

Seven Brides For Seven Snapes

by richardgloucester

Severus Snape has decided he needs a wife, and Hermione is the lucky woman he picks for the job. But he hasn't told her everything she needs to know...

One: Bless Yore Beautiful Hide

Chapter 1 of 11

Severus Snape has decided he needs a wife, and Hermione is the lucky woman he picks for the job. But he hasn't told her everything she needs to know...

A/N: This story is the result of one of my own prompts for the SSHG Winter 2008 Exchange once I came up with it, I found myself entirely torn between hoping one of a select list of authors would write it, and hoping just as fervently that nobody would, so I could do it myself. I love the film on which this tale is based, and though I have made a great effort to reimagine it for my characters and for the Potterverse, I have also (as anyone who chooses to read to the end will see) modelled my story very closely on it chapter headings are the titles of songs or scenes from the film, and here and there I have purloined a choice line of dialogue.

And so, naturally, my 'disclaimers' section must needs be rather more extensive than usual: this is a work of fanfiction, from which I make no money. Any characters and settings recognisable from the Potterverse are the property of J.K. Rowling. The story, and certain lines of dialogue, are modelled closely on the film "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers", screenplay by Albert Hackett, Frances Goodrich and Dorothy Kingsley, music and lyrics by Johnny Mercer and Gene de Paul. Anything else is mine.

Darling Subversa was kind enough to beta-read the whole, and Machshefa has held my hand and cheered throughout. Thank you, ladies.

Happy fiftieth birthday, Severus!

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Seven Brides for Seven Snapes 1: Bless yore beautiful hide

Severus Snape did up the last of his buttons and took a cursory look in the mirror before heading out. He didn't usually take such (indeed, any) pains with his appearance, but his plans for the day involved rather more than the usual expedition to London for supplies, news, books, and a comfortable pint at the Leaky Cauldron. Today it was important that his hair be brushed, his clothes immaculate, and his manners ... Well, making an effort was one thing; falling completely out of character was something he'd leave to some hero of a sequel-of-a-sequel-of-a-sequel-of-a-second-rate-spin-off.

He slammed the door cheerfully behind him. The sun was shining and the portents were good. The war was long over, all the charges against him had finally been dropped, and business was beginning to look very healthy. He was a (belatedly) decorated hero and could walk down the streets of wizarding Britain broadcasting an aura of "I told you so" with complete impunity. Of course, almost nobody actually liked him. But, as this was neither an unusual, nor if he were perfectly candid with himself an entirely unwelcome state of affairs, it was no skin off his not inconsiderable nose. He enjoyed the status of Necessary Evil. It saved him the trouble of having to interact pleasantly with the ninety-nine per cent of the human race who rushed headlong to corral themselves into the category: "Dunderheads". He'd always liked that word. He'd

spent many excruciatingly tedious hours in the Potions classroom developing an elaborate system of subcategories and mentally shuffling his pupils and acquaintance from one to another as time and imbecility dictated, but nearly everyone fitted under the main, slightly comedic, heading which he could safely use in the certain knowledge that not even Dumbledore was aware of the levels of vitriol concealed therein.

He had taken his entertainment where he could find it, in those times.

But now, while the old games still held an attraction, it was time for Severus to achieve the next step in his grand plan for Life After Voldemort. He twitched his cuffs straight and Apparated.

Diagon Alley was heaving every Tom, Dick and ... ew ... Harry seemed to be inconveniently determined to live Life After Voldemort to the full. He had to make a paper aeroplane of the list with his book order and send it over the heads of the other customers at Flourish and Blotts. Mr Stitch, the tailor, proprietor of *Dans le Temps*, had to forcibly eject a half-dressed Cornelius Fudge (so puffed with indignation he looked like a randy pigeon) in order to take Severus' measurements and listen, with an increasing droop to his mouth, to his demands. Gringotts was a waste of time and would have to wait until later. But nothing, simply nothing, could dent Severus' good mood. He was a Man with a Plan, and fortune favoured him today. He stepped into Weasleys with a swish.

The Weasley boys had continued to do well after the war. Fred's death had proved merely a pothole in the road to world economic domination. They had expanded the jokes and novelty side of the business, developed a sideline in 'Play Yourself in the Classics' books (wherein one could choose plot options to suit even the most superficial reader) to complement the Daydreams range, cornered the market in wards (off the shelf and made-to-measure) and defensive charms, and finally, their recreational potions trade had reached such a scale that they had decided to go into potions supplies as well, since they were already ordering in wholesale quantities for their own needs. Their shop had expanded into the properties on either side, and then again, until a goody section of Diagon Alley glowed with the violently pink livery they had made their own.

"Mr Snape!" said Fred, materialising through the cash register. "We weren't expecting you today! Percy hasn't finalised this month's accounts yet, I'm afraid, though if you'd care to step through to the offices, I know that George and Ron want to talk to you about some ideas for modifications to the Babble Bubbles. Ron thinks there could well be an untapped market at diplomatic functions around the world..."

"Are they free now?" Severus asked, his eyes roaming the milling crowds.

"In about half an hour, I'd say."

"Well, in that case I think you'd probably prefer me to cool my heels out here rather than giving me a clear thirty minutes to rifle through your records, wouldn't you?"

Fred eyed Severus' smirk aghast, knowing full well that they'd done just that on many occasions and Severus wasn't just a collaborator, he was also, potentially, a competitor.

"Well, then," continued Snape blandly, "I'll just give my order to your clerk and see what's on the shelves while you convince your brothers of the wisdom there may be in *not* keeping me waiting."

He dismissed Fred with a turned shoulder and drifted by an indirect route towards the frillier areas of the shop, whence the sound of giggling could be heard.

"...was *really* hot!" said a slightly breathy voice. "I mean, you wouldn't expect it of a man his age, but Circe's *tits* I came like an exploding cauldron!"

"Which one was it?! Show me!" insisted another voice.

Severus moved carefully so that he could observe while giving the appearance of inspecting the range of Melodic Mixtures (*IDEAL FOR RELUCTANT POTIONEERS!*), and saw that there was a small group of young women deeply absorbed in the descriptions on the 'Muggle Film Stars' range of Patented Daydreams.

"But my *mum* likes him," protested another of the girls, flicking her long, black hair over her shoulder in a gesture Severus thought he recognised. "Honestly, Lavender he's over *sixty*. You must be joking!"

"Oh, no I'm not," Miss Brown replied. "Well, that settles what I'm getting you for your birthday you have no choice. He's the man for you. For me. For all of us. I wonder if they do another one with him in it?"

Severus backed silently away and made his way round through the displays until he could observe from another angle. Ah, not just Miss Brown, who had grown into her early promise of being a bombshell, but also Miss Chang, she of the flicky hair and lustrous almond eyes, petite but trim and fit-looking from her Quidditch career, and also the Patil twins, possessed of flawless skin and, he noted with interest, a shared penchant for push-up bras, if he wasn't much mistaken. All in all, a feast for the eyes of any bachelor.

He picked up a box of Warbling Wind Chimes ("GUARANTEED TO REPEL MALIGN SPIRITS!") and let it jangle.

The girls looked up. Severus' lip twitched to see Miss Chang whip the incriminating box behind her back as all four faces flushed in an ingrained response to being caught by a teacher.

"Ladies," he said, bowing ever so slightly. It was a trick he'd learned from Lucius. It pretended respect while reinforcing superiority. Very useful. He looked them over appreciatively, enjoying the deepening blushes.

"There you are, Mr Snape," came another voice to his right. "My brothers are ready to see you now." Ginny Weasley bounced into sight, wearing low-cut jeans and a tight t-shirt that would have had Molly in fits. She looked like an advertisement for the benefits of fresh air, healthy living, and sex under haystacks.

Wondering where that thought had come from, Severus walked off to his meeting without sparing any of the young women another glance. He'd look them over again later.

The meeting was productive. His signature potions were selling very well, and the Weasleys wanted to increase their order despite the swingeing imbalance between his and their shares of the profits; plus, they were willing to underwrite some very off-the-wall research he wanted to undertake into the applications of Squid by-products. Feeling genial not that anyone would have noticed Severus decided on elevenses in the Weasleys' new coffee bar. Ever the observer, he chose one of the high stools at the counter where he had a good overview of the room. Miss Brown and her friends had monopolised a cluster of easy chairs nearby and were giggling again over their purchases. He stared at them openly, noting how Miss Brown preened and eyed him back, one of the Patil girls began mesmerising deep breathing exercises, and the other two squirmed self-consciously. Each of them quite luscious in her own way, but there was all that infernal giggling which was a bit off-putting.

No whoever it was had to be just as decorative but rather less asinine.

Still, he kept up his contemplation of the wares on offer while addressing his slice of cake.

"Fred, if you don't bugged off and leave me *alonethis instant*, I swear I will have you exorcised!"

Shedding Weasleys as she came, Hermione Granger headed directly for the counter where Severus was sitting.

"All right, Ginny count me in on the birthday present. And tell your mother I'll be there at the weekend if she really thinks my presence is that vital. No, Percy, I don't need any help with my accounts, and no I will not go out with you. Nor you, Ron never again though I'll help you go over the Muggle product lines later. Yes, George, I'll do a couple of hours in the lab later maybe..."

She hitched her bum up onto the stool next to Severus and laid her head down on the counter with an audible thunk. Her hands hung loosely down past her thighs.

"What can I get you, Hermione?" said Luna from behind the display of cakes.

"Five minutes' peace and a bucket of coffee," came a muffled voice from under the pile of hair. "I don't know why I ever agreed to rent a flat above this shop."

"You don't?" enquired Severus.

The heap of hair rolled slightly and a leery eye regarded him through a gap.

"Oh, yes low rent, which is sort of vital considering what the Ministry doesn't pay me. Unfortunately, nobody said anything about slave labour on the side. I want to be a house-elf they have it easy."

Luna put a small vat of coffee next to Hermione's head, then reached over and hauled at an arm until she could manoeuvre a slack hand towards the handle.

"Do you need a straw today, Hermione?" she asked.

"Just give me a minute. I might make it on my own."

There was a lengthy pause, at the conclusion of which Hermione managed to navigate her mouth to the edge of the mug.

"Hello, Mr Snape."

"Good morning, Miss Granger. Hard night?"

She hmphed.

"You could say that. And Harry somehow miraculously managed to get called away on urgent business before the paperwork was done. I've talked Kingsley into taking you on as our first call for external expertise on Dark magic, by the way, but I'm afraid I'm not nearly done with those Arithmantic equations you wanted..."

"It's quite all right," said Severus magnanimously, feeling a wave of sheer genius washing through him. "There's no hurry."

"I think I love you," said Hermione with true gratitude.

He waited in silence as she negotiated her way to the dregs, then watched her trudge to the door leading upstairs. There was just one more thing he needed to check.

He gave her half an hour's head start.

It wasn't terribly promising that the answer to his knock was a muffled scream of frustration, but when she flung open the door, spitting "WhaNOW?!" through a mouthful of toothpaste, he rapidly concluded that his timing was perfect.

Rabid, minty frothing and a heavy frown notwithstanding, Hermione Granger in an undersized bath towel, with another twisted round her head, presented a very pleasing vision. Underneath her frumpy Aurory robes, or the baggy sweatshirts she favoured in her free time, she had been hiding a petite and curvy body, elegant legs, dainty feet, and a long, smooth neck. Her eyes, round as saucers and glaring furiously at his catching her very nearly in the altogether, were a very pleasant shade of brown. It wasn't possible to take a more detailed inventory, seeing as he rapidly found himself with a faceful of door.

It was slammed again, hard enough to shake plaster from the ceiling, once she'd returned wrapped in a dressing gown, and he took the opportunity to say nonchalantly, "I think you ought to marry me."

"Listen, Hermione," he continued in a reasonable tone after a very insistent *Alohomora* gained him access to her living room, "it's not that extraordinary a thing to ask..."

"Not that extraordinary?!" she shrieked. "What about all the... the... I don't know... The going out for a drink now and again, talking about things other than work, getting to know each other just a bit beyond academic interaction? You can't just waltz in here and propose out of the blue! I barely know you!"

"You said just now you loved me."

"Oh, get stuffed. I'd say that to Argus Filch if he could lighten my workload."

She turned her shoulder on him and walked to the fireplace, where she stood looking into the empty grate. Severus rested his hands on the back of a nearby armchair and spoke to her reflection in the mirror above the mantel.

"I think the past couple of years have shown that we get along well enough. We can work together productively even when you're worn out and wouldn't you say that academic encounters have revealed more about both of us than flirting over drinks could do?" Certainly there had been long arguments....

She refused to meet his eyes in the mirror. But at least she wasn't shouting at him.

"I'm not going to pretend to be anything you know I am not, but I'm offering you a life of interesting work and intelligent conversation, without constant demands to do things which bore and annoy you. Think about it marrying me would be the surest way of freeing you from the Ministry and, more importantly, the Weasleys. You could move to Timbuktu and they'd still have a hold on you. As Mrs Snape, you'd be beyond the pale."

"Why me?" she asked, turning round and looking at him sceptically.

He shrugged.

"You're the best."

"Not a word of praise in all the years I've known you and now, all of a sudden, I'm qualified to be Mrs Snape?"

"Where's your sense of adventure? You can't tell me you're not dying to get your hands on my... library."

She laughed. It had a promisingly suggestive quality that had nothing in common with anything resembling a giggle.

"Where's my common sense, you mean."

"Well?" He raised an eyebrow and, playing his ace, looked down his nose at her.

"I must be mad. Let me get dressed, and we'll sneak off down the Ministry before anyone can stop us."

Two: Ding-dong, ding-a-ling-dong

Chapter 2 of 11

Severus Snape has decided he needs a wife, and Hermione is the lucky woman he picks for the job. But he hasn't told her everything she needs to know...

Seven Brides for Seven Snapes 2: Ding-dong, ding-a-ling-dong

In the end, it wasn't until the next day that they managed to tie the knot. True, they managed to sneak down the back stairs unobserved, but when Hermione nearly fell asleep in her pizza at lunch, Severus declared that he'd rather not marry the walking dead, and in any case, he could pass the intervening time quite pleasantly terrorising Kingsley into providing a licence and approving the immediate termination of her contract.

"It should really be me that does it you make me look like a feeble Little Woman!" she grumbled.

"And how would that go, exactly? Describe the encounter," Severus ordered, leaning back and folding his arms as though he were waiting for a wrong answer in the classroom.

Hermione fiddled with the wax that had dripped from the candle onto the table top.

"Well," she said slowly, "Kingsley would get all reproachful, mention all the things I'm in the middle of doing, then do the pouty mouth and the big, sad puppydog eyes. Then he'd get Harry to come in and tell me how he couldn't possibly do without me..."

"And then?"

"And then I'd cave. Okay you do it. Just for once it would be nice to have someone take care of me. I knew there was a reason for accepting you: my inner self is a Barbara Cartland heroine!" She grinned, not catching the moment when his gaze shifted.

"Do you really think I'd have proposed if that were the case? However, *you* are a pushover when it comes to people you like."

"Does that include saying 'yes' to you?" she responded tartly.

"That, Hermione, was a rare moment of perspicacity and self-preservation. And you just let slip that you like me, by the way." He looked exceedingly smug.

The situation was surreal, she thought, as she watched him sip his espresso. The dim light of the Muggle restaurant suited him, warming his sallow skin and adding to the fascination of his dark eyes. She'd never let herself think of him as anything other than someone she had enjoyed working with from time to time since the war ended, but if she were completely honest with herself, she wasn't indifferent to him, and found his looks striking rather than ugly. When it came down to it, she was completely fed up with the Weasleys, Harry, the Ministry, and everything; the thought of spending her time with just one companion a companion who interested her on many levels was enticing; and, frankly, she could do with a bit of being looked after. Whoever would have thought Severus Snape would be safe harbour for a battered spirit? She shrugged inwardly. Stranger things had happened.

They lingered over coffee, talking until Hermione could barely keep her eyes open. How nice it was to have a one-to-one conversation, especially one in which the other person actually gave the impression of interest in what she had to say. The future looked promising. She staggered home with the firm resolution to skive work that night, and the comforting reflection that Severus mmmm, yes, he had become 'Severus' in the space of a few short hours was undoubtedly what all her friends would call a Bad Influence.

At ten o'clock the next morning, wearing her prettiest dress, a touch of make-up, and a wide if rather nervous smile, Hermione met her fiance outside Kingsley's office door. Severus had clearly made an effort. Not only was his suit made of the finest wool with buttons of polished jet, but his hair had been trimmed and he seemed to be trying to look friendly. Or it might have been indigestion the tiramisu had been on the heavy side.

"Shall we?" he said, and took her hand. The feel of his long fingers curling round hers and the warm, dry rub of his palm sent a jolt through her. She swallowed and nodded. They went in without knocking.

"Hermione, are you really sure about this?" Kingsley had had the gall to include Harry in the ceremony, just to pile on the emotional blackmail, and tried to draw her to one side for a kind, avuncular talking-to. All of which pissed her off and made her stick to Severus like a limpet. "He's not ... Well, he's not the sort of man I want to see taking charge of a girl I think of almost as my own family."

Hermione glanced up at Severus, who was doing a poor job of concealing his unholy amusement.

"Firstly, Minister, Severus is not 'taking charge' of me we are getting married, which even in the wizarding world can sometimes be regarded as an equal partnership, however primeval the mores here are in general. Secondly, at twenty-two, I am not prepared to be talked down to as a little girl. Thirdly, I feel sorry for your family if you exploit them the way you have been exploiting me. Yes, I am sure."

"But Hermione," Harry said, his anguish probably genuine as her departure meant he would actually have to do his fair share of the work for a change, "he's not really a very nice person, you know. Sorry, Severus, but you're not."

Severus permitted himself a twitch of the lips as he settled his arm round Hermione's shoulders.

"Harry, Ron's a nice person, and I felt as though I was baby-sitting the whole time; Percy's a nice person, but I want to strangle him every time he opens his mouth; Neville's a nice person, but a complete bore; Dean's a nice person, but it's entirely too much fun making him feel intellectually inadequate. Shall I go on?" She sighed. "Did it never cross your mind that I might not be a very nice person, and that Severus and I might be ideally suited? When Severus walks into a room, I generally think 'Oh, good' I don't get that awful sinking feeling that here's just one more person who wants me to do something for them."

She caught Harry and Kingsley giving her an incredulous stare. She missed the one on Severus' face.

"I can't help feeling that you're going to regret this, my dear," rumbled Kingsley mournfully.

"Let's just get on with it, shall we?" said Severus.

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The next stop was Hermione's flat. She stuffed the few things that meant anything to her into the beaded bag, took a last cursory look round, then shut the door.

"Ready to put on a show, Mrs Snape?" said Severus, offering his arm.

"Ready when you are, Mr Snape," she replied, settling the hand with the plain gold band and the large emerald that marked their twenty-two hour engagement on his sleeve where it could not fail to be noticed.

They walked through the shop with insouciance, pretending not to notice the storm of gossip breaking in their wake. Hermione didn't look back.

"Severus? How about a picnic before we go home?" was the last thing anybody heard.

"Are you serious? You want me to sit on the ground somewhere and eat sandwiches?"

Hermione fiddled with her rings.

"It's rather a juvenile way to get fed."

"I *like* picnics," she protested. "It's nice to be in the fresh air and eat simple things!"

"And drink lashings of ginger beer, I suppose," he added sourly.

"Well, I..."

"Don't you think a decent restaurant would be more appropriate?"

"Honestly?" She spread her hands in exasperation. "*None* of this feels 'appropriate' it's all completely surreal. Right now, a restaurant would just make me fidget. I ... I've just got married, we're going 'home', and I have no idea what that even means other than some very vague notions extracted from the few romantic novels I've had the misfortune to read. Can't we ... can't we just buy some sandwiches and strawberries and maybe a nice bottle of wine and get used to the idea?"

He was hard to read at the best of times, but he didn't seem to have that constipated look that usually presaged a set-down. Hermione didn't know how to do 'appealing', as such, but had confidence that her expression could at least be read as hopeful. And in truth, she really did need some time before finding herself inside four walls with him. Severus Snape was in many respects an unknown quantity, and things unknown tended to leave her tongue-tied until she had at least a smidgeon of information upon which to base a theory. Ah the merest twitch of the lips!

One lightning stop at Harrods for a hamper it was their wedding day, after all one Apparition, and they found themselves on a hilltop, surrounded by alien wind-carved rocks under the light breeze and sunshine of a perfect Yorkshire summer's day.

"This is beautiful!" exclaimed Hermione, reaching up to tie her hair back from her face. "I never would have taken you for a romantic, Severus!"

"Don't do that," he said, catching her hands. "Just turn your face to the breeze."

She blushed and looked away.

"Where shall we sit, then?" she asked after a moment.

In the end, a small dell lined with sheep-cropped grass and shy moorland herbs provided them with the seclusion they sought. Hermione covered her awkwardness by setting out the picnic, fussing over getting the arrangement absolutely perfect. She looked up at last to find an uncommonly relaxed-looking Snape, jacket discarded and shirt sleeves rolled up, lounging with his back against a mossy rock. He seemed more approachable than she had ever known him, and as he was clearly making an effort, she asked, "What's your home like? I'd like to know what to expect before I go in and start rearranging your life!"

He focused his attention on opening the wine before answering.

"I moved into my mother's family home after my grandfather died did you know that?"

"No! I had no idea. You've managed to keep away from press attention very effectively."

He smirked.

"Having shady connections doesn't hurt, once in a while," he replied.

Hermione laughed.

"Well, then, tell me what it's like."

He described a Jacobean manor house in the Dales, equipped with an ancient herb garden, networks of cellars, attics and outbuildings which lent themselves to conversion as work rooms, extensive grounds in which he was trying to establish populations of some of the less offensive magical fauna ... At some point, he took out his wand and used it to sketch plans, which hung in the air for many minutes before fading on the wind. Hermione listened, fascinated as much by his gestures and the mobility of his features as he talked about things which interested him as by the idyll he was building in her imagination.

"It must be wonderful to have such a rich family heritage," she commented. "I barely know anything beyond the names of my grandparents; Mum and Dad weren't interested in all that sort of thing very forward-looking and progressive. We never talked about where we came from as a family. Perhaps that's why I've always clung so much to this ..." Rummaging in her bag, she pulled out her battered old copy of *Hogwarts: A History*. "I sort of co-opted the school's history as my own."

She gave him a tentative smile.

"I'm looking forward to being a part of all that, I think. To be able to work together, you and me, to build a new business from those ancient foundations, using what you've already done You know," she said, jumping suddenly to her feet, "in fact, I have a pretty good feeling about all of this! Crazy as anyone I know would find it, I think marrying you might be the most sensible thing I've ever done!" She spun on her toes, giddy with delight in the day, her daring, and the champagne she had drunk, then ran to pick a small bunch of flowers from the clumps nestling in the rocks. "Here you go, Severus, a posy for the groom on his wedding day!"

She was surprised when he accepted the gift with a good grace, retrieving his jacket so he could tuck the nosegay of wild thyme into the top buttonhole.

"With so much energy and commitment, Hermione, you convince me that I, too, made a wise decision in marrying you. There is just one thing more, however..."

He dropped his jacket again and held his hand out to her, holding her regard with a neutral but expectant look in his eyes. She placed her fingers, cold suddenly, in his, and allowed him to draw her close. She wanted to prompt him to go on, but found that her voice had once more deserted her when it might have been useful to have around. Finding his free hand with hers and holding tight would have to do. Indeed, it seemed encouragement enough.

He cleared his throat was it possible that he was finding this moment equally awkward? before speaking.

"I don't intend this to be a marriage in name only."

Hermione felt herself reddening. What could she say? That she'd been trying desperately to avoid looking at the Erumpent in the room? That, despite her efforts, ever since

accepting him, she'd embarrassed herself with dwelling on his eyes, his hands, his nose, and what might be hiding behind all those buttons? That she was deeply flattered to be desired for everything she had to offer? That she was rather shocked at herself for reacting so strongly, physically and emotionally, to a man she felt she hardly knew?

She stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the lips. It was quite gratifying to draw back and note a definite flush along his cheekbones. Perhaps he would blush even more, later.

"Home, then?" she said.

Three: When you're in love

Chapter 3 of 11

Severus Snape has decided he needs a wife, and Hermione is the lucky woman he picks for the job. But he hasn't told her everything she needs to know...

Seven Brides For Seven Snaps 3: When you're in love

"Hold still, you stupid bugger!"

Hermione was surprised to hear any voices at all the admonishment itself barely registered.

"Severus?" She was puzzled.

They had Apparated to a small country lane bordered along one side by a high stone wall. There was a wide but modestly-styled wrought-iron gate near where they had appeared, set between pillars topped with rusty spear-heads. Somewhat obscured by lichen, the words "Prince Hall" were discernible, carved into the left-hand pillar. Beyond the gate, a neglected gravel drive curved away to disappear behind a stand of beech trees. Severus dismantled the wards and opened the gates wide enough to let her pass; she waited while he set everything in order again.

"Old habits die hard?" she enquired mildly, having recognised some of the charms used in the Hogwarts protections mixed in with a weave of hexes and diversions that must surely be of her husband's own invention.

"Old habits and new caution I've only just been cleared, remember? I am not a popular man, Hermione."

"Never mind you're popular with me, and that's all we need."

She took his hand and started up the drive, wondering why he seemed reluctant to move with her.

"Hermione, there's something you ought to know before ..." He was looking singularly grim for a bridegroom.

"Don't be silly! What can there be that's worse than what I already know of you?" she quipped. "Come *on*, Severus! I want to see the house!"

She could have sworn he muttered, "Gryffindors!" but she chose to let it pass.

The front doors of the house, a handsome three-storey building, were evidently unused. Weeds grew through the steps, and there was rust under the flaking paint of the hinges, she noticed as they passed. But the stable-yard, to which Severus led her, took her mind off the sadness she felt at the building's air of neglect. Broad and sunny, its brick paving shining after a recent shower, it bore signs of use and care, and ... occupation.

The voice spoke again, more gently.

"That's right, you great idiot just rest it a bit now..."

And then a hand reached over one of the half-doors to pull the bolt aside. The owner of the hand followed, backing out of the gloomy interior and crooning gently at whatever was whickering inside. When he turned, Hermione gasped.

She stared open-mouthed at the man, then at Severus, then back at the man again. What she was seeing was a younger version of her husband well, a younger version if Severus had been stunningly beautiful, and blessed with pale skin and a nose merely aquiline. Shame about the scruffy hair, scraggly beard and odd, baggy tunic belted clumsily about his hips.

The young man, for his part, goggled an instant and then broke into a broad grin. He dashed across the yard to seize Severus by the hand and then envelop an utterly flummoxed Hermione in a hug that crushed her breathless perhaps not such a bad thing, really, considering he smelt rather strongly of menagerie.

"You did it! You really did it!" exclaimed the stranger. "I never would have thought it! And she's even pretty! How did you manage, you old dog?"

"Severus?" queried Hermione faintly.

He looked uncomfortable.

"Ah, yes, my brother Septimius. I was trying to tell you about ... Septimius, this is Hermione."

But Septimius wasn't listening. He had rushed into the house, yelling, "He *did* it! He *did* it!"

Severus sighed, took Hermione's unresisting hand once more, and with an even grimmer expression, followed.

As they crossed the threshold, another figure loomed out of the shadowy hall into the light falling through the doorway.

"Shut your confounded trap, kidlet," he said in tones so silky he made Severus sound like a fairground barker.

This one was immensely tall and broad, and where the first brother's facial hair had not hidden his beauty, Hermione thought it might be rather a good thing that this one

was heavily bearded. Black-haired and coal-eyed, his face was rough-hewn and forbidding, yet when he took her hand and bowed over it, murmuring, "Hermione, it is a fortunate day when my brother wins such a woman," she forgot his looks entirely.

"Seneca," said her husband shortly.

"Pleased to meet you," she managed to say. "I had no idea that Severus had broth...."

Two more darkly bearded men emerged from the bowels of the house, shoving the still-shouting Septimius out of the way.

"Salvius and Scribonius," supplied their eldest brother.

They did not speak to her, but stood looking down at her as though she were a mildly interesting laboratory specimen.

"Pleased to meet you," said Hermione. She was beginning to feel numb. "But which one is Salvius and which one is Scribonius?"

"I am," they said in unison, smirking.

"Are there any more?" she asked.

"Better get it over with," muttered her husband, then bellowed. "*SEJANUS! Get your backside out of the lab right now and come and meet your sister! SI...*"

"I'm here, Severus, you don't need to treat us like a room full of Hufflepuffs," said a sarcastic voice from behind them.

Hermione's jaw dropped again. There was that beaky profile and the tall, rangy frame that seemed to characterise them all, but the young man standing in the doorway wiping earth from his hands had light brown hair and extraordinary amber-coloured eyes that seemed to have captured the essence of honey and sunlight.

"Couldn't do any better for yourself than Severus, then?" Obviously a Snape, despite his looks.

"And your name is?" she prompted him, unfazed after years in a Snape classroom.

"Yes, *Sidney*, tell her your name, why don't you?" jibed a man who must be Sejanus, ascending a steep flight of stairs from the cellars. Where Septimius obviously had all the looks of the family, this brother had cornered the market in physical grace, thought Hermione, admiring the way he moved, which was not disguised even by the shapeless tunic he, like his brothers, wore. But ...

"*Sidney?*" she queried.

"Yes, Sidney," said Sejanus in a sing-song, resting his shoulder negligently against the door frame, *do* introduce yourself."

Whereupon Sidney launched himself at his brother and they went down in a flurry of fists. Severus stepped over them indifferently, and helped Hermione pass by into the kitchen.

"Sidney's name doesn't seem to follow the pattern," she said tentatively.

"Grandfather had a bit of a thing for Roman history, which explains the rest of us. But our mother went into labour early with Sidney, before Grandfather could bring her here for the lying-in, so Dad took her to the local Muggle hospital and got the baby registered before anyone else even knew about it," he explained as he pulled out a chair for her. "He said and I quote that he was 'buggered if he'd have another damned poncy stupid name in his family'."

"Shame he's the only one that looks like Mam played away," said either Salvius or Scribonius.

Hermione was looking over her shoulder at where the fight continued.

"Never mind them, Hermione. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"I might need something a little stronger. Are there any more?" she asked wryly, feeling dwarfed by the crowd of bearded men looking down at her with expressions ranging from well-disguised guilt to open curiosity.

"Just the seven of us," he replied.

"Just ... Vodka it is, then." She winced as someone's head met the floor rather hard.

Stiff drink in hand, Hermione followed Severus on a tour of the house, feeling rather as though a barbarian horde of questions was stampeding from the back of her brain to gather behind her forehead, waving interrogation marks and baying for answers. She held them back with difficulty, biding her time lest the existence of a hitherto unsuspected extended family should not prove the only surprise of the day. The addition of some analgesic to her cocktail was beginning to look like an attractive option, though. Particularly with her shaggy retinue following inexorably in her wake as she was introduced to what she had expected would be her secluded idyll with Severus. She caught his eye as he turned to usher her through a heavily-carved dark oak door into the library. *There will be explanations later*, she ordered silently. He had the grace not to pretend to misunderstand.

"The library," announced Severus.

Hermione fell in love (it was becoming something of an annoying habit, she felt), even though the library presented what was at first a very unpromising facade (she was definitely developing a pattern). It was dark with old panelling and ancient beams; it was high, occupying two storeys and dimly lit by tall latticed windows; it was long, and it was crammed with books and scrolls and parchments. It was also a mess – an unholy chaos that made her want to scream. One of the brothers slouched forward and half-heartedly shuffled some papers into a rough stack, thereby clearing a small space on a table, into which a pile of books promptly collapsed. Some of them went so far as to make a break for the floor. He caught them expertly and shoved them back into place.

"It needs a bit of sorting out and cataloguing," he shrugged. "Grandfather bought everything he could lay his hands on, never tidied anything, and I'm too busy with research to waste time on that kind of thing."

Hermione's glare would have done Madam Pince proud.

"You do know that a library is only a truly useful tool if it is properly organised, don't you?"

"I keep telling Salvius that he ought to tidy up before getting stuck in," Severus grumbled.

"Those would be the times you stride through here scattering papers left, right and centre, and demand that I find you some half-arsed Etruscan thesis, and *throw, dammit?*" Salvius griped.

"Hmph."

"What's next?" sighed Hermione.

The tour continued through the many rooms of the ground floor. Those which were in use were so obviously in use that it was difficult to negotiate a way through them. It seemed that although all the brothers were engaged on some work or other, none of them had evolved beyond the 'hey a horizontal surface! I'll put something on it!' school of organisation a method which apparently required a large quantity of dust, broken quills and other detritus to hold the piles of books and parchments in place. The rooms which were not in use, a collection of pretty parlours and comfortable snugs, were pristine, the furniture under dust sheets, the air a little chilly and sad.

She asked to see the potions laboratories and was led down the precipitous stairs, past many closed store room doors, to a large and rigidly tidy space which Severus proudly announced as his own. Hermione was impressed at the set-up, until she poked her nose into the adjoining office, which looked as though something had been nesting in it for the past century or two. With a sinking feeling, she opened another door, on the far side of the office. She had found the potions store room, a cornucopia of the strange, the dangerous, the revolting and the mundane, all in ... She searched for a word. It was her wedding day. She had to try to be nice. All in ... in ... disarray.

There were two further doors leading out of the store room. One led back into Severus' lab, where he had got distracted, showing his brothers some papers (*Oh, Merlin! Not more paper...*!) he had brought back from London. She closed it quietly and tried the other, which opened onto something like the lair of a mad scientist from a 1950s B-movie, with added explosions. From there, more alarming stairs brought her up to where she had first entered the house.

At least the kitchen was nice.

She sat herself down at the long, well-scrubbed table and tried to gather her thoughts. She had anticipated that marriage to Severus would ring the changes in her life, but... She sighed and tipped her head back, inhaling the sweet scent of the herbs which hung in bunches from the beams, drying.

When she straightened again, there was a fresh pot of tea in front of her, with milk in a little yellow jug, and a hand-turned pottery mug, slightly chipped, slightly wobbly, with the legend "Sev" painted on it in careful, childish letters.

*

Night was falling, and she was out in the yard, leaning on the door from which Septimius had first emerged and communing with the Thestral she had found in there. She had once found them disturbing and ugly, she remembered, scratching the creature's cheek as it hung its head over her shoulder, but this one, which looked distinctly sorry for itself with its bandaged leg, was rather a sweetie. It might look all grim and frightening and bare its teeth a lot, but two soft words and a chunk of raw liver she'd found in the fridge, and it was putty in her hands. Hagrid had been right when he said they were misunderstood.

"There you are," said Severus from behind her.

The Thestral twitched, but Hermione didn't stir nor cease the caressing motion of her fingers.

"Supper's ready, if you'd like to join us." His voice was neutral.

"Yes, of course," she replied, equally carefully.

It was hard to read expressions in the gathering dusk, but after a brief moment, he held out his hand and she took it. They turned towards the house and walked into the warm light spilling from the open doorway.

They ate in the kitchen. Severus, naturally, sat at the head of the table, after he had held Hermione's chair for her, to the right of his place. Other than that, there seemed no particular order. The food was plentiful and very good. Hermione busied herself with it while she listened to the conversation around her.

The Snape brothers had a plan, she discovered, to rival the Weasleys as the wizarding world's foremost business enterprise. Between them, their areas of expertise covered most of the specialisms, and her impression was, as the discussion ebbed and flowed around her, that they were brimming over with ideas. It was wonderful, how they sparked off one another, challenging each other's conclusions and assumptions and interjecting observations which set off whole new chains of thought. Intellectually, it was the most stimulating environment she'd ever experienced. But they were never going to get anywhere without managing to be far more organised than they were. She knew it, and so did they. The phrase she heard most often, as she sat unusually quiet in their midst, looking round at their flushed faces and eyes sparkling with excitement, was "Now that Hermione's here ..."

Suddenly she became aware that the voice saying those words was that of her husband. She looked at him, leaning forward and tapping his forefinger on the table as he said something forceful to Seneca, and discovered that she was angry. She lurched to her feet and glared at them all.

"So *nice* to know that I'm going to be *useful* around here," she spat into the abrupt silence.

It seemed only fitting that the newest member of the Snape family should slam the door as hard as possible on leaving the room.

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Four: When You're in Love, cont.

Chapter 4 of 11

Severus Snape has decided he needs a wife, and Hermione is the lucky woman he picks for the job. But he hasn't told her everything she needs to know...

Seven Brides For Seven Snapes 4: When You're in Love, cont.

Severus wasn't used to feeling in the wrong.

This might come as a surprise to most people, in the light of his personal history, but ever since he'd been stupid enough to take the Mark as a boy, he had gone to great pains to redress that error for in his book, stupidity was probably a worse crime than many of the others that made all those old women on the Wizengamot shake their addled heads and had, indeed, been proved right at every turn. Right about the Marauders being weak and irresponsible; right about Lily's mistake in marrying James; right about the Potter boy's nature; right about Quirrell, about Lupin, about everything Dumbledore was doing wrong; about ... well, about almost everything, really. But now ...

He watched his brothers continue to argue about this and that over dessert, and had to admit that the uncomfortable roiling sensation in his gut was that unwelcome old friend, guilt. The thing he thought he'd left behind years before, burnt out of him by the bitterness of being Dumbledore's most *useful* tool.

But in the space of a few short hours, he had seen Hermione move from happiness and enthusiasm to anger and hurt, and he had nobody to blame but himself.

Though looking at the situation rationally, a large part of the fault could be laid at her door, for building up castles in the air, he thought. She must know him well enough not to expect their married life to be a Disney paradise. It was just a slight case of disappointment, and she'd get over it soon enough he'd never have chosen her if she hadn't been resilient.

His stomach started to feel a little better, and he took note of the speculative looks the boys were throwing at him. Neptune's nadgers, it was like being back at school, with everyone whispering and giggling about whether you'd snogged or were going to snog so-and-so behind the broom sheds. And that was just the staff.

He harrumphed and stood up, adopting his most forbidding air despite knowing full well that it had less than no effect on his family.

"You lot should get to bed," he ordered. "We have a great deal to do tomorrow."

"You must be tired yourself," answered Scribonius. He closed his eyes and spoke in a whispered monotone, "I foresee, however, that sleep will not claim you for many hours to come..."

Someone sniggered.

"Oh, grow up," snapped Severus. "And Scrib, if you can't think of anything useful to do with those vaunted divinatory powers you go on about so much, then I'll set you to helping Septimius muck out the stables. You may have balls of crystal, but I think even you might blanch at spending a day shovelling griffin guano."

"Playing for time, big brother?" Sejanus teased. "Perhaps Scrib could read the Tarot for you let you know what's in store upstairs. You got your pack on you, Scrib?"

Severus left, maintaining family and personal tradition with a good, solid slam of the door.

He told himself he didn't hear the guffaw that broke out just before the wood met the frame.

It was ridiculous to feel this self-conscious, really. Here he was, a successful man on the brink of making the world his own (but in a good way), head of his family, a powerful wizard, Master of his chosen specialty, skilled in most other areas, and now husband of a young, talented, and pretty wife. This litany of virtues had brought him up the stairs and along the corridor to his own bedroom, where he expected Hermione a sensible young woman would have got over her temper tantrum and be waiting for him in his bed, wearing something flimsy, and welcoming him with open arms.

Her arms, as it turned out, were not open. They were firmly crossed over her regrettably fully-clothed chest. Neither were they in bed. Nor did they look conspicuously good tempered, considering that the hand at the end of one of them was gripping a wand that was spitting red sparks and seriously endangering Hermione's rampant, Gorgon-like hair.

He couldn't quite help a glance at the undisturbed bed.

"Oh, so you thought I'd be there all dollied up and smiling, did you?"

Severus had an uncomfortable flashback to some of the prime tellings-off he'd had to endure from authoritative females over the years. Any moment now yes, the hands were on the hips.

"You thought I'd have 'got over it' by now?"

"Well "

"Well, I haven't! And I probably won't. You got me here under false pretences, Severus Snape. You ... you *liar*!"

"But "

"But me no buts! I'm here now, and I'll play my role and do my bit for your business but I'll expect to be paid and *well* paid for my work, since that's what you got me here for, and there *won't* be any collateral benefits, so you can just forget about sharing this bed with me!" She turned her back on him.

"Hermione " This really wasn't going at all well.

"How could you?" She gulped some air. Though her back was rigid, he could see she was trembling with rage. "How *could* you let me go on like that talking about life together, and projects, and conversations, and just being with you? You must think I'm a prize idiot."

Ah.

"Hermione," he cajoled. He put his hands on her shoulders, only to have her wrench away. He took a deep breath. If he knew anything about women (and he didn't, really) then it looked as though he had just the one chance to rescue the situation. "Hermione, if you were an idiot, I would never have married you."

"Oh, yeah, I was forgetting I have a *useful* brain."

"Stop sulking and listen to me, girl!"

"Ah, yes," she said, "there's the Snape we know and love! I wondered how long it would be before he came out to play."

By this time they were facing each other, her arms akimbo, his crossed, matching frowns in place.

"Don't be childish. Just listen, Hermione. It's true I did marry you because you would be useful here. We have a great deal to accomplish, if I am to earn a place for my brothers and restoration of our name, and I needed someone at my side who would be able to help me do that. There is nobody as qualified as you, with your intelligence, and strength, and capacity for work ..."

Hermione glared.

"Don't glare at me," he snapped, glaring down his nose out of habit. "If it happens that the finest colleague I could have chosen is also a vivacious and beautiful young woman whose presence gives me good grounds for being smug, you can't blame me for ..."

"Yes, I can blame you, Severus!" To his consternation, there were tears rolling down her cheeks. "You got me here under false pretences. Why *why* did you let me go on like that about our life together? It's mortifying!"

He flushed and hemmed. "It ... It was a good dream. One that was good to share for a little while."

He reached for her hand, but she jerked away again.

"A shared fantasy doesn't make a marriage, Severus," said Hermione miserably. "I'm not sleeping with you."

"Fine."

He closed the door silently behind him in what he hoped would be read as a gesture of deepest sarcasm and returned to the kitchen nursing his anger and hurt pride, forgetting that the others would still be there. The cards were out, though it was a normal pack, and Knuts were changing hands across the table, but the moment he entered, all activity ceased. He faced his brothers, completely nonplussed until he remarked the sly grin spreading over their faces.

"That was quick, old man," said Sidney. "Used you up and thrown you out already, has she?"

"She wants a drink, you pillock," said Severus. He looked around desperately, then grabbed the first bottle that came to hand luckily, it was wine.

Hermione shrieked and tried vainly to cover her underwear with her hands when Severus burst back into the room. He barely noticed.

"Here," he grunted, thrusting the bottle at her.

He shouldered the bathroom door open and proceeded to take off his jacket and shoes.

"What are you doing?" squeaked Hermione when his hands went to the fastening of his trousers.

"Sleeping in the bath, since I can't have my own bed and there are no others free in the house."

"But ... But ... what if I need to have a pee in the night?"

"Piss in a pot. If it was good enough for my grandfather, it's good enough for my wife." And with that he shut the door.

A bath really was not a suitable place for a grown man to sleep, he decided. If his legs were straight, he was practically sitting up. If he let his legs relax, he ended up sliding down with his shoulders and neck twisted into a sailor's knot. When he stuck his feet right out of the bath so he could lie down with a straight back, the backs of his knees hurt. He was in this position, staring mournfully at the ceiling, when Hermione opened the door and peeked round it. The sight of his feet and hairy legs poking over the end of the bath was evidently rather amusing.

"What are you doing, Severus?"

"Sleeping."

"It doesn't look very comfortable."

He drew his feet back one at a time and pushed until his eyes appeared over the side of the bath. As did, he was uncomfortably aware, his bony knees.

"It isn't."

"I don't suppose it occurred to you to Transfigure the bath?"

He did not feel that the question merited an answer. Nevertheless, Hermione elicited one from him in the form of a startled yell honestly, did the girl have no respect for his dignity? when she abruptly transformed the tub into a flat surface on which his head landed with a clang.

"Oh, do excuse me," she said insincerely, making the surface soft.

Severus felt martyred. He fixed his eyes on the ceiling and tried to pretend he was not splayed on his back wearing nothing but a half-buttoned shirt and a pair of underpants, under the unforgiving bright lights of his bathroom, while a young woman wearing he risked a sidelong peek a black negligee (hmm, promising ...) smirked at his predicament.

"Why don't you just leave me to sleep? What do you want, Miss Granger?"

A negligent wave of her wand dimmed the lights to a soft glow, but other than leaning her shoulder against the doorpost, she didn't move.

"Severus, it cannot have escaped you that I am somewhat disenchanted with the way this day has turned out, and with the way you have behaved towards me."

"Your girlish fantasies are your own responsibility."

"Indeed they are."

She waited until he turned on his side and propped his head on his hand to look at her directly. The negligee was really very sheer and clingy. It was unfair of her to flaunt herself so. He surreptitiously adjusted his shirt to cover the parts of him that were expressing enthusiasm at the sight.

"You must be aware that I have a great many questions for you, and that you owe me a rather lengthy explanation or three ..."

He winced.

"You always have questions, Miss Granger," he growled, attempting not to look at her cleavage, outlined in black silk, which was hard, because she seemed to be sticking it out. "I'm surprised your hand isn't waving in the air."

"... but those can wait until the morning, I think."

She sat on the edge of the Transfigured bath.

"What are you doing, Miss Granger?"

"Seeing that some part of my girlish fantasy does actually get fulfilled, Professor Snape," she said a little breathlessly. "You see, even though you do actually deserve a thorough hexing for today's charade, I do, actually, rather like you. And ..."

She spelled open his shirt to expose a torso whose muscularity did, he had to admit, give him the odd frisson of justified vanity during his morning ablutions.

"... after due consideration, I believe I am not willing to forgo the pleasures of my wedding night for the sake of an argument that can keep."

Severus decided to ignore that last bit. A Slytherin worth the name could always ensure that an argument had an indefinite shelf life.

He bounded smoothly to his feet and pulled her to stand close against him, her curves pressed to his body in a manner he found most satisfactory. A little gasp and a lewd squirm told him that his wife was well pleased by his body's interest in her charms.

"Very well, Mrs Snape, to bed, then," he said, scooping her up and making rapid strides across the bedroom.

"No! No!"

She struggled wildly.

"What *now*?"

"Your brothers have booby-trapped the bed, of course."

"I'll kill them."

Five: A chaw of tobacco

Chapter 5 of 11

Severus Snape has decided he needs a wife, and Hermione is the lucky woman he picks for the job. But he hasn't told her everything she needs to know...

Seven Brides For Seven Snapes 5: A chaw of tobacco

Hermione sat contentedly, a mug of tea in her hands and her lists spread out on the table in front of her. In spite of the hour, ten o'clock, the house was quiet, the concept of an early start apparently being unfamiliar territory to her unruly pack of brothers-in-law. She relished the calm before what she was sure would be a storm and let the warm sunshine falling through the window warm her shoulders while the ticking of an old clock on the mantelpiece above the fireplace measured the rhythm of her thoughts.

In the security of solitude, she permitted her mind to wander a little. She gazed dreamily into the mug that said "Sev" and which she was already beginning to think of as hers. The night had been ... most satisfactory. She had woken with a disinclination to look for a fight and a smile on her face that broadened when she looked at the blissful features of her still-sleeping husband. It made her feel extremely smug to know she'd put that expression on a face that was known far and wide as the epitome of cantankerous. So she'd decided, in the spirit of research to which she was a devoted slave, to see if she could get him to wake up with a grin.

She could.

Breakfast had been waiting when they arrived downstairs, and as they ate, Severus had consented to tell her something of his family in order, as he said, to "stop her pestering him with her incessant bloody questions" before he went down to his lab to begin his day's work.

"Well, go on, then," she had insisted when he didn't continue. "Why doesn't anyone know you have brothers?"

"Grandfather went to great lengths to hide them."

Severus sighed into his coffee.

"I suppose it was necessary. By the time Seneca was coming up to school age, I was heavily involved with the Dark Lord's junior fan-club. Grandfather saw better than I did where it was all going, and made sure that the kids were sent elsewhere, so they never showed up on the Hogwarts rolls, not even as potential students."

"So where did they go?"

"The Molotov Institute in Novgorod."

Hermione blinked.

"*Novgorod?*"

"Novgorod."

Pause.

"Novgorod," she repeated.

"Uh-huh."

"Well, that explains the beards and baggy tunics, I suppose."

"Indeed."

"And I suppose the wards were for when they came home during the holidays? They *did* come home, didn't they?"

"In the summer."

"But why did he keep sending them all away after Voldemort fell the first time?"

"I suppose by then the Snape name was mud in wizarding society." He affected an indifferent tone, but he was messily eviscerating his sausages.

"Oh, Severus," she said softly.

"And anyway, Grandfather always was a belt and braces security obsessive providentially, as it turned out, since you evidently can't keep a good megalomaniac psychopath down."

In the summer sunshine, it was possible for Hermione to summon a laugh at that.

"Good job we proved him wrong second time around, don't you think?" she said, pouring more coffee and passing Severus *pain au chocolat* to dispel the face she had always strictly in the privacy of her own head called 'Mr Grumpypants'. She had too many memories of Monday morning Potions class to want to see that one very often.

"Now, finish your breakfast and go away and be useful somewhere while I think about how to bully your brothers into some semblance of good order."

"After Potter and Weasley, they should be a doddle."

"Be nice."

Hermione put her mug down. The time had come to set things in motion.

"May I speak with the house-elves, please?" she said to the empty kitchen. After all, it was hardly poltergeists doing the cooking.

Accustomed to the discretion of Ministry elves, Hermione was unprepared for what sounded like a barrage of machine gun fire.

"If the Mistress would like to come out from under the table and get on with whatever it is she feels she has to say to us, then we might be able to get back to ~~ow~~work."

This did not sound like the sort of elf Hermione had met before. This voice sounded as though its owner had had the meaning of the word 'obliging' explained in full, had examined all the ramifications, expounded at length on their philosophical lacunae, shredded them into hamster bedding, and buried them in the muck heap.

In other words, it sounded like a Snape.

Hermione had been rather nervous about handling elves, but Snapes were another matter entirely.

She crawled out from under the table and took her time straightening her clothes before facing what turned out to be a row of eleven elves, variously attired in clean pillowcases, teatowel-togas, and hessian sacks which, in the case of two elves, were accessorised with wellington boots bearing traces of steaming manure. (It was later explained that wellies were not, as many people erroneously suspected, items of clothing they were 'protective equipment' and thus allowable under the Elvish Code of Practice [Rural Appendix].) All twenty-two large, green eyes were regarding her challengingly. An elf whose embroidered pillowcase strained slightly around his belly stood slightly in front of the others, his arms crossed.

"Good morning," she said politely, ignoring the obvious. "Who among you is in charge, please?"

Two of the other elves sniggered.

"I am the Optio, Mistress," said the embroidered elf, bristling.

"Optio? Oh! The centurion's aide!" Hermione exclaimed. "I see the Prince enthusiasm for Roman history extends beyond just naming my brothers."

One of the other elves pricked an ear she supposed it was the equivalent of an eyebrow raise for a creature that didn't have any and nodded slightly.

"And what is your name, Optio?"

"We goes by our titles, Mistress," he said firmly. Arms still folded, he jerked his head towards the others. "Them's Primus, Secunda, Tertius, Quartus..."

"I think she's got the picture, Optio," interrupted one of the others.

"Show some respect, you!" snapped Optio.

"Why?" asked Secunda in a perfectly reasonable tone. "Just 'cause you inherited the title don't make you the boss."

"Yes it bloody does!"

Hermione felt things were getting a little out of hand.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, and ladies! Time is passing and we have work to do."

That got their attention. Mentioning work to a house-elf was like dangling manticore spawn in front of Hagrid. Hermione cleared her throat nervously. She hated beginning with a criticism.

"Erm, I have noticed that although many rooms here are very clean and tidy many of the rooms used as work spaces are... er... not."

"That's not *my* bloody fault," muttered the Optio, his ears drooping. The others shuffled their feet.

"Optio, I suspect that had you and your cohort been given the opportunity, the disorder in the workrooms would be less pronounced..."

"They haven't let us do nowt for a month!" squeaked the elf ninth in line, smallest, stringiest, and twisting a feather duster between her hands. "And those of us that weren't off in Russia with the young maisters had too much with the inside of the 'owse to get t' outside looking nice...."

Hermione gaped.

"They made all that mess in a *month*?"

"Well, to be fair, Mistress," said Primus, "Master Severus has had since the end of the war to construct that papier mache rat's nest he calls an office. He claims it's a 'system'."

Hermione snorted.

"Am I right in thinking that you have had direct instructions from my brothers not to touch the rooms in which they work?"

"Yes, Mistress," chorused the elves in tones ranging from embarrassment to bitterness.

"Am I right in thinking that it is an affront to house-elf honour to allow such mess to go untouched?"

They straightened hopefully. She began to feel oratorical.

"Am I right in thinking that as Mistress of this house, I outrank them all?"

"Yes, MISTRESS!" they shouted. There were tears in the Optio's eyes.

"Well, then, first I'm going to set you to committing a little light burglary, and then here's what we're going to do..."

*

"Severus? I'm going into London is there anything you need?"

He looked thoroughly absorbed in observing the progress of whatever he had brewing in a polished steel cauldron. Even his nose looked focused when he concentrated like that, Hermione noticed. It was rather endearing. She waited for his answer. After a minute or two, he set the potion under stasis and looked up.

"I'll walk you to the gates and show you how to lower those wards," he said. "You can't ..."

"... Apparate here, any more than one can at Hogwarts. Yes, I worked that one out quite quickly. Belt, braces, gaiters and puttees, your grandfather. And you rather like it."

He snorted, but took her hand once they were outside.

"And why are you going back to London already, wife?"

"Shopping."

"I might have known," he sighed. He fished in his pocket. "Well, I suppose you might as well have the key to my fortune, such as it is. The goblins warned me this would happen."

Hermione laughed.

"I won't bankrupt you. I'm just going to Marks and Sparks for your brothers. At the moment I feel like I'm wandering round inside a bad production of Dostoyevsky. I shudder to think what they might be using for underwear ..."

"You're going to buy knickers for my brothers? They're going to love that."

He was evidently enjoying the prospect.

At the gates, Hermione surprised Severus with her demand for a kiss goodbye. She wondered, suddenly, if she was presuming too much on the night before.

"You're taking this marriage business very seriously, wife," he said, reaching for her hands after a moment's hesitation. "It's a little unexpected."

"I take everything very seriously, husband," she replied. "Oh, and you might want to ward your lab when you get back inside. I imagine it's going to get very noisy before long."

*

Hermione browsed the selection of men's underwear and wondered how her brothers-in-law were going to react to her admittedly uber-Gryffindor tactics. She hadn't for one moment considered anything like a subtle approach. Sitting at supper with them had convinced her very quickly that anything less than a full-out assault was going to be met with derision, argument and, as a last resort, petulant stonewalling. She had decided very quickly to simply bypass all that and show them what a big sister was all about. She had sent the elves to steal all the boys' clothes and place anti-Transfiguration wards (they were delighted to learn these, as the Snape men were notoriously cavalier about how they used their surroundings) on any fabrics that were easily available. She had prepared six large notices to be pinned to the inside of each bedroom door, informing the occupant that the locking spells in place would not yield to any magic wielded by a person not freshly washed and *shaved*. She'd made sure that last word was in large, red letters, and had added a few sparkles, just to add insult to injury. Finally, she had instructed the Optio that should any of the boys she had immediately lumped them into that category manage to break the locking spells without obeying her instructions, then they were not to be fed.

Boxers or briefs?

It was quite fun selecting a different colour for each brother.

Black for Severus, of course.

Then an accidental trip to the lingerie department.

Whoops, was that a large book shop across the road?

Hermione decided that it was a) nice to have the time to actually shop, and b) that shopping, when one had the time, could even be pleasant.

*

Most of the initial round of shouting was over by the time Hermione returned. She found her brothers-in-law attired in a selection of frilly and flowery bed linens tied at random round their bodies, seated round the kitchen table partaking sulkily of what looked like a splendid lunch. Glowering left her unmoved, however, and she blithely took Severus' chair and helped herself to cold roast chicken and salad.

"I had no idea I'd married into such an attractive family," she said blithely.

Someone growled.

Well, to tell the truth, with the exception of the inexplicable Septimius, they were none of them classically handsome, and in the case of Seneca, downright fearsome to behold, but there was something ... Character, charisma? She examined them while they ate and refused to return her gaze.

Seneca, built (as Ron would say) like a brick shithouse, craggy and forbidding, with heavy brows and a lantern jaw, but blessed with *that* voice and charm in bucketloads when he chose to exercise it. The man for whom the term *joli-laid* had been coined.

Salvius, the one who had received the most unadulterated expression of the Snape nose, and whose obvious difficulty in tearing that appendage out of his book in order to remember to scowl endeared him to Hermione.

Scribonius, a devilish glint in his dark eyes, and clever hands for scattering the runes, shuffling the Tarot, and arranging the stems of mallow and hogweed for the divinatory fires.

Sejanus, lounging like a panther, looking as though he were just waiting for the next opportunity to pounce with the most cutting remark he could think of.

Sidney, tawny and amber, the most similar to Severus in feature, but a Severus hewn from golden sandstone rather than black iron. He was toying with the salad leaves, arranging them by size and variety a gastronomic taxonomy.

And lastly, Septimius, blessed with all the looks and sunny disposition that had passed the others by; as enthusiastic as Hagrid about every animal that existed; and a true Hufflepuff if ever there was one. No wonder they all called him "Timmy".

And now, all of them hers to shape into something that could move in British wizarding society without breaking anything important.

"So," she said, "first things first. I've bought decent clothes for all of you, so you won't look like a bundle of scarecrows any more. I had to guess at sizes, but I'm sure a little foolish wand-waving will fix that. We will reconvene in the library in half an hour, and I'll tell you what's going to happen next."

*

One week of relentless bullying later, Hermione felt she deserved another trip into town. Harry and Ron had been exhausting at the best of times, but a houseful of Snapes, while offering more in terms of stimulating conversation, almost had her beating her head to a pulp at the end of each day. If it hadn't been for Severus, whose habit of authority swayed even his brothers occasionally, and the unswerving devotion of the house-elves (the Optio, discovering a passion for stationery supplies, had cleared out a back scullery and plastered the walls with charts, pinboards, and every colour of sticky-note known to creation, leaving Hermione no alternative but to place him in charge

of the details of organising the house while she held onto the 'big picture' role by the skin of her teeth), she would probably have given up at the end of the first afternoon.

The one ray of sunshine was that when, frazzled from shouting down Salvius over the importance of cataloguing the library (while the elf Tertius quietly got on with the job) or from browbeating the others into agreeing that some sort of *system* would help them actually to integrate their various fields of expertise, she was able to escape to Severus' work space. There, they talked over his plans for the future, and he even, after several large hints were dropped, let her begin to sort out his office.

Hermione was beginning to have a few ideas for her own role in the enterprise, and now she wanted to equip her own work space, which was what she told Septimius when he bumped into her leaving the house.

"Oooh, can I come?" he asked.

"It's really going to be very boring," she said repressively.

"But you're going to need someone to help carry things, aren't you?" he pleaded.

He gave her his most melting look, made all the worse by the fact he had no idea he was doing it.

"Oh, all right, then. Wash your hands, first, though you've been feeding the Thestrals."

The next thing she knew, he'd charged into the house yelling, "Hermione's going to town! Who's coming?" and she had a full escort of six men, all trying very hard not to look excited about their first trip to Diagon Alley. It was, she supposed, rather gratifying to be thus accompanied they were an impressive bunch but somewhere inside, there was a Very Bad Feeling growing.

"Just remember," she said, "behave yourselves."

And they tried. She had to give them that.

She had brought them to Weasleys, as she wanted both to give them an idea of the competition and to see Ginny. Ginny squealed and dragged her to the coffee shop where she bombarded her with questions while Hermione attempted to keep a weather eye out for trouble. Septimius followed her and almost immediately fell into conversation with Luna, who had spotted a Vrugoi hovering above his left shoulder.

The other Snape brothers looked about them with interest, but they seemed to find nothing more fascinating than the young women who wandered to and fro, casting curious looks at the strangers.

Too late, Hermione saw that a small group of girls was drifting purposefully towards her brothers-in-law.

She saw Sejanus poke Sidney and hiss, "Go on say something."

She saw Sidney shove his hand in his trouser pocket and say ...

"Want to see my Gargantua nuts?"

Six: Going courting

Chapter 6 of 11

Severus Snape has decided he needs a wife, and Hermione is the lucky woman he picks for the job. But he hasn't told her everything she needs to know...

Seven Brides for Seven Snapes 6: Going courting

There was silence. A heavy sort of silence. The sort of silence that defined the word "ominous".

The Snapes were regarding the three young women with interest. These latter persons seemed to be competing for how round they could make their eyes and mouths go.

A young man and his friends rushed forward.

"Are you insulting my sisters?" he said, entirely too pugnaciously for Hermione's liking.

"No he wasn't," said Seneca, pushing to the front. "He was just offering her a look at his nuts. And last time I saw them I thought they were mighty fine nuts, too!"

Oh, Circe preserve me from boys' humour, prayed Hermione.

And from testosterone, she added a moment later, when the first hex flew.

Within thirty seconds, that part of the shop floor looked as though the Visigoths had been through and stopped to party. Seneca stood easily parrying a barrage of hexes and jinxes from the three young men, and returning a well-aimed stinger now and again, while his grinning brothers egged him on. Septimius turned around to see what was happening.

"Hey, it's us!" he said, pleased, to Hermione but her stool was already empty.

She skirted the magical maelstrom and shouted at her brothers, "Do something!"

"What for?" queried Scribonius. "There's only three little ones!"

Hermione growled and cast a protection charm on herself before diving in. Despite the strength of her magic, she was severely buffeted by the curses bouncing off her shield. She grabbed Seneca's wand arm.

"Stop it! Stop it at once!" she yelled.

He ducked a hex that sneaked through his distraction and smashed a display of crystal balls, spraying shards that ripped into the walls around them.

"Stop it!" she shrieked again.

"Really, Hermione?" he said mildly. "Very well." And with three well-placed Stunning Spells, his opponents collapsed to the floor.

Hermione was breathing hard, her hair crackling with barely-controlled magic and her wand sparking.

"You ... *You* Just get out. Get. Out. All of you. Go home at once."

She turned her back on them and did not look up from her clenched fists until she had heard their footsteps crunching across the floor to the shop's Apparition point, followed by six loud cracks.

When she did raise her head, her heart sank even further. The level of destruction was beyond words. The walls were gouged, curtains shredded even the near side of the coffee shop had not been spared, and stuffing oozed from rips in the upholstered seats stands overturned, goods ruined, potions sets, charms kits, and a display of miniature magical pets were jumbled together apparently producing new forms of life (George was already taking notes) ... And so it went on.

Her shoulders rigid with the effort of keeping some measure of control, she turned her mortified and enraged gaze to her friend.

"Ginny, I am so, so, sorry. I'll listen, just send me the bill for the damage and I'll take it out of their sorry hides. And tell me what I can do to help you with the immediate repairs."

Ginny stepped gingerly across and gave Hermione a tentative hug.

"Hey it's not your fault. I won't pretend we can't use a bit of help with this, and tidying messes always calms you down, but I can see you have your hands full. Don't take it too hard, Hermione."

Luna drifted over and patted the top of Hermione's head.

"Anyway, it wasn't your brothers who did most of this," she said. She nudged one of the three prone young men with her toe. "These are the ones who were throwing the dangerous spells around."

"Yes," said Ginny grimly. She scowled at them. "Goyle's little brother, an Avery cousin and ... Don't know this one, but he has a look of the Notts about him. I should get the Aurors out."

"Oh, please don't!" Hermione wailed. "I don't want Severus and his brothers involved in anything official!"

"Calm down," said Luna. "They're well protected they'll sail through any trouble. Oh, yes," she added earnestly, seeing Hermione's sardonic look, "they're absolutely swarming with Vrugoi. Protective spirits a bit like fairies, but not nearly as pretty. Which is appropriate, I suppose, because your brothers are really quite ugly. Impressive, of course, but mostly rather ugly, and I doubt very much that they would like the thought of being covered in pretty things."

Ginny rolled her eyes; Hermione giggled. Then she laughed. Then she laughed until tears ran down her face.

"Only three little ones," she gasped. "Wait until I tell Severus! But I'm going to let them stew for a bit. Let's get this lot cleared up, shall we?"

*

It was a chastened bunch of brothers who greeted Hermione when she returned that afternoon. Of course, they were all doing their utmost to act as though nothing untoward had occurred, but the act was just that little bit too nonchalant to fool her. Or, for that matter, to fool their brother.

"So, are you going to tell me what happened, or am I going to have to hex it out of somebody?" Severus asked her when he came into the kitchen just as she was unloading her shopping onto the table.

"Hello, dear. Nice to see you. Have you had a good day?" She gave him a peck on the cheek and turned to give a new pack of sticky-notes and some fine-tipped coloured pens to an ecstatic Optio.

"Hermione," he warned.

"What?" she said innocently. It was quite enjoyable seeing even Sejanus squirming with ill-concealed anxiety behind his brother's shoulder.

"There's always Veritaserum," he said.

"Oh, Severus," she pouted. She looked up at him through her eyelashes and fiddled with one of his jacket buttons. "Don't you have better methods of persuasion available down in your lair ...?"

It was just as much fun seeing Severus unable to decide whether to strut or cringe at being publicly flirted with.

"Come on, husband. I've got a whole load of supplies for your lab here. We can unpack them while you interrogate me." She thrust a wooden box into his arms, picked up another, and headed towards the cellar stairs, hips swinging.

The crates forgotten, Hermione reflected that such 'interrogation' could very well be the stuff of a Weasley Patented Daydream not that she was about to let them anywhere near her private life. It was a very good thing that she and Severus had thought to ward his lab against both intrusion and eavesdropping. He still kept a little distance in many respects, but their love life was, she suspected, proving something of a revelation to them both.

And there was, of course, the added benefit of sparing his brothers the outburst of braying laughter when she described to him what had happened.

"What I don't understand," she said when he had mastered himself, "is why they should be awkward like that. I mean it was almost as if they'd never seen a girl, the way they were behaving."

"How much do you know about the Molotov Institute?" Severus asked.

"Nothing, aside from its being in Russia. I couldn't find anything at all in the usual sources. Not one mention." She turned over in his arms from where they had been spooned together and looked into his dark eyes, thinking that she would never tire of the opportunity she had of being this close to him.

His arms tightened a little.

"I'm not surprised. The Institute protects its identity even more closely than Durmstrang. And while it offers the highest level of education and practical training in all the magical arts, it is also run on strict monastic lines, as in ..."

"As in, no girls. Ye gods." She stared at him, appalled. "Oh, no please don't tell me I've got six barely-controlled, fully-grown, magically powerful virgins on my hands?"

He snorted.

"I doubt very much that they're virgins, Hermione, except where girls are concerned so I suppose you're right."

"How old is Seneca?"

"Thirty-six."

"Oh, Merlin."

She arranged for vast quantities of chocolate ice cream to be served for dessert that evening.

*

"I've been thinking," announced Hermione a couple of days later.

"What you?" said Sidney, but without bite. All of the boys had been going out of their way to be nice to Hermione since she had, as they evidently believed, not told Severus the whole truth.

"Yes, me," she replied. She tapped the envelope she was holding. It was a nice envelope, made of creamy vellum, with a sinuous silvery-green decoration embossed around its edges and on the flap at the back. It was an envelope that announced, "I contain something very impressive." It was an envelope that screamed money. It was addressed to "Mrs Hermione Snape" in perfect copperplate handwriting, and the dark green seal glinted with real gold dust that was mixed in with the wax. It looked affronted by the butter stain that marred the perfection of its surface.

Hermione took another bite of toast and Marmite and chased it down with some tea.

"Do you know what this is?" she asked everyone in general.

Severus raised his eyes briefly from the book he had propped against the orange juice Hermione's heavily annotated and sticky-noted copy of *Hogwarts: A History*, her hobby and lifetime's ambition: the unexpurgated edition.

"It looks like something from the Malfoys," he said. "I trust you've checked it for jinxes?"

"Of course I have. Nothing major."

"So what is it?" Septimius said eagerly.

"It's an invitation to the annual charity garden party at Malfoy Manor," said Hermione. She found she was having difficulty suppressing a grin.

Severus grimaced.

"You're not seriously considering going, are you?" He stirred four sugars into his black coffee. "It'll be ghastly Narcissa has taken to inviting the whole bloody world to this thing in an effort to make the Malfoys look respectable again. Cucumber sandwiches and anodyne cocktails full of fruit salad, simpering debutantes flirting with spotty boys, and the hosts' gruesome attempts to schmooze all the people they tried to kill a mere few years ago."

"But you go every year you said so."

"Of course I do. I know where Lucius keeps the good whisky."

"I don't see what this has to do with us," put in Sejanus. "We're not invited."

Hermione slipped the invitation out of the envelope, which she dropped unceremoniously into a blob of marmalade that remained on her plate. She leaned back in her chair and smiled round.

"Oh, but you *are*," she said.

Severus frowned.

"What are you up to, Hermione? You don't play around with the Malfoys, you know."

"Then Narcissa should be more careful how she phrases her invitations. She's done this the old-fashioned way, woman to woman, you know. '*Mrs Hermione Snape and escort are cordially invited blah blah blah*' ..." Hermione grinned. "She doesn't define *whom* I may take as my 'escort', nor *how many* my escort may comprise."

They looked at her a little blankly.

"Ta-daaaaaah!" she added.

"You can't be serious," said Severus.

"Oh, yes I am," she retorted. "But before we go ..." She looked critically at her brothers again. "... I'm going to teach you how to talk to girls."

"Good luck."

"Shut up, Severus. If you can talk to girls well, to your wife at least so can they. I won't permit another disaster like last time."

There was a little shuffling of feet on the quarry tiles under the table and an exchange of glances.

"Hermione," said Salvius, for once the brother to speak up, "what did we do wrong?"

"Do we have a mirror in the house?" she asked. "A really big one one we can see all of you in at the same time?"

"Seneca might have one," replied Sejanus slyly.

The others snorted.

"Do you have a mirror, Seneca?"

"Come on, Hermione," Sejanus answered before Seneca could. "Let's show you what ugly-puss here might be able to offer us in the way of a looking glass."

She cast a puzzled look at her largest brother but shrugged and allowed them to herd her out of the kitchen.

They trooped up the fine wooden staircase to the first floor, making a terrible pounding noise that had Hermione adding carpeting to her mental list of home improvements, then down a portrait-lined corridor characterised chiefly by sleeping and sneering, and up a further flight of stairs to a long gallery that was new to Hermione. It seemed to run the length of one wing of the house and was illuminated by large windows all along one side. She recognised it as the sort of room that would originally have been used

for taking exercise when the weather was foul. Their footsteps were dampened by a simple canvas covering over the floorboards, but their voices echoed loudly in the otherwise nearly empty space.

Nearly empty, for ranged here and there along the wall facing the windows, against the wall in between the windows, taking up the entire wall at the far end of the long room, and even free-standing here and there, were ... mirrors.

Large, small, massive, minuscule, there were mirrors everywhere. Hermione fought not to flinch too openly. She wasn't a fan of her own reflection at the best of times, but at eight in the morning with her hair screwed haphazardly on the top of her head, she wasn't enjoying seeing about a hundred Hermiones cringing back at her. The effect wasn't helped by the Hermiones being lost in a forest of enormous, large-nosed men.

"Whu ...?" she said articulately.

"Oh, you've only seen his office workspace, Hermione. This is Seneca's special project." Severus pushed through the throng to put his arm round her shoulders and ushered her to a mirror that didn't actually reflect anything more definite than cloudy suggestions of forms. "Did you ever see Moody's foe-glass?" he asked.

She shook her head, peering closely. Something else was moving there, beneath the surface.

"I understand the idea behind it, though. Is this a foe-glass? I can't make it out very well."

"It's something like that it's ..."

"I've made some improvements, Severus," said his brother. "Look at this one."

He tugged at a piece of cloth that was draped over another mirror. It slid off the glass to reveal a blurred bird's-eye view of the interior of Weasleys Wizard Wheezes.

"It helps when I've actually seen what I'm trying to connect to. Or perhaps it's contact with the people I haven't quite worked that one out yet. Could be both."

"Good work," said Severus laconically. "As you know, Hermione, Seneca is our Charms expert, and he is, as you see, using his talents to ..."

"Spy on the opposition," she finished. "Clever!"

Seneca preened a little.

"And of course," added Scribonius, "while I'm planning our strategy based partially on what he gleans here, he can strut up and down in front of the ~~real~~ mirrors admiring his ugly mug and speechifying."

"Shut your face, planet-boy."

"Seneca's also our PR man," Severus supplied as he settled himself into a shabby armchair with his book. "The voice, you know ..."

"Perfect," smiled Hermione, placing herself bodily between Public Relations and Strategy. "Now ... Okay, let's go and look in the big mirror over there. Come on, all of you."

She chivvied them down the long room to stand in front of the huge, gilt-framed looking-glass.

"So what do you see, gentlemen? Salvius, put the book back in your pocket and concentrate."

Sidney shrugged idly.

"I see us," he shrugged idly. "I see us all the time it's not a particularly arresting sight."

"That's where you are wrong," Hermione contradicted him. "Just look at yourselves at you as a group. You're tall, you're striking-looking ..." Further down the room, Severus snorted. "... you're all powerful and show it in the way you hold yourselves you are, in fact, a very impressive, even intimidating, sight."

She took a breath.

"Now try to imagine how people are going to react when you burst onto the scene."

She turned to their reflection and took another objective look. She was more or less used to them by now, but well, they were quite breathtaking. Individually, each one was attractive in a dangerous way (Septimius excepted), arrogant in that Mr Rochester fashion (Septimius excepted), obviously intelligent (Septimius usually kept his brains hidden under a simpleton's smile) ... Septimius was just drop-dead gorgeous. As a group, they were as irresistible as a phalanx of Soviet tanks. So the girls they met would swoon and flirt, and the local boys would get out their testosterone, polish and sharpen it, and wave it around.

Now all she had to do plaster some manners over the top.

"Now, listen when you go out in society here and start talking to young women, one thing you have to remember is that, like those girls in the shop, they have men and boys who are with them and are interested in them, too."

"Oh, we'll deal with them quickly enough," said Seneca. His brothers made noises of agreement.

"NO! You can't do that! Those men are their friends, family, maybe boyfriends people they know! You can't just waltz in, hex the opposition and grab a girl like a piece of cake! You've got to behave like gentlemen show them that you're more the gentleman than the men they're with. Oh um ... Look, pretend I'm a girl stop leering, Sejanus and say good morning to me, holding out your hands to shake."

They all made a very creditable show of it, except Sidney, who looked suddenly uncomfortable, and stuck his hands in his jeans pockets.

"What's the matter, Sidney?"

"My hands are muddy."

Severus snorted again, loudly.

"Well, never mind that. Then you have to think of something nice to say. Septimius why don't you try?"

Septimius looked momentarily blank, then, "Nice night for trapping stink-adders," he blurted.

Severus guffawed loudly and closed the book, abandoning all pretence of reading.

"Give it up, Hermione! You're never going to make gentlemen of this bunch of louts."

"You're no help at all, Severus! Now go away go on!" She hauled him out of the chair and pushed him bodily out of the room, waiting until they were out of range of the mirrors to grin and give him a kiss. "Vamoose! Just wait and see what I can do!"

"Foolhardy Gryffindor."

She returned to her task.

"Right. Sidney and the rest of you I don't think you can assume from the outset that a woman is going to want to plunge into a conversation about *your* enthusiasms. You need to say something to her *about* her. Salvius, why don't you try?"

Salvius, who was usually quiet to the point of being withdrawn, looked put-upon, but nothing was to stand in the way of Hermione's will.

"Er I'm delighted to meet you?" he tried.

"Excellent. Now, given that our wizarding world is a bit socially prehistoric, you could try offering me your arm as we walk."

And so it continued, for the next two hours, until,

"And now for the dancing."

Their appalled reaction took her right back to her fourth year and McGonagall's desperate efforts to get the boys to move at all, never mind moving with the music.

"Oh, come on! The Malfoys always have dancing at these events it's as much cattle-market as charity do, and a prime opportunity to size up the livestock ..."

"I'm surprised to hear you referring to other members of your sex that way," remarked Sidney. "I thought you were some sort of feminist revolutionary."

"I wasn't referring to the women, Sidney," she replied smoothly. "Come on, then let's put you through your paces. I assume they do dance in Novgorod?"

Seneca called the elf Secunda to bring the radio and they found a station playing dance music. Much to Hermione's relief, they did show some skill, though clasping each other round the waist proved a bit of an obstacle at first. She watched from the sidelines as they performed a reluctant waltz, a grim foxtrot, and refused to attempt anything latin, but then when the band struck up a lively polka, she felt they really needed to practice with a live girl.

"Come on, Septimius," she called, and showed him the first steps. It was true he moved much more lightly with her in his arms. She was passed swiftly to Scribonius, then to Sejanus, and after that it became a chaotic whirl as the brothers showed her what a man educated in Russia calls a dance.

Whoops! I'm in the boys' half of the playground now, she thought as she was physically thrown from one man to the next, while the others whirled and kicked around them. Eventually, they collapsed and calmed.

"Well," said Sejanus, spinning to sit elegantly on the floor, "I think we're ready."

Seven: Barn Dance

Chapter 7 of 11

Severus Snape has decided he needs a wife, and Hermione is the lucky woman he picks for the job. But he hasn't told her everything she needs to know...

Seven Brides for Seven Snapes 7: Barn Dance

Severus twitched his cuffs so that the merest quarter-inch of white showed, then turned to the mirror to check his black silk cravat and do up the last few buttons. Hermione had persuaded him to let his hair grow so he could tie it back, which he found suited him, despite exposing more of his face than either he or the world was accustomed to seeing. Mr Stitch had done his best work at that price, Severus would have removed the man's entrails and personally embroidered rude words on them if he'd done anything less than the best and the new suit was perfect. Severus knew he was by no means beautiful, but height and carriage, good shoulders and a bucketload of attitude filled out excellent tailoring to produce something he felt Hermione would approve of.

It rather surprised him that her approval had become significant.

Still, he supposed one couldn't live with a woman, share her work, watch her take chaos in hand and make something like order out of it, without her assuming some importance in one's life. And while her recklessly straightforward approach to problems sometimes gave him pause, he'd been proved right in his choice time and again. How prescient of him.

And of course, there was the amazing and frequent sex, which put a spring in his step that he had to work hard to disguise.

And, surprisingly, the companionship. A week into their marriage, Hermione had claimed one of the smaller parlours as 'theirs'. She had ruthlessly removed any furnishings she didn't like, with no regard whatsoever to family history (the Optio had been very obstructive until she made a gift to him of the utterly vile orange crystal and silver epergne; Secunda and Octavus, however, were rapidly becoming her devoted slaves), scavenged whatever she fancied from all corners of the house, filled the walls with books, scattered cushions in every conceivable colour everywhere, and named it a 'snug'. His brothers were given to understand that they were not welcome there except in circumstances of direst emergency. And in that room Hermione had shown Severus the most extraordinary thing of all: that she apparently liked to be with him. "Snug" had never been a term he had particularly understood nor felt the need to understand before now, but she was working changes.

Of course, he wasn't entirely sure that unauthorised changes were part of the arrangement he had envisioned when proposing. He raised his chin and scowled down his nose at his reflection. Good. Still as intimidating as ever.

Hermione sneaked her arms around his waist from behind and peeped mischievously round his arm.

"Gorgeous," she said.

"Hardly."

"Oh, but you are. Do the 'you are a flobberworm beneath my heel' expression again!"

Severus rolled his eyes.

"Dare I hope, Hermione, that you are going to at least pretend a proper respect for me in public?"

"There is always hope, Severus."

She shoved him aside so she could hog the mirror, and thus he was able to conceal the surprise her last words had engendered. She might even be right.

Well, even if she was completely wrong, there was at least satisfaction. He could live with that. And, looking at her in her finery, he knew there would be a great deal of satisfaction during the day ahead, rubbing everyone's noses in his success. He went to stand behind her as she did a last check of her make-up. She was wearing a dress in some sort of pale russet tone that clung and swirled rather attractively, with shoes and a short jacket in cream. His wife. He placed the string of amber beads he had bought for her around her throat, fumbling a little with the clasp under her unruly hair. Yes, satisfaction, that was it, he thought as she turned to kiss him in thanks, heedless of her lipstick.

They found the boys waiting at the foot of the main staircase. The front door had been forced open for the grand occasion, and the late summer sun flooded the wide entrance hall, warming the newly-polished floor and glinting on the glass in the picture frames. Standing in the warm light, Severus' brothers, dressed exactly like him in severe black with their hair tied back, looked like monoliths hewn out of coal. They would shock the wizarding world, bursting on the scene like this. Walking among them, inspecting their outfits, smoothing a shoulder here and there or counselling the doing-up of just one more button, Hermione was like a ray of the sunshine that she had bulldozed into the old house seemingly fragile, but fierce and inexorable. Severus felt another rush of that... satisfaction.

Hermione stood back and admired her handiwork.

"Very nice," she said approvingly. "Now remember you're on your best behaviour, and that's with capital Bs. No rising to any provocation. We're going to show that the Snapes are better than the lot of them. Ready?"

Severus left his vantage point half-way up the stairs, reflecting agreeably that at least he had not succumbed to the docility that had his entire pack of little brothers nodding seriously. He offered his arm to Hermione.

"Shall we go?"

*

Whatever his doubts about Hermione's course of action, Severus was secretly delighted at seeing Lucius' and Narcissa's jaws drop as he and his family Apparated ~~in~~ *masse* onto the terrace at Malfoy Manor. They had, of course, known for weeks that he had brothers the *Prophet* had squeezed some juicy headlines from the Diagon Alley disaster but coming face to face with the reality was, judging by their expressions, rather like being smacked over the head with a wet haddock. Clearly, he would have to race Lucius to the whisky stash.

"Mrs Malfoy," Hermione was saying graciously, "I *do* hope you won't take it amiss that I brought rather a large escort, but you see, I was keen that my brothers should have their first experience of British wizarding society in the very best circumstances."

Narcissa snapped her perfectly painted mouth shut and glared elegantly. The boys looked as grim as a Russian winter, which meant they were nervous. Lucius had that twitch in his cheek which meant he was about to start giggling. Merlin, it was going to be a long day.

"I'm delighted to meet ... all ... your brothers, Mrs Snape," said Narcissa tightly. "Ah, I see the Minister. Do excuse me."

Hermione, quite used to being snubbed by pure-blood snobs, took it with a mere glint of the eyes and turned her smile on Lucius.

"Might we know where to put our contributions to the charity auction, please?"

But Lucius, damn him, had followed in his wife's wake, leaving Hermione to shrug and Severus and his brothers to bristle.

"It's okay don't get all steamed up on my account, please," she said grimly. "Let's just show them who's got more breeding, shall we? Now, where do we put these things?" She gestured to the assorted magical wonders, trinkets all, but pretty and clever, that they had created for the occasion. They looked around, and Severus was slightly taken aback to see a small posse of young women approaching, their eyes fixed firmly on his brothers even as they greeted Hermione.

Ginny Weasley was at the head of the group. Hermione received a peck on the cheek and a brief whisper in her ear, which made her chuckle, before the Weasley girl tucked her hand into Seneca's elbow. "I'll show you where to put it," she said, too innocently for Severus' liking. She'd always been an unruly wench at school. Seneca didn't look remotely put out, however.

"I'd be very much obliged. Thank you," he replied, turning on the Voice and bowing slightly.

Severus watched dismayed as, one by one, his brothers were led away, meekly uttering courteous platitudes, by Cho Chang, the Patil twins, Lavender Brown, and Luna Lovegood, the last-named already promising Septimius a glimpse of the Rambastuous Blintoats in the Malfoys' lily pond.

"Severus, close your mouth," admonished Hermione. She smiled up at him happily. "You know, it wouldn't harm you to learn a few manners either."

He claimed her hand and raised it to his lips.

"What do I need manners for? I've already got a wife!"

She laughed. "Abominable man. Now come along and pretend to be a human being, and I promise I'll treat you with a proper awe and respect."

"I shall enjoy watching you try not to implode from the effort, Hermione. Lead on. Lead on to purgatory."

*

What amazed Severus most about the next hour was the way Hermione effortlessly negotiated wizarding society, exchanging small talk, arranging conversations so that he was obliged to contribute the absolute minimum, deflecting most of the people he really didn't want to talk to, and delicately not stepping in when a truly barbed comment was justified. He was beginning to wonder whether the person on his arm was some sort of changeling, when she said, "Merlin, all this socialising with morons gives me a headache. I'd forgotten how much I hated it back at the Ministry." She snagged a glass of orange juice from a passing house elf and knocked it back. "Severus, take me to the dance floor before I bite someone!"

He had no inclination to dance, personally, but the suggestion did have much to recommend it in that they were unlikely to have to talk to anyone else while waltzing under the apple trees.

Severus had become quite absorbed in the business of showing the world that yes, Snape really had married a young and pretty woman, yes, Snape could dance, and yes, Snape was capable of some amusing wandless magic while performing said dance with said pretty woman (Potter's suddenly slippery wine glass, which he was forced to juggle to a pleasing for Severus conclusion was particularly entertaining), when he became aware that his brothers had congregated nearby and were looking speculatively at the young women who were already twirling with their respective partners. Surveying the field, he saw nothing but a depressingly large number of his former students, and promptly rebelled against sharing the space with them. He'd had enough of that at Hogwarts, and while Albus and the others might have thought it 'fun' to 'spend relaxing time' with the brats, he himself would rather try talking philosophy with a Skrewt. He steered Hermione to a loveseat and drew her down beside him.

"It's nice to see everyone again," she said, watching the dancers.

"I thought you just said you didn't like socialising..."

"I said 'see', not 'talk to'. I like to get an idea of how everyone's doing. It doesn't mean I want to spend three hours listening to Lavender and Parvati talk about the best spells for curling hair. I'm quite content to let Dean and Seamus put up with that," she said, gesturing to the two young men, who were looking glassy-eyed. "Mind you," she continued, "to be fair, Lavender and Parvati are capable of putting up an intelligent conversation once in a while. They're probably just taking revenge for hours of Quidditch and football talk."

She settled comfortably against Severus' side.

"You dance well," she said to him. "I'm glad. I see Harry and Neville still haven't improved since our fourth year." And indeed, Miss Weasley and the other Patil twin were wincing from crushed toes and unanticipated changes of direction.

"You will note, however, that my Slytherins are very capable," he replied smugly, as Draco whirled Miss Lovegood past, followed by Blaise Zabini with Cho Chang in his arms. "I enjoyed rubbing Minerva's nose in that after all the effort she put into trying to train her Gryffindors."

"How on earth did you get them to keep quiet about 'Severus Snape, Prancing Master'?" exclaimed Hermione, then adopted what he assumed was meant to be an imitation of his own voice. "There will be no foolish broomstick-waving in this class. I will teach you the subtle art and science of the pirouette..." Ouch!"

She giggled and fell silent.

Severus couldn't remember the last time in his life when someone had felt free to tease him like that. He leaned back in his seat, closed his eyes for a moment, and put his arm round Hermione's shoulder. He opened them again when the music changed and he felt Hermione tense.

His brothers had moved forward with the clear aim of inviting the young women, who looked far from unkeen, to dance. It wasn't surprising, in the face of the approaching phalanx of tall, black-clad echoes of everyone's second-favourite bogeyman, that the local boys (so to speak) quickly scooped up their partners into a romping polka, leaving them little choice but to dance along or be dragged across the floor in a most ungainly fashion. Hermione was as tense as a cat about to spring, but to Severus' surprise, his brothers simply lounged, patently waiting to pounce, but with a show of nonchalance that impressed even him.

Ginny Weasley was the first to free herself, twisting away from Potter to catch hold of Seneca's outstretched hand. Then, one by one, the others followed suit, leaving their rejected swains to grumble while the Snapes danced. Amusing as it was to see Potter and Malfoy in cahoots, and although he had no doubts that his brothers could squash any opposition, Severus was aware that Hermione was winding up to a pitch of anxiety.

"Should I intervene?" he inquired as Zabini managed to snag Chang back from Salvius.

"Not yet," she answered tightly.

She got up and beckoned to Salvius. She placed a hand on his arm. "Well done," she said. "*You* didn't grab at her or hang on when it might have hurt her. I'm proud of you. And, if it's any comfort," she added, assessing the other girl's face, "I think she's thinking exactly the same thing, and Zabini's going to find his privates hexed inside out unless he does some very fast talking. That is *not* the way to treat a witch these days."

Severus was content to let Hermione manage the situation. There was no way he was going to get embroiled in a hormone-fuelled diplomatic nightmare. Besides, it wasn't his brothers doing the pouting. Chang had finished the dance by turning her back on Zabini and returning to Salvius with a radiant smile; none of the other girls had abandoned her partner. Snapes, one; rest of the world, nil.

And then George Weasley had to show up with the brilliant idea of an impromptu Quidditch tournament, on which bets would be taken, the bookie's profits to go to the charity of the day. And Lucius had to be drunk enough to think it a charming idea. And Draco had to mention that he had a shed full of racing brooms he was testing for his company's next issue. And Potter had to repossess the Weasley girl's hand and say pointedly, "Well, those Snapes are a ready-made team all by themselves. How about we make another, lads?"

*

All Hermione said after she lifted her face from her hands was, "Just play fair, please, whatever happens." She went to join the other young women, who clustered round her, whispering excitedly. Severus saw her turn towards him once, her expression at once woebegone and hopeful, as she gave him a half-smile. He nodded curtly and drew his brothers with him towards the field where Draco had his practice hoops set up.

"You heard her," he growled.

"Yes, brother, we did," said Seneca grimly.

"Besides," said Sejanus, "there are ways of fouling that are really difficult to spot even for the expert referees."

"Your word all of you," insisted Severus. "We are here to start building a reputation. The chicanery only starts once everyone believes in us. Got it?"

"Anyway," Septimius said as he laid his jacket aside on a bench, "we won't need to cheat. You know that last season we beat Mongolia, China, Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Liechtenstein Who else was there?" He looked to Scribonius.

"You really do miss girls in Novgorod, don't you?" Severus muttered. Then, aloud, "Who was your seventh?"

"Ivan the Inexorable," Scrib replied. "Name adopted to make up for the fact that it's really Ivan Buttercup," he added, on seeing Severus' raised eyebrow. "He was our Keeper."

"I shall endeavour to be equally inexorable. Just keep the bloody Quaffle at the other end. I haven't played for years."

He started to lead them onto the pitch, but then stopped.

"Oh, and don't forget we win."

The offer of a ride on the new 'Greased Lightning' in exchange for refereeing the match brought Hooch smartly out of the bushes where she had been cavorting with Gwenog Jones. On her whistle, the fourteen players took to the air, Sejanus and Potter facing off as Seekers, Ron Weasley pasty-faced in front of the goal hoops at the far end, Sidney and Seneca armed with Beaters' bats, and Salvius, Scribonius and Septimius already flying rings round the other team as they passed the Quaffle tauntingly to and fro.

Severus found he enjoyed playing again, as long as the ball didn't come too close too often. He made a couple of easy saves, let one through, kicked the next right back into Longbottom's face, and felt he was cutting quite a dash. His brothers were humiliating the opposition, which was as it should be. But then things started to get nasty. Thomas and Finnigan were called three times for using their bats on players rather than on Bludgers. Zabini gratuitously fouled Septimius so badly that the boy had to sit out for ten minutes. Potter, trying to get away from Sejanus, made such a reckless swerve that he scratched cuts into Seneca's face with the tail of his broomstick. Severus knew his brothers were tough, so he restricted his retaliation to loud demands for more severe penalties. His brothers, clearly furious, kept their promise as well.

Good, thought Severus, as he cleared a badly-aimed shot from Draco. Such discipline boded well for future encounters in the field of business. Now if Sejanus would just get the Snitch, they could get off the pitch and rub their victory in the whelps' smug little faces.

Everything went black.

Eight: Sobbin' Women

Chapter 8 of 11

Severus Snape has decided he needs a wife, and Hermione is the lucky woman he picks for the job. But he hasn't told her everything she needs to know...

Seven Brides For Seven Snapes 8: Sobbin' Women

In the couple of seconds Severus was out of it, he'd dropped thirty feet and was listing badly, but he came to snarling and shaking his head like an angry bear. He barely heard Hermione's cry of "Oh, thank God!" as he shot back upwards, teeth bared. The new broomsticks had a satisfying turn of speed and, coupled with reflexes undimmed by armistice, facilitated the gratifying crunch as Severus drove his shoulder solidly into Dean Thomas at the very moment that Finnigan, the other beater, felt the heel of Seneca's size eleven dragonhide boot flatten his nose. After that, the fight was pretty much a given, as was the result seven down, Snapes victorious, and the Snitch nowhere in sight.

Severus, nursing a goose-egg and sore ribs as well as a bruised hand (wands, providentially, were not allowed in even informal Quidditch games), watched Hermione tend to his brothers' injuries, Octavus carrying her tray of medical supplies, while Secunda and Nona followed her around the kitchen table, doling out mugs of tea and analgesic potions. Nobody was speaking, and she had barely said a word since they had left Malfoy Manor. Her face was still white and her eyes shadowed. He wasn't used to seeing her soft lips pursed in a line that even McGonagall couldn't have achieved. She came to him last, bending forward and probing his head with gentle fingers. He winced and hissed. She put her hand, so very cold, under his chin and searched his eyes.

"Good, no concussion," she said. Her chin wobbled and she clamped her mouth shut again, reaching for the bruise paste. More went on his hand, and then she turned her back to take the tray from Octavus and put it on the counter.

Severus took his cup of tea and saw Hermione surreptitiously brush her hand across her eyes before she returned to the table. He thought uncomfortably that he'd never seen her cry like this before. When she was upset, she raged. These silent, suppressed tears were more difficult to shrug off.

Septimius gingerly patted her arm.

"We're sorry, Hermione. We really tried not to, but when those two sent both Bludgers straight at Severus from behind like that, when he wasn't even involved in all the other stuff..."

She sighed.

"I know, Timmy. You did your best. You all did your best. I suppose the provocation was just too much. I think you should all go and get a good night's sleep now."

Severus watched her wrap her fingers round the mug that Secunda pushed into her hands. That wonky mug he'd made when he was ten and that she'd claimed as her own. She never drank tea or coffee from anything else. She bowed her head to inhale the steam and her hair fell forward to hide her face.

He stood up gingerly as they trooped out.

"Hermione?"

"Hmm?" She didn't raise her head.

"I'm stepping outside for a few minutes to get some air. Are you coming?"

A slight shrug.

He went outside feeling disquieted. It had been an unsettling day, and now Hermione was unreachable. She was never unreachable. He tipped his head back and looked at the stars, admiring their cold light in the boundless sky. He moved a few steps into the stable yard to be further from the yellow glow of the kitchen windows. There were a few hay bales stacked against the tack-room wall, so he sat down again and rested his aching head against the brickwork.

Septimius came out of one of the nearby loose-boxes, where he was keeping an orphaned litter of silver leverets. He rubbed at his stomach and flopped down heavily next to his oldest brother.

"I feel bad, Severus."

"Hermione'll get over it."

"No, not about that, not really, it's..."

Severus thought Septimius was blushing, though it was impossible to tell in the darkness.

"Well, spit it out!"

"It's Luna! She's just so..."

"Borderline certifiable?"

"Don't be mean, Severus. She's extraordinary. She knows so much about all sorts of animals." Septimius laughed a little. "She took me to the Malfoys' lily pond to show me the Rambastuous Blintoats."

"There's no such thing, little brother," Severus snorted.

"That's just what I told her. And you know what she said?"

"I can hardly wait to hear."

"She said, 'Yes, they're just common frogs of course, but the Malfoys would be heartbroken to think they had anything common in their home!'"

Severus laughed.

"I can't stop thinking about her."

"As long as you're capable of working at the same time, I don't see that as a problem."

"But Severus! What if I never see her again? After today, nobody's going to talk to us ever again." He sank his head into his hands.

Severus, impatient of dramatics and wanting to take Hermione to their snug for some quiet time together, huffed.

"Then you'll just have to find another girl elsewhere. You've only seen her once, after all "

"Twice."

" and you'll find one girl is much the same as another. Go to bed, Tim. It'll seem different tomorrow."

Hermione was waiting for him in the kitchen doorway. She gave him a look he couldn't interpret, but didn't resist being tucked against his side and settled in their favourite sofa with a good book, though she refused the wine he offered. She remained monosyllabic, but then, she was tired and disappointed. He would make love to her as never before, to show her that she was appreciated, and in the morning they would resume life as if the whole asinine garden party debacle had never occurred.

*

Severus put it behind him with no difficulty. He was working on a new Wit-Sharpening Elixir that had all sorts of potential commercial and medical applications, and was little short of obsessive about it. He supposed he was fortunate that Hermione dragged him out of his lab at seven-thirty every evening, forced him to eat, and then practically barricaded him into their living room so that he was obliged to wind down. It annoyed him, but he had to admit that returning to work each morning at six-thirty, feeling fresh, was better than his former pattern of emerging every five or six days looking like a starving scarecrow and stinking like the hind end of a warthog. He actually made more progress this way.

Hermione had become the mainstay of the family, he realised. She helped all of them with their work, spent long periods with Salvius and Tertius putting the library to rights, and was developing her own niche within the structure. More than that, she somehow managed to draw them all together, make them less of an accidental agglomeration of awkward personalities and more of a family. Severus was discovering that the other members of the household were more than just brothers they were people. Scribonius, he found out, was a talented joiner. Their father had been a carpenter and had taught them all the basics a boy needed a craft, even if he was a bloody freak and Scrib had simply taken it further, grounding himself in working with those clever hands when he needed a respite from Divination. The bookcase he presented to Hermione for her birthday was a work of art. Sejanus read Victorian poetry, though it was risking a nasty jinx to mention it. Seneca liked horses. And so it went on. Hermione was responsible for turning the old house into a home, and though it occurred to Severus once or twice that she said little about herself, even when they were alone, he found he was grateful for her influence.

Yet something, since the garden party, was not right. His brothers were restless.

They all had time away from Prince Hall, though he was careful to take only one of them with him on visits to London, or to clients, and they were all making progress with their work, but still there was an air of discontent. And then, one day in November:

"Severus!"

Hermione burst into his laboratory. Fortunately, his potions were at a waiting stage and he was catching up with documentation. She looked a little distraught.

"What is it?"

"It's Seneca! He says he's going to leave, that he's never going to be able to integrate here in England while he's tied up with the family and stuck in Yorkshire! Severus, he's serious!"

Severus frowned and laid his quill aside.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. Severus, I think he's ..." She hesitated and then rushed on. "I think it's because of Ginny."

"How can it be because of her? He's only spent a few hours with her, once! That's ridiculous."

"It may be ridiculous to you, and he's not really saying anything, but I'm fairly sure that's what it is. Once is all it takes, with the right person," she added quietly, not quite meeting his eyes. "Listen, Severus, whether or not you think it's ridiculous, over-romanticised twaddle, you have to take it seriously, and you have to go and talk him out of leaving. Because once he goes, they'll all go. They're all missing their girls."

"*All?*" Severus felt himself boggling, and with an effort managed to stop. He never boggled. *All* his brothers mooning around like lovesick adolescents? This bypassed ridiculous, skirted preposterous, and went straight to farce. His lion-shaped timer went off, blasting out the exciting part of the 1812 overture. It was his wife's idea of humour she'd got annoyed with his jibes about Gryffindor subtlety. He waited for the last cannon to fire and then took her hands in his.

"I have to finish this," he said, looking down into her worried brown eyes, "but then I'll go and talk some sense into them."

"Be gentle with them," she admonished as she left.

He harrumphed and picked up a glass stirring rod,

*

Dinner was a subdued affair. Severus brought Hermione's *Hogwarts: A History* to the table so he could catch up with any new discoveries she'd made while at the same time observing his brothers surreptitiously. She was right. Sighing and moping were definitely elevated to levels he'd only witnessed just post-Valentine's Day at school. It made him shudder. Thank heavens for The Book, as he'd taken to calling it (Armando Dippet kept *what* in his hat?) - it was endlessly entertaining. Hermione excused herself before dessert, pleading fatigue, which left the field clear for Severus to find out exactly what was going on. He closed The Book and picked up his spoon.

"So, Seneca, Hermione tells me you're thinking of leaving."

Seneca's poked at his apple crumble unenthusiastically.

"Yes."

"Because of a girl."

"Yes."

"Have you thought through what your leaving will do to the structure we're in the process of building here? What the loss of your Charms expertise and your persuasive skills will mean?"

"Yes."

"And you're willing to ditch your and our success for the sake of a girl with whom you have spent one afternoon?"

Seneca glared.

"Yes!"

Severus regarded the rest of his brothers, who were following the conversation with bated breath.

"Am I to understand that something of this sort has been occurring to each and every one of you during the past few weeks?"

With expressions ranging from apologetic to evasive to defiant, they gave him to understand that this was indeed the case.

"Circe and all the piglets," muttered Severus, rolling his eyes. He knew as well as he knew himself that it would be no good trying to talk them out of it. He took a spoonful of crumble and sat back, chewing thoughtfully. The Book, with its gaudy multitude of sticky notes and ribbons poking out here and there, caught his eye. "Well, in that case, we shall just have to do something about it, shan't we?"

*

If Hermione was surprised that Severus decided to take his brothers out for a 'team-building' exercise the next day, she didn't show it. Rather, she looked quite relieved at the prospect of a day by herself.

"I'll read a bad book or two and catch up on a little sleep, I think," she said, kissing him on the cheek. "You seem to have hit on a good idea the boys look more cheerful already."

And indeed they did, despite the grim uniform of black jumpers, trousers, boots and cloaks. Severus too felt the buzz of anticipation. Today was all about precision and decisiveness, and actions of at best dubious legality. He had almost forgotten the pleasure of operating on the cusp of the law.

They spent the morning in a meeting room at the Leaky Cauldron organising, sending owls and putting together contingency plans. A lunch of Tom's excellent beef stew fortified them, and as they emerged onto Diagon Alley Severus handed each one a Portkey with the words, "Remember disarm and be discreet. These activate in an hour. I shall wait in the courtyard behind Flourish and Blotts. Make sure you do *not* have any difficulties." With that, they split up.

Sidney was the first to return, a wildly struggling Lavender Brown slung over his shoulder. He set her down on an upturned crate and reinforced the Silencing and Binding Charms on her. She twitched furiously and glared. Sejanus Apparated mid-snog into the yard, Padma Patil realising too late that she'd been kidnapped and her pocket had been picked. Miss Chang and the other Patil were carried in asleep, a result, no doubt, of Morpheus Potion in their tea. Salvius and Scribonius looked very smug about the ease of their capture, especially in light of the scratches evident on Seneca's face when he appeared in their midst with Ginny Weasley, who was doing her utmost to chew her way through a gag. Septimius was nowhere to be seen. Severus started to feel very jumpy. Any minute now, someone would be bound to want something from the yard, and they had a mere five minutes before the Portkeys ...

Ah.

Timmy strolled in, hand-in-hand with Miss Lovegood, discussing magical amphibians. The next few seconds astonished even Severus. The Lovegood child took one look at the scene before her and without changing her abstracted expression whipped out her wand like lightning, wrenching free of her swain and backing towards the alley entrance in a fighting stance. Six Snape brothers immediately responded in kind, and Severus was forming the first hex in his mind when Luna's wand flipped out of her grasp and landed in Septimius' fingers. The girl was seemingly immobilised. Severus let out his breath and raised an eyebrow at his brother.

"Wandless magic," shrugged Septimius. "With all these older brothers around, it was a necessary skill. I'm quite good at it, really."

"Severus! The time!" shouted Seneca.

"Grab them!"

Pigeons flew up, startled, as air rushed in to where thirteen people abruptly disappeared.

*

Whoever had thought it a good idea to let the girls speak once they were safely inside the wards had been way beyond wrong, thought Severus. He winced at some of the curses these supposedly gently-raised young women were uttering. Though cursing was better than messy weeping, which was the current vocation of the Misses Patil and Chang. It had been a short-acting potion.

He cast a withering look at the lot of them and led the way up the drive to the house, followed by his laughing brothers, high on success, and six resentful, raucous, and mercifully disarmed females.

It was cold and almost dark at the end of the dank November afternoon, so the light spilling out as the front door opened was a welcome sight, as was the shape of his wife, silhouetted against the warm glow. Severus was about to greet her when he found himself rudely shoved aside by the pack of women, all of whom had now taken to wailing and crying. They clustered round Hermione, sobbing out their woes.

"What have you *done*?" she exclaimed. "What have you all *done*?"

But the din was too great for sensible answers to be heard, so she called for the Optio and shooed the girls away to the kitchen with a promise of sweet tea and her presence in a couple of minutes. She was breathing hard when she finally looked at Severus and the others again.

"Well?"

"We, er," began Septimius. He fell silent, quailing at Hermione's obvious fury.

"How could you *do* this? You've all been telling me how much you love these girls and you show it by using *force* against them? By disarming them? By frightening them?"

Severus watched his brothers shuffle. He supposed Hermione had a point, from one perspective, but as not one of the girls had a bruise on them ...

"Give me their wands. Now!" She held out her hand. "And then you'll go and sleep over the stables, because I am NOT having such a pack of animals in the house. I thought you were at least beginning to be gentlemen, but it seems I've been a fool. You disgust me. All of you. Go away!"

She batted impatiently at the tears of rage that were spilling down her cheeks. Severus shooed his shocked siblings away into the darkness then returned to take Hermione in his arms and calm her.

"You, too, Severus," she said quietly, holding up a hand to keep him away.

"Why me? I didn't grab any of them!" He took a step forward and came up against the tip of her wand against his throat.

"You think I don't know who orchestrated all this? You think that just because you got a wife so easily, because I fell in love with you the first time we worked together, that it would be the same for everyone?"

"What do you mean? We worked together for two years before I even thought of asking you to marry ..."

"Do you honestly think I'd have put up with your strop, opinionated, arrogant, sarcastic bad temper for that long if I hadn't been completely infatuated?" Her voice was shaking as much as her hand, but Severus was careless of his danger as he bit back.

"You could say it's as much your fault ..."

"My fault?"

"If you weren't so obsessive about digging up old tales and laws that have never been repealed ..."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Your book! Your little history project! That episode in 1329 when Hogwarts School and Hogsmeade village were running out of females, so the male staff and students stole the young witches of Strathclyde."

Hermione was gaping.

"You didn't seriously think ..."

"Remember that judgement of the Wizengamot you tracked down?" Severus put on his most superior tone, in full knowledge that he was heaping coals on his own head.

"*In direst tymes, when there be dearth of one sexe to perpetuate the people, it is meet to make remedee of coercion, so long as there be none cruelty*" he quoted.

Hermione withdrew her wand. "You arrogant bastard," she spat. "You disgust me. You will take the girls back right now and apologise to them and to their families. They must be frantic with worry."

"Impossible," Severus snarled. "In times of danger, the wards on this place become impenetrable from within and without, to all but the head of the family. And I am not about to undo an action which was taken with the sole aim of making *you* happy. Now let me in!"

"No."

The look Hermione gave him as she shut the door in his face was hard to decipher, but Severus stood for a long moment in the dark, excluded from his own home, feeling something that reminded him too closely of bone-racking shame. He smothered it with rage. At least he still had Spinner's End.

Nine: June Bride

Chapter 9 of 11

Severus Snape has decided he needs a wife, and Hermione is the lucky woman he picks for the job. But he hasn't told her everything she needs to know...

Seven Brides for Seven Snapes 9: June Bride

Beyond the knot in the panel on which her eyes were fixed, everything in Hermione's peripheral vision was retreating.

"Mistress? Mistress Hermione?"

The elf's voice penetrated from far away. Hermione blinked once, twice, and forced herself back to the present. The grandfather clock's steady, booming tick calmed her racing heart. She took a deep shuddering breath and looked down into Secunda's huge, concerned eyes.

"I'm sorry, Secunda, did you say something?"

"Mistress, the young ladies have had their tea and they're all crying still. You need to say something to them." She glanced at the door. "Master Severus ...?"

"Master Severus is probably going away for a little while," Hermione responded, her voice raspy. "There are some things he needs to think through. The same goes for the boys. Secunda, please would you let the others know that my brothers are not to set foot in the house until I permit them to do so?"

"Mistress?" The elf was horrified.

"They have to prove they've earned the right to a civilised existence."

Hermione bent her head for a moment and gathered her strength. The girls were shocked and afraid, and needed reassurance. Though how she was to give them that when they were all effectively trapped on the Snape estate was another matter.

She pulled her jumper straight and twisted her hair up into a knot, then marched briskly to the kitchen, where six woebegone faces looked up from around the kitchen table. The Optio was busy at the stove. He frowned at Hermione as Secunda whispered her message in his ear, but then nodded unhappily. She nodded back at him before pulling out Severus' chair and sitting down.

Of the six girls, Luna was the only one looking moderately calm, and even she had reddened eyes. Parvati and Lavender were clinging to each other, feeding each other's distress, thought Hermione impatiently, just as they always had at school. Padma was twisting her many rings round and round her fingers, tears coursing down her cheeks. Cho just looked blank and withdrawn. Ginny was crying silently and furiously, her cheeks blotchy.

"When can we go home?" she demanded.

"There may be a little problem with that," Hermione said. Immediately, those who were capable of speech bombarded her with 'whys' and those who were not, burst into fresh storms of sobbing. She took the opportunity to hand the girls' wands back to their owners and waited until they calmed sufficiently to hear her.

"I'm sorry about this, but it seems that the estate's protective wards are going to keep us all here until such time as they are either removed or broken. They are keyed only to the head of the family and so ..."

At the renewed outburst of grief produced by this statement, the minuscule portion of patience remaining to her snapped and she laid down a blanket Silencing Charm. She ignored the glares. After months of living with seven Snapes, she was immune to dirty looks and pouting.

"Just listen! Hysteria gets us nowhere. It is late and we could all do with some rest. The Optio here, and the other elves, will show you to the bedrooms. Optio, would you make sure the boys' sheets are replaced with fresh ones? where I suggest you make yourselves comfortable. I'll see that some supper is brought to you. I will see if I can get a message to your families, and in the morning ..."

There was a sudden clamour of knocking at the back door. Hermione scrambled to her feet and ran out of the kitchen to answer it.

"Severus!" she cried, flinging the door open. "Oh."

It was Septimius. She quickly masked her disappointment.

"What is it, Septimius? Make it quick."

"It's Severus!" He sounded frantic. "He's going! He came and told us he was leaving and he says he's not coming back until he's got the new series of potions ready! You *know* how long that's going to take! Hermione, you might be able to catch him if you run down to the gate he won't listen to us."

Hermione fought the urge to fling herself out into the darkness, and won.

"It's his decision, Septimius. And I'm not giving in to such passive-aggressive tactics. He has to acknowledge he's done wrong as do you all before I'll have him here again. Now go away. The house is for the girls."

She stood in the dark hallway for a few bleak seconds before becoming aware that she had let the Silencing Charm lapse.

"I really think you should exercise more control over them," Lavender accused as Hermione returned to the kitchen. "They seem to do anyth ..."

"Shut up, Lavender. They're adults. They make their own decisions, both good and bad. I'm not their mother."

"But Professor Snape ..."

"You want me to *control* my husband? What a strange notion of marriage you have." She laughed bitterly. "Now go to bed, please, all of you. We need clear heads to address this situation."

Ginny and Luna were the last to follow the Optio out of the room. Each briefly put an arm round Hermione's stiff shoulders, but neither could think of anything to say, it seemed.

That suited Hermione. She sank into Severus' chair once more, tipping her head to rest against the high back, and closed her eyes.

"You should eat something, Mistress."

"I'm not hungry, Secunda."

"But you need your strength, especially now."

"I might have known you'd work it out." She felt a tear escape from under her lashes and trickle down her cheek.

"I don't reckon it takes a genius to put fatigue, nausea, and a sudden dislike of onions together and come up with the right answer," the elf said drily.

"Much too simple for a genius," Hermione responded. "I was going to tell him this evening."

More tears were pursuing the first. She stretched her eyes wide and looked up at the beamed ceiling, but there was no holding the damn things back.

"Secunda, I'm going to go away and cry for a while now, if you'll excuse me."

"Right you are, Mistress. I'll bring supper to the snug in half an hour. That should give you enough time."

*

Dawn, a week later, saw Hermione pacing the boundaries again. Well, part of the boundaries. Covering the periphery of the estate on foot was teaching her exactly how large it was. She'd also discovered a Dower House in great disrepair, a tumbledown hamlet, abandoned for what looked like centuries and buried under ivy, what seemed to be a bomb crater too well-concealed by rampant nettles, and a healthy marijuana patch (the micro-climate charms were fascinating, and confirmed her estimation of Sidney's skills). What she had not yet found was any way to breach the wards. Not even a Patronus could get through. Her otter now just sat glumly on its tail, so often had it failed to take a message out.

She blew on her fingers. Wands and mittens did not mix, so she'd taken to wearing fingerless gloves despite the chill. Indeed, the temperature was dropping day by day, even by the hour, it seemed. Even her thick clothes and boots, a woolly hat, and Severus' long scarf wrapped nine times round her neck couldn't quite keep it at bay. She stopped to take her thermos out of her backpack. Secunda had taken Hermione's care into her own hands and would not let her out of the house without a full inspection and a picnic, which had to be eaten by the time Hermione returned. Hermione reckoned that as long as Secunda didn't know *what* was eating it, she could get away with leaving half a loaf of toast for the robins, and she knew the crows and rooks appreciated the sausages.

The long grass crunched under her feet as she shifted to and fro, jiggling slightly while she drank the sweet black coffee that was about the only thing she could keep down in the mornings. Her trouser legs sparkled with clinging frost. If she wasn't much mistaken, there was snow on the way.

It was good to be out this early. It was peaceful. The house was too full of movement and voices. With just the boys there, the days had generally been quiet enough, each of them in their separate workspace, concentrating hard, or discussing things in pairs, with occasional bursts of noise and activity when ideas and projects came together for a while. A house full of women with little to do was a nightmare. They expected Hermione to want to talk to them all the time. And when she was in the house, reminders of Severus were everywhere. She continued to organise his office space, in the hope that he would be back soon. The elves kept his unused lab immaculate. In the kitchen, she imposed his shape on his chair, or silhouetted against the window drinking tea and discussing the best balance of herbs with the Optio, or she imagined him stamping into the library demanding such-and-such a reference, or ... And in the snug, where she retreated for peace, she could not help but curl into his place on the sofa, or into his big armchair, seeking a ghost of his embrace. In bed, she held his pillow to her, breathing in his scent and weeping miserable, angry tears for all that she felt she was losing, and for all of his bloody arrogant wrong-headedness. Her husband had about as much empathy as a brick, but still she loved him, and it made her want to scream.

Outside, nobody watched her, or expected comfort from her, or asked her for things to do, or tried to apologise. Damn them. She wasn't convinced they really felt that they'd done wrong. They were intelligent, they knew the right words to say but did they actually *feel* it?

A sound in the nearby birch copse startled her. Oh, just one of the Thestral herd. She was quite used to them by now, with their scaly hides and skeletal horse heads. This particular beast, judging by the scar on its leg, was the one Septimius had been treating when she first arrived. It trampled through the weeds and ground elder towards her and poked its nose at her rucksack. It poked again, sniffing noisily, making clouds of steamy breath, then looked at her hopefully.

"You want a sausage? I'm afraid they're cooked, but you're welcome to try."

She rummaged for the packet of sausages, kept warm by elfish magic, and passed one to the Thestral. It took the titbit daintily from her fingers and chewed thoughtfully before spitting the mess onto the grass. She laughed at its affronted expression.

"I suppose you think I should bring you a pound of raw steak?"

It shoved its nose against her pocket, hopefully.

"You great, soft beast!" she said and patted its cheek. It responded by placing its forehead against her side and rubbing vigorously up and down. Hermione braced herself against the affectionate gesture.

"Lummox." Then an idea struck her. "Listen you wouldn't let me ride you round the perimeter, would you? No flying, mind," she added when it rustled its wings. "I just want to cover more ground. And then I'll get you some meat from the kitchen. How would that be?"

It snorted and bared its teeth in a snicker. She took that as a yes, and picked up the rucksack.

"Just come over here by this rock so I can climb up, will you?"

*

Two more weeks passed. Hermione and her Thestral, which didn't seem to want a name, made the circuit twice, the second time through deep snow. They made no progress with regard to the wards, but Hermione was given an exhaustive tour of the home farm by Sexta, Septimus and Decimus, who managed to convince her that starvation was not going to be an incentive she could use to get the girls involved in her efforts to circumvent centuries-old magic that had been reinforced by generation after generation of paranoiacs, not least of whom was her husband. She found his magical signature everywhere. She even started having conversations with it when she came across a particularly clever twist.

Secunda insisted that she be back in the house by ten for a hot drink and a bath. To be honest, a little coddling did Hermione the world of good, though she annoyed the elf by insisting that the Thestral was seen to first. She would then lie back in hot, scented water, letting her hair fan out round her as she set her mind to the next attempt to break out. Once she was dry, she would go to the snug and reach for pen and parchment, scribbling down ideas, Arithmantic equations, reminders to look up charms with particular characteristics, or potions she might try to brew. Then, before she could really get stuck in and forget to eat, she would be roused to go and find her guests for lunch.

Cho was usually in the library. She was always at the opposite end of it from Salvius, the pair of them silent except for the rustling of parchment, the thump of a book being put down, or the scratch of a quill on a new index card, but there they were, obviously working together. Padma had wandered down to the labs one afternoon in search of the wherewithal to brew herself an anti-cramping potion, and stayed to tell Sejanus exactly why the theory behind his experiments was faulty. The shouting was audible all over the house. Padma was now engaged in demonstrating to her volatile admirer that he was still wrong, no matter how loudly he could shout. Parvati had of course been drawn to explore the attics, where Scribonius discovered her in a trance over a scrying glass. As it was the one instrument he had difficulty bending to his will, he invited her to stay. Sidney had come to the house seventeen times (she counted) to complain about Hermione being incapable of keeping her interfering little friends out of his greenhouses. Hermione bawled some choice epithets about whose fault it was precisely that the interfering little friends were there in the first place, but nevertheless slung a cloak over her baggy sweater and trudged down with him, to find Lavender jotting notes about the relative concentrations of certain essential oils in some of Sidney's hybrids. The next time he came to the kitchen door, he declared her to have "the best nose in Europe", even if she was horribly underfoot.

It had been impossible to keep the boys away from their own work spaces, and to be honest, Hermione was glad to see an intermittently spiky rapprochement between her brothers and the objects of their desire.

Luna and Ginny were also much occupied with Septimius and Seneca (who came to know the awesome power of the Ginny Weasley Bat-Bogey Hex), but they took the trouble to seek out Hermione other than at lunchtime and for dinner. They generally came to interrupt Hermione's tussle with her absent husband's spellwork for an hour in the evening, sharing whatever insights they might have into the current problem as Seneca was discovering, Ginny's work at WWW was confirming her as an expert in some of the trickier sides of Charms work, and Luna's perspective was always oddly productive or simply to chat.

"It's not doing you any good to hide away, working all the time," said Ginny. "You're so pale and drawn."

"I have to get you lot out of here somehow!" protested Hermione. "Or at least send a message to say you're alive and well!" She sank her face into her hands. "I feel so responsible!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Ginny scolded, sounding for a minute just like her mother. "You're not their keeper, and we're all adults, so you can stop trying to look after us like a pack of babies."

Hermione burst into tears.

Luna came in with a plate of cakes she had been working on all day. The Optio had taken her under his wing, and as a result the meals had a tendency towards oddness from time to time.

"Have a butterfly cake," she said kindly, then, "Oh, bother!" as they took off.

Hermione's tears changed to giggles and she allowed her friends to hug her.

That night, snuggled in Severus' pyjamas, she whispered the story to his pillow. "You should have seen us trying to catch them!" she said, and fell asleep with a sad smile on her face.

The next morning, finding a fresh storm of snow drifting down, Hermione decided not to go out for her customary ride. The Thestral came to the kitchen window for its meat ration and a pat, but returned voluntarily to the barn with the rest of the herd. They didn't like the feel of snow on their wings. Hermione settled into Severus' chair and tucked her thickly besocked feet under her. The Optio was busy at the stove.

"Are the young masters allowed in for breakfast today, Mistress?" he asked non-committally as he stirred the porridge.

Hermione sighed. There seemed little point keeping them out any longer.

"Yes, Optio, they can eat in the house now."

The tips of his ears rose, and his shoulders relaxed. He turned round to smile at her. She hadn't realised how much of a strain her orders had put on the elves.

"But they will still be sleeping above the stables."

"Of course, Mistress. It wouldn't be right to have them in here with the young ladies."

She suspected that the old workers' quarters were in any case now far cosier than they had been a few weeks before. Elves had their own ways of getting round rules, after all.

So breakfast was a noisy, crowded, and jolly affair. Hermione found she could smile at the fun, even though this in itself saddened her. She was growing used to the ache of Severus' absence, to the regret of not being able to share her news with him, to the strain of having nobody to lean on. So when Septimius suggested they all go for a walk to gather evergreens and berries to start the Christmas decorations, she acquiesced readily enough.

She opted out of the snowball fight that sprang up, choosing instead to wander away from the squabble about the ethics of using magic to enhance the velocity of hurled snow. There was a place she knew where the holly grew thickly, with many bright berries. It wouldn't take long to harvest a few branches.

"Where is the Mistress?" asked Secunda sharply, while she and the other elves helped to deal with the pile of wet coats, gloves and boots.

Ginny broke off from bickering with Seneca about hiding ice inside snowballs.

"Hermione?" she called. She ran to the back door and called outside. "Did anyone see her leave? Where did she go?"

Secunda and Octavus began shoving outdoor gear back into everyone's hands.

"You have to find her! Now!"

Nobody questioned the urgency of the elf's order. Nobody doubted its wisdom when, hours later, Septimius landed a Thestral in the stable yard, slipping off its back with Hermione in his arms.

"The Thestral found her!" he said in a panicky voice. "She fell into an old tunnel near the hollies. The ceiling collapsed under her." He relinquished her to Seneca to be carried upstairs. "Will she be okay? Please tell me she's okay! She's so still!"

"Let me come up," offered Padma, pushing the others aside and making to follow Seneca. "I'm a Healer..."

"I'll call you if you're needed, Miss," said Secunda. "But I reckon it's not much more than cold and bruising. I hope it's not more," she added grimly.

Seneca laid Hermione gently on her bed.

"Go and get me hot water bottles, hot, sweet tea, and the dark green cushion from the big armchair in the snug," he was ordered. "Then go away again."

Hermione started to cry weakly.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so cold. I lost my wand. I'm sorry. My head hurts. Severus?"

"You've given your head a good thwack and your ankle's sprained," said the elf briskly as she banished Hermione's coat and boots and surrounded her in a warm aura of elfish magic. "Master Severus isn't here you know that, Mistress."

"Oh. Yes. I forgot." She couldn't seem to stop the tears. "I'm sorry!"

"None of that, now, Mistress. You're fine. You'll be just fine. Don't go to sleep just yet, though. I want to get you all warm and clean and tucked up with some sweet tea inside you."

"Secunda, what would I do without you?"

"Something even more ridiculous than throwing yourself down an old tunnel, no doubt."

Hermione laughed weakly, then gasped and reached out.

"The baby? What about the baby?"

"*Baby?*" echoed Seneca from the doorway.

*

Hermione was late to breakfast the next day. It had taken some time and eloquence to persuade Secunda that she was perfectly fit to get out of bed. She had slept well and was actually, for a change, starving hungry when she woke. The bump on her head didn't trouble her much, and her ankle was well strapped, so it wasn't as if she was immobilised. As for the baby, he "She, Mistress, definitely she!" was having a party and using Hermione's bladder as a trampoline. For some reason, Miss Snape seemed to have taken the accident as a signal to become vastly more active.

She hobbled down to the kitchen and paused outside the door to let her daughter get over the urge to head-butt her in the stomach.

"If you hadn't been so wrapped up in flirting with Seneca, you'd have seen she wasn't there!" Lavender's voice rang out.

"Why is it suddenly all my fault? We were all there, and I didn't notice you take your eyes off Sid for a single moment. It was all, 'Oh, Sidney, come and help me out of this snow drift' and batty eyelashes all day!"

"It was *not*!"

"Please stop arguing," said Cho quietly. "None of us was paying attention. We were all at fault."

"And to think we never even knew she was pregnant!" added Parvati. "Why didn't she say anything? She should have said something!"

"Hermione can be very private about personal things," said Luna.

"I just hope the baby's okay," said Padma. "That elf wouldn't tell me anything..."

"That elf" is called Secunda," said Hermione, pushing the door open, "and has been midwife at the birth of almost every single Snape since nineteen sixty. I think she can manage. And yes, the baby is fine, thank you."

"Oh, Hermione! What if ..?" Parvati was managing to look utterly tragic.

Hermione helped herself to coffee and an enormous mound of bacon and eggs.

"If I weren't pregnant, you'd just have been going on about how stupid I was to fall down a hole. Now, perhaps we can stop arguing and have breakfast in peace."

"I still think you should let me examine you," said Padma, on the verge of a sulk.

"They haven't let you do any obstetrics yet at St Mungo's?"

At least she had the grace to blush.

"It would be very valuable experience for me," she admitted. "Would you, please?"

"You can have a look once a week, with Secunda present, as long as you remember she's the one who's in charge of my care. Now, can we stop talking about my completely normal and uneventful pregnancy and please eat? Where are the boys, by the way?"

"They went to look for your wand," said Ginny. "You know, you don't have to wear those enormous jumpers any more. I mean, you don't need to hide it."

"I like wearing enormous jumpers."

"Oh, it's so romantic!" burst out Lavender. "Oh, don't look at me like that, Hermione. How far along are you?"

"Due late April."

"And you got married in June! I've always wanted to have a baby right away when I get married!"

"Actually, it's more the result of carelessness than romance," said Hermione sardonically. "Pass the mushrooms."

The outside door banged and there was a trampling of feet in the hallway.

"*WIPE THEM!*" bellowed an elf.

Septimius appeared in the doorway, hopping as he pulled off his second boot, which he flung over his shoulder, to an irate shout of "Oy!"

"We found your wand!" he said, and thrust it into Hermione's hand. "It was right up in one of the trees."

"Thank you."

She watched as her brothers settled themselves into the free spaces around the table. She waited for a while. She mopped up the last puddle of egg yolk with some toast and chased it down with some orange juice. Then she picked up her wonky mug and inhaled the fragrant steam.

"Okay. Someone tell me what the matter is besides the obvious shock of imminent unclehood."

It was Sejanus, he who generally stayed aloof unless he had something annoying to say, who finally answered.

"We nearly lost you, Hermione. It was... a shock to us."

She felt something in her chest release, and she smiled behind her mug.

"It's horrible to have someone dear to you snatched away, isn't it?" she asked pointedly.

"At least something good came of your fall, Hermione," said Seneca, breaking another awkward silence.

"Oh?"

"Yes. What with the tunnel being forgotten for generations Sal hunted up a record of it in the early eighteen-hundreds, but nothing since then the wards are a bit weaker down there. We think that with a bit of work, we might be able to get a message through ..."

Ten: Spring, Spring, Spring

Chapter 10 of 11

Severus Snape has decided he needs a wife, and Hermione is the lucky woman he picks for the job. But he hasn't told her everything she needs to know...

Seven Brides for Seven Snapes 10: Spring, Spring, Spring

Lavender's attention wandered as an animated discussion of warding charms and hexes sprang up. Typical Hermione Granger behaviour. Any normal woman would want to talk about her baby and make plans for its nursery and discuss names. Not Hermione oh, no. *She* got all lit up about Arithmancy and over-complicated spellwork. You'd never know she was pregnant, the way she behaved. She'd probably never even notice the baby once it was born.

Lavender always felt left out of conversations like this one. It wasn't that she was stupid she'd done well enough at school without putting too much effort in but rather that she just wasn't interested in all that theoretical stuff. What she liked, what she was good at, was style, and colour, and art, and all those things that her parents said were 'all very well for hobbies'. Which had left her stranded in a stupid, boring job at the Ministry, living for her lunch breaks and evenings, and a flat stuffed with lovely crafts and clothes she had no purpose for. It wasn't fair. And here was Hermione, mistress of a gorgeous old house she obviously didn't give two hoots about. Lavender had been itching to redo the colours and furnishings since she got here, and it was only good manners that kept her sitting on her hands.

She glanced over at Sidney, who was listening attentively to Hermione's point about triple-inversed polarities in locking spells being complicated by the inclusion of a blend of Ogham with standard runes or some such.

Well, at least there were the greenhouses to go to. Sidney didn't say much about it, but he clearly had an eye for beauty. Only yesterday he had given her the most perfect deep purple orchid spattered with scintillating gold flecks one of his own hybrids. It smelled divine. She had immediately cast a Permanence Charm of her own devising, to preserve its beauty and perfume forever. Most such charms destroyed the scent. And he had looked impressed. Really impressed. Not just with her looks or her repartee, but with something she'd created.

So ner, Hermione, she thought.

"If you'll all excuse me, I've got one or two things to do upstairs," she said inately.

She trailed a hand across Sidney's shoulders as she passed him. He was such a love he immediately caught her hand and kissed her fingers, raising those glorious amber eyes to hers with a silent promise of more passionate embraces. He took her breath away. He called her his flower ... She lifted her chin as she left the kitchen. *She* wouldn't be chasing *her* man away any time soon.

"Lavender!"

Hermione caught her at the foot of the stairs.

"What is it?"

"Can I ask you a favour?"

"Go on."

"It's Christmas soon, and I'm sure we'll still all be stuck here, and I want to make it nice, and ..." She took a deep breath. "Lavender, would you be in charge of all the decorations and stuff? It's my first Christmas in the family, so it has to be glorious, but I'm just no good at that sort of thing. And you've always been brilliant at it. Please?"

Lavender thawed a bit.

"I'd be delighted. Thanks. Do you want me to consult you at all?"

"No I trust you to make everything magnificent. Thanks, Lavender. This means a lot to me."

As Hermione returned to the back of the house, Lavender saw her place her hand on her swelling stomach. There was such a strange expression on her face. So tender, but so very, very sad.

*

Scribonius leaned over the top of the half-door to check on the silver leverets. It had been an amazing stroke of luck to find them, and better yet that Septimius was there to raise them. They generally died if they were abandoned. Half-grown now, they were already beginning to glow.

"Will these hares be ready for the Equinox?"

"Oh, yes. They'll be big and strong just right for what you need."

"I've always wanted to try this," said Scrib. "I've read so much about it, but this is the first time in over a century that anyone's managed to raise a litter. I'm going to publish a paper that'll make all the academics back in Novgorod green with envy there'll be less sneering about 'unorthodox methods' then."

"Glad to be of service, brother."

"They're sweet," commented Luna, making them both jump. "What are you using them for?"

"It's a divination spell. They go crazy and dance under the full moon at the spring equinox, and the patterns they make on prepared ground can be used to give indications about the future."

"I like the spells where animals don't have to be killed," Luna said with one of her vague smiles. "They always seem more propitious. And it's good timing not long before Hermione's baby arrives."

"So, what are you going to give Hermione for Christmas, Scrib?" Timmy asked as he fed shreds of cabbage to the young animals.

"I thought I might make a cradle. I had a look at ours and it's got woodworm."

"That's good thinking. Will you carve it, too?"

"If I can think of the right motif, yeah."

"That's actually a bad idea."

Merlin, but Timmy's girl was blunt at times.

"And why is that, exactly?"

"I'm sure you'll work it out if you think about it."

She stared at him with those unblinking silvery eyes until he thought his own might start watering. Well, he wasn't about to start playing stupid guessing games. He waited. She shrugged and wandered off.

"Timmy, how on earth do you put up with her?"

"She's cute. And perceptive. She's right perhaps you should make something for Hermione, not the baby."

"Oh."

"You should find out when Severus is going to come back and wrap that in a ribbon for her."

"You think I haven't tried?" Scrib growled. "The tosser's hidden himself good and proper I can't see him with anything. Neither can Parvati, and she's better at scrying than I am."

"I've noticed you and she are getting very cosy. Been trying any of the *really* unorthodox methods the pros think nobody knows about?"

Scrib felt himself blushing.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I showed her a couple of those texts, and she, well, she said she's game for anything as long as it's with me!"

"I thought you were looking a bit blissful these days."

"So, what are *you* giving Hermione for Christmas, kidlet?"

"A cat, I thought. She said she had one, before. Something cuddly."

*

The Optio sat back in his comfy chair, conscious of a job well done. Not that all the jobs he did weren't well done, but Christmas dinner had been a triumph, and the evening buffet of turkey sandwiches, mince pies, cheese straws, and all those other little dainties well, he would be hard put not to admit to perfection. And while he had not done all the hands-on preparation himself, he had certainly been the coordinator.

It had been decades since there had been a Christmas like this. He looked around his HQ and blessed the First Elf for sending him Mistress Hermione. She knew what organisation was all about; she it was who had introduced him to whiteboards and coloured pens and sticky notes. The three boards dedicated to Christmas Day currently held pride of place, and he was taking a few minutes to admire them in all their multicoloured glory before they were erased and the Boxing Day boards took their place.

What a pleasant change it was to have a proper Mistress, who valued his skills, and who set about turning the Hall into a home again. He'd been wary at first the elf networks had been busy for years with gossip about the dreaded S.P.E.W. but the Mistress showed that she had come to respect their culture, even if she did blather on about pay and holidays and other such nonsense from time to time. He raised his sherry glass in a silent salute to his stationery supplies cupboard.

There was a quiet knock at the door.

"Optio?" The Mistress put her head round the door. "May I come in?"

"Of course, Mistress! Take a seat! I'd have thought you'd be in bed by now you'll not do yourself any good, missing out on sleep, now."

She shrugged but sat willingly enough. The Optio reflected that it was a good job Secunda had taken her in hand. The girl wouldn't take care of herself at all, left to her own devices. She had a package in her hands.

"Optio, I've given the others their presents here's yours. It's a good job I did my shopping before we all got stuck here," she added wryly.

"There was no need, Mistress," he said, gingerly accepting the gaily-wrapped parcel.

"It's not clothes," she laughed. "I've learned my lesson in that, at least."

He unwrapped it carefully, smoothed and folded the paper for re-use, and stared at the set of books.

"Cookery books, Mistress? You're not satisfied with my cooking?"

She looked horrified, and for a dreadful moment, he thought she was going to cry.

"No! No! I love your cooking! Oh I'm sorry! I just thought... You love cooking so much, I thought you'd be interested in what's popular in the Muggle world at the moment. This writer's really good, and I thought ..."

The Optio felt awful. Secunda'd have his guts for garters if he upset the Mistress.

"Mistress! My mistake! It's a lovely present!" He thumbed through the first book and let it fall open at a particularly attractive photograph. "Chocolate fudge cake. That'd be the one that the Master liked so much in Muggle London, then?"

He scanned the recipe it looked promising. Then he noted the last line: "Serves 10. Or 1 with a broken heart." [Footnote 1]

He looked up again to find that she had gone.

*

The hole had been widened, but it was still rather a scramble to get in and out. Seneca could have made the climb easier, but he enjoyed seeing Ginny get all dishevelled. He suspected she knew perfectly well why he had not altered the access to the tunnel, and that's why she too had left it alone. Spending time with her was always like that guessing games, and mostly being second-guessed.

Seneca, despite his skill at talking rings round other people, had always secretly preferred *not* to talk about what really mattered to him. He was good at using speech to get results, but it felt like cheating to use it on Ginny, so he left silent messages. Growing up with six older brothers, she was an obvious expert at reading male communication ploys, and she never failed to understand him.

Nor did she fail to let him know that his company was welcome. After all, she had now spent weeks in a dark, dank, miserable tunnel with him, engaged in the frustration of attempting to break a seemingly impenetrable barrier of spells. Her magic was wonderful fresh and alive, like a blustery spring day full of birdsong. He touched it every time they worked together now, since they had found they made more inroads on the wards by melding their power. It was intimate, and intimidating.

"Sod it!" snapped Ginny as their latest attempt failed and the wards snapped back into place as if they'd never been dented. "I think Hermione's right. We're going to have to infuse some blood magic Merlin, I hate that stuff. It's filthy."

She flopped onto one of the heavy crates they'd dragged down as furniture and unscrewed a thermos. "Tea?"

He joined her and rummaged in the basket for biscuits.

"It's not all Dark magic, you know," he admonished. "When there's a strong familial tie ..."

It struck him what he was saying. His biscuit stopped half-way to his mouth.

"Gods, Ginny. Your family. I'm ... I'm sorry."

In the candle light, he saw tears well in her eyes.

"It's not just me," she said, facing him squarely. "It's my dad and my mum they nearly lost me at the end of the war. They did lose my brother. They must be frantic. Or maybe they're past that now." Her chin wobbled.

"They surely don't think you're dead?"

"No! Oh, no! Mum's got one of those clocks, you know? It probably just says 'missing' or some such. I hope so, anyway. I keep having this dream, that my hand on the clock just spins and spins and then flies off into nowhere."

Seneca folded her in his arms.

"You're making me spill my tea, Seneca."

"Let's go and see how far Hermione's got with researching the last layer of charms we identified. She's so frustrated at not being able to get her own hands on these wards."

Ginny snorted.

"She wouldn't fit down the hole, anyway. Yes, let's go and make her eat toasted teacakes in the kitchen, where she can't keep throwing doleful looks at the cupboard with Severus' birthday presents in. He is such an arse for sulking this long."

"Actually, I overheard Secunda telling her off for throwing darts and swearing at that cupboard and my grandfather sulked for thirty-two years before dying in a fit of pique, so don't hold your breath. We need to keep working."

"I love you, Seneca!"

He was speechless, which seemed answer enough for her.

*

Cho and Padma faced each other across the chess board. The room was a little chilly, but they were enjoying the crisp air and watery March sunshine admitted by the open window, and it was nothing that a shawl or two couldn't cope with. Cho moved her bishop, and as she did so the sunlight picked up the ring on her left hand.

"Opals are such a funny choice for an engagement ring," remarked Padma, frowning at the bishop, who was gesturing rudely at her queen.

"It's a family heirloom, he says." She held up her hand, angling the ring to bring out its colours. "I've always liked opals full of hidden fire."

"Like Salvius?"

Cho blushed. "You could say that."

"He certainly does keep his fire hidden," continued Padma judiciously. "So quiet and studious most of the time, and then, *bam!* he explodes over something trivial."

"How are you getting on with Sejanus? I must say, it's a treat to have you here out of the lab."

Padma prodded a pawn, which slouched unwillingly into the next square and squatted down with its arms over its head.

"Hard to say, really. He's like quicksilver. One minute all honey, the next vinegar and he's always saying really cutting things and arguing with me. I'm never sure quite where I stand with him, but I can't stay away."

Hermione, bearing a vase overflowing with daffodils into the room, caught Padma's wistful statement. She put the flowers down on a table, moved them to the mantelpiece, then the windowsill, then back to the table.

"How come whenever Lavender does this they're always perfect, and whenever I try it, they always look vaguely wrong?" She shrugged and sank into an easy chair.

"Sejanus wouldn't let you anywhere near him if he wasn't besotted, Padma. He's completely ... *oof!*"

"Kicking hard?"

"Kickboxing, more like. I can't believe I've got another six weeks of this."

"Do you want a game of chess?" asked Cho. "It might take your mind off things a bit."

"No it's all right, but thanks for offering. I haven't the patience for chess, and besides, I can't concentrate for thinking about what they're all doing down there."

"Ginny said they needed to try with all the blood members of the family at once. She sounded quite hopeful that they'd break through today."

Hermione grimaced.

"Merlin, I hope so. I really, really, really hope so. I've got to get you all free somehow."

Cho looked at her ring again, and back at Padma.

*

Secunda wasn't happy with the idea, but sometimes it just wasn't worth arguing with Hermione. And there was an example, she reflected sourly. She'd never thought it would come to addressing her Mistress by her first name. Silly modern notions. It wasn't proper. But Hermione insisted, and had a neck as stiff as any elf's, so ... She finished tying Hermione's shoelaces and stood up to check her handiwork.

"I feel awful getting you to do my shoes, Secunda. It's so wrong, somehow."

"When you can't get near your feet, it only makes sense to ask for help."

"Are you sure there's only one baby in here? I'm so huge and there's still a month to go!"

Secunda snorted.

"Come along, now. If you're insisting on following this daft notion, then you'd better get it over with before you get any bigger."

In fact, thought the elf, Hermione was moving very well for a woman in advanced pregnancy. She didn't let it slow her down any more than she had to. A shame that Master Severus wasn't there to see how lovely his wife was, carrying their child. They crossed the stable yard, wet from the night's rain, and took the path down to the tunnel. Hermione exclaimed at the new growth everywhere and drew Secunda into a trivial discussion about whether it was worth bullying the Optio into using the new growth of wild garlic in an omelette. She seemed on good form, but Secunda knew nervousness when she heard it.

It was good to see that the boys had enlarged the hole into the ground and set a sturdy ladder in place. Even so, it was no place for a pregnant woman. Dark, dank, slippery, dirty ... She could have continued her litany of subvocal grumbles, but right now she had to make sure her Mistress got down the ladder in one piece.

She followed, checked Hermione once again ("I'm *fine!* I've been up a ladder helping Lavender paint the nursery, haven't I?"), and gave her consent for the next part of the folly. She wasn't happy, though.

"Master Seneca!" she hissed.

He stopped and let the others go ahead to where Ginny was waiting at the boundary.

"What?"

"You'd better be very sure this is the only way to do this, young man!" Secunda threatened.

"I was sure two weeks ago but this is the first time you've let us try."

"It's the first time I've been willing to let her risk early labour. It's not safe. Not for her. Not for the baby."

He sighed and rubbed his hand wearily over his face.

"I know, Secunda. And if there was any other way ... Look we've practiced together until we're chanting the incantation in our sleep, and we've configured it for maximum protection of Hermione, but the charm needs *all* the blood members of the house to be present. And that means the baby, too. It's actually safer for him to be where he is for this casting once he's born he'll be too fragile."

"Just look after her, boy." Secunda was quite proud that her voice remained more or less steady, she was that afraid.

At the boundary, Hermione and the others were already in formation, needing only Seneca to slot into his place. Miss Ginny drew back a ways with Secunda, to be out of range. She was nervous, too, judging by the way her fingers were trembling in Secunda's hand. The elf felt her ears droop blood magic made her itch, even when none was shed. She could feel the power building as seven wands were raised and directed at one particular spot in the invisible wall. She didn't catch the incantation it was in some funny language she didn't know but the backwash blew her off her feet. She struggled up to see Hermione, supported in her brothers' arms, hurling her Patronus directly ahead and, when it slipped through with barely a shudder of distortion, punch the air.

"We did it!"

The boys were crowing their success. Miss Ginny ran to hug her friend.

"Ginny, I've sent a message to your father. It's still not easy to get anything through, but at least he'll know you and the others are all right and he'll spread the word. Oh, *Ginny!* We did it! All thanks to you and Seneca!"

"What about Severus? Aren't you going to send one to him?"

Secunda thought that was a very good question. She was glad, however, that she was not the one who caused Hermione's face to close down like that.

"It's up to him to contact me, Ginny. All this time, he could just have walked back in here, and he hasn't." She frowned around the group. "And that goes for all of you. Nobody contacts him. Secunda? I might need a bit of a push to get up the ladder."

The walk back to the house was slower, and silent.

"Mistress? Are you fit?"

"I'm fine, thank you. Just a little tired after that. Must be why I'm feeling a bit spaced-out."

Uh-oh, thought Secunda.

*

Septimius loved his eldest brother. He almost hero-worshipped him, to tell the truth. But the way Severus'd behaved towards Hermione had severely tarnished his image. Hermione had forbidden them to send any messages to Severus, and he could see why, but he could also see that she loved him, and she missed him, and right now she needed him there.

He slipped out of the house unnoticed. It wasn't difficult, given that everyone's attention was elsewhere. Hermione's Thestral whuffed from the shadows as he passed, wishing him well, perhaps.

The altered wards shimmered slightly in the wand light he cast in the tunnel. He wasn't even sure his message would get through without a repetition of the spell, but he had to try.

"*Expecto patronum!*" he said firmly. His Labrador wriggled through and was gone.

"You're a good man, Septimius," said Luna from behind him. "That must be why I'm going to marry you, once you get round to asking me."

*

For the first time in all the forty-one years he had been Master Severus' particular servant, a position he regarded as both a privilege and a horrible responsibility, Primus surveyed a carnage of smashed glassware, overturned cauldrons and spilled potions with equanimity. With pleasure, even. He leaned against the door jamb and dug in his pocket for a packet of cigarettes. The Master didn't like him to smoke when there were potions brewing, but there was bugger all left that was going to be of any use to anyone, so he might as well light up for a while before cleaning this lot away.

Secunda would skin him if she saw him smoking, but who cared? She'd skin him worse once she saw he was wearing overalls.

The Master had been so furious at being followed to Spinner's End that he'd given Primus clothes. Primus had taken them without a blink and stayed anyway. 'Free' meant 'free to make his own decisions', as far as he could see.

He took a long drag and blew the smoke out through his nose contemplatively. Perhaps this bloody stupid exile was over at last. Sometimes Master Severus shook out the worst elements of his father's and grandfather's personalities, mixed them together and let them explode: pride, arrogance, impulsiveness, bad temper, resentment ... Primus had had a soft spot for Toby Snape. He wasn't a bad man at heart, but he'd never learned to cope with a wife who had more power than him. It wasn't even enough that she never used it on him he knew she could if she wanted, and sometimes it drove him mad that she didn't. Mind you, the making up made the walls shake as much as the fights did and accounted for the arrival of six little brothers for Master Severus.

He hoped for Mistress Hermione's sake that she knew some better contraceptive spells than Eileen, though he doubted it if she was dropping a sprog already.

He finished his fag and crushed the end under his shoe. There was a bottle of ale waiting in the kitchen, but it could be his reward for cleaning up the mess. He'd be glad to see the back of this miserable bloody house.

He'd followed on Master Severus' boot heels the day he stormed off the Prince estate, slipping out just as the wards slammed up. The Master had already Disapparated, but Primus knew where to go. And what he'd find. He stayed out of sight while the Master shouted and stormed and threw hexes around; he remained out of sight once the self-righteous ranting set in; he came out when Master Severus started to hit the bottle. That's when he got given a tie to wear and told to "sod off". But he'd stayed and cleaned up the mess and the tears. It was just as bad as when the Master was serving the two bad wizards through that war.

Primus stopped in his sweeping and crunched across the glass-strewn floor to rescue Master Severus' notebooks from where a smoking rivulet of Bes-knew-what was creeping towards them. These, he knew, were precious.

There had been nothing but work, work, work once the first week or two went by. Now and again the Master would glance out of a window, searching for something, it looked like, or stare at the fireplace, but no messages came, so he just worked, ate when Primus shoved a plate in front of him and stuck a fork in his hand, and never spoke. He never went out, never read the papers, just became a complete hermit. It was sodding miserable.

Primus read the papers, though. He knew there was a search going on. But he wasn't about to betray the Master, when he knew them girls were perfectly fit and the other Masters safe.

He righted the cauldrons and set the mops to work on the floor. All the glass was piled up on some old *Prophets*. Time for another smoke.

Oh, he'd been right worried about Master Severus, mind. All closed up like that and ready to go off like a bomb any time. And then Master Timmy's Patronus barrelled in. Primus stuck the fag in the corner of his mouth and smiled as he gestured to cast the memory up on the wall, the better to enjoy it again.

There was Master Severus, jumping off his lab stool with his wand drawn and hair flying. There was that great shining dog leaping at him and shouting:

"Severus! I don't know what you thought you were doing, blocking off all communication like that, but it's taken us this long to make a hole barely big enough for a Patronus. I won't waste time saying all the things you deserve to hear, because you need to get home NOW! Hermione's baby's coming!"

Then the dog vanished. Primus snorted at the image of his Master gaping like a fish. Last time he'd seen that was about 1970. "Baby...?" shouts the Master. "*Baby...*?" She never said a word, damn her!" Then he starts throwing hexes around. Then he stops and sits down like a collapsing deckchair. "Oh, Merlin's *balls*! She couldn't! The wards I had no idea... A *baby*. My baby! Hermione!" Then he gets this insane light in his eyes

Primus peered more closely, considering. Ah, yes, that was the look old Master Prince used to get when Eileen's mother so much as stubbed her toe.

And after that, well, Primus had already put the front door back on its hinges. He surveyed what was left of the mess and lit another cigarette from the stub of the last. He was far too old to go rushing around like the children. And besides, Secunda would never let him smoke as much as he wanted, once he got back.

*

[Footnote 1: Nigella Lawson, *Nigella Bites* (Chatto & Windus, 2001), p. 48.]

Eleven: Finale

Chapter 11 of 11

Severus Snape has decided he needs a wife, and Hermione is the lucky woman he picks for the job. But he hasn't told her everything she needs to know...

Seven Brides for Seven Snapes 11: Finale

Severus landed running. He charged through the wards without breaking stride, re-erecting them with a hasty wave of his wand over his shoulder as he tore up to the house, scattering gravel from his flying boot-heels. The last curve of the drive ignored, he ploughed through the flower beds, up the steps, and threw the front door open with a crash.

There seemed to be a lot of people in the hall and rather more chairs than he had expected, some of which were blocking the direct route to the foot of the stairs. They were the ones that got blasted into kindling while the people lately occupying them scrambled shrieking out of the way. The only thing of which Severus was truly aware was the protracted moan that came from above and filled him with what, in a lesser man, might have been called 'panic'. He pounded up the stairs, dimly aware that someone may have been shouting at him, ran along the corridor and skidded to a halt in his bedroom doorway.

Heart pounding, chest heaving, he took in the scene: Hermione, his Hermione, was curled on her side, lying at an angle across the bed, the better to grasp the bed-post in a grip that turned her knuckles white and threatened to splinter the wood. Her eyes were shut and she was letting out the most protracted sound he had ever heard a human being produce. He was astonished she had that much air in her. And then, of a sudden, the sound was gone and she was panting, and another voice was soothing her. He noticed Secunda, then, her magic washing over Hermione as she smoothed the tangled hair away from his wife's flushed face.

"You took your time," said the elf sourly. She didn't look round. "Come and make yourself useful, boy. I'll tell you what I think of you later."

Severus edged into the room, his forward momentum having deserted him abruptly. Hermione seemed unaware of his presence, though her eyes were half open, fixed on her hands, which had loosed their desperate hold.

"What's wrong with her?" His voice was hoarse.

"She's concentrating. Let's just hope you haven't ruined it, crashing in here where you don't have any right to expect a welcome. There, there, now, Mistress."

Hermione's knuckles were going white again and she was drawing in deep breaths. Her eyes closed.

"OooooooOOOOOOOOOOH," began the long groan again.

"Why's she mooing?" Severus whimpered.

"Whatever does the job." Secunda took pity on him. "Come here, Master Severus, sit behind her and stroke her hair back from her face. When she comes out of this one we'll see if she wants you to rub her back or anything. Don't panic. She's doing well."

Hermione's groan tailed off, and she pressed her head against his hand.

"Severus?" she murmured. "You came back! You utter swine. I've missed you so much ..." She licked her lips. "Water?"

Secunda passed him a wet flannel which he held to Hermione's lips. She sucked for a moment then irritably jerked her mouth away.

"Back rub," she managed to order before drawing her breath in again.

Secunda showed him where to press, but a second later it seemed irrelevant as Hermione went into another long moan. He had never felt so helpless.

"Secunda?"

But the elf's hands were hovering above Hermione's enormous belly, and she was concentrating hard. The groan ended with a curious sort of grunt, and Secunda smiled with satisfaction.

"There we are," she said. "Hermione, you might want to think about sitting up a bit, now. The young miss is ready."

Which was how, some indefinite period of time later, Severus found himself kneeling on the bed facing Hermione as she reclined half-propped against the headboard, her feet braced against his knees and her hands crushing his to a pulp as she pulled hard for purchase, and, with a full-throated scream, delivered their daughter practically straight into his lap.

Secunda reached between them and lifted the baby into Hermione's arms. Severus realised, seeing the tears streaming down his wife's face and somehow lighting her happy smile, that his own cheeks were wet.

"Is she ...? Is she ...? Hermione ...? Are you ...?" Some part of his brain informed him he was gibbering, and he shut up.

Hermione was gently touching the tiny, red, slimy, crumpled baby. "Isn't she beautiful?" she asked him, raising her shining eyes to his.

Ew, said that part of his brain.

"Gorgeous, in a hideous sort of way," said the rest of him, honestly. "Hermione ..." He took a deep breath. "Forgive me. I didn't know ..."

"Shhh. Later."

"What shall we call her?" he asked.

"Livia," replied Hermione firmly.

He raised an eyebrow.

"Definitely Livia. It keeps the Roman tradition alive, and, well, she's going to need all the cunning and strength of her namesake to make headway in this family."

"Livia," he said. He reached out and touched the tiny fingers, which wrapped around his own. He felt a sudden huge rush of something he couldn't immediately name.

"Why don't you let me get them cleaned up a bit, Severus?" said Secunda gently. She was looking a little teary herself.

He found it very hard to extract himself from his daughter's grip. *His daughter.*

"Hermione, I'd better take the girls back to their families."

"Be very careful, Severus," she whispered, fear and concern clearly written on her tired face.

*

A pack of disgruntled swains, some fathers and brothers, Ron Weasley, who was still usually to be found on Harry's coat tails, half the Auror section, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Arthur Weasley, were all rather tired of searching the approximate location of Prince Hall. Old records had determined that the Princes hailed from the North, but since all that approximateness boiled down to half of Yorkshire, and Atlantis had nothing on the concealment charms that kept the Snapes' house Unplottable, most of the searchers had long ago come to the conclusion that fine beer and some prime male bonding were all that Yorkshire had to recommend it. Arthur would have added that there was also the cricket, but since it was winter and nobody else had heard of the game, he kept his trap shut.

Of late, the 'search' had chiefly consisted of participants sitting in pairs in rainstorms (theoretically) or in hostelrys (the de facto version), or in the case of Longbottom and Zabini a bijou tent for two, keeping a weather eye out for disturbances in the ambient magic. Places known to be devoid of anything ambient, much less magical, such as Leeds, were left off the surveillance list.

And yet, such as it was, the surveillance continued up to and including the day in late March when Longbottom stiffened suddenly and said, "Did you ~~fe~~ta?" and Zabini opened his sultry eyes and replied "Did I ever!"

"No, you idiot!" shouted Longbottom. "Something really big just happened!"

"Thank you, darling."

"In the magical field." Longbottom was so cute when he tried to drip sarcasm.

They fired off a few Patronuses and pulled their clothes on while they waited for the rest of the party to gather. Whatever it was had been close by.

The Aurors set about combing the nearby lanes for the source of the disruption a magical upheaval which was still causing ripples. When it turned out that not only was the phenomenon caused by a complex of wards so deeply paranoid they made MI6 look like Jemima Puddle Duck, but also that someone or something had made such a mess of passing through that the wards were showing intermittent signs of disintegration, there were only two conclusions to be drawn: one this was the work of Severus Snape; and two it was a trap.

After a few rounds of "You go first," and "No after you!" Arthur Weasley, who simply wanted to ensure that Molly's clock was telling the somewhat surprising truth about his little girl, raised his wand and managed to wriggle his way through relatively unscathed. From inside, he was able to work to help widen the access, and soon the entire party was standing by a gate that had been undetectable from the country lane on the other side.

Kingsley adjusted his robes and his dignity and set about deploying his troops. It was a pest and a pain trying to explain in whispers to the non-Aurors the fine arts of crouching, sneaking, and not walking into things in the dark and saying "Ow!" loudly, but once he felt they had at least got the rudiments, it was a simple matter to begin dividing them into groups.

"Auror Potter, you take Finnigan, Malfoy..."

He was interrupted by a full-throated scream carrying clearly through the crisp night air.

"They're killing them!" shouted Potter.

At which point strategy was abandoned in favour of a charge that would have made Tennyson smile in his beard.

*

Severus tore himself away from Hermione with difficulty. It was hard to believe he had been foolish enough to deprive himself of her for so long but then, until he had met her, his habit had been to regard self-deprivation as the moral high ground. What twaddle.

"Bugger off, Severus," said Hermione fondly as he lingered at the door. "Tell your brothers they're uncles before you have to tell them they can't be husbands just yet that might avert a few of the hexes."

Livia squeaked as he shut the door behind him. It sounded just like "Dada". Clearly, and entirely expectedly, his child was precocious. He rolled his shirt sleeves down and cast a quick Cleansing Charm on his clothes, then marched to the head of the stairs where he looked down on the array of anxious and excited faces, both human and

elvish.

"Hermione and the baby are doing well," he announced.

There was an immediate rush to pull him down the stairs, and much hugging and back-slapping. Severus found it distinctly odd, though not unpleasant, to be an apparent object of affection to various nubile young females, who pressed their lips to his cheek and embraced him. He ignored the flush he felt rising in his cheeks and accepted the glass of champagne that was pressed into his hand.

Seneca hushed the excited babble.

"We have to wet the baby's head. What's his name, Severus?"

"*She* is called Livia." He had a brief flash of inspiration. "Livia Circe Snape. So you louts had better watch your step around my daughter."

Everyone laughed. Seneca raised his glass.

"To Livia Circe Snape may she never lack for uncles!"

"Or aunts," added Ginny, to which everyone gave a great whoop.

Severus looked around and something registered he must truly be addled to have missed this. Each of his brothers seemed to be entwined with one of the young women, the very same young women who had so adamantly fought against being brought to Prince Hall in the first place.

"Am I to understand ...?" he asked grimly.

"Yes, brother," said Seneca, bridling.

Severus sighed.

"But we I have to take them back, Seneca."

"We won't go!" pouted Miss Brown. "We're happy here aren't we, girls?"

"Yes, we are!" said Ginny. There was something about the angle of her jaw that reminded Severus uncomfortably of Molly. He remembered, too, that this was one of the hellcats that had taken on Bellatrix Lestrange at the age of sixteen. He thought of poor henpecked Arthur Weasley and decided he had to make some decent effort to save his brother.

"Miss Weasley you must have been Confunded. You were brought here by force, kept here by force, and now you expect me to believe this is anything but Stockholm Syndrome? You expect your families and friends to believe it?" He looked around at all the girls.

"I suppose we have all been talking lately how your families must worry about you," added Septimius. He looked into Luna's eyes and encountered a curiously steely glint in them. "I think I have to stand with Severus," he added, backing away from her.

"You're all going back, with me, right now," Severus announced. "If after a decent period of separation, once your families are convinced of your mental and emotional stability, you still wish to associate with my brothers ..."

*

The sounds of brawling, punctuated by incoherent female screams, were truly appalling. Every chivalrous instinct awoke in the hearts of the rescuers. What must the girls have had to endure? What kind of beasts were these Snapes? What scenes of brutality and rapine awaited within?

They crashed through the doors and beheld ...

A pitched battle between the women and the men, jinxes and hexes flying, splintered furniture littering the floor, and Severus Snape, his back to the doorway, shouting, "Oh for Merlin's sake, just *stop it!!!*"

They shouldered him aside and crashed bravely into a barrage of Tickling Charms, Jelly-Legs hexes, Giggling Curses, Cross-Eyed Jinxes and, as Minister Shacklebolt discovered, Ginny Weasley's infamous Bat-Bogey Hex.

Arthur strolled in and offered Severus his hand.

"I take it the girls are planning to stay here, then?" he asked mildly.

"It looks that way," Severus replied. "They were a little annoyed when my brothers agreed that they ought to go back."

"Hmm," nodded Arthur, thinking of Molly's clock, on which the station "In Love" had appeared, and where Ginny's hand had been fixed for several months. The fighting had stopped, and now the girls were shouting angrily at their variously incapacitated would-be heroes. "I'd say they can hold their own against you lot. Oh am I right in thinking that congratulations are in order?"

Severus blushed.

"You are."

"I thought I recognised the scream. Well, then congratulations!" Arthur slapped him on the back. "Girl or boy?"

"Girl."

"Wonderful!"

"Tea?"

"Mmmm. I think we'll leave the ladies to sort this mess out, don't you? Why don't you take me up to see Hermione and the baby so I can tell Molly all about it?"

*

The next morning, Hermione and Severus brought Livia down to witness the marriage of her six doting uncles to her six far more practically-minded aunts. Minister Shacklebolt presided, with a bad grace.

After a brief and intense whispered discussion, followed by consultation of Hermione's extensively revised *Hogwarts: A History*, Minister Shacklebolt also presided over the marriage of Neville Longbottom and Blaise Zabini with an even worse grace. He then departed for London, vowing to have his minions hunt through the bowels of the Ministry for every piece of obsolete legislation that could be found before the blasted Granger chit turned wizarding Britain inside out.

Neville and Blaise Longbini were informed that the rooms above the stables were theirs for the taking, and they were more than welcome to stay. After all, every girl ought to have a set of gay step-uncles to advise her on fashion and the like, especially with a disaster like Granger for a mother.

Hermione's gift to the newlyweds was her completed plan for the family business the 'Daydream Edition', as she called it, wherein all the girls' various skills and expertise were factored in as vital elements.

Severus' gift was the somewhat sour promise to have the Dower House and the hamlet reconstructed as soon as possible. He declared that his sisters-in-law were entirely too thrilled by the baby, and the house wasn't big enough.

Hermione waited until she was well-recovered from the birth before entrusting Livia to Secunda's care for an afternoon and summoning Severus to the snug for a frank discussion of the events of the past year. The reasons for her delay were twofold, as far as he could tell she was entirely too besotted with her baby, her husband, and the restoration of her family to work up a good head of steam; and it gave everyone else, from the lowliest of the elves to the oldest of her brothers, an opportunity to get theirs in first. She apparently believed that this approach built a satisfying crescendo of guilt.

Severus arrived at the snug doorway knowing that he ought really to be feeling chastened. But such reproaches as he had received from his family were like algae off a squid's tentacle the little that stuck was easily chewed off. He was, after all, the head of the family, and as such was not obliged to listen to reproaches. Besides which, the elves had always groused at him, and most of the humans simply used the opportunity to shower him with thanks for his perfidy. Hermione, however, was a different matter.

He had never bothered himself overmuch with concern for the feelings of others or not since his youth had taught him it was a waste of time but the place Hermione had carved for herself in his life raised her wellbeing to a matter of vital concern. And if that wellbeing was dependent on giving him a thorough telling-off, then he was prepared to submit. This time, anyway.

She was waiting for him on the sofa, wearing a pretty dress and a stern expression.

"Sit down, Severus," she said, indicating the place next to her.

He was mildly horrified. This looked worse than telling off. This looked like a serious relationship talk. He'd known men flee the country after these.

"Please, Severus."

Second use of his name in two sentences. He swallowed and sat, facing her serious gaze.

"You know you did wrong, Severus, and I think we need to talk over exactly why you..."

He let her go on for forty minutes before he interrupted.

"You've had a lot of time to prepare this, haven't you, Hermione?" he enquired.

"Well, yes you know very well I have!" she said testily.

"And you consulted a lot of books."

"Hmph."

"And you have a whole sheaf of notes somewhere to hand, don't you?"

She failed to prevent herself from looking at the drawer in the coffee table.

"I love you, Hermione!" Even he was surprised by that.

"Well, *honestly!*" she huffed. "If you think I'm going to let you get away with all that you've done, simply by saying 'I love you', then ..."

She paused and gazed at him.

He held his breath.

She laughed and threw herself into his arms.

"... then you're completely right!"

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