

Happily Ever After

by kbauman24601

Professor Snape and Ministry employee Granger get unwillingly sucked into a novel.
My answer to the Lost In A Book Challenge by LotM.

Chapter 1 - Prologue

Chapter 1 of 18

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The HP world belongs to JKR. I just play with it.

Author's Notes: For those unfamiliar with the challenge, I have included a few of the rules. Also, a huge thank you to my Beta, Tinnidawg! You are the best!

Lost in a Book Challenge

Offered by Ladyofthemasque

Based upon the story "Lost in a (Not So) Good Book" by Bubblebunny

Here's the Lost in A Book Challenge:

1. Hermione Granger and Severus Snape encounter a wizarding romance novel (I have modified it to a non-magical romance) with our favorite wizards and witches.
2. They get sucked literally into the storyline, taking on the roles of the hero and heroine.
3. They must complete the storyline of the novel in order to escape the book and return to the real world.
4. They must fall in love with each other during the course of their adventure, though they don't have to start out that way, if you don't want. The main genre will therefore be Romance.
5. The sub-genre of the novel can be any category—Western, Sci-Fi, Fantasy, Regency, Contemporary, Horror, Medieval, Prehistorical, and so forth...but the MAIN category must remain focused on building some sort of romance between SS/HG (mildly romantic or downright smutty or some combination thereof).
6. The number of "chapters" should be at least 5, though the chapters can be as short as 100 words, or as long as 10,000. (There shall be no limit to the size of the story, but it would be really, really nice if you finished it, and didn't abandon it...)
7. Severus and Hermione must kiss at least 3 times, though it doesn't have to be voluntarily at first. Greater levels of passion are at the author's discretion, but nothing lesser will be accepted.
8. The Deadline for this Challenge (submitting the *first* chapter) will be February 17th, 2006, because it's my birthday, and I want to read some nice prezzies from all the fine writers here at WIKTT. If there's lots of enthusiasm, I'll definitely consider extending the deadline.

9. Feel free to use other HP characters to fill out the various supporting cast roles. CAVEAT: If you decide to place this into a specific genre, such as the Anita Blake series (by Laurell K. Hamilton...mmm, Severus as Jean-Claude...), please be mindful that some fanfic sites do not allow crossover-fics to be posted on their boards (for example, Ashwinder or RestrictedSection.org).

Chapter 1 - Prologue

Crawling around the dusty floors of a library might have been the last thing that any normal young woman in her twenties would consider doing, unless that someone was Miss Hermione Granger. Miss Granger had graduated five years ago, but the research she was working on required her to haunt the halls of Hogwarts once again. She was also able to access the Restricted Section without fear of reprimand and was making good use of the freedom.

"Where is that book? It is said that it was last seen in the library at Hogwarts. Even that old man at Flourish and Blotts swore that it was still here."

"Well, well. What have we here? Come back to take refresher courses?" a silky voice sneered. The owner of the voice paused. "Then again, did you come back to haunt the library?"

"Professor Snape, always a pleasure." Hermione looked up from where she was sitting and took in the black boots, trousers, teaching robes and scowl that she remembered seeing throughout the seven years that she had attended here.

The Draco/ Snape debacle from her sixth year turned out to be nothing more than a cover up. Draco Malfoy and Professor Snape had been working for the Order, and the "death" of Dumbledore allowed them access into Voldemort's inner circle. Shortly after Voldemort's defeat, Dumbledore reappeared and promptly went into a quiet retirement, leaving McGonagall to take over as Headmistress of Hogwarts. Professor Snape had been reinstated as Potions master, and Draco became a hero.

"Is there anything in particular that you are searching for or are you aiding Madam Pince in her yearly clean up?"

"Oh, just help me up," Hermione snapped as she extended her hand.

Professor Snape grasped the very tip of her index finger and gave a halfhearted tug. As soon as she came to her feet, he immediately brushed his hands off, as if she had a contagious disease.

"Oh, thank you! That was definitely a huge help!" As he sneered at her, she looked down and gasped. She could not see one clean spot on her robes. She was covered from head to toe in dust and cobwebs. *So much for making an impression on my ex-professors* she mused.

"I am looking for a very old text. It describes the process of 'transporting' a living object into a non-living environment. No, not a Horcrux. This transporting is very temporary. There is a time limit imposed, usually just until an objective is reached. The living subject is able to hear, feel, taste, everything but from the confines of the object they have been transfigured into. The Ministry is interested in using the process for studying hazardous species in their normal environment. Just think, being able to study ogres in their natural habitat from the safety of..."

"Miss Granger, please, spare me your enthusiasm. It is truly wearying. I do not know where this particular book is at. Perhaps, if you asked Madam Pince where it is located?"

"She did not know where it was. All the references say that the book is here, but there is no reference to its exact location."

"It is dinner time. I was sent to fetch you from the library and bring you to the Great Hall for supper. You may return to your research after the meal. Headmistress's orders."

"Oh, very well." Hermione started brushing her robes off. She reached down to grab her briefcase when a small, bright book caught her eye. Something about the book called to her, and thrusting her briefcase in the general direction of Professor Snape, she bent down to grab the book. If nothing else, she would have something to read during dinner.

Snape rolled his eyes and reached again for her dust covered hand. The familiar pulling of a Portkey surprised them both. The last thing either of them saw was the shocked expression on the other's face.

Chapter 2 - Once Upon A Time

Chapter 2 of 18

Once upon a time, somewhere, Severus Snape and Hermione Malfoy meet. Yes, I said Hermione Malfoy!

Author's Notes: Again, Tinnidawg, you are the greatest!

Chapter 2 – Once Upon A Time

Looking around, they noticed they were standing on the pavement of a cobbled street. Instead of cars and buses, however, there were horse drawn carriages and people riding on horseback. Hermione saw women dressed in long, empire-waist gowns while the majority of men wore light colored, form fitting pants with short dark jackets. Severus, though he had traveled extensively, did not recognize any familiar landmarks.

"Hermione! What are you doing out there? Come inside. Father wants to speak to you." Hermione whipped around and saw Draco coming down the steps of a very large brick townhouse.

"Severus! We have been looking for you all over, old chap. Ron and Remus are already at the club!" Severus looked up and saw Harry Potter headed towards him with a very happy expression on his face. He turned a horrified face towards Hermione.

"Oh, no! Not them," Hermione groaned.

"Not them? You have ten seconds to explain this to me before I start hexing Potter," Snape growled out of the corner of his mouth.

"Just go along with Harry! Please? I will meet you later. We have to find out exactly where we are. Besides, I am not sure that we can do any magic. Nobody I see is carrying a wand." Despite landing in an unknown situation, Hermione's eyes were at once cautious and excited. Severus rolled his own eyes and steeled himself for whatever horrible punishment was sure to come. She heaved a sigh of relief when he allowed himself to be hauled away by a very happy Harry.

"What were the Duke of Walforth and you talking about? Father will want to know this immediately. Come inside before people start commenting about you standing in the street."

Hermione let herself be ushered into the large townhouse before her. Her mind was racing, trying to understand this new world. She had the vague feeling that she had heard the name Walforth before. She had learned over the years to control her questions, as observation and patience usually yielded the same results.

Nothing prepared her for meeting her "father" however. She was ushered into what she assumed was a library and came face to face with none other than Lucius Malfoy. He was dressed in black trousers and a long black frock coat. His long silver blond hair was tied back with a narrow black ribbon. She felt the blood drain from her face. She pinched the back of her hand, fervently hoping she would wake up from this dream.

"I thought you were in Azkaban. What are you doing here?"

"Young lady, that is not amusing. I have never been to this place you call Azkaban, as you well know. Your brother noticed you standing in the middle of the street creating a spectacle of yourself with the Duke of Walforth. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Hermione looked down and let out a soft gasp. Her black robes had changed into a soft blue, high-waisted gown. *How interesting for the transportation spell to change a person's clothing and setting so completely*, she thought. "Well, sir. I honestly do not recall how I met him. He just appeared and helped me up, sir. *Oh, Merlin, what have we gotten into?* she thought.

"Well, my poppet, it appears that you two are familiar with each other. Am I correct then in assuming that nothing unseemly is going on between you two? Did he mention anything about tonight?"

"No, sir, he did not. I think I would like to go to my room now." Hermione turned away to leave the room, but his voice stopped her dead in her tracks.

"Of course, of course. Before you go, did he mention anything about, oh, I don't know, marriage?"

Hermione whipped around. "What?" she screeched.

"Kindly moderate your voice, young lady! What would your mother say to hear you raise it in such a fashion? Go to your room and freshen up." Lucius dropped a kiss on Hermione's forehead before turning away to sit behind his desk. He immediately pulled paper and pen towards him and started writing. "Don't forget the supper we are attending tonight at seven."

Hermione turned and walked out of the door in a daze. It was a strange day when Hermione did not know what to think. This would be the second time in her life when she was so shocked. She mounted the staircase and turned down the corridor at the top. She was going to have to play "guess the room," as she had no idea which room was hers.

"Little sister, I really think you should start paying attention to where you are headed," a voice lazily drawled.

"Hmmm?"

"Your room is two doors back." Draco opened the correct door and followed her into her room. He sprawled in one of the chairs and watched her as she paced around the room. "You know, you are acting very peculiar. What is going on, Hermione?"

"Draco, how well do we get along?" She was guessing on the name, but as he called her by her own name, she assumed his was the same as well.

Draco cocked an eyebrow, amused. "Well enough, I guess. You are my favorite twin sister. You adore me and I adore me. Why?"

"I was just curious. How well do you know the Duke of Walforth? Were those friends of his that dragged him away?" No time like the present to start gathering information. Now that some of the shock was wearing off, Hermione thought she would enjoy this, if only for a short while. It was very surreal to think of Lucius Malfoy as her father and Draco as her caring, twin brother. How ironic that the two people who hated her most in her world were actually related to her in this world.

"I know that he and father used to be friends, but had some sort of disagreement. Father has been trying to get back into his good graces and advance his influence within Parliament. We belong to the same Club but are not close intimates. Harry is his younger brother, and they are very close. Ron and Remus are close friends of His Grace's." Draco watched her make another circuit around the room. "You are going to make me dizzy. Lie down and rest, Hermne. I will see you later. I believe all of us have to attend the supper tonight."

Hermione lay down on the bed. *Hermne?* She shuddered at that name. When she had time, she vowed to get to the bottom of that nickname. She was not very tired, but decided she could put the quiet time to good use. She was starting to suspect what had happened but needed to gather more information. She had to bite her tongue to keep from laughing when she thought about Severus and Harry being related. Now, she just had to figure out how to get out of this world, but in the meantime, things looked like they could be very entertaining.

Chapter 3 - There Was A Handsome Prince

Chapter 3 of 18

Poor Severus. He discovers who his family is!

Chapter 3 – There Was A Handsome Prince

Severus allowed himself to be led away from the large townhouse. Once they rounded the corner, he yanked his arm from Harry's grasp.

"Would you let go of me?" he snapped.

"Sorry about that, Sev. You were starting to create a scene, standing in the middle of the street with Miss Malfoy. Besides, the others are really waiting at the club for us.

We thought we would go to the races today. You did mention that you were looking for a new team for your stables." Severus ground his teeth at the nickname and could not figure out why Harry was standing about talking to him, as if he enjoyed it. He preferred the wary looks and short conversations they usually shared, if they shared any at all. Even after five years, he still found Potter highly annoying.

"Miss Malfoy? Don't you mean Miss Granger?"

"Who is Miss Granger? You were talking to Miss Hermione Malfoy. Weren't you a close friend of her father before your disagreement? I know you do not get along with Lucius now, but really, you should remember his children's names. Which reminds me, mother asked me to remind you that we are required to attend supper this evening with her at seven."

"Mother?" Severus had the beginnings of a migraine and having to deal with all of these "surprises" was becoming more than he could handle. He did not think he could handle much more.

"Ok, maybe a drink before we head for the races," Harry said taking in the ashen face of his brother. "You do remember our dear mother, Lady Minerva, don't you? If you did not have the same scowl and horrid taste in clothing, I would swear you were not Severus Snape, Duke of Walforth, and my dear older brother." Harry grinned and started walking towards the waiting carriage. "Coming?"

Severus closed his eyes, counted to ten, opened them, and groaned. Everything was the same as when he closed them. He started thinking of the many favors Hermione would owe him for being on such good behavior.

They arrived at Whites, the club Harry was talking about. "There you are old man. We were beginning to wonder if you had changed your mind. Should we head to the races now?" Remus grinned as he and Ron climbed into the waiting carriage.

"When you said that you were going to consider marriage, we did not think you meant immediately, Severus."

"You heard about him standing outside Malfoy's home then, Remus? My, news does travel fast in this city," Harry said, grinning.

"Well, when one is the Duke of Walforth, of course. So, what do you think of Miss Malfoy?" Ron grinned at Severus as he spoke. Severus gritted his teeth and deepened his scowl. "I was curious though, out of all of the young ladies at court, why Miss Malfoy? You can have your pick of all of the eligible ones, and the not so eligible ones, why her?"

"I wonder how Lady Sibyll will react when she hears about this?" Remus mused.

"Who?" Severus told himself that Sibyll was not an altogether uncommon name.

"Your current paramour, Lady Sibyll Trelawney?" Remus looked at him questioningly. "You do remember her, don't you? That eccentric widow you have been keeping?" Now all three men were looking at Severus with slight frowns as he made a light gagging noise.

Severus had finally had enough. If Hermione wanted him to play a part and fit in, then that was exactly what he was going to do. Serve her right anyway, he thought with a lot of satisfaction.

"I am sure that no matter who I marry, they will just have to get used to the idea of my having a mistress. It is the thing to do, is it not?" And Severus motioned to the driver to proceed to the races.

Author's Notes: A million thanks to my beta, Tinnidawg! Also wanted to thank all of you who have reviewed. I respond to each and every one! Sorry for the short chapter. Longer ones coming.

Chapter 4 - And A Beautiful Princess

Chapter 4 of 18

Ok, so Hermione is not a princess, but it sounds nice. Hermione and Severus have a very enlightening supper.

Chapter 4 And A Beautiful Princess

The sound of pouring water woke Hermione from her nap. Looking for the source of the sound, she noticed a young girl preparing what looked like a bath. She was surprised that she had fallen asleep trying to figure out how to get back to Hogwarts. The stress and surprises had tired her more than she had realized. She threw back the coverlet and approached the steaming tub.

"Oh, miss, you startled me. Would you like me to lay out your gown for the evening?"

"Yes, thank you." Hermione was happy to discover lavender had been added to her bath. She soaked in the tub until the water had cooled and then climbed out to prepare for the evening.

"Oh, how lovely! Thank you." The maid gave her a surprised look but did not say anything. She helped Hermione dress in a soft silk gown of light apricot. There was a darker band of apricot satin just below her breasts. Since Hermione had cut her hair a couple of years ago, it was too short to put up in the fashionable chignon. Instead, the little maid added a gold net like cap that complimented her gown.

"Hermne, you have exactly two minutes before father comes up here and drags you down by your hair," Draco warned her as he leaned casually against her door.

Hermione nodded, grabbed the shawl and reticule the maid handed her, and walked out of the door. Draco followed lazily along behind.

"About time you got down here, young lady. How many times do I have to tell you, do not keep the horses waiting once they are hitched to the carriage?" Lucius sighed and chucked Hermione under her chin.

He turned as his wife, Narcissa, came down the stairs dressed in a beautiful emerald green gown. Hermione was starting to think that she had stumbled into Wonderland when Narcissa patted her cheek lovingly as she and Lucius walked out of the house. Draco and Hermione followed them and all four got into the elegant black carriage waiting at the foot of the stairs.

The house they pulled up to was a solid brick mansion. Lucius helped his wife down and started up the stairs. Draco turned and helped Hermione down and they followed their parents through the doors to meet their hostess.

"Draco, when you said supper, I was thinking of something smaller. There have to be about twenty people here." Hermione felt panic rising and took several deep breaths in an attempt to calm down. Fortunately, she recognized most of the people present.

"This *is* a dinner for just family and close friends. You know most of these people. Are you sure you are feeling all right? See, there is Lady Minerva." Hermione did see and could feel the blood draining from her face. Standing in front of her was Minerva McGonagall, or at least somebody who looked an awful lot like her.

"Hermione, how nice of you to join us this evening. It has been a long time. You are right, Lucius, she has grown into a lovely young woman."

"Thank you, Your Grace." Hermione could only mutter a greeting in response. She joined Draco in the drawing room.

"I see that you have met my 'Mother,' Miss Malfoy," she heard a voice hiss in her ear.

"Yes. Well, I hear that you know who my 'Father' is, Your Grace," she retorted.

"Did you notice who my brother is? I can barely tolerate Potter on the rare occasions when we are required to attend Order meetings. Are you sure you want to continue with this charade?"

"I do not think having Draco as a brother is any better. Besides, Harry is not that bad. And yes, we need to continue with this pretense. I still do not know how we are going to get out of this."

"Well, I do know that we cannot do any magic. I tried to hex Potter when he hugged me and nothing happened. Oh no, here come my 'friends.'"

"Miss Malfoy," Remus said, coming up to her and Severus. Ron and Remus both kissed her hand in greeting. "How nice of you to join us this evening. It has been a while since we were all together."

"Yes, well, it is a pleasure to be here. Thank you."

"Hermione! Oh my, how wonderful to see you!" Hermione was knocked back a step by a small whirlwind in a gauzy cream dress.

"Ginny! What are you doing here?" Hermione asked before she could stop herself.

"Well, we are family friends of the Snape family. Oh, you mean what am I doing back from France? Well, Bill and his wife decided that they needed time to get to know their new baby alone, so I came home early. Ron invited me to be his dinner guest tonight, and I am so glad I decided to come. Much better than helping Uncle Dumbledore make lemon ice." Ginny looked at her close friend and noticed that something was bothering her.

"Well, I am glad you are back. You should come tomorrow for tea. And bring your mother. I would love to know how your family has been doing and how Paris was." Hermione could not get over how elegant Ginny was with her hair gathered up on her head, and the cream gown made her skin just glow. She watched Draco's eyes follow Ginny around the room. She was happy to see this as they had started dating each other around the time she started working for the Ministry.

Looking around, Ginny asked Harry, "Harry, do you know where my parents have gone off to?"

"Here they come, and not a moment too soon, as Jeffrey is announcing dinner."

Everybody filed into the dining room. Hermione, escorted by Severus, noticed that Draco was escorting Ginny. As she settled down to the first course, Hermione relaxed and let the conversation flow around her. Severus ate little, but refrained from scowling at everyone at the table and kept his sarcastic remarks to a minimum.

The only surreal moments were when Minerva and Narcissa discussed the joys and sorrows of motherhood, and when Lucius made witty comments that set the whole table laughing. Severus was sure he would need a memory modification charm of some sort to deal with the images of Lucius flirting lightly with Minerva.

The tinkling of silver on fine crystal ceased all conversations. Minerva and Lucius both stood up and looked at Hermione and Severus. Severus could feel his stomach clench and saw the apprehension in Hermione's face.

"I would like everyone in this room to know how honored Lord Lucius, Lady Narcissa and I are tonight to have you all here to witness such a happy moment for our two families." Hermione now wished she had not eaten the aspic. She was sure she could feel it wiggling in her stomach.

"Last night, Lucius and Severus met and agreed to put past grudges behind them in order to forge a new friendship. As part of this agreement, Lucius has agreed to give his consent for Hermione Malfoy to marry His Grace, my son, Severus." Minerva raised her wine glass in a toast to the newly engaged couple.

Hermione felt all of the blood drain from her face. She looked from the very happy and satisfied faces of her family and friends to that of Severus, her new fiancé. She felt Ginny give her a hug and vaguely heard words of congratulations being directed at her. She took one look at Severus and knew she had to get him out of the room before he said or did something he would later regret. She grabbed his arm and propelled him through the dining room door, across the hall and into the parlor.

She heard what sounded like teeth gnashing together. Looking up, she saw that his jaw muscles were indeed tightly clenched. She braced herself for the explosion she knew would follow.

"What in Merlin's name is going on! I have to endure relatives that I would rather use as specimens in experiments! I have to tolerate Trelawney as a mistress. I was forced to hear myself being called 'Sev' by those lunatics you call friends! Now I have to marry you!?"

"Do not think I enjoyed today either, you great insensitive prat!" Hermione felt tears prickle behind her eyes. She would rather prance through naked than marry this man, but how dare he act so outraged! She was the one who was being treated unfairly. "I do not think overreacting is going to help this situation. And what do you mean, you have a mistress?"

"Overreacting? I am overreacting?"

"Well, you are the one who is yelling. It appears that you wanted this marriage earlier. Why do you have a mistress?"

"That was not me. If you recall, I was not 'here' last night."

"Fine, be insensitive and point that out!" Hermione turned and quickly rubbed the tears from her eyes.

"Why are you crying? I cannot believe this. Control yourself. You should be honored to be marrying me."

"Give me one good reason."

This stumped Severus. "Well...For one...Hmmm. You just should!"

The muted sounds of people's voices alerted Hermione to their audience. Quickly composing herself, she turned to Severus, "Okay. I will marry you. But I want you to know, this is not over. People are listening, and I suppose we have already created enough of a scene. Thank Merlin it was only these few. And get rid of your mistress!"

"I agree. But do not think for one minute, I am going to play the besotted lover or the henpecked husband. I will give you a list of rules before the wedding. The only reason I will get rid of Trelawney is because I cannot stand that frumpy fraud, not because you demand it."

Hermione rolled her eyes and walked to open the door. Sighing heavily, Severus followed behind.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to my beta, Tinnidawg! Without her, this chapter would make absolutely no sense! I am so glad to those of you leaving reviews, they definitely motivate me!

Chapter 5 - Tea Time

Chapter 5 of 18

A little tea helps calm the nerves, so they think.

Chapter 5 Tea Time

Severus knew it was early, but he had to talk to his 'fiancée.' He had spent all of last night trying to figure out a way to get back to his beloved dungeons. All he got for his attempt was a headache and severe indigestion at the thought of having to marry Little-Miss-Sunstroke, or was that Sunshine? As soon as it was socially acceptable, he headed for the Malfoy home. Before he knew it, he was seated at the breakfast table with Lucius, Narcissa and Draco.

"What are you doing here?" He looked up to see a very tired and grumpy looking Hermione enter the dining room. It did not look like she had gotten any more rest than he had. She had dark shadows under her eyes and a sullen expression on her face.

"Hermione!" Narcissa was shocked that her beloved daughter would speak to her future husband in such a fashion.

"No warm, morning greeting for your very handsome brother or dashing fiancé? We sure woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning, didn't we? I thought you would be positively glowing; after all, you are going to marry the greatest catch of the season," Draco tutted as he started eating his second helping of buttered eggs.

"Tea." Hermione slumped in the first available chair. She could do nothing more than glare at Draco. Severus was highly amused watching her adjust to a warm and loving Malfoy family. He was finding it a little unsettling himself, but he had always considered them friends and so was not as uncomfortable as her. He was glad she was as comfortable with her new family as he was with his. *Serve her right for thinking that Harry was a better brother than Draco* he thought.

"Cheer up, Hermne. You really need to become more of a morning person," Draco said as he reached over and ruffled his sister's hair. Hermione gritted her teeth and wished for her wand. *Why does he have to be so happy? Oh, that is right, he doesn't have to get married to HIM* she grumped to herself.

"Please stop calling me that! Why do you insist on using that awful name?" Hermione said before she could stop herself.

Draco smirked before answering, "Well, I believe I have called you that since we were about three. The fact that it irritates you just adds to my pleasure in using that cute little name."

"Children, that is enough. Draco, please leave your sister alone. It is undignified to call your sister Hermne now that she is about to be married. Hermione, dear, do not slouch. It is bad for the posture. When you are a duchess, you will have to remember a lady never slouches." Narcissa looked at her daughter fondly and went back to reading her papers. She was used to their frequent arguing and had become quite good at stopping it before all out war was declared.

"Good morning, poppet." Lucius dropped an affectionate kiss on his daughter's brow as he got up from the table.

Hermione watched him leave the room in stunned silence. *He couldn't have just kissed me!* She looked over at Severus and saw his amused smirk.

Hermione ground her teeth together and drank her tea. She made a mental note to visit her parents' dental practice as soon as she got back to Hogwarts. She was starting to have a very real fear for the condition of her teeth. Feeling somewhat better after her first cup of tea, she turned to Severus. "I am glad you are here. We need to go over the 'wedding plans' and a couple of ideas that I had last night."

"Ahhh, Hermione, that reminds me, I think we will start shopping for your wedding trousseau today. Of course, we also have calls to make this morning, and then we must start planning for your wedding. Are you listening to me?"

Hermione turned her head and noticed Narcissa, her *mother*, frowning at her from her place at the table. "I was hoping to talk to His Grace since he is here," Hermione trailed off upon seeing the look on her mother's face. "I am sorry... Mother. I am sure that will be fine. I had asked Ginny and her mother to tea later today. Will that be all right?" Hermione was relieved that calling her Mother was the correct form of address. She would have hated to have had to call her Mama.

"Yes, I will extend a formal invitation this morning. Your Grace, if it is possible, please join us for tea. You and Hermione may discuss your plans then. We really do need to get started on the wedding planning and wardrobe," Narcissa said apologetically.

Severus agreed and went to join Lucius in his study. The latter claimed he needed to discuss the various terms of the contract they had signed. The last thing Severus wanted to do was spend his morning shopping for clothes. The thought alone caused him to feel nauseous. He hoped that Hermione was not one of those girls who enjoyed frequent shopping; of course, if she did, he could always send Potter with her.

Later that day, Draco escorted his sister into the sitting room while Narcissa dressed for afternoon tea.

"I do not think that Mother found that in the least amusing, Hermne."

"I do not care, Draco. I cannot believe that anyone can be that... that... ignorant! Don't they know what those things do to a person's body?" Hermione was in an extremely bad mood. She had endured numerous fittings and measurements at the dressmakers today.

She had helped Narcissa pick out five new gowns, various undergarments and matching hats. She had even picked out nightwear that the seamstress assured her was the current rage. Hermione prayed that she would have found a way back home before the wedding night, as she knew she would die of mortification if Severus ever saw her in them. She drew the line, however, at the mention of a corset. They were starting to come back into fashion, and she had had a tremendous row in the shop with

Narcissa. Her mother and the seamstress were both determined that she should start wearing them. Hermione was just as adamant about not wearing them.

"What does what to a person's body?" asked a lazy voice from the deep recesses of the sitting room.

"Severus, hope your day was pleasant," Draco greeted Severus with a warm handshake.

"I was subjected to a fitting for my wedding trousseau, which included a corset!"

"Really, how intriguing. Do you have one to model?" Severus could not stop himself from asking. The thought of his future bride in a corset gave him a rather warm tingle, which surprised him. Hermione rewarded him with a deep blush and a look that could have sent him to St Mungo's. Before she could retort, Narcissa sailed into the room.

"How nice of you to join us, Your Grace," she simpered. "Hermione, darling, would you please ring for tea?"

Ginny, Ron and Molly arrived shortly before the tea was brought in. The four women fell to discussing the wedding details and, of course, the latest fashions. The men moved to the other side of the room and discussed horses and hunting.

Throughout tea, Severus watched Hermione closely. He was intrigued by how content she seemed in her new surroundings. She was neither as upset nor as hysterical as he was afraid she would be considering her tender years. She was actually pleasant to talk to and was not at all as bossy, nor did she act like a know-it-all as she did at Hogwarts. Her clothes were a definite improvement. He wondered if she would occasionally wear the gauzy gowns once they got back to their own time. Who would have thought she had such a nice, trim figure under those robes?

As for himself, he was starting to relax and enjoy the new environment he found himself in. He did not have to deal with annoying students or professors. He could say and do things that he would not normally do back at Hogwarts. Deep inside, he grudgingly admitted that he enjoyed the respect and camaraderie that he received. A small, very small, part of him also enjoyed having friends and family that supported and accepted him. He did try to be less critical and disapproving of these people. It took a bit of effort on his part to bite back his sarcastic comments, but the more he relaxed, the easier it became. He just had to figure out how to avoid marrying Hermione.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Tinnadawg for being such a wonderful beta!

Chapter 6 - And the Plot Thickens

Chapter 6 of 18

There is always something! Nobody can fall in love without complications.

Chapter 6 – And the Plot Thickens

After tea, Severus had his carriage brought around to the front door. Hermione claimed that she needed some fresh air. She wanted as many 'witnesses' as possible around her when she told him what she remembered of the book. Narcissa graciously gave her permission for them to drive through the park.

Once they were settled in the carriage, Severus said, "Hermione, tell me what is so important." At her shocked expression, he pointed out, "It does not take a mind reader to know that something has you upset. You have frayed the edge of your handkerchief."

"Well, I do remember part of the book's plot. Just remember, Severus, it is only a silly romance novel," she finished in a rush.

"Mmmm. And do you mind telling me what about it 'only being silly romance novel' has you so scared?" Her anxiety was neither comforting nor reassuring. He was glad of the brandy that Draco had given him during tea.

"Well, as you have figured out, there is a marriage."

"How enlightening," he huffed.

"Well, that took place in the first quarter of the book." Hermione looked at the other carriages in the park, anywhere but at her intended.

"First quarter? What is there to a romance beyond girl meets boy, boy falls in love with girl, then happily ever after? Don't those silly pieces of fluff usually end with a wedding?"

"In most instances they do. This particular book did not. It involved a wedding, falling in love, and a child."

Severus groaned and rubbed his temples with his hands. "This wasn't a horror novel by any chance was it? Just disguised as a romance?" The only benefit to her book, as far as he could see, was the gratuitous sex that would result in said child. He made a mental note to find the book when he got back to Hogwarts.

"It took a long time for the hero and heroine to fall in love," she mumbled.

"Beg pardon?" He was sure he had misunderstood her mumbling.

"Love! It took a very long for them to fall in love. It was an arranged marriage!"

His queasiness returned. "Are you telling me that you have to fall in love with me? Can't you just say you love me, and then we can return to our previous lives?"

"No, it took a long time for them to fall in love with EACH OTHER!" Hermione was starting to wonder how he managed to notice the slightest noise at Hogwarts when he only seemed to hear every other word she had said since arriving in this place.

"Well, how did they manage to do that? It shouldn't be all that difficult. Just copy what they did, and we should be home in time for dinner."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I do not remember what they did to fall in love. But I am going out on a limb and guessing that, since we have not been exactly following the book, we will have to fall in love on our own. No script. Do not look at me like that! I am not sure if we will have to have a baby also, or if just falling in love will be enough to get us back home."

"Hmmm, that should explain the conversation Lucius and I had earlier today. Did you know that he has a contract of sorts that I have to fulfill before I get your dowry?"

"Contract?" Hermione asked weakly. From the look on Severus's face, she knew she was not going to like what he had to say.

"Yes. First, I had to produce a financial statement to ensure that I could support you properly. Second, I am to marry you within a month; your mother requested this, so that she may have her social event to kick off the season. Third, there is to be at least one child, if not more, within the first two years of marriage. Fourth, if we ever separate, I am to turn over the original amount of your dowry, plus a certain percentage for each year that we were married. Fifth, I would make you fall in love with me."

"And you agreed to this? Why?" Hermione did not see this last condition happening any time soon, if at all. She, personally, was starting to feel like a caged bird at best, and at worst, a brood mare.

"Oh, do not worry. I had a couple of provisions of my own. In return for these things, I requested that; first, I have total financial control of your dowry once we were married. This is a common practice, so he did not argue. Second, you are not to take a lover at any time during our marriage, or his contract will be null and void. Third, you will be a dutiful wife in all aspects of our marriage." By this time, Severus was valiantly holding his laughter in. Her looks of indignation, surprise and disbelief were almost too much for him. "Fourth, you would do your best to make me fall in love with you."

"I think I am going to be sick. You and my dear *Father* have no right to decide how I will behave. If you think that..."

"If you will recall, during this time period, these conditions are all normal and usually expected of a wife. It is not out of the norm for contracts such as these to have been created." *Nothing like a little revenge* Severus thought with satisfaction.

Hermione snapped her jaw shut. She could not believe that she was out maneuvered so easily. This just added impetus to her determination to find the quickest way home. *But how does one fall in love with a self-centered Neanderthal? Dutiful my foot* she thought.

"My darling, you do not look like one in the deep throes of love. I will take you home now. You need time to think how truly lucky you are. By the way, Minerva, I mean Mother, has invited you and your mother to tea tomorrow." He was almost dancing with glee; he was enjoying himself so much.

Severus delivered Hermione to her home, kissed her hand as she got out of the carriage and went home. He chuckled as she watched him drive away. She was definitely starting to turn a slight shade of green. He almost felt sorry for her, but he was having too much fun baiting her. Now he just had to figure out how to fall in love with the maddening Ministry official.

Author's Notes: Three cheers for my wonderful beta, Tinnadawg!

Chapter 7 - Tea Time II

Chapter 7 of 18

Hermione and Narcissa have tea with Minerva.

Chapter 7 – Tea Time II

"Narcissa! Hermione! So glad you could make it for tea. It has been too long!" Minerva greeted the two women warmly. She was seated in her parlor wearing a beautiful green plaid dress. "You remember my brother, Albus. He was busy attending to a business matter and had to miss supper the other night."

Hermione felt her jaw drop open but could not have stopped it even if she had tried. Albus had rarely been seen since his retirement. Everyone else she had met in this macabre situation was still alive back at Hogwarts. Yet, Albus was sitting in a chair next to Minerva looking very much like he did when he had been at Hogwarts. He still sported his long white beard and had his half moon spectacles, but he was dressed in black trousers and crisp white shirt with a bright blue waistcoat. She almost did not recognize him without his robes.

Feeling three sets of eyes upon her, she snapped her mouth closed and murmured a greeting to her hostess. She sat down on a soft loveseat and arranged her flowered silk skirt around her. Looking up, she saw Albus smiling at her.

"I can't tell you how happy we are that you will soon be joining our family, Miss Malfoy," he said, "I can't wait to hear the pitter-patter of little feet dancing through the halls once again. Harry and Severus are grown now, and once we get Severus settled, then we can..."

"Oh! How lovely, lemon cakes!" Hermione, desperate to change the subject, exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, how wonderful. Please try them. They are my favorite." His eyes smiled and she knew that he was not fooled by her interruption.

"Minerva, you are sure that a month is not too short a notice for the wedding? I would like this wedding to be at the start of the Season, one of the first, big social events of the year." Narcissa was one of the leaders of the ton and saw this as an opportunity not to be passed up. Besides, didn't her darling little girl deserve the best?

"I believe that it would be the perfect start to the Season, Narcissa. I am just worried whether everything will be ready by then. Severus has stated he did not want a big fuss, but he just has pre-wedding jitters. Please, let me know if you need any assistance. Hermione, are you feeling well, dear?"

"I will take her out for some fresh air, my dear. Please, you and Narcissa continue your discussion of the wedding plans, and we will return shortly." Albus offered his arm, which Hermione grabbed as if it were a lifeline.

"Oh, thank you so much, sir," Hermione said once they were outside.

"Do not mention it, child. Why don't you just call me Uncle Albus. Everyone else does," he chuckled.

"Uncle Albus, I do not know if I can do this. It is all so sudden." Hermione felt her own pre-wedding jitters coming on. She had always dreamed of falling madly in love with the man she would eventually marry.

"If you have any hopes of finding happiness and love, Hermione, you will follow through with this. Love is a very powerful force. It is what is behind every good romance

story.”

Hermione looked at Albus closely. Surely, he did not know about her situation.

“Sir, what romance story?” Hermione asked.

“Oh come, my dear. Life is one big romance novel. The story of a man and a woman, coming together, sometimes reluctantly, and falling in love for the rest of their lives. You could also say that life is like lemonade. You start out with the basic ingredients: lemons, sugar and water. Easy to guess who the lemons are and who is the sugar,” he chuckled. “As you create the final product, if you add too much of any ingredient it becomes too sweet, too bitter or watered down and bland.”

“Do you really think we will fall in love? We barely know each other.” Hermione decided he was just an old man rambling. Nobody else was aware that they were not the real Duke and Hermione.

“The Hermione that I used to know was spoiled and manipulative. Her parents did not see that side of her, as she concealed it well from them. Draco has already been to see me, telling me how much you have changed since meeting my nephew. I told him to enjoy the change and hope that things do not go back to the way they were. He was satisfied with my lack of concern and quite pleased with the change.

“Let me explain a little about my eldest nephew. He is a little more... temperamental... than most people. Then again, he has a very important role to fulfill. He is capable of great passion but does not believe in displaying it. Be patient with him; the woman who wins his heart will have a treasure beyond compare. Just trust me, my dear, and see what happens in the end.” With that, he turned them back towards the parlor.

Hermione followed, thinking about what Albus had just told her. She was not sure if she believed everything he said, but she was willing to give his advice a try. For now, she was going to enjoy this new life, since it appeared that she was going to be here for a while.

The rest of tea passed uneventfully. It was after they had returned home that Narcissa dropped a bomb. “Hermione, darling, I know that things have been very busy lately. Is there anything about the wedding that you would like to talk about?”

“Well, now that you brought it up, yes. Whose idea was it that we sign marriage contracts?” Hermione demanded.

“No, darling. I was talking about something a little more romantic,” Narcissa was unsure how to bring up such a delicate topic. She did not want to shock her innocent daughter.

“Romantic?” Hermione was now lost. “What do you mean romantic? Like love?”

“Yes. Do you have any questions about love and marriage?” Narcissa sighed with relief.

“No, none. This is a contracted marriage, mother. It is nothing like you and father.”

“Hermione!” Narcissa finally said in exasperation. “I am talking about after the wedding. The wedding night!”

“Oh. Well, um, no. I don’t think I have any questions,” Hermione felt her cheeks start to redden. *Oh, Merlin. Not The Sex Talk*, she said to herself.

“I know that you are a good girl and have remained chaste. I just want to let you know that regardless of what you may have heard from other girls, the marriage bed is not all as bad as they say.”

Hermione groaned. The last thing she needed right now was a mental image of Lucius and Narcissa in the throes of passion.

“In fact, it is quite a pleasant experience. I just don’t want you to be scared. I am sure that Severus will be very considerate. He is such a nice boy.” Narcissa trailed off as she looked at her daughter.

Hermione didn’t know if she should laugh or cry. Hearing Severus referred to as a boy was almost more than she could handle. She wasn’t exactly sure how she felt about having to share a bed with him. She kept trying to **not** think about that. It made her stomach feel too fluttery.

“Are you all right, dear? Are you sure you don’t have any questions or concerns? All right, you may go, but remember, I am always willing to talk to you about this wonderful time in your life,” Narcissa said as she kissed her daughter on the cheek.

Hermione walked out of the room in a daze. She was not totally ignorant of what was supposed to happen. She had read a few books, talked with her mother while still attending Hogwarts, and dated Victor and Ron. She was not too concerned, as all she had to do was fall in love. *Keep telling yourself you don’t have to do the baby part of the story*, she told herself.

Author’s Note: So sorry about the delay in posting. I also need to apologize to my dear beta, Tinnidawg, for misspelling her name in the last chapter. A million thanks to you, my readers, and to Tinnidawg! I am truly humbled and awed to have my storied as one of the features. Chapter 8 is in the works and will be extra long.

Chapter 8 - A Long Engagement

Chapter 8 of 18

Time has never moved slower for the... lovebirds?!

Chapter 8 A Long Engagement

In all the romance novels Hermione had read, the time leading up to the wedding day would fly by. It would have flown by had Hermione and Severus been madly in love. As it was, they were not madly in love; it was usually mere tolerance. The time leading up to their wedding proved to be the longest three weeks either of them ever remembered.

It was towards the end of the first week that Hermione discovered her main passion, reading mountains of books, was not acceptable for a well-bred young lady. To Hermione, books were both of a form of relaxation and education. She also found reading a great way to pass time. While wandering around her father’s library, she found a

book on magic during the Regency period. Being a curious person, she started reading. She usually read in the privacy of her bedroom at night; but had become so engrossed in the text that she had pocketed the book on her way to one of the numerous fittings for her wedding dress. While the seamstress was pinning the hem, Hermione took the book out and started to read. Narcissa came into the room, took one look at her daughter reading and admonished, "What do you think you are doing? Stop, before you give people the wrong impression! You are a lady!" Hermione was not able to do more than gape at her mother before the book was plucked from her hands. Holding the book between her thumb and forefinger, Narcissa placed the book in her reticule.

"Mother? Why did you do that? I was reading that book. There is nobody in here." Hermione was utterly flabbergasted. The book didn't really contain any real information, it mostly told the gentle reader how to recognize a dangerous witch or wizard, but she had found it highly entertaining.

"It would be one thing if you were reading something appropriate for a lady of your station. Something like poetry or a light novel would be fine. That, however, is highly inappropriate. What will people think! Besides, you will ruin your eyesight poring over books. You do not want to ruin your posture, do you? Now, stand up straight and let us not hear another word about it. I think a new pair of dancing slippers will help you forget all about that dry pile of papers. That's my darling girl." And with that, Narcissa went back to looking at the various silks the dressmaker had for her wedding dress.

"She did not even return my book once we returned home. In fact, she won't even let me read anything that she hasn't approved first," she snapped later that evening. She was relating the event to Severus but was becoming rather peevish as he continued to sit in silence.

"Well, what did you expect? It was just a useless book." Hermione's head whipped around when he said that. She had always believed him to be a great lover of books and knowledge. "Hermione, just because it is a book does not mean that it is of great import. Honestly, you act as if every dusty tome is full of a mountain of knowledge." Severus really did love books, but he couldn't help teasing her. Besides, he thought she looked very much like a cute, aqua gowned owl at the moment. He wondered if her eyes could get any larger. *I wonder how she would react if I offered her a treat* he thought. He never thought he would receive such enjoyment from taunting and provoking anyone.

"Fine! I can see that you don't care how my day went, how did your day go, *dear*?" she asked sarcastically.

"Humph. How can you expect me to fall in love with you if you are so sarcastic? You should try to be, at least, a little nicer. Even I am not as acidic as you are." Hermione was sure her jaw hit the floor. He continued, "My day was absolutely horrific. My week was worse. My *Mother* has decided that I need a new suit of clothes for the wedding, get a new hair cut and spend some 'quality' time with her and Harry. By the way, I discovered that Minerva calls Harry her 'Little Hedgehog' because of his hair when he was a child. She also has this foolish idea in her head that we should travel after we are married. She has been busy gathering a list of places I might want to take you. That reminds me, here is the list of people she is inviting to the wedding."

Hermione was still giggling as Severus looked around for his coat. Not seeing it, he shrugged and sank further back into his chair. He felt a crinkle in his pocket, reached in with his hand, and withdrew a crumpled piece of paper. He handed the paper to Hermione and enjoyed watching her eyebrows disappear into her bangs.

"Two hundred people? Is this just your side of the family, or does it include friends?"

"Just my side of the family from what I understand." He had been just as appalled when he had first seen the list. He was a very private person and had hoped that she would be able to stop Minerva from inviting the majority of these people. Her next words caused him to groan in dismay.

"Well, that about matches Narcissa's guest list. Mother will be very happy."

"I am going to call it an evening. I have developed a horrendous headache. Harry wanted to go to some club but he will have to torture somebody else tonight." Severus got up and walked into the hall. Hermione followed and waited while the butler retrieved his hat and coat.

He turned around and saw her gazing at him. "Erm, well. Tell Lucius I will see him tomorrow. Good night." Not knowing what else to do and not liking the feeling of being unsure, he reached out and patted her awkwardly on the top of her head, and stepped out the door.

Hermione, stunned and feeling equally awkward, stuck out her tongue as the door closed. She then whirled around, stormed up to her room, and did not reappear until the next morning. She would never admit to hoping that he would kiss her.

Despite their awkward moments, Hermione and Severus continued to spend their free evenings together. Interestingly enough, they started to miss each other if business or wedding plans kept them apart for more than a couple of days. Of course, they would rather have helped Albus make taffy than admit this. Hermione was starting to feel comfortable in her surroundings and even enjoyed spending time with her new family. She felt ready to face any new challenges on their journey to freedom.

It was during the following weekend that Hermione vowed to enter therapy as soon as she got back to Hogwarts. Late one night, she was sitting in the parlor reading an approved book before bedtime. Draco, kissed her forehead, patted the top of her head and said, "Good night, Hermne. Don't wait up for me." And he headed out to his club. After a briskly rubbing her forehead with her handkerchief, she decided to go upstairs to bed as she was tired.

Going past Lucius and Narcissa's bedroom doors, she heard, "OH, GOD! LUCIUS! DON'T STOP!" She immediately clapped her hands over her ears and ran for her bedroom. The words of her mother echoed in her mind, *The marriage bed is not all as bad as they say*. When she tried to tell Severus what had happened the next evening, he started laughing so hard that she got very angry and stormed out of the room, vowing that she would never talk to him again.

Severus endured the silence treatment for exactly three days. On the third day, he dressed with care and went to visit the Malfoys. Lucius had told him that they would be home for the evening. Narcissa was doing needlework, and Lucius sat next to her reading his book. Draco and Hermione were playing a game of chess, Hermione was very happy to see that it was the Muggle version. Paul, the butler, stepped into the room and announced Lord Snape.

"Lucius, Lady Narcissa. Good evening. I was wondering if I might have a moment with Hermione." Severus hoped she had forgiven him for laughing at her. He really needed to talk to her.

Hermione was just getting up to plead a headache when she heard Narcissa say, "She would be delighted to. Draco, please escort your sister and Severus to the blue parlor. And stay with them," she added.

Not one to disobey, Draco went with them to the parlor. However, as soon as they entered, he turned to Severus and said, "Look, say what you want. I need my beauty sleep. I am starting to get shadows under my eyes. I can't let my little sister start looking better than I, can I? If you need me to restrain her, I will be lying on the divan over in the far corner." With that, he turned and proceeded to lie down, ignoring the daggers that shot from Hermione's eyes. "By the way, Hermne, you might want to stop grinding your teeth. You are a little young for false teeth."

"He is such a conceited bore," she muttered under her breath. "What do you want, Severus? To laugh at me some more?"

"No, I just needed a quiet place to rest." He threw himself down in the nearest chair. He really didn't want to argue with her. All he wanted was a brandy, relaxing company and sleep. Or maybe, brandy and relaxing company to sleep with. Severus choked that thought off before it went much further. He blamed it on his nerve-racking day.

He had woken up and gone to his club with Harry. It was becoming a routine with him. Unfortunately, he was starting to become used to spending a lot of time with Harry. He vowed that as soon as he got back to Hogwarts, he would lock himself inside his quarters for an entire month. That way, he would stand less of a chance of running into Harry, Ron and Remus.

Today, he had received a letter while at the club. It was his mistress, begging him to come see her at teatime. *Well, no time like the present to get rid of the frump* he thought. So at teatime, he arrived at the address that was included. It was an attractive brownstone in a respectable neighborhood. He was ushered into an overheated and over stuffed room. It was a clean room but cluttered with fragile knick-knacks. He gingerly settled himself on the edge of a fluffy chair.

"Oh! Severus! I am so glad you agreed to come. It has been so long." Without looking up, he knew just to whom that whispery voice belonged.

"Sibyll. Yes, I am glad you sent for me..." was as far as he got. He was prepared for a frumpy, brightly colored, untidy mess. What he actually saw brought him to a crashing halt. Standing before him was a tall, willowy blonde. She was dressed in a lightweight, sky blue silk gown. Her ample bosom was almost spilling out of the tight bodice. Her golden hair was gathered into a loose knot at the top of her head and her blue eyes gazed dreamily at him. *Hmmm*, he thought, *I might have to rethink this mistress thing*

"Yes, darling. I was consulting my star chart, and it foretold of a life-altering event for me. It also told me that you would be creating a union of some sort?" she tilted as she drifted closer to Severus. He stood in mute fascination as she wound her arms around him and reached up to lightly kiss him on the lips.

At the touch of her lips, he started and swiftly drew back. As much as this creature fascinated him, the reference to a star chart reminded him that this was Trelawney. The last thing he wanted was an involvement with her. What happened if somehow this Trelawney and the Trelawney from Hogwarts shared memories? The thought made him grimace. Best to keep things professional; but how to do that with one's mistress?

"Yes, well, the union you are referring to is going to be between myself and Hermione Malfoy," he bluntly said.

"Humph, I can see why you came to me. Why go to that broomstick when you could have all of this," Sibyll said, as she ran her hands up her sides and cupped her generous breasts.

Severus swallowed hard and continued, "That is another thing. I have decided that I will not be seeing you anymore." *Do I really want to do this?* He idly wondered as he watched her hands continue to massage her breasts. He could see her nipples start to pucker through the thin fabric.

She looked at him in disbelief. "What did you say? What do you mean? After the last couple of years we have shared? You aren't going to just leave me, are you?" She was not going to give him up easily. "I have been available to you at any time for the past three years. I think I am worth much more than a mere brush off."

Severus had investigated his relationship with Lady Trelawney earlier in the week. Heck, he had done some checking as soon as he had found out that she was his mistress. He had been very generous over the years he had been with her. "I will turn the deed to the house over to you. It appears you have earned it," he sneered. "I will pay your bills up to this day and no more."

"But, Severus, I care for you. More than you know. I... I... I love you." She started to cry softly, a few delicate tears formed in her eyes. She had been picturing herself as the new Duchess of Walforth for the past year. Somehow, her calculations and charts had gone horribly wrong.

Severus handed her his handkerchief and strode to the door. "I doubt that very much. Good day, madam," he said as he walked out of the door. He always felt uncomfortable around women who cried. Had he looked back, he would have felt extremely uncomfortable for an entirely different reason. Sibyll had pulled a corner of the parlor curtain aside, and her eyes glittered like twin chips of blue ice as she watched him climb into the carriage.

"I seem to be plagued by women who want to marry me," he said as he finished his story. "First, you and now, Sibyll. Who next? Ginny?"

Hermione shook her head sympathetically. It was hard to get angry with someone so deluded. Of course, she did live with Draco, but he suffered more from self-love than delusion. "Have some tea, Severus. I am sure it isn't as bad as you make it out to be. Come, play chess with Draco. I can't manage another game," she said as she poured him a cup.

Finally, the week before the wedding rolled around. Hermione started thinking that they just might survive being married to each other. By now, she had become used to spending the evening with him, either at her house or being escorted by him to one of the various social functions around town. Narcissa, determined to have the wedding of the season, continued with her wedding plans.

Hermione was more than happy to leave the planning to her mother as she was then free to spend time with Severus. They discussed what might be happening at Hogwarts during their absence, if there was a duplicate of them running around there. Occasionally, they tried to think of ways to help themselves fall in love with each other. It was a purely academic discussion as neither Hermione nor Severus had ever been in love. Hermione did not count Victor as it was a very short-lived romance, and the fiasco with Ron was more infatuation due to surging teenage hormones than anything else. Severus did not count Sibyll, as he was not very sure of their relationship prior to his arrival, and his previous encounters with females were either platonic friendships or stress relief.

Out of idle curiosity, Hermione decided to question Draco for a man's point of view. "Draco," she started, "what would you do to make someone fall in love with you?"

Draco, looking up from his paper, answered, "What do you mean? What makes you think I would have to do anything?"

"Oh, say you liked a girl, but she didn't necessarily like you?"

"What?"

"You know, what would you do to make somebody notice you and find you attractive?" Hermione was starting to get very annoyed.

"Hermione, I can hear you. I just don't understand what you are asking. I mean, look at me. What makes you think a woman wouldn't like me or fall in love me? Why would I have to do something?" Draco was starting to think his cute twin sister wasn't as smart as he once thought she was.

"Draco, not everyone loves you on sight."

Draco frowned at her. "Yes, they do."

"Oh, I give up!" she said, throwing her hands up in exasperation. "Fine then, what would a girl have to do in order for you to fall in love with her?"

Draco's brow smoothed out, finally, a topic he could relate to. "All the women I find interesting are beautiful. They have to possess a good disposition, not be vain or selfish, and of the right class."

"What?" Hermione shrieked. "How can my twin brother be such a big snob?"

"What? Do you know how tiresome it is to have to cheer a girl up who is always sad? How irksome it is to have to play to a woman's vanity? How annoying it is to have someone on your arm that detracts from your entrance? Besides, it is our place to make advantageous alliances, in order to increase our land holdings, wealth and social position. Sometimes, Hermne, I just do not understand you." Draco got up and folded his paper. He decided he would get more peace at his club. He dropped a kiss on the top of her head and continued into the hall.

Hermione was too stunned to do anything else but stare blankly after him. A small part of her was afraid that he might be speaking for most men. Merlin, she hoped not. Severus did not act like her brother at all and that alone gave her some hope. If she was truly honest with herself, but she was still struggling to deny this, a part of her liked seeing him in black pants and white shirt with a dark colored vest. The way the wind tugged at his tied back hair reminded her of the pirate gentlemen in her romance novels. But, she squelched those thoughts before they were able to do more than pop their heads up. She refused to fall in love with him before he fell in love with her.

Interestingly enough, Severus was having a similar conversation at his own house. However, he was talking with his brother, Harry. Luckily, for Hermione, Harry was more considerate than her narcissistic brother.

"Harry, I know there is nothing wrong with me, so why isn't she in love with me yet?" Severus asked idly. As it was still early in the day, both men were sprawled in chairs in the parlor. They had been out late the night before and had engagements later that evening.

"What makes you think she doesn't already love you?" asked Harry. He could see this conversation becoming very entertaining.

"She has not professed her love. She isn't always underfoot. She doesn't try to anticipate what I want or need. She doesn't hang on every word..." He trailed off as Harry started laughing.

"Sev, old boy! Do you honestly expect her to do that? Any woman to do that?" Harry asked as he wiped tears from his eyes.

Severus scowled at his brother. "Every woman that has had a crush or interest in me has always gone out of her way to be agreeable. They stare at me like addled cattle and bat their eyelashes. They think that every word I utter is law. Why should she be any different?"

"Would you honestly be happy with a wife that behaved like that? Hermione is pleasant to look at, can carry on a conversation beyond clothing styles and does not expect to have a man wait on her hand and foot. Besides, you are not the most handsome gentleman." Harry, himself, had considered paying court to her if his brother had not beaten him to it. *Who knows, if things don't work out with Severus he thought, I might marry her.*

"Hmmm, you have a point. I do have the tall, dark and brooding look down, though. But, I still need her to fall in love with me; you saw that ridiculous contract her father had me sign."

"If I remember correctly, you have to fall in love with her too. Are you telling me you love her?" Harry was surprised at this.

"Don't be ridiculous," Severus snorted. "When I know that she loves me, I will attempt to love her. If she proves to be a good wife, I will let myself love her." He glared at Harry when he started laughing again.

"Sev, you can't make yourself fall in love. Where did you get an idea like that?" Harry couldn't keep from chuckling every few seconds. This was just too funny. "A good piece of advice, do **NOT** tell Hermione that she has to fall in love with you. Maybe you should talk to mother." *However, if he does, I just hope that I am there to see it* he grinned to himself.

"Maybe he should talk to me about what?" Minerva asked as she came into the parlor. She was glad to see her sons getting along again. The past week Severus had acted very peculiarly around his brother, almost as if he did not like him.

"Oh, he wants to know how to make Hermione fall in love with him. I am going out to the club for a while. I will be back later, mother." Harry knew when to beat a hasty retreat. As much as he would have enjoyed staying around for this discussion, the looks he was receiving from his beloved older brother were threatening enough.

Severus glared at his brother as he strolled through the door. He did not want to know how to make Hermione fall in love with him. However, he was trapped now and the last thing he wanted right now was a lecture on love from Minerva McGonagall.

"Oh, how wonderful! I am so glad you are going to try to make this a love match, dear. I was afraid you would let it be just an arranged marriage. Let me see, to make that lovely young woman fall in love with you..." Minerva paused to think. She so wanted to see him happy. She also wanted to be a grandmother by this time next year.

"First of all, dear, there are always the small gifts that you can bestow on her. Small tokens, such as flowers, jewelry and trinkets are good presents. Second, talk to her and with her about a variety of subjects. Find out what her interests are; show her you care. Third, spend time with her; let her know that she is the most important person in your life." Minerva warmed to her subject. She started thinking back to her late husband and their courtship. She stopped, however, when she heard a strangled gasp.

"Mother, please, I can not take this discussion. I DO NOT need to know how to make her fall in love with me. The actual conversation I was having with Harry was WHY she was not in love with me yet." Severus was desperately wishing he had never brought up this topic. He did not think he could take much more of these talks.

"You were what?" she asked. "If that is the way you see it, then I can be of no help. I hope she owns a strong cast iron skillet." Minerva got up and started towards the door.

"What do you mean? Why wouldn't she or at least the kitchen have one? I assume she won't need one for cooking my meals. That is what the staff is for." Severus was starting to get very annoyed. Why couldn't people just leave him alone and stop telling him that **he** had to get **her** to fall in love with him.

Minerva whirled on him. "I hope she has a skillet so that she can beat some sense into you." She then stalked out the door. She needed to dress and go visit Narcissa; they had some plotting to do.

Severus rubbed his eyes and sank back into his chair. He had a musical to attend this evening with Hermione and his headache guaranteed that it would not be a fun night.

The week of the wedding saw a very nervous Hermione. She was starting to worry that they would never fall in love with each other. They had not kissed or even held hands yet. She decided that this was the week that she would introduce Severus to romance, or at least a little lust. If it did not work out, then she prayed he would agree to a Memory Charm when they finally returned to Hogwarts.

"Good afternoon, Severus," she said as she came into the entryway. They were on their way to a picnic with Harry, Ron, Draco, Ginny, and a few other young people. Hermione took extra care getting ready. She chose a soft pink muslin gown. It had a low, scooped neck and a darker pink ribbon just under the bosom emphasized her breasts. She had even stooped to dampening her skirt, just enough so that it hugged her curves and emphasized her legs. She prayed fervently that her parents did not see her like this.

"Yes, Harry and Ron are already there. They wanted to see if the Lovegood twins were going to be at the picnic. I do not think they are the same Lovegoods we know..." Severus felt his mouth dry out as he looked at Hermione. The sun was behind her and turned her dress semi-transparent. He could see the outline of her slender legs and hips. He quickly averted his eyes and prayed he did not run into her parents. He did not want them to see her dressed like that and make her change.

"Yes, that is good. Do you think I need a heavier wrap than this silk shawl?" she asked, oblivious to the fact that Severus was staring at her.

He blinked quickly. "No, you are fine. Shall we go? The carriage is waiting."

He handed her up and then got in himself. He was more than shocked to feel the soft material of her glove slide into his hand. Looking down, he saw her smiling shyly up at him. He nodded softly and Hermione grinned to herself, glad he was being agreeable, so far.

The ride was short, and once they reached the picnic site, they were joined by Ginny and Draco. "Hermione! I am so glad you came. Your Grace," Ginny bobbed a greeting to Severus and linked arms with Hermione.

"Ginny. Did you come alone, or did Ron bring you?" Hermione did not see Ron or Harry.

"Actually, Draco brought me. Ron and Harry are around someplace, but they were more interested in Laura and Luna Lovegood," she said with a grimace.

Hermione looked at Severus in surprise. He in turn raised an eyebrow. He was curious as to just how many people they were going to run into on this adventure. He and Draco fell into step behind the girls as they strolled around the picnic area.

"So tell me, Hermione, are all of the wedding details finalized? Narcissa came to see mother yesterday. She wanted to see if our peaches were ripe, something about a punch?" Ginny's mother had one of the most noted gardens and was frequently asked to supply fruit for special occasions.

"Yes. She has never been happier. I do believe she has planned most of the wedding. But I really don't mind; she has such a good eye for detail," Hermione explained. She

really was glad that Narcissa did most of the work on the wedding details. She, herself, was not good at planning such a big event and it had even made Hermione feel closer to Narcissa.

"Good. We will all be there for the wedding breakfast. I am just not sure why you want to have such an early wedding. Sunrise is really early, ten would be more acceptable," Ginny said. She was not a very good morning person.

"That is what we wanted, Miss Weasley," Severus said quietly. He may not be having a wizard wedding, but he wanted to pick one of the most magical times, midnight was not acceptable, and there was no full moon anyway. Hermione also wanted to observe some of the magical traditions; both had agreed not to tell anyone why.

"Don't worry, Ginny. Mother was not happy about it either. Nevertheless, in the end, she let me have my way. It was the only thing I was adamant about." By this time, they had found Harry and Ron.

"No luck, Harry?" Severus smirked. He did not see the twins anywhere.

"They were going to attend but came down with colds. Rotten luck, heh?" Ron said.

"Well, you boys can all discuss it as you fetch our plates," Hermione said. "Come on, Ginny. There are a couple of blankets under that big tree."

Severus grinned as he came back carrying two plates of food. Hermione was seated on a blanket barely big enough for two people. It looked like close quarters, and he intended to take full advantage of it. He had become quite warm following Hermione around. He could see the gentle swell of her bottom as she walked, and though her dress was drying, it was still a very lightweight fabric and could not block the sun's rays.

He was also amused to see Ginny holding court on an equally small blanket next to them. Draco was bringing a plate to her and did not seem in the least surprised that she was saving him a spot. Harry and Ron sat on the grass between the two blankets.

"Here you are, Hermione. I got a sample of everything for you," he said as he handed her a heaping plate.

"I hope you don't think I can eat all of that," she said.

"Then you can feed me what you don't like," he said. She looked up at him to see if he was making fun of her. When she saw him gazing at her with calm black eyes, she blushed and looked back at her plate.

She was sitting with her legs tucked slightly under, so he settled down beside her. He lay down in such a way that he ended up leaning against her curled legs, with his head near her knees.

"I say, Severus, that does look comfortable," said Draco, as he copied the position next to Ginny. Both girls looked at each other, blushed, and then grinned.

"Ugh! Come on, Harry, there are a couple of single ladies on the other side," Ron said as he got up to refill his plate. Harry waved and followed Ron across the grass.

The rest of the picnic also went smoothly. The girls finished eating and rested. Then after a short stroll around the park, they decided to head home. Draco offered to take Ginny home, which she readily agreed to.

Severus helped Hermione up into his carriage for the ride home. He was pleased that she had placed her hand in his once again. This time, without the glove on. When they pulled up in front of her house, he escorted her to the door. Since they were in front of the public street, he lifted her hand and brushed her knuckles with his lips. The feel of his lips, velvet soft, caused Hermione's knees to shake slightly, and she closed her eyes. She opened them again when she heard his voice next to her ear saying, "I'll see you later this evening," and felt his lips again as they brushed her temple.

She could only nod wordlessly as she went into the house. *Maybe there was hope after all*, she thought.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to my readers! Tinnidawg, you are awesome! Hope you all enjoy this chapter. I am truly honored to have my story included in the featured section!

Chapter 9 - Here Comes the Bride

Chapter 9 of 18

Everyone loves a wedding! It is a dream come true, for some.

Chapter 9 Here Comes The Bride

Severus sat in Lucius's library, deep in thought. He could still smell the warm sweetness of Hermione's skin when he had briefly kissed her. He knew that he was not in love with her, but there was something about her that made his pulse race. He did admit, only to himself, that he was getting used to the idea of marrying her. He was sure that, with time, they would be able to live together, somewhat peacefully. He just hoped that it was close enough to 'love' for them to be able to return to Hogwarts.

He was startled out of his private thoughts when Lucius entered the room. "Ah, it is almost time, Severus. I am very happy that you are marrying my little girl. No matter what happens, just remember, she is my baby. If any harm comes to her, I will be very displeased."

"Really, Lucius! She is not all that helpless. I will make sure she is as happy as she can be married to me."

"Good, I'm glad that has been settled. Welcome to the family, son!" said Lucius, chuckling as he embraced a very stiff Severus.

Severus could not have been more shocked had Lucius danced a jig in front of him naked. *Why do things like this always happen to me?* he grumbled to himself. *First, I get involved with the Death Eaters, then I get suckered into teaching for Albus, next I get the Golden Trio for my students, after that, I end up in this lovey-dovey mess with Hermione, and now, I am being hugged by my lunatic of a best friend.*

Meanwhile, upstairs in her bedroom, Hermione was pacing back and forth nervously. She was excited and very apprehensive at the thought of becoming the new Lady Snape. She looked in the mirror and did not recognize the woman staring back at her. She had to admit, Narcissa had done a marvelous job picking out the perfect gown. It

was a beautiful ivory silk gown with little cap sleeves. Seed pearls lined the neck and sleeves. The gauzy overskirt reminded Hermione of wispy clouds. The same seed pearls were used to trim the scalloped edge of the overskirt. She had an ivory ribbon threaded through the lace of the bodice and under her breasts. A matching ribbon was threaded through her short curls.

"Mother, I think I am going to be sick! I can't do this!" Hermione could hear the panic creeping into her voice but could do nothing to stop it.

"Oh! My poor darling! You will be just fine. Every girl is scared on her wedding day. Whatever you do, if you think you are going to be sick, please try to miss the dress."

"No. Not that, I mean everything afterwards! I don't love him. How can I be expected to have a baby with him? See him every morning over the teapot?"

"But, Hermione, darling, you don't have to love him right away. It could happen after you get married. He is so caring and considerate, I am sure that in no time, you will be madly in love with him." Narcissa tried to soothe her daughter's frayed nerves. "Besides, I am sure you will enjoy the wedding night, and after that, everything else will look much better."

Hermione rolled her eyes and smiled weakly. *And maybe I will become the next Potions mistress*, she thought wryly.

Sometimes, Narcissa got the feeling that her daughter did not pay any attention to what she was saying. She was starting to get concerned, as Hermione did not look very well at the moment. They were interrupted by a soft knock at the door. Ginny poked her head around the door and smiled at her best friend.

"You look beautiful, Hermione. He can't help but fall in love with you now."

"Thank you, Ginny," Hermione said as she picked up her little nosegay of pink and white roses.

"Of course, any girl would die to be in your shoes," she continued. "You get to marry an actual duke; there aren't that many our age, you know. Then add in the fact that he is richer than Midas! He is also so tall, dark, and mysterious. I can't tell you how many of my friends just adore that..."

"Ginny, enough! Please. Have you looked at him? A title isn't everything you know."

Ginny's brow wrinkled. "Well, I know he isn't as handsome as your brother, but there is something about him that is most attractive."

Hermione rolled her eyes and turned towards the mirror again. She had just looked into the mirror when the door opened again. Her father walked into the room and stood behind her. She smiled softly and watched Ginny slip silently out of the door.

Lucius looked at his little girl. He couldn't believe that she about to take her wedding vows. He had been very serious when he had spoken to Severus earlier. "Hermione, poppet, if ever you are not happy, just say the word, and I promise that by the next day, you will be," he promised.

"Thank you, but I am sure things will be fine," she said with a watery smile.

"Hermione, your father is right. If you are not happy, we are here for you. Just remember that every marriage has its ups and downs," Narcissa said, as she pressed a kiss to her daughter's head. She arranged the veil over Hermione's curls and left the room.

"Yes, don't move back too soon. I still have to get Draco married. Come, Severus is waiting for you," said Lucius, as he placed his daughter's hand on his arm.

They walked down the stairs and into Narcissa's parlor garden. It was a small, private wedding ceremony with just immediate family and close friends. Lady Minerva was seated on a small sofa with Uncle Albus. Harry stood next to the groom. Hermione let her eyes dance over to the other side of the room, as she was not ready to look at her soon to be husband. She saw Narcissa seated next to Draco and an empty chair. Behind them sat Molly, Arthur and Ron. Ginny stood up in front.

Lucius led her slowly up the short aisle and stopped next to Severus. Her breath caught as she took her first glance at him. He had on black trousers and boots. He wore a fine white linen shirt tied with a white cravat and a very dark blue waistcoat and black coat. His hair was neatly tied-back with a dark blue ribbon that matched his waistcoat. She shyly looked into his eyes, afraid that she would see boredom or even scorn. She was very surprised to see calm dark eyes staring back at her with just a trace of humor. Relieved, she gave him a small grin. Together they turned, and the ceremony started.

Later, she could not remember every detail of the ceremony. What she did remember was bits and pieces. She knew she had said, 'I do,' and felt a thrill at hearing his deeper response. She remembered that part because the priest had used the word 'obey.' It was only the slight tightening of Severus's grip on her hand that made her answer. She also remembered the feel of cool metal slipping onto her finger during the exchange of rings. And, of course, there had been the kiss. Ever since she was a little girl, she had dreamed of her wedding. The kiss, she had always pictured as soft, light, with just a hint of passion; it would definitely send a frisson of electric current down her spine. She had read romances; she knew what she wanted! But this, this was definitely not a dream. She did not feel soft, except for the softness of the skin of his lips. She felt the light brush of his lips and swore that she saw stars dancing behind her closed eyes. There was no light touch of passion. It was more of a spontaneous surge of passion through her body. The electric current she felt raced down her spine and speared her fingers and toes. She felt chills break out upon her skin.

She opened her eyes to see a small smirk on her groom's face, probably at her dazed expression. He himself was amazed at what he had felt when he'd kissed her. He was prepared to feel nothing except the weight of responsibility when he spoke his vows. He had grudgingly admitted that he might have felt a little tingle of warmth when he had kissed her. He was unprepared for the lurch his heart gave as he touched her soft, warm lips. He was unprepared for the strong desire to both possess and protect her. He could tell the kiss had affected her also. He fought for control so that when she looked at him, all she saw was his calm and slightly amused expression.

No sooner had the kiss ended than the family descended on them. They were kissed and congratulated by everyone. Finally, Severus growled into Hermione's ear, "If I get hugged by one more person, I will spend the rest of the day in the study." Hermione quickly started moving him towards the ballroom. She did not want to face all of the people by herself.

Hermione and Severus may have had their way on the ceremony being only family. Narcissa, however, had invited the rest of society to their wedding breakfast. Hermione could not believe all 400 of the wedding guests were in attendance. There were rows of tables lined against the walls with every type of fruit and vegetable and meat imaginable. Since the buffet tables took up most of the ballroom, more tables had been set up in the garden and the dining room for guests as they wandered through the house and around the grounds.

Severus took one look at the cramped rooms, groaned, and whispered to Hermione, "I don't suppose I could plead a headache and go to our rooms instead?"

Hermione mutely shook her head. "Mother would hunt you down, and you would lose your title of 'nice boy.'"

"Fine, you have half an hour, and then I will leave whether it is acceptable or not. Do not, I repeat, do not let anyone else touch me. I detest crowds. Now, you owe me another favor for being nice," he snapped.

"What happened to my 'loving' husband? And wouldn't it be nicer, if you had said you were doing this to prove your love for me?" she hissed back.

He fumed as he started wading through the crowd. He made a beeline for the food, stopping only to greet those people that he could not avoid.

"Sev! I just can't believe that you actually went through with it!" Harry said as he stepped right in front of his brother. Ron and Remus thumped Severus on the back and added their best wishes.

"Yes, do tell, Severus. What did you do to make her go through with the wedding?" Remus asked.

"I do believe that I won the bet. Pay up!" Ron chimed in.

Severus looked at the three in irritation. "You actually placed bets on whether I would marry?"

"No, dear brother, we placed bets on whether Hermione would actually marry you."

Severus glared at them and shouldered his way past. He ignored their laughing and grinning. He grabbed a plate and piled it with fresh fruit, toast and sausages. He had just made it to the door and was planning to sneak upstairs when he saw Lucius looking at him.

Sighing, he turned around and went to join his friend. "I know old friend, it seems like the day will last forever. Don't worry; I know Hermione will not last much longer, and then you two can say your goodbyes." True to his word, Hermione came storming up to them thirty minutes later.

"Oh, glad you were able to find something to eat, dear. I need to get out of here."

"You know, poppet, it would sound more like an endearment if you weren't glaring at him." Lucius chuckled softly.

"Father, please, I just want a quiet place to think. I would also like something to eat."

"Your mother has a tray for you in your room. Once you have had a quick bite, she will help you change before you leave for your little honeymoon." Lucius kissed her on the cheek as she hugged him. Turning towards Severus, he said, "By the time you get changed, the carriage will be waiting at the door."

Half an hour later, the newlyweds were in an open carriage heading for the country. Severus had promised her they would take a real honeymoon once the Season was over. With Parliament starting soon, he couldn't afford to be gone long. For now, they were going to spend a couple of weeks at his country manor.

Author's Notes: A million thanks to my beta, Tinnidawg! To my readers, I am glad you are enjoying the story. Chapter 10 is in the works!

Chapter 10 - The Wedding Night

Chapter 10 of 18

Will they ever make it? The long awaited moment has arrived.

Chapter 10 The Wedding Night

Severus had visited his country manor a few days ago so that he could become familiar with the house and grounds before he took Hermione there. His staff had assured him that all would be ready when he brought his new bride. A warm tingle of pleasure ran through him at being able to take Hermione somewhere quiet and comfortable. As he turned up the lane, the trees parted, and Hermione and he caught a glimpse of his country home.

"Oh, Severus! It is lovely! The ivy and pink flowers make the gray stone look so warm and inviting. It is so homey," Hermione said as she clutched his arm and gazed in wonder.

It was a picturesque large gray manor with the typical circular drive in front. Ivy and pink roses climbed the sides up to the second floor. Soft gray smoke curled from all three chimneys. In the background, Hermione could see a hothouse and a lake.

"Homey? Nesting already?" Severus teased. He got out of the carriage and turned to help her down. "Hmm, only six servants. It looks like we will have plenty of privacy," he observed dryly.

Hermione followed his gaze and saw that there were indeed, six servants waiting at the top of the stone steps. She noticed that there were three males. *Hmm, let me guess, the butler, the gardener and the stable hand*, she mused. The other three were women. They wore the black and white uniforms of maids and cook. She was actually glad to see them, as running the manor would have been a daunting task alone.

They mounted the stairs, and once they reached the top, the butler stepped forward, "Welcome, my Lord. On behalf of the entire staff, I offer congratulations on your nuptials. We have been expecting you. My Lady, Miss Winks will be your maid while you are here. Sir, if you need anything, please, don't hesitate to ring." With that, he opened the door, and Severus and Hermione entered the house as man and wife.

"If you will follow me, my Lady, I will show you to your bedchamber," Miss Winks said. She was a solemn young maid with neat golden curls.

Hermione looked at Severus, but he only nodded. Sighing, she turned to follow the maid. *I hope he gets lost*, she thought. *How dare he leave me alone*

Severus could tell his young bride was upset with him, but he wasn't quite sure why. He decided to give her some time to calm down before he went up to talk to her. Turning, he headed for the library. He wanted to look at the ledgers here and get the most pressing matters out of the way. He knew that Hermione would never forgive him, if he spent the whole week attending to estate business when they were supposed to be on their honeymoon

An hour later, he was startled to hear the door to the library banging open. He looked up and sighed, "Hermione, did you get settled in? What are you doing down here already? What is the matter?"

"What do you mean already? I have been cooped up in my bedchamber for over an hour! I thought you would come up and at least show me around since you seem so familiar with your surroundings." Hermione walked into the library and started perusing the titles on the shelves.

"What makes you think that? I have been going over the books here. I had some urgent business matters that couldn't wait. I thought it would be better if I got that out of the way first. Then, I could spend the rest of the time with you. I figured I would have to baby-sit you," he smirked.

"Ah, yes. And here, I thought you would carry me over the threshold. I am told that is what a loving husband does to his new bride," she retorted.

"I believe supper is almost ready. I am going to go change and will meet you in the front parlor. I don't really feel like arguing with you tonight," he said. He got up, kissed her on the forehead and walked out of the room. Just as he had expected, she became absolutely quiet and still from shock. *Oh, this is going to be such fun* he thought to himself. He was still not too sure about what to do tonight.

While Hermione waited for him in the parlor, she decided that he was not going to win in this little game. If he wanted to have a 'happy' home, who was she to deny him that? She pinched her cheeks to redden them just a bit, tugged the bodice of her light blue gown down just enough to expose a little cleavage and pulled a few curls forward so that they wisped around her face. Hearing him come down the stairs, she turned towards the door with a light smile on her lips.

"Severus, darling, you are right. We shouldn't fight or argue. Let us have a nice dinner, and then we can read together by the fire or take a short walk in the gardens," she simpered.

Severus stopped short and stared. He looked a little closer to make sure that it was the same Hermione he had left fifteen minutes earlier. He saw a little glimmer in her eyes and her sickly, sweet smile caused his jaw to harden. *Well, two can play at this, dear wife* he thought.

"I think we should come back to the parlor after dinner, my pet. You can stand in front of the fire and recite poetry for me. I can think of nothing more relaxing than listening to your dulcet tones and gazing at your wonderful form backlit from the fire."

Severus had to pat her on the back when she choked on her reply.

Dinner turned out to be a very stilted affair. They ate in relative silence, and when they had finished, he escorted her back to the parlor. He was slightly disappointed when she chose to sit on the sofa farthest from the fire.

"What, no poetry? My pet, I thought surely you would want to read some." He stood in front of her holding out a slim volume of poems.

Hermione glanced at it. "You are right, darling. How about you row to the middle of the lake and recite some poems for me. I will sit in the gazebo and pretend you are my knight in shining armor, coming to rescue me." Hermione could feel a smile working its way up.

"Well, I wouldn't want you to catch a chill sitting out there. How about this you read, from where you are sitting, and I will finish going through the ledgers." He didn't really want to continue with this inane conversation, as he feared that he would break out in a smile any moment.

In the end, Hermione sat quietly reading by the fire while Severus went through the ledgers. The clock struck eleven, and Hermione could not keep from yawning. She looked at her husband from under her lashes. "Severus, I think I will turn in," she said.

He looked up at his wife and glanced at the clock. The time he was dreading had arrived. "That is fine. Go up and I will be there shortly." He looked back at his ledgers and continued to read a column of numbers.

Slightly irritated, Hermione huffed, "Fine." She got up and walked regally from the room. She went into her bedroom and rapidly undressed, threw on her nightgown and jumped into bed. She may have to consummate the marriage, but she wasn't willing to make it easy. Ten minutes later, she got up and snuffed out all but one candle. She was just turning back towards the bed when the door on the opposite wall crashed open.

Severus stood in the doorway glaring at her. He had left the parlor right after Hermione. He had undressed, crawled into bed, and sat facing the connecting door, as he waited for his bride. He had hoped to find her waiting for him in his bed, but he was willing to give her time to adjust to being his wife. Ten minutes later, he had realized she was not going to come. He grabbed his robe and stalked through the connecting door.

"Severus! What is the matter?" Hermione clutched the neck of her nightgown and stared at him.

"What are you doing? Why weren't you in my room?" he glared at her.

"What in Merlin's name are you talking about? I have been waiting here for you! Quite patiently too, I might add."

"You can not seriously think I was coming to you? I have been waiting in the master bedroom for you. I let you have the adjoining room for your clothes and other belongings. After tonight, you will be sleeping in my bed." Severus couldn't help but notice the confusion in her eyes. "You **did know** that this room adjoins mine, didn't you?"

"No, I did not. Can we wait until tomorrow to consummate this?" Hermione said only half jokingly.

"No. I want to get this over with as soon as possible. Let's go to bed." He was starting to get a headache and wanted nothing more than to fall asleep. Had he been more aware, he would have noticed Hermione's eyes narrowing as he spoke.

"I don't think so. I am not in the mood anymore. Your romantic attitude, or rather the lack of it, is not doing anything for me, either." She turned to crawl back into her bed but squealed when she felt a strong set of arms come around her.

Severus had grabbed her around the middle and swung her up into his arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck instinctively. She noticed the smell of spice, wine and musk on him. *He smells wonderful*, she thought. The next thing she knew, she was being dumped unceremoniously onto the bed.

"Hermione, I am too tired to argue. We have to consummate our marriage tonight if you want us to be bound as witch and wizard, not just as Muggle husband and wife. I do apologize for neglecting you earlier today," he sighed.

Hermione unfolded her arms. "That part is forgivable. But, if you only think of this as a task that has to be completed according to a schedule, then we really should wait for another night. I know that I do not have much experience beyond kissing, but really, I do not think that I am all that unattractive," she glowered.

"No, you are not," said Severus, looking at her attire, "but I believe my grandmother once had a nightgown like that."

Hermione's jaw dropped. Reaching behind her, she grabbed a pillow and lightly hit him with it.

He grabbed the pillow and tossed it to the floor. He reached out to pull her closer but ended up with a handful of her nightgown. Before he registered this, he tugged hard and the material ripped all the way down to the hem. Hermione looked down, squealed, and dove under the covers. She could hear him chuckling lightly.

"Well, that certainly accomplished a multitude of things. It got you into bed, got rid of that ghastly nightgown permanently, and you are the quietest I have heard you be in a long time," he said as he removed his robe.

He snuffed all but one candle and got into the bed. He rolled over and reached out with his hand. He was expecting to feel the warmth of Hermione; instead, all he could feel was the soft bedding. He reached a little further and felt her arm. He sighed; he was more than willing to fulfill his duties, but he had been hoping she would meet him half way. He was already very uncomfortable knowing that he was about to sleep with his ex-student. "I am not going to hurt you. You will fall out of bed if you don't come away from the edge. I am not quite the monster the students make me out to be. I thought we were at least starting to become friends over the past few weeks." He rolled a little closer and lightly touched her arm.

"We are friends. It is just a little overwhelming. I have never done this before, you know." She found his touch relaxing. She scooted closer to him until she could see his face clearly. She shyly reached up with her hand and touched one side of his face. She liked the way his cheek fit into the palm of her hand.

He turned his head and kissed her hand lightly. Now that she was closer, he could see her clear brown eyes and did not see any fear or hesitation in them. He slowly moved his hand down the length of her arm. He traced the curve of her body until his hand came to rest at the indent of her waist. He felt her draw in a shaky breath and also felt her small hand trace the contour of his face and move slowly downward towards his chest. His breath caught when her hand skimmed over his hardened nipples.

Severus shifted until he was half covering her. He looked down and was relieved to see her responding to his touch. Her pupils were dilated, and she looked a bit flushed,

but he couldn't be sure in the soft candlelight. He didn't want to scare her by going too fast, yet, he didn't know how long he would be able to last. He moved his hand up and let it rest a few seconds below her breast. When he saw the startled look leave her eyes, he cupped the soft mound of flesh.

Hermione gasped at the intense tingling he was creating in her. She felt the jolt of passion all the way to her core when his thumb lightly grazed her nipple. She moaned and arched her back. She felt his hardened nipples as she ran both her hands up his chest. He had nice broad shoulders and was much more muscular than she had imagined. When she felt his mouth close over her tightly furled nipple, she arched again and ran her fingernails down his back.

Severus groaned when he felt her lightly rake his back with her fingernails. His total concentration was centered on her breast. They were ample handfuls, and he thought her tightened, pink nipples were perfect. Not wanting to neglect its twin, he took the nipple of her other breast deep into his mouth while lightly squeezing and massaging the one he had just left. The dual sensations were causing Hermione to gasp and moan louder. She arched again and this time, wrapped her legs around his hips.

When he felt her legs come around his waist, he reached lower and rested his hand on her stomach. He drew light circles around her navel and then slowly started working his hand lower until he felt soft curls. Then his fingers slowly worked their way down until he felt a warm dampness.

Hermione lightly panted. She had never gone beyond light petting and fondling with Ron. She could not have stopped Severus even if she had tried. She could feel the tension in her stomach and the feeling of his hot mouth on her nipples was more than she could bear. When she felt his questing fingers lightly probing her moist curls, she couldn't stop her moans of encouragement. She spread her legs a little further and arched her hips to help alleviate some of the pressure she was feeling. She felt him slip a finger into her soft passage. Her body jerked at the sensation.

Severus felt like he was going to burst when her hips started to rock slightly. She was very tight, and he felt a small thrill go through him that he was to be her first. When her breathing started to become ragged, he gently pushed another finger into her. With his thumb, he found her small, erect nub and lightly worked it back and forth.

"Oh, Merlin! Severus! Please," Hermione gasped. She arched her back and rocked her hips faster. Severus increased the movement of his hand, and when he felt her walls start to tremble, applied a bit more pressure on her clitoris as his fingers rubbed faster. All of a sudden, her muscles locked, and spasms rocked through her body. Hermione cried out and dug her fingers into his back.

Feeling her body flutter around his fingers, Severus positioned himself above her and gently, but swiftly, entered her. He felt her fingernails break the skin on his back when he breached her maidenhead. He pulled almost all of the way out and slowly slid back into her slick folds. His eyes rolled at the feeling of burying himself deep within her wet heat. She was as tight as he had imagined. It only took a few more thrusts before he felt his own orgasm upon him. He groaned lightly and slumped forward.

A couple of minutes passed before he opened his eyes. He found his head nestled on Hermione's breast. She was gently brushing his hair out of his eyes and looking at him with a soft, contemplative expression.

He quirked an eyebrow at her.

"Well, I guess mother knew what she was talking about," was all she said before kissing him gently and snuggling up against him.

He just rolled his eyes as he turned over. He grunted softly in surprise as Hermione nestled her head on his shoulder. Together, they fell asleep.

Author's Notes: Tinnidawg, you are the absolute best! Three cheers to one of the busiest people I know! To my readers, I hope you enjoy this chapter. The next one is going to take a bit longer to post, summer and work got very busy! I promise to update as soon as possible!

Chapter 11 - The Honeymoon

Chapter 11 of 18

A week together, alone. Wedded bliss.

Chapter 11 The Honeymoon

Severus slowly became aware of a sharp pain in his arm. He opened his eyes and looked at his young wife, her head pillowed on his shoulder. Her tousled short curls made her look even younger. He enjoyed the unfamiliar warmth of her soft body pressed against his. Yawning, he eased his way out of the warm bed. He may as well get some work done while she slept. He did not want to be accused of neglecting her again. He dressed in his black pants and shirt from the day before and headed for the library.

Hermione woke up a couple of hours later. She lazily reached her hand out, expecting to find Severus. Her head popped up when she only felt cool linens. *Calm down*, she told herself. *You know he doesn't sleep much. He hasn't run away. Yet.* She scrambled from the bed. The soreness between her legs hardly slowed her movements. She pulled on a peach robe she found at the foot of the bed and went in search of her husband.

She found him in the library, busily scribbling on some paper. She had an odd sense of déjà vu. The curtains were drawn, and only a couple of candles were lit. Papers had fallen to the floor and there was an unsteady pile beside his right elbow. "Now, if there were some poor, helpless students sitting in front of you, I would swear we were back at Hogwarts," she teased as she walked into the room.

Severus started when he heard her voice. "What time is it? My students were never helpless. I will have you know, had we used Mr. Longbottom's experiments during the war, we would have won sooner."

Hermione giggled. "It is about eight in the morning. Were you going to wash and dress for breakfast?" She walked around the desk and gently kissed him on the forehead.

Severus looked at the pile on his desk. He had actually gotten most of the important paperwork done. He looked back up and choked. Hermione had loosened the belt of her robe and was wedging her way between him and the desk. He was shocked when she sat on his lap, their faces inches apart. He raised an eyebrow at her brazen behavior.

Hermione merely smiled at his silent question. She leaned forward and gently teased his lips with her own. She groaned softly when his hands came up and cupped her breasts. Her hips rocked softly as he started kneading the twin mounds. Her mouth opened as he deepened the kiss.

Severus didn't know if this was going to be a daily ritual to their morning routine, but he was not going to question his good luck. He dropped his hand down to the opening

of her robe. He couldn't stop his own groan when he discovered she was completely naked underneath it. His fingers stroked her damp curls, encouraged by the mewling sounds coming from the back of her throat. Just as he was preparing to push a finger into her wet warmth, a knock sounded at the door.

Hermione squeaked at the intrusion. She jumped off his lap, and had just straightened her robe when the butler opened the door. "Excuse me, my Lord," he said, lowering his eyes. "Cook said she would have breakfast ready whenever you got hungry."

"Give us an hour, Mansford. I lost track of the time." Severus had requested breakfast in an hour when he had come downstairs. He ushered Hermione up the stairs to their bedroom. He was glad that there was a minimum of servants; this way, he was able to spend more time with Hermione alone.

An hour later, both the Lord and the Lady were seated at the table, plates piled high. Severus watched Hermione pour tea for them both. "What would you like to do today? I am at your disposal." As long as she chose something he liked doing, he didn't see why he couldn't be an attentive husband.

"I suppose we should go about and meet all of the local tenants here. I need to become familiar with these people too. I don't think we have time for a party, but going into town should allow me to meet most of them," Hermione said as she buttered her toast.

Severus groaned. He hated crowds normally; to have to subject himself to meeting new people all day sounded like cruel punishment indeed.

"What? Did you think we would spend all week in bed?" Hermione asked.

"Actually, that does sound like fun," he said innocently.

"Severus, really. You are a responsible landowner, I think. We need..."

"Hermione, I was teasing you. Why don't we go to the stables? You can pick out a horse you like, and then we will ride into town. The local inn serves decent food, and that way, we can meet the tenants and browse through the local shops."

"Oh. All right. Can we take the carriage instead?"

"Why? It is a nice day out. Oh, stop looking at me like that. I actually do like the outdoors. I also happen to enjoy riding," he knew what his students, past and present, called him at Hogwarts.

"I'm sorry. You just did not seem like the outdoorsy type, at least while I attended school," she said.

"Well, go upstairs and change. With the number of trunks that your mother sent, I am sure there is a riding habit somewhere. Miss Winks would know. I will meet you downstairs in the parlor." Severus pushed away from the table, walked around and held Hermione's chair for her.

Hermione walked slowly up the staircase. She had never ridden a horse before and was actually, a little afraid of them. She went into her old bedroom, though she didn't know how it could be old when she only had it for fifteen minutes the previous night. Miss Winks was busy hanging up her clothes.

"Miss Winks, is there a riding habit in any of those trunks?" Hermione had to admit that with five trunks, there had to be an outfit for any occasion.

"Please, call me Jane, my Lady. Everybody else does, even the family. Here is your riding habit. Um, actually, here **they** are. It appears you have three." Miss Winks held up three dresses for Hermione to choose from. She was shocked when she had found them. When she had first met her new mistress, she had thought that Hermione seemed a sensible young woman, but her choice in clothing was quite surprising.

Hermione groaned. Indeed, there were three. She just couldn't believe her mother. In true Narcissa form, she had chosen three beautiful riding habits. However, it was the colors that caused her to groan aloud white, peach and pink. "Thank you, Jane. Are you sure there aren't any others?"

"It would appear not, my Lady," Miss Winks shook her head in amazement. "If you don't mind me asking, why did you pick those colors?"

"It was my **mother** who chose my trousseau. Next time, I will just have to pay more attention," Hermione groaned. "I will wear the pink one. The color is a little darker and shouldn't show as much dust." She just knew Severus would make some comment.

She popped her head around the corner of the upstairs hall. She ground her teeth together when she saw Severus standing below in the hall. He was dressed all in black and was carrying a black riding crop. *Trust him to be impeccably dressed* she muttered. She had made it halfway down the stairs before he heard her approach.

Severus was sure his eyes were going to pop out of his head and could feel his jaw fall open. Hermione looked lovely in pink; he just couldn't believe that she would wear it riding. *Oh, this is just too funny!* He chuckled to himself.

"Hermione, dear..." he started.

"Not one word, Severus, not one word," she ground out as she sailed past him. She gritted her teeth as she heard him chuckling behind her.

"Yes, but, my pet," he continued. "You do realize that we are going to be riding **outside**. There might be a little dust or dirt..."

"Severus, just shut it," she continued towards the stables. She had seen them from the parlor earlier.

"Are all of your clothes that becoming shade?" he was openly laughing now.

"Severus, unless you want to wear this habit, I suggest you stop laughing. I did not pick out these colors. For your information, my mother did!" Hermione stopped so he could catch up and show her which barn the horses were in.

"Oh, well that explains it then." He was still chuckling softly as they walked down the middle aisle of the barn.

Hermione stopped before the stall of a pretty, gray mare. "She is beautiful. Do you think I would be able to ride her?" She looked docile enough. Hermione pet the soft nose that came through the bars.

Severus nodded his approval and they waited in the yard while the horses were saddled. He had chosen a large black stallion; he couldn't see himself on anything else. He swung up into the saddle with ease. He had forgotten how much he missed riding all those years at Hogwarts. He turned around to see what was keeping Hermione.

She looked at the gray mare standing calmly beside the mounting block. She hadn't realized how tall she was in the barn. She lightly patted the mare's neck and tried to summon the courage to put her foot in the stirrup.

"Hermione? Are you coming?" She looked up at Severus' voice.

"Yes. I have something to say, first. I have never ridden a horse." She waited for him to start making his usual sarcastic remarks. When he didn't say anything, she looked up at him.

"I see," he said, his brow wrinkled in thought. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Well, I guess I never really thought about it. It can't be that difficult. Just tell me how what to do before I get on." Hermione never thought she would need to know how to ride a horse, so she never really studied it while attending school.

"It isn't quite that easy. Come over here and ride with me. We will have to arrange lessons later."

"No. I am not going to ride on your lap. What would people think?" Hermione didn't want to tell him that she was also afraid. She remembered the time in her third year she had ridden a Hippogriff and had not liked that at all. She knew that this horse could not fly, but the association was still there.

"Hermione, we don't have all day. We are married. It is a small village. Come here." He reached down and easily lifted her in front of him.

She sat very still, her hands clenched around his wrists. She looked down, moving only her eyes, and quickly looked straight ahead. She just knew she was going to fall over and break her leg.

"Hermione, let go of my arms. I can't control the horse if I am unable to feel my hands. Now, if you need to grip something, grab a hold of his mane, that's the long hair in front of you." He couldn't believe that he had found something that she was not competent at. His concentration was needed to keep the black beast calm.

"I know what it is called. Just because I have never ridden a horse does not mean that I don't know what this hair is," she snapped. She dropped his wrists and quickly grabbed a handful of the horse's mane. She squeaked in surprise when the horse started moving forward. She felt her body start to slide down as she was sitting sideways on the horse's back.

"Shift your weight backwards until you are sitting fully in my lap. You won't fall. My arms will steady you."

Hermione did as he said and found that her balance was indeed much better. They soon reached the outskirts of the village. Both of them were happy to see that it seemed like a happy and well cared for place. There were people walking in and out of neat buildings, talking to each other in the street, and children playing in the yards. As they approached, many stopped what they were doing to look at the new comers, but there was no hostility or suspicion in their faces.

Severus stopped in front of the small inn. He handed the reins over to the young stable boy and guided Hermione inside.

"Welcome, my Lord. How can I be of service?" the bartender asked.

"My wife and I would like the shepherd's pie and ale," Severus answered. He held a seat out for Hermione.

"Ale?" she asked quietly. She had never had anything except butterbeer or the occasional glass of wine. But, as it appeared it would be all she would get, she shrugged and tried a sip. Being very thirsty, she decided she could get used to the taste. Besides, the food smelled wonderful and she was hungry. Soon, their lunch and the ale were gone.

After their meal, she spent a few minutes getting to know the people working at the inn and the few customers there. Then Severus led the way outside.

Hermione wanted to get some paper and pens, so, next, they stopped at the town's shop. As soon as she entered, she was greeted by what seemed to be the entire female population of the small town. Severus nodded and made a beeline for a small collection of books in a quiet corner. He was soon joined by the few brave husbands who had come in with their wives.

Hermione greeted the shopkeeper and was assured that the items would be delivered to the manor. She greeted the other women and soon had more invitations to visit than she could possibly fulfill in the week she was here. By the time she had met everyone, it was late afternoon. Guiltily, she looked at Severus. She was very surprised to see him deeply engrossed in conversation with some other men. She was sure he would be very impatient to get home by this time. Making her excuses, she went to join him.

"... and we will have to get together so that I can see what process you use." She heard him say as she walked up to him.

"Of course, my Lord. Just send word when you have the time. Good day," the man said. He smiled at Hermione and left the shop, his wife joining him at the door.

"I do apologize for taking so long, Severus. I am ready to go if you are," she said.

"Of course, we need to start back if we are to be on time for dinner," he said.

Hermione and Severus rode back to the manor in near silence. It was neither strained nor uncomfortable. Both marveled at how well things were going so early in their marriage. Hermione was shocked to discover that she liked being his wife. She hoped things would continue to go as smoothly. Severus was appalled to discover that he had spent the whole day in her presence and enjoyed it. He just wondered when things would change.

After a quick bath and change, they ate a leisurely dinner and retired for the night. Hermione was a little disappointed that Severus did not attempt any intimacy, but she was glad for the rest as she was still a little sore from the night before. Severus, on the other hand, was hoping that Hermione would give him a sign that she was in the mood for a late night romp. When she pulled on her long nightgown, he tried to stifle his disappointment. He climbed into bed and felt better when he felt her arm slide around his waist. Cuddled together, they went to sleep.

Severus awoke the next morning to a soft, tickling sensation on his nose. He batted at the irritant and rolled over. Pretty soon, he felt something crawling across his back. With lightening fast reflexes, he grabbed a hand. The soft scream told him it was Hermione.

"Good morning to you too," she grumbled.

"What were you trying to do?" he asked, cracking open an eye.

"I was trying to wake you up. I thought it would be better than hitting you with a pillow. Though now, it does seem like a rather good idea." She wasn't really mad or hurt, but he didn't need to know that.

"If that is your way of seducing me, you need to work on it." He laughed as Hermione just gaped at him.

She opened and closed her mouth a couple of times. It was one of the rare occasions that she was struck speechless. Finally, she found her voice. "If I had wanted to seduce, dear husband, you would know it." With that, she flounced off the bed and had hardly taken three steps before she felt his strong arms close in around her waist.

"It does seem that we were in the same position on our wedding night, my dear," he purred. Getting the best of his wife did more for his libido than seeing her in a red corset. *Well, maybe*, he thought to himself.

He laid her on the bed and immediately tore her nightgown from neck to hem. He decided that it was in fact quite generous, as now the maids would have new rags.

Hermione shrieked and crossed her arms across her breasts. "What do you think you are doing?"

"Opening my wedding present," he smirked.

"That is my only other warm nightgown! Now how do you expect me to stay warm..." Hermione's voice trailed off as Severus ducked his head and started lavng her nipples with his tongue.

"I suppose I could think of a couple of ways," he said. He sucked one plump nipple into his mouth, lightly worrying the bud with his teeth. He moaned when Hermione arched her back, pushing her breasts up further for his enjoyment.

She grabbed hold of his arms and could do nothing more than moan and writhe in pleasure. She felt warm shivers run from the sensitive buds down to her core. Curious to

see if his breasts were as sensitive as her own, she slipped on hand down and lightly brushed his flat nipple with the tip of her fingernail. She felt a warm tingle of pleasure at his light groan.

Severus shuddered as her hands explored the smooth plains of his chest. The soft tickle of her fingers as they explored his lower stomach. When she gently wrapped her hand around his swollen flesh, he drew a sharp breath. "Hermione, please, stop now, or I will not be able to go slowly," he bit out. The feel of her hand slowly caressing him was quickly sending him to the edge of his endurance.

Hermione loved the feeling of power she had over him. She was very aware of the wetness between her own legs. "What if I want you to lose control?" she asked breathlessly. She gently squeezed on the downward stroke when she spoke.

That was all Severus needed to hear. He surged up between her legs and entered her with one sure stroke. He gritted his teeth at the feel of her moist heat enveloping his hardness. He felt the tightening of her muscles as she gasped. "Did I hurt you?" he asked, exerting all his will power to hold still.

"No," she gasped. "Please, don't stop. I need to feel you deep within me." She wrapped her legs around his waist in an attempt to get closer to him. She wriggled her hips to adjust the way he was positioned above her.

Severus started moving in long, sure strokes. He enjoyed watching her face. Her eyes closed in pleasure as he rubbed against her swollen clitoris. He quickened his speed and was happy to note that she was just as aroused as he was.

Hermione grabbed his upper arms when she felt the tempo increase. She rose to meet him thrust for thrust. She opened her mouth in a silent scream when she felt him reach between their bodies and start massaging her over-sensitized bud. That extra stimulation was all that was needed to send her hurtling over the edge. Her inner muscles milked his engorged length.

Severus felt her orgasm crash over her. The feel of her muscles tightening around him was more than he could bear. He surged one last time into her heat and stiffened. His breathing was harsh and ragged. He reached down and found a blanket. He wrapped it around them both as they fell into an exhausted sleep.

It was around noon before they found their way out of bed. Instead of subjecting Hermione to another bout of riding sidesaddle, Severus had the small carriage readied. He wanted to check on the crops and land to make sure all was sound. He was not totally ignorant of the obligations of a landlord as he did have some property he had inherited while teaching at Hogwarts.

He looked beside him and smiled inwardly at his wife. Hermione was dressed in a delicate pink gown. It was actually a good color for her, but the style was rather fussy for his taste. He thought that Hermione might share the same opinion, as it was the second time she had pulled on the ruffled sleeves. He made a mental note to have her visit a new dressmaker as soon as they got back to town.

Hermione was glad to be out and included in the tour of the land. She admired the quaint country setting and made mental notes to herself of possible improvements she wanted to discuss with Severus. "Is it possible to stay here longer?" she asked. She was enjoying the growing bond of friendship between them.

"Unfortunately, Parliament meets soon and I have to attend," he said. He too was finding that he liked being able to discuss everyday things with another human being. "Don't worry, we will be able to return often," he continued at her disappointed look. They continued their ride in relative silence. When they returned to the manor, they spent the evening together in the parlor. Neither felt the need for idle chatter.

The rest of the week flew by, and before she knew it, Hermione was tucked into the family coach. She was returning to London to start the Season as a society matron. She just hoped that she would be able to survive; parties and gossip were not her favorite things in the world. She would have even been happy to return to her mundane job at the Ministry than host a ball. But, she knew that Severus' position in Parliament dictated that she be just that, a leader of society. For his sake, she was willing to try.

Severus too, was not looking forward to returning to town. He didn't mind attending Parliament and even the daily task of attending to his many estates. What he did not like, was hosting the balls and dinners that his social rank dictated he give. He still did not like people, or rather having to talk to empty-headed nitwits. At least Hermione was interesting to talk to, she was even intelligent enough to have a decent conversation with on occasion. He sighed. *Hermione will at least have something to do, what with planning the many dinners and parties and balls this Season.*

All too soon for both of them, the coach stopped in front of the London mansion.

Author's Notes: Due to vacations between both myself and my beta, it will probably be about a month before I will be able to update again. I apologize to my many readers, but it is sooo needed! Enjoy this long chapter, I hope you enjoy it. Tinnidawg, you are the absolute best! I will have this posted to Ashwinder once they are moved.

Chapter 12 - After the Ball Is Over

Chapter 12 of 18

The Duke and Duchess return to London after the honeymoon.

Chapter 12 After the Ball Is Over

It was later in the afternoon when the coach pulled up in front of the Snape townhouse in London. It had been a quiet trip as both occupants were wrapped up in their own private thoughts. Severus was mulling over various topics before Parliament. Hermione was anxious to see her family and get settled into her new home.

Severus looked from the window at the commotion coming from outside. He groaned when he saw Harry waiting for them at the door. He could see his and Hermione's family standing at the parlor window. He rolled his eyes to see Harry enthusiastically bound down the stairs to get the coach door. He stepped down and was immediately engulfed in a hug. "Get off of me," he quietly growled.

"Sev, old boy, how are you? How was the honeymoon? Bet you would have liked another week away," Harry said. He grinned as soon as Severus handed Hermione out of the carriage. He grabbed her in a bear hug also.

"Harry! Put me down!" she laughed. "It is nice to see you too." She straightened her dress as she walked into the house.

She turned towards the parlor as she heard her brother's voice drawl, "I see that married life agrees with you, little sister."

"Draco! Did you come to see me also? I knew you liked me," she teased.

"Actually, Lady Minerva invited us to dinner this evening. I guess she knew that you would want to see my handsome face as soon as you got back to London."

"Really, Draco," Narcissa reproved as she came forward to hug her daughter, "If you remember, I made you come tonight."

Hermione stuck her tongue out at Draco as she gave her mother a warm hug. Severus came in at that exact moment and raised an eyebrow at her childish behavior.

Lucius got up from his chair and came forward to greet the newlyweds. He was happy to see that his daughter seemed to be handling married life rather well, so far. "Severus, how was your week together? Did you get a chance to have a look at the latest proposals before Parliament?" The two men sat at the far end of the parlor, deep in conversation.

Hermione settled herself next to Narcissa. "I had a good week. We got to know each other a little better. I think we will get along well."

"That is good, darling. I am glad. Your father and I were a little worried, and Draco even offered to go and pay a visit. Thankfully, Ginny talked him out of it. Now that you are back, we must get you a new wardrobe for the Season. Of course, there will also be dinners and balls to attend. You will have to make sure you host at least one event," Narcissa prattled on.

"Narcissa, let the poor girl get settled in first," Minerva said as she entered the room. "I do apologize for not being here when you first arrived. I had to attend to a little matter regarding the menu for tomorrow."

Hermione stood and greeted her new mother-in-law. She felt a true affection for her and knew that they would get along well.

"We have a picnic and reception planned for tomorrow afternoon, to introduce the new Duchess of Walforth," she continued.

"I'm sorry. You are having what tomorrow?" Hermione did not want to have to attend a social function so soon after arriving.

"The Season is starting, and your mother and I figured that the best way to introduce you to society was to have a small gathering. We will plan a formal ball later in the season. Don't worry, dear, it will only be close friends. Now, I believe dinner is being served, shall we?" Minerva led everyone into the dining room.

Dinner was a lighthearted affair. It wasn't until afterwards that Hermione voiced her disapproval of tomorrow's event. "Can you believe that I have to start attending social events one day after I return from my honeymoon? I don't have time to have a new gown made. I was hoping to relax and get used to my new home," she ranted. She turned around when she did not get a response. "Severus! Would you listen to me?"

Severus winced. "Hermione, I cannot help but hear you. You are shouting. Moderate your voice unless you want the entire household to hear you."

Hermione wrinkled her nose at him. "Well, then, what do you think? Are you really that excited about the picnic tomorrow?"

"No. But I do not see any way out of the event. Besides, if all they want is a small event, I see no reason to stop them, either. Wait until they make you help with the ball."

Hermione stared at her husband as he chuckled softly. What she did not know was that he had indeed tried to get out of tomorrow's event. When he had threatened not to show up, Minerva had calmly informed him that if he did not attend, then people would gossip about it, especially as they had only been married for a week. Since he hated gossip more than anything, at the present time, he ground out that he would be in attendance.

"Come to bed, Hermione. It is late and I need some sleep," he yawned.

Hermione huffed as she crawled into bed. She snuggled up to him and soon was asleep.

Hermione awoke the next morning, alone. Severus had risen and also finished breakfast by the time she had made her way downstairs. Everyone else was still eating, so she helped herself to the food on the sideboard.

"Good morning, Severus. Are you feeling well?" she asked, noticing the tension lines around his mouth and eyes.

"Adequate. Are you going to be ready for your first bow to society in a few hours?" he asked. She groaned and he chuckled. "Then I leave you in the capable hands of my mother. I have a couple of errands to run, but I promise to be back in time for the picnic."

Once Severus walked out of the door, he quickened his stride. He had to find his cousin, and fast. Lady Minerva had cornered him as soon as he had come downstairs this morning. It appeared that Lady Trelawney, his ex-mistress, had married his first cousin, Lord Fudge while he had been on his honeymoon. Said cousin had been invited to the picnic today before Minerva had been made aware of his new marital status. Both Severus and his mother agreed that Hermione should not be told about his previous relationship with Trelawney. He needed to talk to his cousin and make sure that he had his new wife well under his hand.

Hermione, meanwhile, was going through her wardrobe with Minerva and Narcissa. Since her wedding, Hermione was seeing much more of Narcissa than she had when she lived at her parents' home. The room looked like her trunks had exploded, dresses covered every inch of the room.

"Well, I would prefer to wear either the apple green muslin or the sky blue silk," Hermione said. She stood in the middle of the colorful mess while the two older women searched through piles, trying to find matching shoes and shawls.

"Oh, good, Narcissa. Since you have found the white slippers, she can wear the blue silk," Minerva said with satisfaction. "We can leave all of this for the maids to put away. Now, you two finish dressing while I go dress myself."

"That color does look good on you, Hermione. I believe that I will wear my yellow silk, that way we won't clash when we stand close together," Narcissa said as she left to return home.

Hermione sighed, looked around and thanked the heavens that she actually had maids to tackle this disaster. Her personal maid helped her step into the dress. She decided to just weave a white silk cord through her curls. She didn't want to worry about ruining her hair style as she would be outdoors most of the day.

Hermione walked out into the back garden and took in the sight before her. She was amazed at the number of people that Lady Minerva considered "close" friends and family. It looked very close to the same number that attended her wedding. Squaring her shoulders, she smiled and stepped out to greet her mother-in-law.

"Minerva, it appears that all of society is in attendance," she said.

"Hermione, my dear, I do believe you are correct, the only person missing is Severus. I do hope he is back soon," Minerva said.

"Where did he go?" Hermione asked. She had expected him to meet her at the bottom of the stairs so that they could make their appearance together.

"He had an important matter to attend to. I had thought he would have been back by now..." said Minerva anxiously. She too had hoped that they would have been able to enter the garden together.

"I am back. I had to change and was told that Hermione had already gone to the gardens," Severus said from behind them.

Both women turned and smiled. Minerva had never felt prouder of her son. Hermione looked at him and almost fainted. He had never looked more powerful and handsome than he did on this occasion. He offered an arm to his wife and mother and led them to the gazebo that was situated in the center of the garden.

"On behalf of the Snape family, I want to thank you all for coming," Severus said. He still hated large crowds but was duty bound to thank his guests. "If you are in need of anything, please, don't hesitate to ask. Enjoy the day."

Hermione stared at him in shock.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing. I just... well... I have never heard you be so polite and civil in a public gathering before. It almost sounded like you are enjoying this," she whispered.

"Don't get used to it," he said. "I just figured I wouldn't have to talk to as many people if I thanked everyone at once."

Hermione looked at him, narrowed her eyes, and trod upon his foot as she walked in front of him to greet her parents. She smiled when she heard his soft hiss of pain.

"Father, I am glad you are here. I was hardly able to talk to you at all last night. Of course, we live close enough that I can stop in and visit you and mother all the time," she said as she gave Lucius a kiss on the cheek.

"Of course you may, darling. How is married life treating you so far?" he asked. He privately hoped she wouldn't be coming home all the time as he had plans that involved a lot of private time with Narcissa.

"I think I will enjoy being married to him," she replied.

"Good, good. I am certainly glad to hear it. Now would you mind telling me why he is scowling at you?" Lucius asked.

Hermione shot Severus a sickly sweet smile and replied, "He wanted me all to himself. He loves me so much that he can't stand to be apart for very long. See, here he comes now."

"Lucius, Narcissa, how are you this afternoon?" he asked. He didn't trust what would come out of his little wife's mouth. He was almost afraid to guess what she had said to put such an amused look on his best friend's face.

"We are fine, Severus. I am glad that to hear that you two are getting along so well. But come, you can't keep Hermione all to yourself forever. Let's go over there; I see a couple of friends I want to introduce you to."

Narcissa and Hermione watched the two men leave. They turned to rejoin Minerva and to mingle with the other guests. Everyone was anxious to meet the new bride. Minerva groaned when she saw Draco coming. Attached to his arm was none other than Lady Sibyll, the new Mrs. Cornelius Fudge.

"Hermione, I would like to introduce you to Lady Sibyll. She is newly married to your husband's cousin, Lord Cornelius Fudge," Draco drawled. He did not particularly want to introduce his sister to Snape's former mistress, but he had been cornered. Since she had married into the family, he saw no graceful way out. All he could do was shrug apologetically to Minerva.

"How do you do, Lady Sibyll," Hermione said. She was surprised to note that her new cousin was very beautiful and looked exquisite in an ice blue silk gown. She also noticed that the neckline was a bit lower than an afternoon picnic warranted.

"Lady Hermione, welcome to the family. Isn't it such fun to be new brides together?" she gushed.

"Indeed. You will have to come to tea sometime so that we could get better acquainted," Hermione said.

"How is Cornelius doing, Sibyll?" asked Minerva. As long as Sibyll could be civil, Minerva was willing to include her in their group.

"He is doing well. He is over there in the corner with the rest of the men," she laughed.

"Mother, I need your advice with something," Draco said.

"Of course, darling," Narcissa said as she and Draco wandered away from the group.

"Excuse me, Lady Minerva, but I was wondering if you were planning to host the Easter picnic this year," an older gentleman asked. Minerva turned to talk to the newcomer and left Hermione and Trelawney alone.

"It is a beautiful home. Are you going to be living here?" Lady Sibyll asked Hermione.

"I am not sure. I haven't really discussed it with Severus," Hermione said.

"Really? Lord Fudge is such a dear. He let me pick our new home. It is absolutely perfect. Just the two of us. He is so generous and kind," Sibyll trilled.

"I don't really mind this house. Family is very important to us," Hermione started to say.

"Of course, dear. You are so young yet; I suppose the help of a more experienced person like Lady Minerva is so reassuring. I remember that I was hardly able to handle the simplest of servants' quarrels at your age," Sibyll continued.

Hermione could feel her teeth start to grind together. "That is not the case at all. We have just returned from our honeymoon yesterday..."

"Oh, did I tell you? We are going to be going on a three week tour of the continent for our honeymoon. My dear Mr. Fudge wanted to spoil me with a trip in absolute luxury," Sibyll interrupted.

Any moment now, Hermione was sure that she would personally start feeding Sibyll the cut glass punch bowl if she did not stop prattling on. She was saved from making that effort by Ginny.

"Hermione, there you are. Your mother said you were over here visiting with a cousin," Ginny grinned at her.

"Ginny. How wonderful of you to come. Yes, this is Lady Sibyll. She has just married my husband's cousin, Lord Cornelius, Marquis of Fudge," Hermione said.

"Really? It must be true about absence makes the heart grow fonder, Lady Sibyll. I see Lord Fudge looking for you," Ginny said. She took Hermione's elbow and started drawing her away. "I believe your husband is also looking for you, Lady Hermione."

"Oh. Excuse me, Lady Sibyll. I mustn't keep him waiting," Hermione happily said, as she almost dragged poor Ginny, in her haste to get away.

"Oh, thank you for rescuing me," Hermione said, once they were a safe distance away.

"No problem. Draco said that you might need help. He didn't want to leave you with her but she can be determined," Ginny laughed. "What did she say that has you so flushed?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Are you sure?" Ginny couldn't remember the last time she saw Hermione flushed in anger. Well, anyway she couldn't remember the last time in the past month

that she saw Hermione so angry.

"No, nothing. Well, she did go on about having her own house and such. But I couldn't get a word in edgewise to say whether I wanted one of my own or not," Hermione bit out.

"Oh. Well, do you?"

"What?"

"Do you?"

"Do I what? Want a word in edgewise? Yes, I did."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "No, do you want a home of your own?"

"Oh! That. I never really thought about it. I guess it would be nice, but I don't mind living at the family residence either."

"Good," said a voice behind them.

Hermione and Ginny both jumped.

"Oh! Severus. That was not nice. Don't scare me like that," Hermione scolded.

"Ginny, Draco is looking for you. I told him I saw you head over here," Severus said.

"I forgot. I will see you later then, Hermione," she said over her shoulder. She could tell when she was not wanted.

"So what is this about a new house?" he asked.

"Just a little bit of nonsense your cousin and I were discussing," she hedged.

"Hmmm. They are waiting for us to lead the picnic. Come," he said, as he held out his hand.

Together, they went back up towards the house. They enjoyed fresh fruit and sandwiches. Hermione fed him choice bits of cheese and bread. He kept her goblet full of sweet wine. By the end of the day, she had forgotten her discussion with Lady Fudge.

By the end of the week, Hermione was willing to run naked through the house, screaming at the top of her lungs if it would keep everyone from mentioning houses. She had just received the last guest when Severus entered the drawing room. He stopped short when he saw his wife sitting in a chair talking to nobody.

"Hermione?" he asked quietly. "Who are you talking to?"

"I am talking to myself, Severus. Do you know why? Because that is what insane people do," she snapped.

He raised an eyebrow. "Insane?" He started thinking back to what he could possibly have done to upset her lately.

"Yes. Everyone who attended our reception has been to pay a call."

"Well... That is very nice of them." He still wasn't sure if he was in trouble or not.

"Do you want to know what they all have been saying?" she asked quietly.

"That they hope we are happy?" He prayed to whatever higher being was listening that he answered correctly.

"No! They **all** mention that there is the cutest house on such and such a street! They are all willing to take me to see it! They **understand** why I am saying that I am content in this house, but **wouldn't** I love to have my own?" she practically shouted at him.

Severus didn't know what to say. This had him beyond confused. His brain scrambled to keep pace even as he realized that she was still talking.

"I told them all, every single person, that I am not looking for a new home and that I wouldn't consider moving unless we agreed to it," she continued. When she got no response, she looked at Severus. "Oh, for Merlin's sake, close your mouth, Severus."

"Are you saying you want to buy a new house?" he asked. Then he immediately realized he had said the wrong thing.

"**NO!**" she yelled.

"Hermione," he said, starting to get upset himself. He realized that he had done nothing to warrant being yelled at. "Stop yelling. You are starting to sound like a spoiled student. What exactly are you trying to say?"

She took a deep breath. "Nothing. I am saying absolutely nothing." She rose and regally walked out of the room, stopping to give him a peck on the cheek on her way out of the door.

Severus shook his head and went in search of Lady Minerva.

"...so then everyone thinks that Hermione and you should buy a large, opulent house and put Lady Sibyll in her place. They mean well, but I can understand Hermione's frustrations." Minerva poured tea and handed it to her son.

"Why didn't she just tell me that?" he asked.

"I believe it is because you had already caught her mid-tantrum. Give her a bit to calm down. Let the topic drop. Poor thing, even her mother is taking her around and pointing out houses," Minerva said sympathetically.

"Do you think that she would like a new house? I didn't think that you two had any problems getting along," Severus commented. He didn't mind living at home, but the thought of a house with just the two of them did sound rather like fun. He would have to give it some more thought.

"Depending on how you presented it to her, she might like it. We get along fine so don't worry about us. Hermione doesn't strike me as the type to want to show off. I believe she would be amiable to a new house if you presented it to her as your idea or as someplace for just the two of you."

"Who has an idea? Sev? That is rich, mother," Harry laughed as he came into the room. He had been with Ron earlier and had decided to return home for some much needed rest.

"Yes, I have an idea, Harry," Severus ground out. He still did not like the idea of Harry as a sibling, but he decided that he would make a good servant. "I need you to come with me and look at a couple things. You can hold the horses," he said.

"Sorry, old boy. I am going to go get some beauty sleep before I go out tonight," Harry yawned.

"No. You are coming with me. You can take notes for me on my errands," Severus said. He grabbed hold of his brother's arm and marched him outside.

Minerva sighed and went in search of Hermione. She wanted to make sure that she wasn't too upset. Maybe she would go with Narcissa and Hermione and try to distract them with some shopping instead. Hermione had been looking tired this past week; not that she blamed her, but she wanted her to look her best for the Easter picnic she had planned this coming weekend.

Author's Note: Hope you enjoy this chapter. Sorry about the long delay. A million thanks to Tinnidawg, my poor, overworked beta!

Chapter 13 - Home Sweet Home

Chapter 13 of 18

Easter holiday and a surprise!

Chapter 13 Home Sweet Home

Easter morning arrived with plenty of sunshine. The family was assembling below to go to church. Upstairs, Hermione was involved in a very secular activity.

"Severus, please?" she pleaded.

"No," he bit out.

"It won't be as bad as you think. Just try, for me? Pretty please?" she asked.

"What would you do in return?" he asked, unwilling to subject himself to an hour's torture for nothing.

"You think you should be given a reward for going to church with your family?" Sometimes, Hermione just couldn't believe how self-serving he could be.

"Hermione, I have never been to church. It holds no special significance or sentimental value to me. In case you have forgotten, let me rephrase that, obviously you have forgotten that I am a wizard."

"I am a witch and I have occasionally gone to church. Besides, I know you enjoy listening to Bach frequently. Some of the compositions he wrote were for the church. If you go with me, you might hear some other music you might enjoy."

Severus snorted. He hoped that by arguing with her they would be delayed enough to avoid going to the service. "Have you been to church even once since you found out you were a witch? Do you realize that we refer to Merlin and other gods? I am not going."

Hermione looked out of the window and saw the carriage pulling up to the door. "Fine, I am not arguing with you! I am sending your mother up. Let me know what type of reward she offers you!" She stormed to the door and slammed it hard enough to rattle the pictures on her way out.

"That insufferable, little piece of..." he started to mutter.

"Severus! Stop whatever horrid thing you are about to say. I want you to get dressed immediately. You have five minutes to get downstairs and into that carriage," Minerva said. "And don't forget to comb your hair," she threw over her shoulder in afterthought as she wheeled around and left the room before he could even think of a suitable retort.

Desperately wishing that he had landed in a magical book so that his muttered curses would work, Severus slowly dressed and stalked towards the carriage. Hermione beamed at him while he glared at her. Minerva patted his knee with a, "there's a good boy," while he sulked. Harry grinned and elbowed him as Severus stepped on his foot while sitting down. *What I wouldn't give for a wand*, he thought. *Too bad that insufferable book doesn't allow magic*

Minerva decided that Easter would be a simple family affair in town. The family traditionally went to the country estate, but everyone agreed that they would prefer something smaller, especially after the engagement and wedding. Despite the informal celebrating of Easter this year, there were still plenty of enthusiastic participants for the children's egg hunt and games.

Later that day, Hermione sat beside Harry watching the children play. She had been enjoying the hassle free life that she had been forcibly thrust into, but it was starting to pall. She had discovered that she was incapable of doing any magic, and out of boredom she had read most of the books in the library. She was unable to work due to her rank and position in society, besides which, she had no desire to be a barmaid or flower seller anyway.

"Here you are, Hermione. I noticed you hardly touched your lunch, so I have brought you a plate of fruit," Severus said. He reclined next to her and set the plate on the ground between them.

"Thank you, Severus," she said, picking up a grape. "I couldn't possibly eat all of this. Do you think Harry would care to join us?" she asked with an impish grin. She was continuously surprised at how thoughtful and caring he was becoming. She didn't count his behavior this morning against him, as he had ended up going to church with her with minimal surliness.

"Since I brought so much, I figured that we could share it," he said. He opened his mouth and looked at her expectantly.

Then again, I could be wrong, she thought to herself. She looked at him, looked at the plate of fruit, and grinned.

The next thing Severus knew, he was choking and gasping for air. He sat up quickly and spit out four grapes. He turned and glared at his 'loving' wife. "I fail to see the humor in that," he snapped.

She grinned, plucked a grape, and popped it into her mouth. "I am sorry, dear. You looked like a hungry bird, so I fed you. It looked like there would have been plenty of room for four little grapes."

"You will pay for that one, my dear," he said as he gave her a quick kiss. "Harry, come. We have some details to see to before tomorrow," he ordered as he stalked away. He could hear Hermione laughing softly as he left. He almost ran over Ginny as she was hurrying towards his wife. He muttered a terse apology and continued with Harry running to catch up.

"Hermione, are you busy?" Ginny asked as she came up to Hermione.

"No, why don't you sit down?" Hermione said, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"Are you okay? Your husband hurried past me without even a 'good morning,' and he did not look very happy," the younger girl asked.

"I am fine. He just doesn't appreciate my sense of humor at the moment. How are you these days?"

"I am doing well. I hardly see you much anymore with the wedding and all the fuss that surrounds it both before and after the event. Not that I blame you. If I were just married, I would be all wrapped up in my new husband," said Ginny.

"I am sorry, Ginny. I didn't mean to neglect you. Why don't you and your mother come for tea tomorrow? Then we can go to the dressmaker, and you can help me pick out a couple of new ball gowns," Hermione said. She felt guilty, as Ginny was her closest friend, both currently and back at Hogwarts.

"Oh, I didn't say that to make you feel guilty," Ginny said in a rush. "Why don't you take your mother with you? She is always dressed so fashionably."

"After having to wear a pink riding habit, I refuse to let her pick out my clothes anymore," Hermione said. She shot her friend a disgusted look when she started giggling.

"Sorry, Hermione. I am picturing you in a pink habit, and it is extremely funny!" Ginny finally stopped laughing and soberly said, "I would love to go with you. Tea tomorrow? Would, um, would anyone else be at tea?"

"Just Minerva, my mother, you and your mother."

"Of course. Is the Duke going to be there? Or your brother?" Ginny asked with a blush.

"Oh!" Hermione finally realized what Ginny was actually trying to ask. "Well, I know Severus has some sort of business tomorrow with his brother, so I highly doubt he will be present. But I do believe that Mother is bringing Draco. He has started coming to quite a few social events lately. I believe that Mother is hoping he is starting to look for a wife."

"Oh," Ginny said quietly.

"Ginny, if you like him, why don't you go after him?" Hermione asked.

The younger girl blushed. "It just isn't done. I'm not that bold!"

Hermione snorted delicately. "Ginny, my brother is in love with two people. Himself and his reflection. If you want him, you will have to do all of the pursuing. He is just too lazy and self absorbed to chase after any female."

"I was actually hoping you could help me, as you are not only his sister but also a married woman now," Ginny said shyly.

"I will do what I can. I think it would be wonderful if..." Hermione trailed off as she watched Ginny turn bright red. A second later, she heard her brother's lazy voice.

"What would be wonderful, little Hermne?" Draco asked.

"Draco, stop being so nosy. I was telling Ginny that I think it would be wonderful if you were to fall in love with someone other than your reflection," she said, grinning up at him.

"I am hurt, dear sister," he said as he laid a hand over his heart. "I can't help how handsome I am. Besides, I love you. And Mother and Father. Of course I can't forget our dear departed grandparents and..." he trailed off as Hermione lightly hit his shoulder.

"Fine, you win!" she laughed.

Ginny smiled at both of them. "Hermione, I see Ron coming up the walk. I'll see you tomorrow at tea time."

"Okay, Ginny."

"I'll see you also then, Ginny," Draco said as she walked towards her brother. He then took a seat beside his sister. "Hermione, why is she going to be at tea tomorrow? I thought you and Mother were going to go to the dressmaker's?"

"Oh, you obviously haven't talked to Mother recently," Hermione said. "I told Mother that Minerva was going to accompany me, I was hoping to have an opportunity to get to know her better. I honestly don't want to ever let Mother pick out my clothes again," she said with a sigh.

"Well, if you are going clothes shopping with Minerva and Ginny, where are Mother and I going?" he asked hesitantly.

Hermione grinned. "You, dear brother, are going to a music recital."

She started laughing at Draco's loud groan. "Don't tell me," he said, "Miss Lovegood's?"

She nodded happily.

It was late in the afternoon of the next day when Hermione dropped Ginny off at home. She got no further than the foyer when she heard a loud groan. She quickly followed the noise into the parlor. There, sprawled on the sofa, was Draco. His usual, impeccably groomed form was now a rumpled mess.

"Draco, what is the matter?" Hermione asked with mild concern.

"If I never have to attend a musical again that featured Miss Lovegood, it would be too soon," he groaned.

Hermione smiled as she watched him rub his temples. "Maybe now you will stop calling me, Hermne?" she purred.

"Only if you have anything to stop this infernal headache," he continued to moan. "I don't understand why you hate it so much. Everyone thought it was such a cute name. It fit you perfectly. You always looked like a little sprite in the angelic white pinafores and the large white bows mother always put in your curls."

Hermione rang for the maid and seated herself next to her brother. "Why aren't you at home anyway?"

"Mother also has a headache and wanted a quiet house. Sev mentioned that he wanted me here after the recital, so I decided to just stay here." He took the headache powder that the maid had brought and leaned back.

"I wonder why he wanted you here," Hermione asked quietly.

"Because I wanted him to go with us," her husband answered from the doorway. He strode into the room and dropped a light kiss on his wife's brow.

"I didn't know we were going out! I really must change!" Hermione exclaimed, flustered by the surprise. She was starting to enjoy the kisses that he bestowed on her in greeting. She was a little tired, but as long as it wasn't going to be a long outing, she was willing to go.

"You are fine dressed the way you are," he said. He offered her his arm and started towards the door. "Coming, Draco?"

With a groan, the younger man heaved himself off the sofa and followed behind. Outside, Harry was already waiting and waved at them to join him. They all piled into the carriage and started moving in the direction of the Weasleys' home.

Hermione was surprised when they stopped to pick up Ginny. Her curiosity was piqued even more when her friend did not seem in the least bit surprised and said nothing but settled in quietly next to her. Things were a bit crowded, but they soon let Harry off at his club. Draco and Severus held a whispered conversation every so often, but other than that, little was said, and the carriage started moving towards St. James Place.

Finally, after about fifteen minutes of wandering through the fashionable streets of London, Hermione turned to Severus and said, "I am enjoying the fresh air, but where specifically are we headed?"

Her husband arched an eyebrow. "What makes you think we are headed in any particular direction? Have you considered the possibility that I just wanted to spend some time alone with my wife?"

"Honestly? No. If you had wanted to spend quality time with me, you would have left my darling brother at home and let Ginny rest after our strenuous shopping excursion," she said. "Besides, you did seem in a bit of a rush to get me out of the house," she continued.

"Your deductive reasoning is quite sound. As much as I enjoy your company, I wanted to show you something." Severus turned to the driver and nodded.

The carriage had come to a halt in front of, for lack of better words, a couple of small palaces. Hermione looked up the street and then down the street. Then she looked at Severus. He just looked calmly back at her. She noticed that Draco was grinning and Ginny was smiling, but nobody said anything. "All right. Just what was it you wanted to show me?" she asked.

"What do you think of your new home?" Severus asked.

"That is not funny, Severus," she said irritably.

Severus stepped out of the carriage and assisted Hermione out of it. He tucked her hand into the corner of his elbow and escorted her across the street. Draco and Ginny followed behind. Hermione noticed that Ginny had her hand resting lightly on her brother's arm and smiled to herself.

Looking back in front of her, she saw they had come to stop in front of an enormous, gray brick mansion. It looked solid and new. They walked to the front door, and then Severus handed her a key. She looked at him in wide-eyed surprise and fit the key into the door. The door opened on silent hinges. The small group walked inside and stood in quiet wonder. The entry had a white marble floor. Dark wood panels gleamed on the walls. An elegant staircase unfolded at the end of the hall.

"Welcome, my Lord," an elderly man said. He had slipped into the hall from a side door. He was jolly looking, and his eyes snapped with repressed humor.

"Peeves, my wife, Lady Hermione, Duchess of Walthor. Please have tea brought to the front parlor," Severus said. He turned and opened the first side door on the right. "This, my dear, is your new home." He stopped and waited for Hermione to enter. He then took her hand as she walked into the room. He was becoming accustomed to touching her in small ways. He even found himself seeking continued contact, such as holding her hand or placing small kisses on her forehead, even in the presence of others.

"You bought this? For me? When?" she asked as she took in the room. She loved the light blue and cream cushions on the furniture and rugs. It made the dark wood gleam, and the whole room was a study in understated elegance. "Did you buy the house furnished?"

"Yes. The previous owner had just had this built, and then a reversal of fortune mandated that the house be sold. It has not even been lived in. I wanted to find a home for just us. It is still close to your parents and my family without being in each other's pockets. Consider it a belated wedding gift, my dear." He looked at her, gauging her reaction to his buying a house without her input first. He figured she would either be excited and happy or put out and enraged.

Luckily for him, it was more of the former. She looked around with a concentrated frown on her face, which smoothed out into a pleased smile. Looking at the tall man next to her, she said, "After a tour of the entire house, I will know for sure, but I think I will like living here. It is rather large but still has a welcoming presence. Thank you, Severus." She would have reached up and kissed him but didn't risk embarrassing him or displeasing him. She did smile up at him with happiness shining in her eyes.

Relief poured through him. "I am glad you like it. I will be happy to show you around, all of you." He brushed her knuckles with a light kiss and enjoyed watching her eyes widen slightly in surprise. He tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow again as they wandered through the house.

That evening, Hermione enthusiastically described her new home to her parents, as both the families and Ginny were gathered at the Malfoys'. The next few days were going to be filled with moving and settling in. By the time they finished dinner and settled into the parlor, they had started to discuss redecorating her new home.

"I will have to come see your new home and help you with the decorating first thing tomorrow," Narcissa announced.

"Mother, I haven't even moved into the house yet," Hermione started.

"All the better, darling. That way, you can have everything ready when you spend your first night there. Who wants to live in a house where painters and workmen have been trampling about," Narcissa continued.

Hermione sighed. "Mother, please. I want to decorate my first house myself. Of course, I will be asking for advice from both of you," Hermione quickly added as she saw her mother start to puff up in indignation.

"We understand, Hermione. Why don't you show us around your home tomorrow and tell us what you have planned so far," Minerva cut in.

"I was going to go to the house tomorrow and catalogue what is already there. Then I wanted to jot down some ideas on color schemes and furnishing. I want to research the family history and see if there is anything that I can incorporate into the decorating of the house, to make it homier," Hermione continued. She smiled gratefully at Minerva.

"Research on decorating a house?" Severus asked, his eyebrow furrowed.

"Of course. According to some of the family records, certain members had distinct tastes in colors or hobbies. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a room filled with watercolors painted by your great grandmother?" she asked in excitement.

"I was thinking of dark woods. Dim lighting. Drawn curtains. Very fitting for the study," he teased lightly.

She wrinkled her nose. "How about red furniture and gold tapestries," she retorted in jest.

Harry looked up from the chessboard he was seated at with Lucius. "I wouldn't mind seeing a room in those colors. I sort of like that idea."

Severus shot him a dark look.

"What about deep hunter green velvet and silver accents for a room?" Draco asked from where he was sitting with Ginny. Severus nodded in approval.

Hermione made a sour face. "If that were the case, I may as well decorate the bedroom in yellow and black," she shot back. Severus choked on the sip of brandy he had just taken.

"Why would you do that?" Harry asked innocently.

Both she and Severus chuckled softly. "No reason," she said.

Ginny looked at them in mild confusion. "I don't know if you want to hear what color scheme I like, but I do agree with Harry. Red and gold do sound very dignified."

Hermione choked in her giggle. "I will take it into consideration." She muttered under her breath so that only Severus could hear her, "I may as well decorate a room for each Hogwarts house color and be done with it."

He smiled and stood up. "I think we are going to turn in for the evening. I have an early appointment in the morning, and it sounds like Hermione will be likewise occupied," he said. They bade their good byes and headed home for some private celebrating and thank yous.

Author's Notes: Sorry for the long delay. Fall is my favorite season, so I am out enjoying it as much as I can. Now that colder weather has set in, I will be hopefully updating more! Tinnidawg, you are the absolute best!!! Promise to get chapter 14 to you before the end of next week.

Chapter 14 - Visitors

Chapter 14 of 18

Friends and family visit the new house.

Chapter 14: Visitors

After a very busy month, Hermione finally had every item in the house cataloged down to the minute grains of salt. She had separated that list into items to dispose of, to donate to various charities, items to be repaired and items that were needed. It was the 'items needed' category that she was worried about. She just wasn't sure how to broach the subject to her husband.

She smiled as she thought back with pleasure about their first night in their new home.

"Are you sure you want to stay here tonight, Severus?" she asked hesitantly. She had not been able to ensure that the house was clean enough to live in yet. She did not relish the idea of sleeping on sheets that mice had danced on the night before.

"I bought this house so that we could be alone. No Minerva, no Harry, nobody," he said. In fact, he didn't care if they had to sleep on the floor wrapped in dust cloths, he was happy just to be away from all the others.

"At least you have minimal staff already," Hermione said quietly. She hoped at least one bed had been made. She was tired and Severus was determined to stay, so she decided to make the best of it. She peeped into the sitting room as they walked towards the staircase. *At least it looks well kept*, she thought.

"I am going to bed. Are you coming or were you planning on burying yourself in the library?" Severus asked. He already had his foot upon the first step. He arched his eyebrow as he waited for his wife to answer.

"I am coming," she sighed. She took his hand, and together they walked slowly up the steps. She was glad they had become comfortable enough around each other and didn't need to fill the quiet moments. As she had gotten older, she learned that it was sometimes the quiet times that meant more.

Severus smiled to himself as they approached the bedroom. He couldn't wait to get his wife into bed. *All of these lovely rooms to take her in* he thought wickedly.

Her surprised gasp made him chuckle softly. He stood behind her and looked into the room and smiled. The large four-poster canopy bed was hung with rich midnight blue velvet and tied back with silver satin cords. The dark wood gleamed from a recent polishing, and a warm fire was blazing in the fireplace. He stepped around her and, still holding her hand in his, slowly drew her deeper into the room.

Hermione was stunned by the warmth and beauty of the master bedroom. She loved the dark blue, silver and creamy white colors of the room. Still taking in the details of the room, she barely felt Severus start to draw the sleeves of her dress off of her shoulders. She shivered when his lips lightly brushed the hollow where her neck joined her shoulder. She slowly turned and threaded one hand in his dark hair and the other caressed his back.

"Mmmm, you know how much I love that," she murmured as he kissed his way around her delicate neck. She shivered when she felt his chest vibrate as he softly groaned.

Severus wanted nothing more than to ravish his wife, but the soft mewls and sighs encouraged him to go slowly and take his time. Her sharp intake of breath as the cool air hit her body caused him to drop to his knees. He had managed to loosen the laces of her dress, and it pooled at her feet. He nuzzled the soft skin of her stomach, and with his hands he traced her familiar curves.

Hermione felt her own knees weaken when his hands covered her breasts. His long fingers massaged the soft flesh as his sensitive fingers sought her swollen nipples. The soft pull on her highly sensitized nipples was creating a burning ache between her legs.

"Sit back on the bed," Severus gently commanded.

She hadn't realized she had backed up against the bed until he had spoken. She carefully sat down on the edge of the bed, and allowed him to gently push her back so that she was lying with her legs over the edge of the bed. Even though she knew what he was going to do, she still couldn't stop the involuntary arching of her back and hissed in appreciation when he leaned forward and delicately tasted her.

Hearing her beg for more and her rapid gasps urged Severus onward. He inserted the tip of his tongue into his wife's body. The gentle clenching of her muscles almost

sent him over the edge. He withdrew, and before she could complain, he gently sucked on her clitoris and at the same time, inserted two fingers and started gently thrusting them into her.

"Oh, gods! Severus! Please!" she panted. Her hips were bucking gently, and she wanted nothing more than to feel him driving into her. She was desperate to feel his body fully upon her.

Severus stood up, and with a deft movement he divested himself of his trousers and leaned over Hermione. He rubbed himself against her opening to lubricate his swollen shaft, and as he felt her hips rise to meet him, he pushed into her until he was buried as far as he could go. As her legs wrapped around his waist, he drew back and quickly lunged forward again.

Hermione had waited long enough; she was more than willing to accept all he had to give. She strained with him and met him, stroke for stroke. Sweat had broken out on her body as she felt the tension become more than she could bear.

As Severus pulled back, he reached between them, and Hermione felt her body explode. Her vision blacked out for a quick moment. She felt Severus reach his own climax, his body tight and eyes closed with pleasure. He gently thrust to draw out their combined pleasure, whispering how wonderful she made him feel, and then wearily lay down next to her. She reached over and brushed his hair from his face. She loved the peaceful expression he always had after they made love. He cracked an eye open and pulled her to him. She snuggled in and soon, the two drifted off to sleep.

Hermione smiled fondly as she recalled that night. Sighing, she looked at her lists once again. At the sound of muted voices in the entry, she tucked the lists into her pocket and fixed a welcoming smile on her face. Peeves entered the room to announce her first caller, "Lord and Lady Weasley, Mr. Ron Weasley, and Miss Ginny Weasley."

Hermione nodded and rose as the Weasley family walked past Peeves. "Arthur, Molly, how nice to see you again. Please, make yourselves comfortable," she said as she gave everyone a warm hug in greeting.

"Hermione, I have heard many wonderful things about your new house. I heard you have a fascinating collection of snuffboxes," Arthur said.

Hermione laughed fondly. His enthusiasm for something as mundane as snuffboxes reminded her of the other Arthur Weasley, the one who loved all things Muggle. "I have scattered many family heirlooms throughout the house. It was actually the passion of Severus' grandmother. If you and Ron would like to wait until Severus joins us, I am sure he would enjoy showing them to you."

"Of course, that would be fine," Arthur answered. Turning toward his son, he continued, "Ron, perhaps you and I could enjoy a quick game of chess while we wait. That way the ladies would be free to talk about fashion or shoes, or whatever it is they find so fascinating."

"Really, it wouldn't do either of you any harm to visit like the rest of us civilized people," Molly said in her no nonsense tone of voice. "Hermione, you look wonderful. I am glad that marriage seems to be suiting you."

"Thank you. Would you like some tea?" Hermione said, gesturing to the waiting tea pot. She poured cups of tea for Arthur and Molly as everyone seated themselves.

"I must say, this house is definitely more welcoming than Lady Sibyll's," Molly stated.

"Oh? I wasn't aware you had visited with her. How is she?" Hermione asked in surprise.

"She had a small house warming reception last week. It was supposed to be close friends and family, but I just don't see how seventy-five people could be considered close," Molly mused.

Hermione had never heard of the party and wondered briefly why they had not been invited. However, not being particularly fond of the Fudges, she decided that she didn't really care and shrugged aside the slight feeling of disappointment.

"She told us that she didn't want people to think you were competing with her and that she was sure that your home would be perfectly **adequate** for entertaining when you felt up to the challenge," Ginny chimed in.

Hermione felt her temper start to rise. She quickly started counting to ten, until she heard Ginny continue, "Of course, she also made no secret that she is expecting. She wore the most beautiful, peacock blue, satin gown I have ever seen. The waist was high, but of course she had to wear the dress tightly enough that it was practically scandalous."

"What?" Hermione asked in shock.

"Yes, dear. You heard correctly, Sibyll is expecting. It is positively indecent considering that she has been married for only a couple of months," Molly fumed. She firmly believed that expecting women should be more circumspect in their activities during that time.

"I am happy for them. It seems she is becoming a very respectable figure in society," Hermione said softly. She looked up in surprise when Peeves entered the room again.

"Lord Lucius and Lady Narcissa and Lord Draco," he announced.

Hermione barely heard everyone greet each other. She was too wrapped up in her shock and surprise. She knew that Sibyll felt some sort of competition with her, but she wasn't quite sure why.

"Hermione, are you feeling all right?" Narcissa asked her daughter. She really didn't remember a time when Hermione seemed so absent-minded. She hoped she was not coming down with anything, the Season was proving to be rather entertaining this year.

"Yes, Mother. I am fine," she said. She shook her head lightly and filed her concerns away for later.

"It is good to see you have a full parlor, considering this is the first week you have entertained in your new house," Lucius said warmly. "Arthur, is this your first visit?"

"Yes, although Molly and Ginny have been here a couple of times already," Arthur said as he and Lucius shook hands.

Pretty soon, the men were gathered around the chessboard discussing hunting and gossip from their clubs. The ladies remained seated around the tea pot, discussing more weighty issues.

"Mother, did you get invited to Lady Sibyll's house party also?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, darling, I did. I must agree with Molly in that it was a total disgrace. Your father and I left early. That place looked cheap and garish. Whoever would pair mauve and crimson in the same room?" Narcissa shuddered delicately in distaste. Hermione softly snorted as she remembered the colors her mother had chosen for her riding habits.

"Hermione, why didn't you and Severus attend the reception?" Ginny asked curiously.

Hermione had opened her mouth to answer, then, closed it in embarrassment. She didn't want to admit that she had never received an invitation from Lady Sibyll. *How utterly annoying to be the only one not invited*, she thought. *How even more disgusting to find that I actually care about that*

"I am afraid that I am at fault for that," she heard a deep voice answer behind her. Turning, she saw Severus standing behind her chair. She smiled warmly at the brief kiss he placed at her temple in greeting.

"I had forgotten to mention it to her. Thankfully I had not penned a response; hence, they were not expecting us. We had gotten involved in a discussion in the library right after I had received the invitation," he said.

Hermione blushed as she recalled exactly what they had been discussing and where that discussion had ended. The amused looks she was receiving from the other ladies made her decide that she did not mind missing the party after all. "Severus, I had told Arthur that you would show him around. He was interested in examining your collection of snuffboxes. I'll arrange for a light luncheon outside when you are done," Hermione said.

Severus nodded and went to join the men gathered around the chess table. He was glad that Hermione had settled into the role of wife so smoothly and quickly. He smirked when he thought about how well the physical aspects of their marriage were going. Mentally patting himself on the back, he felt confident that if things continued as to go as well in the marriage bed, it wouldn't be long before she fell in love with him. He even admitted to himself that he was extremely fond of her by now.

"Severus, I just want to tell you how much I admire your choice in a new home," Arthur's greeting jarred him out of his private musings.

"Thank you. Hermione said you were interested in seeing some of the antiques, especially my grandmother's collection of snuffboxes, around the house," Severus said.

"Yes, yes, of course. No hurry, old chap," Arthur said warmly.

"Ron and Arthur are just finishing their chess game. Sit and relax a bit," Lucius added from where he was observing the game in progress.

Severus could see that Arthur would win within the next couple of moves, so he remained standing.

"Have you been to any of the clubs lately, Severus?" Draco asked, slightly hesitant.

"No, I have been particularly tied up in various sessions at Parliament. Between that and meetings with my accountants, I haven't even had time to attend many of the social functions with Hermione," he said.

"Really? Then I suppose you have not heard the latest gossip circulating about you," Lucius said softly.

"I doubt it can be anything interesting, bearing in mind I have just returned from my honeymoon and am now setting up house," Severus returned dryly.

"Don't be too sure of that Severus," Arthur commented. "Your social position and the recent addition of a lovely, young wife make for plenty of speculation."

"You bunch are starting to sound like the women," Severus mocked.

"Actually, Severus, you might want to pay heed to this latest. We don't even know where it originated," Lucius lightly warned.

"Well, speak. It appears all of you want me to know," Severus snapped.

The ensemble of men looked nervously at each other for a moment before Ron broke the silence. "You aren't still dallying with Lady Sibyll, are you?"

Severus just glared at the young man.

"Well," he said, clearing his throat, "it appears that Fudge has been letting it be known throughout the ton just how 'fertile' he is with his new wife."

Severus continued scowling at Ron. "I fail to see why I should be concerned."

"She was once your mistress. How long has it been since you called it off with her?" asked Draco.

"Definitely longer than two months, I can assure you," Severus said. He was getting frustrated that his own friends were questioning his fidelity to his wife.

"Hmmm, the boys have a point, Severus," Lucius spoke from his chair. "She must be closer to three months. If I recall, the Fudge line isn't as 'fertile' as he claims. I doubt he would announce his good fortune at the club unless he was positive."

"I broke things off with her before I got married. I had not been sleeping with that woman for longer than that," came the biting reply.

"Well, that is good to hear. I would hate to see Hermione hurt," Arthur said. "Come, Severus, show me the rest of this house."

Severus nodded his head and the subject was closed. He ushered his guests out into the entry hall and began the impromptu tour.

An hour later, everyone was gathered around the table in the garden. Hermione had shown Molly and Ginny around, and all agreed that the house was comfortable, yet tastefully elegant.

"Hermione, your father and I have to make our good-byes for now. We promised to have tea with the Longbottoms," Narcissa said as she kissed her daughter.

"Of course. Please, come see me anytime you wish," Hermione answered as she walked with her parents to the entry hall.

"Draco, are you joining us?" Lucius asked his son.

"I believe that I will go riding in the Park with Ron and Ginny," Draco said as he and Ginny joined the others.

Narcissa blinked once and smiled. "Very well. We will see you at home then."

Arthur and Molly also made their excuses, and soon, the house was quiet. Severus turned towards his wife and was just about to suggest going for a ride themselves, when another couple came to pay their respects.

"Severus! Hermione! So glad to catch you at home," Cornelius said as he came through the door. He handed his hat to Peeves as his wife entered ahead of him.

"Lord Cornelius, Lady Sibyll, welcome. Why don't we go into the parlor?" Hermione said in greeting. She had been hoping to spend some time together with her husband, but polite society dictated that she continue to receive visitors for a while longer yet.

"I just insisted that we come see your lovely new home. I have heard so much about it!" Sibyll gushed. She looked around the room, her sharp gaze missing nothing.

"Thank you. It has been fun decorating," Hermione said quietly.

"Yes, I am still adding the finishing touches to my own home. I, myself, prefer the lighter woods. They don't make the rooms seem as oppressive and musty feeling," Sibyll continued.

Hermione bit the side of her mouth lightly. "Severus prefers the darker wood, and Lady Minerva agreed that it makes a room warmer and isn't as garish as the lighter woods," she simply said.

Sibyll just nodded, her eyes narrowed a fraction. "Of course, Severus always had good taste," she purred.

"Come, my dear. I must agree that I too have said many a time how much I enjoy the solid, traditional look," Cornelius said jovially.

"Of course you have, darling," Sibyll said to her husband.

As nobody was in the mood for tea, they wandered out to the garden. The spring weather was warm and inviting. Of course, Lady Sibyll had to make some comment about the state of Hermione's flowerbeds.

"What exactly are you going to have out here, my dear?" she simpered.

"I have instructed the gardeners to plant some flowering shrubs by the walkways and put something bright and cheerful in all of the beds. A nice mix of roses, tulips, peonies, and so forth," Hermione said happily.

"You are leaving that to the gardeners to decide?" Sibyll asked with a slight trace of horror in her voice. "Do you really think that wise? What happens if they put something ghastly in there that you don't like or are allergic to?"

"Why would they do that?" Hermione asked, perplexed. "We are having a couple of gardeners from the estate come in to supervise the planting. I have complete confidence in them and respect whatever choices they make."

"If you think that is best," Sibyll said. The tone of her voice left no doubt that she considered that idea foreign and laughable.

Severus took his wife's hand and laid it on his arm. He could see that she had clenched them into fists and did not want her to say something she would regret. He did not agree with Lady Sibyll any more than she, and wanted to offer her some show of support, even if it was silent. He was rewarded with a small smile of appreciation from Hermione. "My wife knows my tastes, and I trust her implicitly," Severus said in a firm voice as he led the small group back towards the parlor. *Where did that come from?* he asked himself. Then he gave a small mental shrug as he discovered that he actually did trust Hermione's judgment.

"Would you like a brandy, Cornelius? Maybe the ladies would care for a glass of sherry?" Severus asked.

"Thank you, that would be fine," Cornelius said, only to be interrupted by Sibyll's excited voice.

"Do you have any champagne? Since you are now close family, I just can't wait to share the good news," she trilled.

Hermione and Severus looked at each other and then pasted polite smiles of expectation on their faces. A quick look at Lord Cornelius showed him grinning from ear to ear. Severus nodded and called Peeves to bring in a bottle. Once everyone had a glass in hand, Lady Sibyll announced, "It appears that Lord Cornelius and I are going to become parents! My predicted date is around the holidays!" She raised her glass in triumph but didn't drink.

"Congratulations, Sibyll! Cornelius, you must be most pleased," Severus said.

"Yes, we are quite excited. Did you realize, Severus, my boy, that if you decide not to have children, and if Harry is not blessed with any, my son will be your successor?" Cornelius said, slapping Severus on the back.

Hermione choked on her small sip of champagne. She covered it by pretending to sneeze. She had seen the wince of pain on her husband's face at that announcement. She set her unfinished glass down on the table.

"Oh my! I do hope you are not catching a cold, my dear?!" Sibyll simpered to Hermione. "I believe we will have to make our good-byes, as I don't think I should be exposed to any illnesses," she said. Sibyll sailed towards the front door with her husband following in her wake.

"Of course not. I do hope you will come and visit again," Hermione said as the Fudge coach pulled out of the driveway. Under her breath, she muttered, "Hopefully not too soon." She just smiled politely as Severus gave her a long look in question.

"I think I have had enough calls today, Severus. Please, take me for a ride in the carriage?" Hermione softly implored.

Severus looked at his wife and could see she looked a little tired. Not that he blamed her, even he was a little dazed at the whirlwind visit of his ex-mistress and his cousin.

"I'll have the driver hitch up the team and meet you down here in a few minutes," he said. He could tell something was bothering her, but he didn't know exactly what, and he didn't want to make a blunder and presume to guess. He had learned that one did not give Hermione any ammunition to bring up in present or future arguments. His wife had a mind like Devil's Snare.

"Much better," Hermione sighed in contentment as they rolled through the park. The fresh air and warm sun on her skin made her feel drowsy and relaxed.

Severus agreed as he sat beside his wife. She was snuggled next to him with the most peaceful expression he had seen on her face in a while. "I have to agree. It is pleasant to be able to forget one's problems for a bit."

"Speaking of which," she started, "I have been thinking about our situation some more. Stop it," she said when she heard his soft groan. "I have thus discovered a couple of things."

"And I am sure that you are going to enlighten me whether I want to hear them or not," he said dryly.

"Of course. But, I am sure you have reached many of the same conclusions," she said. "First, I have noticed that no matter how hard I concentrate, I can not do any magic." At Severus' nod, she continued, "Second, I have noticed that you and I are growing more comfortable and affectionate towards each other. Whether this is because of the story's course or because we are actually starting to 'like' each other, I am not sure."

Severus scowled and muttered softly to himself. Hermione giggled and continued, "Third, at the rate of our growing 'affection' for each other, we should be in love by the holidays." Here she stopped as her husband had issued a rather indelicate snort.

"Hermione, I don't think you can predict the exact moment a person falls in love," he said.

"Of course not," she said practically. "However, it does give us a general idea of when this adventure might be coming to a close."

"Aren't you forgetting the other stipulation?" he asked quietly.

"No. Not at all. That is the fourth reason I predict around the holidays," she declared rather quickly.

Severus looked at her sharply. "Don't you go around thinking that too! It is bad enough that everyone else is wondering who the father is!" he raged.

Hermione looked blankly at him. "What are you talking about?"

"That harridan, Lady Sibyll. I promise you that there is no way that her child could be mine. It has got to be her husband's or some other unfortunate wretch's," he fumed.

Hermione smiled and shook her head. "Severus, I am aware of that. You told me a while ago that you were no longer seeing her. I believe you. I am talking about your child. The one that I predict will be born around the holidays also."

"Well, that is better," he huffed. He was slightly placated that she, at least, believed him.

The rest of the ride home was rather silent as the two were wrapped in their private thoughts. It wasn't until the carriage had pulled up to the door that Hermione heard a choked gasp. Turning, she looked back at the carriage to see Severus hanging onto the carriage door for dear life.

"Severus, what is the matter?" she asked, afraid he was going to be sick.

"Did I hear you correctly?" he asked.

She smiled. "Yes, you did. I said that I believed you. That wasn't too hard, was it?"

"No! Silly girl! About a baby at the holidays?"

This time she started grinning. "Yes, you heard me correctly. I was wondering how long it would take to sink in," she said, laughing at the stunned expression on his face.

"Ungrateful baggage," he said as he scooped his wife into his arms and carried her up the stairs. The coachman laughed as the door closed, sure that he had never seen his lordship this happy.

Author's Notes: A million thanks to the readers! This one took a bit longer than I imagined. I also want to introduce White Dragon. She has joined Tinnidawg as my second beta! A million thanks to Tinnidawg and White Dragon, without them, it would take even longer for me to update!

Chapter 15 - I Have An Announcement

Chapter 15 of 18

Time to tell the parents the happy news.

Chapter 15 I Have an Announcement

It was a week before Severus and Hermione shared the happy news with their families. Not because they were so happy that they wanted to keep it to themselves, it was due to Hermione's suffering from severe morning sickness. She would have been ecstatic if it had been confined to the mornings, but she was ill almost the entire week. "I don't understand how it can be called morning sickness if one suffers it from the time they wake up until an hour before they go to bed," she complained at one point. Severus wisely remained quiet and handed her a cool rag.

By the start of the next week, her symptoms had disappeared and she felt full of energy. She decided that the whole house was in need of a late spring cleaning. She had everyone out of bed at the crack of dawn, scrubbing walls, beating carpets and dusting anything that could possibly collect dust. Unfortunately for Severus, he was automatically drafted into her cleaning brigade. "I am not getting out of this bed," he grumbled.

"Severus, I want all of the linens washed and ironed today. Either you get out of the bed now or I will make you wash the linens when you can motivate yourself to rise," Hermione commanded from the foot of the bed.

Severus cracked an eye open and looked at his wife. *She looks so delicate and sweet in that shade of rose* he thought to himself. *Who would have thought she could be so bossy.* "Fine, I am awake," he grumbled. He hauled himself into a sitting position, grabbed his robe from the foot of the bed and shuffled over to the comfortable sofa across the room.

"Where do you think you are going?" Hermione demanded.

Severus turned his head and saw his beautiful wife glaring at him, her hands on her hips. He could not imagine how anyone could be so alert without at least two cups of strong tea this early in the morning. "I am getting out of bed so you can wash the linens," he patiently explained.

"No, you're not," she stated.

"Pardon?" Severus was certain that he had misheard her.

"I said, **no, you're not!**" she repeated.

"Fine, then you tell me where I may sleep," he said in exasperation.

"You are not going back to sleep. You are going to get dressed and help me pick out what we are going to need for the nursery. We are going to my parents this morning and tell them of our wonderful news. Then we are going to the tailor's for a few items you need and the dressmaker for myself. After that, we are going to your mother's for tea and inform her of our surprise. Tonight, we are going to the opera. You don't have time to finish your sleeping," Hermione stated in a no nonsense voice.

"Are you sure you are not channeling Molly Weasley?" he asked grumpily. At her irate look he continued, "Is it possible that some of this could be done on another day? It isn't like the baby is coming tomorrow." He could feel the start of a tension headache nudging into his conscious.

"No, it can't wait. I currently feel very energetic and am able to go through an entire day without feeling sick. I want the plans started on the nursery decorating before my mother can take over and surprise us with a green and pink room, or what ever color she decides is fashionable."

At that, Severus shivered with a sudden chill of horror. He changed his direction and headed for his wardrobe. "Give me half an hour," he said as he started pulling out clothes. He looked around when he heard a soft click and breathed a sigh of relief that Hermione had left the room. He would have crawled back into bed had he been certain that Hermione wasn't timing him. He grumbled to himself about pushy females but secretly, he was actually starting to get excited about sharing the news of the baby with other people.

Later that morning, Severus found himself seated in Lady Malfoy's drawing room. *At least I got to eat breakfast* he grumbled to himself. He hated to be rushed, but in this case, it was easier just to let Hermione dictate the day.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of your company this morning?" ask Lucius as he entered the room.

"Good morning, father. Isn't it enough that we just wanted to see you?" Hermione said as she gave her father a kiss on the cheek.

"My darling, little girl. No. You rarely come unannounced. Is something the matter?" he responded as he hugged his daughter. He narrowed his eyes as Severus.

Severus groaned. The last thing he wanted was an argument this early in the morning. "Nothing is wrong. Your daughter got me out of bed at an indecent hour and dragged me over here," he grumbled. He turned and glared at his wife when he felt a soft kick on his ankle. He was startled to see she was looking pointedly at him. "What?" he silently mouthed.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Sometimes, she couldn't believe how obtuse her husband could be.

"Hermione, darling, I hope you don't roll your eyes like that in public. It isn't very attractive or lady-like," Narcissa admonished.

"Yes, Mother," Hermione said, only a slight hint of sarcasm was in her voice. She turned towards Severus and quietly hissed, "Tell them."

Severus leaned forward and under the pretense of kissing his wife's cheek, growled back, "I thought you wanted to tell them. After all, it is you who was so anxious." When he saw her eyes narrow he sighed. He knew when to give in. He stood and gently cleared his throat. *She owes me for this*, he fumed. "Mother. Father." He almost choked on these words as his in-laws were almost the same age as himself. "The reason we came this early was... we..." Severus faltered. He wasn't embarrassed, he just didn't know how Lucius was going to receive the news. He did a quick check to make sure he had an escape route, in case Lucius took the news badly.

"What Severus is so elegantly trying to say, is that you are going to become grandparents this winter!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Oh, my darling!" Narcissa cried as she enveloped Hermione in a warm hug. "How wonderful!"

Lucius stared through narrow eyes at his friend for a moment. He knew that they were married and that his daughter was happy, but still, the thought of that man with his hands on his precious little girl made him uncomfortable. He shook his head at the sound of Narcissa's voice calling him over. "Of course! How exciting. I hope you are taking good care of yourself and being careful not to overdo anything," he gently said.

"I am feeling fine," Hermione said happily.

"Severus." Lucius turned towards his friend. "I am happy beyond words. However, should she become the least bit upset, you will be answering to me," he said, the unspoken threat unmistakable.

"Of course. Thank you for the warm words," Severus said. He could understand the fatherly concern, but really, he hadn't done anything wrong. He looked over at his wife, still talking happily with her mother and smiled. *Yes, married life is definitely not that bad*, he thought.

Hermione felt someone's eyes on her. When she looked up, she was surprised to see Severus smiling at her. Happily, she smiled back and walked over to join him. "We wanted you to be the first to hear our news. We are going to Lady Minerva's for supper and will tell Severus's family then."

"What news?" came a voice at the door.

"Oh! Draco, do come in! Your sister and Severus are expecting!" Narcissa trilled.

"Mother, please. I haven't had lunch yet," Draco said with a pained expression. "I didn't really need to hear that."

"Draco. You will go and congratulate your sister," Lucius commanded softly.

"Don't get me wrong, I am happy for you two," Draco said as he hugged his sister and shook Severus's hand. "I am just amazed that someone would want to spend that much time with my sister. So, we are going to have a miniature Draco running around, huh?" he said as he seated himself elegantly on the sofa.

"A what?" Severus asked. "What have you been doing?"

"No, not me! Yours."

"Draco, why would we name the baby after you?" Hermione asked in confusion. "Normally, the first born would be named after the father, if anyone."

"My dear, Hermne. Why wouldn't you want to name him after the most handsome person you know? Most sought after bachelor. The one you have looked up to all of your life. Sorry, old chap," Draco said to Severus.

"Enough, children!" Lucius smoothly interrupted. "Draco, you and I are expected at our Solicitor's and we also have a couple of other business matters to attend to. Severus, I leave you and Hermione to do whatever you have planned. Narcissa, my pet, I will see you tonight," he stated as he gave his wife a tender kiss.

"That is fine, darling. Hermione, what are your plans for the rest of the day?" Narcissa asked.

"Severus is going to his tailor's and I thought I should get something special to wear for the ball I am going to host."

"Wonderful! I will also need a new gown. Lucius and Draco can drop Severus off on their way and we can go to the dressmaker's together. You don't mind, do you?" Narcissa asked sweetly.

"Not at all," was the terse reply. Severus had actually been looking forward to spending the afternoon with Hermione, but decided it would be prudent to let his wife handle her mother alone.

Later that evening, the happy couple gathered in the dining hall at Lady Minerva's with the rest of the Snape family. As usual, this included more extended members of the family.

"Uncle Albus, I am so happy that you could join us," Hermione said as she gave the older gentleman a kiss on the cheek, and took her place beside him at the table.

"As am I, my dear, as am I. I must say, you are looking absolutely radiant," he said, smiling.

"Thank you, sir." Hermione chuckled to herself. She had been mildly shocked to see Albus in a rich fuchsia, velvet jacket. Of course, it was quite comical as her silk dress was the exact same shade. She was glad that her cream lace overdress toned down the rich jewel tone.

"So tell me, my dear, how did your day go? I heard that you spent the afternoon at the dressmaker's with your mother?" Lady Minerva asked.

"Quite well. Mother made her 'recommendations' and I gave my opinion. Either mother is getting bored with this game or I am getting better at persuasion as it only took us three hours to agree on our gowns for the party instead of five."

"I commend you, my dear. Your mother informed me of these contests of wills and I must agree, you have made wonderful progress."

"Do you mean to tell me, that you spent three hours at the dressmaker's?" Severus asked in disbelief.

"Yes."

"I thought you were joking when you told me earlier. And to think I almost ended up escorting you two," he said rather weakly. He could feel the blood drain from his face at the mere thought of spending so much time at the dressmaker's.

"Why do you think I sent you with father and Draco?" Hermione asked. Noting her husband's pale face, she said quickly, "Please, take a sip of wine. Breathe deeply. Don't you dare faint."

"I do not faint," he growled.

"That's better," she said with a satisfied look on her face. "Of course you don't, dear."

"How goes it with the decorating, Hermione?" asked Ron.

"Wonderfully. Severus ordered some new furniture earlier today," she answered.

"Really? For which room, Sev?" asked Harry. His curiosity rose as he noticed Severus glance at Hermione and she gave a small nod. "Well? Wait, don't tell me. Let me guess. You are decorating a nursery!" he exclaimed and burst into laughter at the stunned faces of his brother and sister-in-law.

"How did you know?" Hermione asked in a small voice.

"I'm sorry. I was just making a joke. Please, go ahead and tell," Harry said, wiping a stray tear from his eye.

"You already told for us, brother," Severus said darkly.

"What?" Harry stopped laughing.

"Hermione and I are expecting a child sometime around the holidays," Severus said.

"Wow! That is wonderful. Congratulations!" Ron said.

"I am very happy for you," Luna said shyly from her place beside Ron.

"Thank you, Luna." Hermione smiled at the pretty girl with large blue eyes.

Severus looked fondly at his wife. He then looked towards his mother. Minerva was sitting in her chair with her hands clasped together at her bosom. She had tears in her eyes and was smiling happily at him. He gravely inclined his head and smiled shyly.

Hermione looked up and saw the brief exchange. She felt tears prick her own eyes to see that same smile turned towards herself.

"Severus. You have made me very happy today. I have longed for you to settle down. Words can't describe how I feel to see you happily married and with my grandchild on the way. Hermione, I feel as if you were my own true daughter. Thank you for this precious gift and for making my son such a wonderful wife."

"I believe a toast to Severus and Hermione are in order," said Albus. He rose with his glass of wine in hand while the rest of the family followed suit. Hermione raised her glass of lemonade. "May the child of Severus and Hermione lead a most blessed life. May he, or she, have good health and the love of its parents forever." Everyone took a sip with smiles and laughter.

Nobody noticed the slight frown that fleetingly crossed Harry's face before he took a sip of his wine. Deciding things were becoming too sentimental, Harry spoke up. "I think that now would be an excellent time for some music. I believe that Miss Lovegood is an accomplished pianist." He raised his brow in question and smiled when Luna nodded her ascent.

Everyone filed out of the dining room and gathered in the salon. Ron stood by the piano to turn pages while Luna seated herself upon the stool. Albus and Minerva settled on the small divan and Hermione sat next to them with Severus standing behind her. Harry took the chair on the other side of the Albus.

"What exactly is wrong with Luna's playing?" Severus asked quietly. He remembered Hermione and Draco discussing Luna's recital in the past.

"Oh, nothing. Her playing is wonderful."

"Then why was Draco sporting a headache afterwards?" Severus asked. Something just didn't make sense.

"Shhh. Just listen. You will understand," Hermione hushed him. She smiled as she felt his hand rest on her shoulder. The gentle strains of the music soothed her.

Everyone politely applauded as the first piece finished. Then Luna started playing a soft aria. This would have been fine, had Luna not started singing. Hermione winced as Severus's hand tightened involuntarily. Whether this was from the pressure of his hand or the screechy voice, she could not honestly answer.

"My gods! You could have warned me that the girl had a tortured cat stuck in her throat," Severus hissed in his wife's ear.

"Now where would be the fun in that? To truly appreciate her voice, it must be experienced without an opinion to cloud your judgment," Hermione giggled back.

Finally, the song ended. Before Luna could start another piece, Minerva stood and walked to the young girl. "Thank you, dear. That was most entertaining. If you forgive an overly fond mother, I haven't heard my son play in a very long time. Would you allow Severus to play for a bit?"

"Of course, Lady Minerva. I was not aware that he played. I look forward to hearing him," Luna said warmly. She was touched by Minerva's request and being blessed with absolute ignorance about her singing voice, she was not in the least offended by having played only two pieces.

"Severus? Would you mind? For your mother?" Minerva asked politely. Her eyes pleading with her son to accept her request.

"Of course, Mother," he replied. "Anything to keep that girl from singing," he muttered under his breath.

Hermione was astonished. She had no idea that Severus could play. In their many conversations, he had never once mentioned this talent. She was further shocked to hear how talented he really was. She tucked this piece of information back in her mind. *One never knows when this might come in handy*, she thought to herself. Visions of him playing to their sleeping child someday, or even to her after a stressful day brought a happy smile to her lips, one that remained for the rest of the evening.

All too soon, the evening came to a close. Hermione tiredly climbed into the carriage and snuggled tightly against her husband. The gentle movement of the carriage and his even breathing lulled her to sleep. Ron escorted Miss Lovegood home while Harry went to his club and Minerva enjoyed a late night gossip with Albus.

Author's Notes: I apologize for the delay in posting this chapter. Real life was not kind. Things should hopefully get back on track. A million thanks to my two awesome betas: Tinnidawg and White Dragon!

Chapter 16: What a Party!

Chapter 16 of 18

Hermione's first ball and what comes of it.

Chapter 16: What a Party!

Hermione sat at her desk sorting through the responses for her upcoming ball. She was pleased that the majority of people she had invited had accepted the invitation. Severus had helped with the guest list to ensure that friends on his side of the family were included. She sighed when she read the acceptance from Mr. and Mrs. Fudge. Inviting those two had sparked a rather large debate, unfortunately, Hermione's argument that they were still family had settled the matter.

"Well, my dear, do you have the final count?" Severus asked as he walked into the room.

"Yes. It appears that there will be 150 attending. I can't believe that we know that many people. Of course, some are family, but still, if everyone had accepted, it would have been about 200 people," she mused.

"They just want to see who ensnared the most desirable bachelor of the Season," he said as he kissed her temple.

"Who wants to see me?" a voice drawled from the door.

"Nobody," shot back Severus.

"Draco, what are you doing here?" Hermione asked, walking over to greet her brother.

"Greetings to you too, dear sister," Draco said as he stooped to kiss her offered cheek.

"Of course I am ecstatic to see you," Hermione said, "but I thought you and Severus weren't going to your club until later."

"We are going later. Mother wanted me to ask you what color the linens were so that her dress wouldn't clash with anything," he said, rolling his eyes.

"Oh, I forgot to send her a sample of the table linens. I will get Peeves to send a sample later this afternoon. If you see her before then, tell her they are egg-shell beige."

"Egg. I can remember that," Draco said. "I am off to the park. Severus, old chap, I will see you later."

"Park? Have you decided to find an accommodating dowager?" Severus asked, quirked his eyebrow in amusement.

"Hardly," Draco laughed. "I promised Ginny that I would meet her for a ride. Charming girl. She is just the right height and always seems to wear colors that compliment my own attire."

"Draco! You can't mean to say that you are spending so much time with Ginny just because she makes you look good!" Hermione gasped in outrage. "If you dare trifle with my friend's emotions, I promise to make you regret ever saying that!"

"Now, dear, dear sister. I am not totally without some feeling. I like Ginny. She is a very nice person."

"Nice? You dare describe her as nice?" Hermione was getting very ruffled. "I know what 'nice' means."

"Draco, if you have any hopes of getting out of here unscathed, I suggest you take your leave now," Severus said. A hint of laughter in his voice caused Hermione to narrow her eyes at her husband. "Don't look at me like that, my pet. I know that Ginny is a very intelligent and sensitive girl. I believe her to be more than 'nice.'" He chuckled inwardly at the visible relaxing of Hermione's shoulders.

"Of course, whatever you say. Good-bye, sister dear," Draco said as he attempted to kiss his sister's cheek.

Hermione turned her head at the last moment, and Draco ended up bumping his nose on the back of her head. Rubbing the offended feature, he shook hands with Severus and strolled out of the door.

"Severus, do you think Draco is just being friendly with Ginny, or do you think he has actually started caring for her?" Hermione asked quietly.

"I am not sure. He has never really been in a rush to get settled. Why do you ask?"

"I don't want to see Ginny get hurt," Hermione said, concern for her friend evident in her voice.

"Am I to assume that she has some feeling for your brother?"

"I believe so. He has escorted her to a couple of balls and a musical this Season, and one of our discussions did involve him."

"Well, don't let him know that you are trying to match him up with her. You will just end up scaring him in the opposite direction."

"What do you mean push?"

"Hermione, I know you. A gentle nudge in the right direction from you is like a shove down a steep hill," he laughed. "Don't worry, if it were our mothers giving hints, the banns would already be in the papers."

"Don't you have something else you should be doing?" Hermione grumbled.

"Yes. I will be back later to dine with you before heading out with your unfeeling brother," he chuckled. He went over to her desk and gave her a light kiss before going out the door.

Hermione sighed and went back to the multiple plans she had for her party. She wanted to finalize the menu with her cook. She wanted her table to be above reproach. She had Cook's assurance that only the freshest ingredients would be used. The only things left were the seating arrangements and approving the flowers.

"Hermione, darling! I am so glad I caught you at home. I had to come and discuss the color you chose for your linens. Are you sure it will be a good color? It won't match your dress at all. Oh, you changed the color of your gown, didn't you? I thought we had decided on that beautiful teal color. Do you have any idea how difficult it will be for me to get a new gown made up in time for your party?" Narcissa said as she rushed in an hour later.

"What are you talking about? Didn't you see Draco? I told him to tell you the color of linens, and I was going to send a sample later this afternoon," Hermione said in confusion.

"Draco said your linens were to be egg yellow. It will clash horribly with my gown." Narcissa wrung her hands in despair. She knew her seamstress would not be able to get anything new made in time, especially since all of her friends ordered new gowns for her daughter's ball.

"Mother, calm down! I told Draco that they are egg-shell beige. Obviously, he didn't pay attention to what I was telling him. Your gown will be fine. I didn't change my gown either," Hermione said. She was going to kill Draco when she next saw him. She was sure that he purposely told Narcissa the wrong color. He was too fastidious about his clothing to confuse colors.

"Oh, well in that case, never mind. Do you have everything planned? Did you need any help?"

"No, I only have the flowers and seating arrangements to finish. Peeves will order my flowers tomorrow, and in two days, I will host my first **ball!**" Hermione exclaimed. She couldn't believe that she was getting so excited; being the center of attention was never something that she craved.

"In that case, I'll take my leave. I will see you tomorrow and be over early on Friday to help you with last minute preparations," Narcissa said as she left Hermione. She had the linen sample tucked safely in her reticule.

By the time breakfast was over on Friday, Severus couldn't wait to get to the relative safety of his mother's house. Hermione was demanding that the servants move the floral arrangements every ten minutes, trying to find the perfect arrangement. Draco and Lucius had fled with Severus after they had been yelled at for getting in the servants' way. Ginny was following the hostess around with paper and pencil, trying to make sure everything on the list was checked off. The hostess rushed around the house, frantic that she might have missed some minute detail.

"Hermione, please. I have got to sit down and have a cup of tea. Besides, all of this rushing upstairs and then back down can't be good for you. Why don't you just let Peeves supervise the servants and you go upstairs and relax until dinner?" Ginny begged.

"Oh, fine. Ring for tea. I have Peeves double checking the china and making sure the rooms are ready for guests. Besides, I need to keep busy. If I could get away with it, I would be in the kitchen. I must let Peeves know that these chairs need to be pushed back a little further. Where did my father and Draco go?" Hermione grumbled, dropping into a chair. She was loath to admit it, but she was tired and needed to catch her breath. Pregnancy was putting certain limits on her energy and **that** she didn't like.

"They left about an hour ago with your husband. They said something about important business and that they would be back tonight," Ginny said. She wasn't going to tell Hermione that they had said she was bossy and that they weren't going to return until it was time to enjoy the party.

"Did you make that note for Peeves about the chairs? Is there anything that I have forgotten?"

"Yes, you forgot to inform me that you were having tea," Narcissa commented from the doorway.

"I am sorry, Mother. Please, join us for tea."

"Thank you, my dear. After this, you will rest while Ginny and I go to my house and get ready for tonight. You have everything organized pretty well. It is wonderful that you are able to throw your first and last ball before you have to go withdraw from the Season," Narcissa said with satisfaction.

"I feel fine," she started to say. The look her mother shot her made her say, meekly, "Well, maybe I will lay down for a few minutes. I do want to be fresh for tonight."

"There's a dear. Ginny, why don't we stop at your house afterwards and pick up your gown? You can get ready at our house, and then we can all come together," Narcissa said as she led Ginny into the hall after tea.

Hermione shook her head, wondering what her mother was up to. She went up the stairs and lay on her bed. She decided she just needed a few seconds rest and then would be ready to help them. A few seconds later, however, found her sound asleep.

"Hermione," Severus said a couple of hours later. "Are you sure that you should wear something that revealing?"

"What do you mean? Mother helped me select this and she always has impeccable taste." Hermione stood before her mirror, turning this way and that as her maid helped her pull on a thin linen chemise.

"Well, that," he grumbled, waving his hand in her general direction. "And, that." Another hand wave. "And, then that."

"Severus, 'that' is not a very descriptive word," Hermione said primly. "I am guessing by the first that, you are trying to point out my breasts. The second that, means my figure? I am a little confused what the third that is."

"I don't remember your chest being so... voluptuous," he said uncomfortably.

"Severus, I am pregnant. 'That' is normal. Enjoy it while you can." She smiled as he blushed. "After the baby is born, it becomes a source of food." She laughed as he paled.

Hermione thanked her maid and dismissed her. Severus was always making the poor thing turn bright red by walking in and out of her dressing room, disregarding decorum. Her hair had been done earlier and an ivory ribbon was entwined amongst the ringlets. As punishment for embarrassing her maid, yet again, he would just have to help her finish dressing. Since he was so adept at getting her clothes off, he should be just as accomplished at getting them on.

"You do realize that I can see through your dress?" he complained after helping her into it... "If I can see, every other man can see also. And I don't share you with anyone."

"Again, dear husband, enjoy it while you can. This is my shift, not my gown. That wonderful silken confection hanging here is my dress. You do want me to be a credit to you, don't you? After all, a powerful man, such as you, needs someone who is admired by..."

"Which brings me to my third that. That silk thing is so thin. I will be able to see right through it." Severus laughed as Hermione spun around towards her evening gown.

"Oh!" she exclaimed and then started to giggle. "The shift provides enough cover. You haven't noticed my body showing before and you won't this time either. I'll show you," Hermione said as she handed him the gown. Thankfully, the gown was made to slip on easily, and she was so intent on straightening her shift that she started when Severus' hands cupped her full breasts.

"I think, my dear, that our guests will have to wait a few minutes," Severus murmured as he leaned down to kiss her. The sight of Hermione's thinly covered breasts had heated his blood, and without breaking the kiss, he lifted her in his arms and walked to the bed.

Hermione willingly wrapped her arms around his neck and deepened the kiss. She had discovered that pregnancy definitely made her feel more amorous. Almost an hour later, she stumbled from the bed.

"Severus, please finish getting ready! Mother will be here in a few minutes and I am not ready."

"Yes, Severus. Do go make yourself presentable. I can see that I have a lot to do," Narcissa said, sailing into the room. She chuckled to herself. No matter how

unconventional, she had insisted that she help her daughter get ready tonight. She didn't care if she had to chase Severus from his own bed. *The joys of being married to such a powerful man*, she thought happily. *No one would dream of saying anything against me*

"Woman, do you always just walk into a person's bedroom?" Severus glared.

"Yes. I do. Just ask anyone. Now, run along, there's a good boy," she cooed as Severus stormed through the door. "I can see how that happened, my dear," she said, waving at Hermione's gently swelling stomach. "Ginny, you can come in now. I will require your assistance."

Hermione sighed and sat at her dressing table. She smiled as Ginny entered with a slight blush on her face. She watched the younger girl pick up her dress and smooth the wrinkles as her cheeks cooled.

"Young lady, if you want to enjoy your husband, so be it. Just make sure it is two hours before any event so you have time to repair whatever damage occurs. Why, it took me half a season to figure that out. You may not know it now, but your father..."

"Mother! Please! The last thing I want to hear about is you and father," Hermione groaned. She had thought that women from this time period were supposed to be shy about such topics. Obviously, whoever thought that had not informed her mother. Of course, she herself wasn't too shocked, but she also came from a different time altogether.

"Really, how do you think you came about, dear," Narcissa laughed as Hermione blanched. "Oh, fine. Let's get your hair fixed and your gown on. No wonder your maid refused to come up here with us. We could hear you at the top of the stairs."

"Mother!" Hermione was mortified. "Ginny, is that true?" Her face turned bright crimson when her friend refused to meet her eyes and slowly nodded. She silently submitted to their ministrations and was soon ready.

Severus was just turning to remind Hermione of the first dance when Sibyll sailed up to them with her husband directly behind her. Severus raised a brow as he took in her attire. "Cornelius, I see you were able to make our gathering," he said by way of greeting.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world. Sibyll, here, made it a point of coming. Even had a new dress made up for the occasion," he said. Severus wasn't sure, but he thought he detected a bitter edge to Fudge's voice.

"Sibyll, what a wonderful color. It matches your skin perfectly," Hermione said, trying not to stare.

"Thank you, my dear. I wanted something special to help make your event memorable," Sibyll preened.

"Ginny, what do you think of Sibyll's gown? She wanted to make tonight special," Hermione said as she grabbed Ginny's arm.

"Oh," Ginny said. She felt her eyes grow round and was helpless to stop them. "It is the perfect skin color, I mean color for her skin," she finished lamely.

"Yes, I couldn't decide what color I liked more and so I just went with something I just knew would match," Sibyll said as she gently flicked her skirt.

"Umm, Hermione. I don't mean to interrupt, but I believe Harry was looking for us. I believe I saw him over by the window," Ginny said. She gently tugged on Hermione's hand as she started backing away.

"Of course, if you will excuse us," Hermione said.

Severus nodded politely, but Hermione was irritated that he didn't even look at her. She was more annoyed when she noticed who, or rather, what her husband was looking at.

"Can you believe that she wore that dress?" Ginny asked as soon as they were out of ear shot.

"No. Memorable my foot," Hermione fumed. She glanced back and was shocked that she could see Lady Sibyll's body outlined through her dress, even in the candle lit room.

"I don't know if you noticed, but if you looked closely, you could even see the outlines of her nipples," Ginny giggled.

Hermione whipped her head around to look at her friend, praying that it was a joke. The faint blush and highly amused expression on Ginny's face was evidence enough that she was telling the truth. *No wonder Severus wasn't looking at anyone else* she thought. "Well, I guess the only thing to do is just ignore her," Hermione said grimly. "Paying attention to her is obviously what she wants."

"Oh, I know that. I just think you should keep an eye on her because I believe it is your husband she is after," Ginny said as she dipped her head in Severus's direction.

Hermione glanced over and sighed. Lady Sibyll had her hand on her husband's arm and was leaning very close as she laughed up at him. Determined to enjoy her evening, she turned away. "You said that Harry was looking for us. Let us find him and see if we can at least have some fun. Where is Draco? Didn't you come with him?"

"He is currently playing a round of cards. I wanted to see who all were here first. Now, let's have some fun."

"Hermione! Ginny! My two favorite ladies," Harry said as they walked up to him. "Glad you found me. Draco said that Ginny is to wait with us and then we would like the first dance with you ladies." He tucked Hermione's hand into the crook of his elbow and rested his on top.

Hermione glanced back at her husband. She was supposed to dance the first set with Severus, but he seemed to be entirely unaware of the musicians tuning up. Sighing, she turned back towards her brother-in-law and smiled. "I would be delighted to open the ball with you."

Harry smiled and took her hand just as Draco sauntered up and claimed Ginny's hand. Hermione looked up in surprise as Harry pulled her close after the first couple of steps.

He smiled down at her. "It seems to be a bit crowded on the floor."

She glanced around. "You are correct. I trust you won't turn me into anybody."

"You are in good hands," he joked back. "So how are things going between you and my brother?"

"They are fine. We have the nursery furniture ordered and it will be delivered in time."

"Does he still see Sibyll?"

"What?" Hermione raised her brow in confusion.

"Well, I was just curious. They seem very friendly," Harry explained as he tipped his head in the direction of Severus and Sibyll.

Hermione narrowed her eyes for a brief second. Had Harry not been paying close attention, he would not have even noticed. He smiled.

"You do know about their past?"

"Yes, he did mention it. Why the sudden interest, Harry?" Hermione watched his face closely.

"Oh, nothing. It's just that..." Harry broke off uncertainly.

"No, you can tell me. What have you heard?" she asked in a tired voice.

"I don't want to cause you any distress, but I have heard a couple of things around the club. I think you should know what you are up against." He watched her pale a little. "It has been whispered that Sev is the father of Sibyll's baby, not Cornelius. I also had a private meeting with her a couple of days ago. She was distraught and needed a shoulder to cry on. She confessed to me that Sev only married you because of your family connections and that he was still in love with her. I am sorry, Hermione," he finished in a rush.

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to calm her thoughts. "Harry, why did she need to confess all of this to you? I do not believe that my husband is the father of her baby as he has been faithful to me since we have been married."

"How do you know that? Did he tell you? Do you trust him?"

"Yes. Harry, I do. Why would you believe her over him?"

"I am confused. She seemed so believable. If you believe him, then I do," Harry said quietly. "I would never doubt anything you say. If you ever feel you need anyone to talk to, though, I hope you will come to me?"

Hermione nodded quietly. She had much to think on but pushed it to the back of her mind. She was not going to let that woman ruin her first ball in her own home.

"Now, just enjoy the dance and let me lead." Harry grinned. He enjoyed dancing with her. He wasn't entirely concerned that she was his sister-in-law. Just because they were related by marriage didn't mean that she couldn't take him for a lover if she so chose. He was annoyed to feel a tap on his shoulder. Looking up, he saw his brother's dark eyes glaring at him. Reluctantly, he let her go.

"Severus, I wasn't sure you were going to share the first dance in our new home with me," she murmured happily.

"I tried to get away from that woman. Don't ever desert me again like that. Next time, you will be punished," he growled playfully.

"Really?" Hermione felt a flutter in her stomach. "Hmm, I might have to see what you consider desertion."

"Do you really want to try, wife?" Severus wondered how long he had before they could politely kick their guests out of the house. "There are numerous ways of torturing and punishing people such as you. First, there is the traditional spanking. Second, nibbling until you are to the point of insanity. Third, tickling," he continued to whisper into his wife's ear.

He could feel her tremble each time he named off a punishment. He felt himself start to harden with each tremble. By the time the dance was over, Hermione was barely able to hold a coherent thought in her head, and Severus was so aroused, he could barely walk. Hermione's hand was claimed by Harry and Severus sighed when he felt Sibyll place her hand on his arm.

"You two looked lovely out there together. But, I am concerned for you, Hermione, dear," Sibyll said. "I don't want you to over do it? I mean you are starting to show just a little, dear." She dropped her voice to a stage whisper at the last, condensation heavy in her tone.

"I believe I have another week or so. But thank you for your concern," Hermione bit out. She looked closer at Sibyll's very visible curves. "I am surprised you are still attending social events also."

Harry cleared his throat uncomfortably. Severus raised an eyebrow at his wife but wisely said nothing.

"Since I am not yet in my confinement, I believe I will be able to enjoy a little more of the Season. There will be plenty of time for sitting at home," Sibyll said with a laugh. "But don't you worry, dearie. I will make sure that your husband isn't tucked away by himself in a corner while you are at home. There are so many entertaining people around," she said as she patted Severus's arm.

"Who told you I would be going out while Hermione is at home?" Severus asked, annoyed.

"You don't want to get bored staying at home all the time, do you? Besides, how will you make the correct contacts if you don't get out of and socialize? Don't you worry about a thing. Cornelius and I will take you everywhere with us. Hermione, do tell him he must come with us. There's a dear."

"Wonderful. Thank you, but I will decide what I do. There are other ways of staying abreast of current events. I believe my brother and I have a couple of things to discuss," Severus growled. His eyes narrowed as he watched Harry whisper in Hermione's ear the entire time Sibyll talked. He grabbed his brother's arm and headed into the crowd.

"Well, that wasn't very friendly. I will have to see about correcting that," Sibyll said.

"I beg your pardon?" Hermione asked.

"He won't get very far in Parliament if he doesn't have a little more polish. I have such high hopes for him," Sibyll replied.

"Hmm, yes. If you will excuse me, there is a friend that I must speak with," Hermione said as she moved into the crowd.

"All right, little brother," Severus demanded as soon as they entered the library. "What exactly are you up to?"

"Excuse me?" Harry replied in confusion.

"What exactly were you discussing on the dance floor with my wife? I saw you say something that she didn't like."

"I was just offering her comfort and letting my dear sister-in-law know that I am always available should she need a shoulder to cry on," Harry said, looking at his nails.

"Why would she need to go to you for comfort?" Severus asked. His patience was wearing thin.

"Surely you've heard? Sibyll told me everyone knew. That you were the one telling everyone," Harry said in confusion.

"Heard what? Harry, are you sure you are feeling well?" Severus was starting to get worried.

"That you are the father of her baby. I can't believe you would sleep with her after marrying Hermione. She is so much better," Harry said angrily.

"I AM NOT THE FATHER OF THAT WOMAN'S CHILD!" Severus roared.

"Then why would you go around telling everyone you are?"

"I didn't. I love my wife," Severus said quietly.

Harry stared at his brother for a moment. "You what?"

"I said I am in love with my wife. I would never do anything to upset her like that."

"Really?" Harry asked. His mind was still trying to connect what he had been told by Sibyll versus what his brother was telling him.

Severus rolled his eyes. Obviously his brother was not as intelligent as he had thought. "Have you ever thought that she might be jealous and not want to let such a catch as myself go?"

Harry felt his eyes bulge slightly.

"Oh, really," Severus snorted. "She has been trying to get me back into her bed since I broke it off with her. I just never realized how bad."

"Well, that would explain why she told me that you were the father and since you didn't love Hermione, I should try to 'comfort' her," Harry mused. "By the way, I was supposed to give you this note, from Sibyll, of course." Harry withdrew a scented sheet of yellow paper and solemnly handed it to Severus.

Severus took it, read it, and then tossed it into the fireplace. He thought a minute with his brow furrowed. "I believe that it is time to teach our dear cousin a lesson. End this fiasco once and for all. I do not want Hermione to be bothered any further with this nonsense. Harry, I need you to get Cornelius to the gazebo in about half an hour."

"What are you thinking?" Harry was intrigued. He truly had no desire to cause any trouble between his brother and wife, but if the opportunity had presented itself to him, he would not have said no.

"I am going to send a reply to the letter and have her meet me at the gazebo. It seems that she has something very important to discuss. Life changing or some such rot. I want Fudge there to see for himself what his dear wife is up to. I am also going to personally see that they leave for the continent for a very long time and will never again interfere with my family."

"All right. I believe he is still here. We'll be there." Harry couldn't wait to see the excitement.

The two brothers nodded to each other and walked out the door. One turning towards the card games and the other, towards the dancing. Neither saw Hermione emerge from the plants, a slight frown marring her face as she followed the tall figure back towards the dance floor.

"I believe that this dance is mine, cousin," Severus said smoothly.

Sibyll looked up in triumph. She didn't see Hermione anywhere nearby as she nodded her assent. She chatted with some friends for a bit until she spied her brother and his partner across the crowded room. Sighing, she slowly made her way over to them.

"Ginny, I am feeling a slight headache. If anyone asks, tell them I am lying down for a few minutes but will be back shortly?" Hermione requested of her friend.

"Of course. Are you sure you don't need to retire for the evening?" Ginny asked.

"You do look a little pale, Hermione. Why don't I get Mother?" Draco said.

"No, I will be fine. Really. Enjoy yourselves." She looked at the flushed faces in front of her. "Or keep enjoying yourselves," she laughed.

"Thank you, little sister. We will." And with that, Draco whirled Ginny back onto the dance floor.

Hermione looked up in time to see Harry bend down and whisper into Fudge's ear. She narrowed her eyes, and looking onto the dance floor, she saw Severus lead Sibyll out the side doors. More than a little curious, she followed quietly.

In the moonlight, she saw them head for the gazebo in the middle of the garden. From the other set of doors, she saw Harry and Cornelius head to the garden path on the right. She decided to take the path on the left as it was shorter and also led straight to the gazebo. When she was close enough to hear the quiet rumble of her husband's voice, she stopped and ducked behind the bushes.

"I am so glad that you are willing to meet me, darling," Sibyll crooned.

"Yes. I must admit that I am curious as to what was so important that you had to meet me tonight."

"I just wanted to hear you tell me how much you missed me and wanted me back," she whispered.

"I beg your pardon?" came the dark reply.

"Oh, Severus. You don't have to pretend. Nobody is listening. You can now admit your true feelings to me! I know that you still want me!" came the impassioned cry.

"You, woman, are delusional. I have not wanted you for a very long time. When I broke things off with you, that was the end. You can't seriously believe that I would want you back. You are also a married woman. What happened to loving your husband? For heavens sake, you are carrying his child," Severus said in exasperation.

From what Hermione could hear, it sounded like he was shaking his arm or leg.

"For pity's sake, woman. Let go of me."

Arm, Hermione said to herself with a snicker.

"Surely, you don't think that I am truly pregnant with that man's child!"

"Well, I don't care whose it is. I do know that it isn't mine."

"I am not pregnant at all. I just said that hoping you would think it was yours and come back to me," came the angered reply. "Do you know that your own dear brother has been panting after your wife for some time now? Let him have her. It isn't like you love her! You don't love anyone. You told me so yourself when you walked out on me!" she cried.

"I have already talked to my brother. Good attempt, however. He respects her. You really need to stop imagining things. I didn't love her at the time I last spoke to you. However, since then, I have come to discover, that I actually do love my wife..."

"Oh! Severus!" Hermione cried as she ran into her husband's arms. His quick reflexes kept them from toppling over as she enthusiastically kissed his face.

"Oh, this is just sickening," Sibyll snarled. She turned to leave and ran right into her husband. "Oh, darling! There you are. Thank heavens. We are going home."

"Wait," Severus bit out. He tucked Hermione under his arm and looked at his cousins. "I believe that you owe my wife an apology."

"What? You can't be serious," Sibyll spat.

When Severus continued to look at her, she huffed, "Fine. I apologize to you, my dear. Cornelius, I have a headache. Take me home."

"Severus, I do apologize for the way my wife has behaved. Also, to you, Hermione. I am going to take her to the country for a couple of years. She should be able to

entertain herself there while you get on with your lives," Fudge said calmly.

"What? I am not going to the country. Whatever will I do there?" Sibyll turned on her husband.

"My dear, I don't care if you sleep with every male you come across out there. But you will be discreet and you will leave Severus alone. I still need his support for a couple of projects I am working on. Am I making myself understood? If not, how about, if you don't behave, you can go visit my other cousins in the colonies?" Cornelius turned to Severus. "Do I still have your support, old chap?"

Severus nodded his head once. Fudge, satisfied, took his wife's arm and led her from the garden. He had such a firm grip that she had no choice but to obey. She was so shocked by her husband's demands that she couldn't think of a thing to say.

"Thank you, Harry. I believe there is a Miss Parkinson that you should meet. Draco will make the introductions if you are interested. He seemed to think you two would hit it off," Severus said as he smiled down at his wife.

"Sure. Sounds interesting. Draco does have good taste in women," Harry laughed as he headed back for the ballroom.

"I am sorry you had to hear all of that. I was trying to keep you from all of this unpleasantness. You do believe me when I say I had and have nothing to do with that woman?"

"I told you before; I believe you and trust you, my dear!" Hermione cried. She stood on tip-toe and kissed her happy husband. Together they turned and walked back to the house. They had the last dance of the evening waiting for them.

Author's Note: Sorry about the long delay. Many thanks to my beta, Tinnidawg, for prodding me and enduring the many editing sessions!

Chapter 17 - Home Again, Home Again, Jiggity Jig

Chapter 17 of 18

Everyone heads to the country for the Holidays!

Chapter 17 Home Again, Home Again, Jiggity Jig

Hermione was officially in confinement. After all the excitement of the past couple of months, she was more than happy to stay at home with just close friends and family visiting her. The weather had turned colder as the holiday season approached.

"Good afternoon, dear," Narcissa said as she entered the sitting room.

"Hello, Mother," Hermione greeted in return. She poured a cup of tea for her mother as she sat next to her.

"How are you today?" asked Narcissa as she accepted the cup of tea and turned to look at her daughter.

"Besides not being able to walk normally, and being mothered by Severus, I am doing well," Hermione grumbled.

"Well, you look wonderful. Just think! In a couple of weeks, I will be a grandmother!" Narcissa couldn't wait to hold her grandchild. She loved children and looked forward to spoiling this one.

"And I will be an uncle," Draco drawled from his usual position, leaning in the doorway. "You look radiant, little sister. You have a special glow."

"Draco. What are you up to?" Hermione asked.

"I invited him," Severus said as he stepped around his brother-in-law. He greeted Narcissa and then turned to his wife. "Is there anything you need? More pillows? Draco and I are going to run a couple of errands, and then I will be back. Did you need me to pick anything up?"

"No. Just go," Hermione grumped as Severus fussed with the blanket she had across her lap. "Severus. If I need anything, there are plenty of servants to fetch for me. Stop it!" she snapped as she swatted at his hand.

"She seems to have developed a shorter temper," he mused to nobody in particular. He didn't mind. It was the only way he was able to show his concern and that he cared for her. He knew that she understood. He couldn't help it that he continued with the behavior just to irritate her; he loved the way her eyes snapped at him.

"Did you need anything, Mother?" Draco asked as he kissed his sister and mother on the cheek.

"No. I have your father running errands for me," Narcissa said with a smile.

"Really? He must be getting on in years to allow you to order him around," he commented.

"Maybe," Narcissa chuckled. "Let me know if you act differently when you get to be his age with a loving wife."

"Ugh! Severus, let us go before she starts match making." Draco blanched.

"That reminds me, Draco. Miss Ginny will be dining with us this evening. She is going to visit Hermione while the servants pack upstairs. We want to be settled at Snape Manor before the baby is born," Hermione reminded her brother. "You are still dining with us this evening?"

"Of course," he said. "I wouldn't miss it for the world. Don't say anything, Mother," he said as Narcissa turned to look at him with an excited gleam in her eye.

"We will see you later, dear," Severus said as he kissed his wife and followed Draco out the door.

"Darling, that is absolutely inspired! I have been trying to think of ways to get him together with Ginny." Narcissa could already picture her son happily married and giving her more grandchildren.

"Well, she is my best friend. Just don't push him too hard, Mother."

"Of course not. You know me," she said innocently.

"Exactly," Hermione laughed. "Are you going to join us in the country for the holidays?"

"Of course. We have most of the packing done and the servants are ready to close the house at a moment's notice. You know I wouldn't miss the birth of my first grandchild for the world." Narcissa laid her hand against her daughter's cheek.

"Yet she doesn't even inform me of what is going on. I wake up and find most of the rooms draped in dust cloths," Lucius drawled as he entered the room.

"Does Peeves announce company anymore?" Hermione frowned.

"I told him not to bother. And you know Draco; he just walks past them as if they weren't there. Here is your package, my love," Lucius said as he handed a small bundle to his wife.

"Would you like some tea, Father?" Hermione asked as she turned to get another cup.

"No, thank you. I need to get home and finish my business correspondence before we rusticate for the holidays." He kissed his wife and daughter and left the house.

"What was so important that you had Father run the errand?" Hermione asked. She loved surprises, even if they weren't for her.

"It is actually for the baby," Narcissa said softly. She unwrapped the bundle and handed it over to Hermione.

"Oh! How beautiful," she breathed. She held up an antique silver rattle. It had been polished, and she shook it, laughing with delight at the light tinkle it gave out.

"If you look closely, you will see your name and Draco's engraved on it. Every Malfoy child has their name engraved on it. Your child will be next. And when Draco has children, theirs will be added also," Narcissa said with pride. "It passes to the male heir unless there isn't one. But since you are having the first grandchild, your child will, of course, be on there."

"It is beautiful, Mother." Hermione felt the tears burning in her eyes. She had never felt so loved and part of something bigger in her whole life. Narcissa leaned over and hugged her tightly, tears gleaming in her own eyes.

"Miss Ginny Weasley is here, Ma'am," Peeves announced.

"Please, show her in," Hermione said as she wiped her eyes.

"Lady Malfoy," Ginny said as she entered. She saw both women wiping their eyes. "What is the matter? Has something happened?" she cried in alarm.

"No, my dear. I was just giving Hermione a gift," Narcissa said gently. She showed Ginny the rattle and explained its history. Ginny thought it was a beautiful tradition and wiped her own tears.

The women spent the rest of the afternoon in pleasant talk and tea. They made plans for the winter since Ginny's family had a small home near Snape Manor. Hermione joined in the talk, but secretly wondered if she would still be there once the baby came.

"Peeves does a wonderful job," Ginny commented. Peeves had just left the room after informing Hermione that everything was ready for the move to the country.

"He has proven to be invaluable," Hermione agreed. "He will be coming with us to the country. He is almost like family according to Minerva."

"I should be getting home. Your father becomes inconsolable when I am not there to share dinner with him," Narcissa said as she rose from the sofa. She laid her hand against Hermione's cheek again. "I will see you in a couple of days, darling. Lucius informed me that we are going to travel together."

"Good evening, Mother. Give Father a kiss for me," Hermione said as she returned her mother's embrace.

"I will see you in a few days also, Ginny?" Narcissa asked.

"Yes, I believe Papa said we were moving this weekend also," Ginny said, rising to walk the older woman to the door.

"Then you must call upon me when you get settled." They bid each other farewell, and Ginny returned to keep Hermione company.

"Really, Ginny. You don't have to sit with me," Hermione said, even though she was happy to have her there.

"I know. But if your husband returned home and you were alone, I would never have any peace," Ginny laughed.

"For some reason, he has become a mother hen," Hermione grumbled. She was secretly pleased at how caring he had become.

"I am not a member of the poultry family," Severus stated as he entered the room with Draco. He walked to his wife's side and kissed her gently on the temple. "How was your day, dear?"

"Wonderful. Thanks to Peeves, we are ready to move," Hermione said as she took her husband's hand.

"Come along, Ginny. I hear the carriage pulling up. These two are making me ill," Draco drawled. He held his arm for Ginny.

"Good evening, Severus. Hermione," Ginny said as she took Draco's arm. She couldn't stop the fluttering in her stomach as his hand curled around hers.

Hermione noticed her brother's gesture and narrowed her eyes. She was happy for her friend and promised herself to talk to Draco the first chance she got. Which would be a while considering that she couldn't move very fast at the moment.

"Severus. I can't wait until our child is born," Hermione whispered as Severus helped her up from the sofa. "I am tired of feeling like a balloon."

"You are beautiful," he said as he looked at her with tenderness.

"For a cow," she grumbled.

"No, you are a beautiful balloon," he laughed at her outraged expression. "You are the one who said you were a balloon."

"I said I felt like one," Hermione said indignantly. She started to cry.

"I am sorry," Severus said in alarm. "I didn't say it to make you cry. I was teasing you, love."

"I know," she continued to cry. "I just can't help it."

Severus looked at her in dismay. He had heard from Lucius that women became more emotional, and so far, his wife had not been too bad. "Come. Let's just go to our

room and have something brought to us."

"Severus, how can you think of that when I look like this?" Hermione dabbed at her tears. She really hated crying.

"I wasn't thinking of that, dear. I just thought that you would like to relax and have an impromptu picnic. A cuddle or two, and that would be all. Promise," Severus said quickly.

"That is so thoughtful," Hermione said. And, promptly started crying again.

Severus sighed. He took her hand and led her to the hall. He gave quick instructions to Peeves and then led his poor wife up the stairs. He couldn't wait to get the old, rational Hermione back.

She had calmed by the time they made it to the master suite. They laughed and fed each other tidbits from their plates. By the time they were finished, both were relaxed and very tired. Severus even got more than two cuddles. All in all, it had been a good day. Hermione fell asleep on her side, with her husband curled around her.

"Hermione, dear! Are you sure you are going to be warm enough?" Narcissa asked her as they were bundling into the waiting carriages.

"Yes, Mother. I can hardly see around all of these robes and blankets. Aren't you riding with me?"

"No. Your father said he couldn't survive the trip without my charming company." Narcissa giggled like a girl. "Now that you and your brother are grown, he seems to think that he is entitled to all of my attention. It really is flattering."

Hermione smiled at the obvious love between her parents. She nodded and snuggled into the blankets. It would have been nice to have someone to talk to, as the ride was long. She looked up in surprise when Severus entered the carriage.

"I thought you were going to ride with Draco," Hermione said in confusion.

"I would have, but he is slightly under the weather," Severus said with a snicker.

"Nothing too terrible?" she asked in concern.

"No. Just out too late last night," was all Severus would say. "Are you warm enough?" he asked as he laid another robe across her lap.

"You sound just like Mother," Hermione said as she pushed the robe off. "I am too warm. However, you can share with me." She held up the corner of her blanket.

Severus slid next to her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. He sighed in satisfaction as she curled against his side.

"Severus," she murmured a while later.

"Yes?"

"Do you think we might be close to getting home?" she asked.

"I suppose. It should be an hour or two," his weary voice replied.

"No. I mean getting back to Hogwarts." She was fighting to keep her eyes open also. The gentle swaying of the carriage was lulling her to sleep.

"Oh. That. Yes. I don't see why not," came the uncomfortable answer.

"Is it wrong to wish that we could stay here? Have a family, and not have to worry about going back to our former lives?"

"No. I must admit I catch myself wishing that also," he said.

Hermione nodded as she heard his deep voice rumble through his chest. She closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep. A small smile appeared on her lips when Severus pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

"Cissy, where are you off to now?" Lucius asked.

"Careful, dear heart. It almost sounded like you were whining," she said coyly.

"Why don't you give me more attention?" he said with a lift of his aristocratic brow.

"No. I promised Hermione to call on her early. She is really starting to get uncomfortable. Come and visit us later. She misses you," Cissy said as she leaned in to give her husband a very passionate kiss.

"If that is the only way I can spend time with you," he sighed. He grabbed the ribbon her maid had threaded through her blonde curls.

"Lucius! It took almost an hour to get my hair the way I like it. Surely you want to see your daughter also?" she asked with an arched brow of her own.

"Of course. But her temper is something to be feared," he said. "I suppose I could talk Severus into a game of chess. Poor man." He laughed when he thought of Severus having to deal with his daughter's mood swings. "Did you want me to take you over?"

"No, dear. Draco is going to take me." She saw Lucius look at her in shock. "We are picking Ginny up on our way to Hermione's. You don't mind, do you?"

Lucius thought for a moment. "No. The sooner he gets settled down, the sooner I can have you all to myself." He laughed at Narcissa's blush. "Go. Tell Severus I will call on them this afternoon."

Narcissa kissed his cheek and went to the carriage that pulled up. She greeted her handsome son as they went to get the lovely girl she hoped to someday have as a daughter-in-law.

Severus greeted them at the door. Narcissa looked closely at him. He looked tired and more than a little worried.

"Is something the matter, Severus?" she asked.

"I don't know. She didn't sleep well and snaps at anything I do or say," he said as he ran a hand through his hair.

Narcissa nodded. Severus hardly ever fidgeted. "Ginny and I will go and see her. Lucius said he would be by this afternoon. Draco will keep you company until then." She shot her son a warning look.

Draco gulped softly and nodded. "How about a game of billiards, old man?" Since Ginny was also here, he couldn't think of anywhere else he wanted to be.

The two men took off at a fast pace. Narcissa shook her head and turned to Ginny. She was pleased to see the younger woman calm and smiling. "Care to wager I will be a grandmother soon?" she laughed.

"Not at all!" Ginny laughed with her. She was excited and couldn't wait to see her friend.

The two women went up to Hermione's room. The drapes were partially open. The bed was empty.

"Is she in here?" Ginny asked Narcissa.

"I am right here," Hermione grumbled from the far corner of the room. She was standing beside the drapes. "I have been pacing because it feels better than lying in that bed.

Narcissa noticed her hand fisted in the velvet material. "Ginny, find Severus and send him to me," she said quietly.

The younger girl left quickly. Narcissa walked to Hermione. "Do you want me to walk with you?" she asked gently.

"Please. Is it supposed to feel like this?" Hermione asked. She could handle the cramping. She just didn't like how the little pains peaked every so often.

Narcissa looked at her with sympathy. She remembered the pain even after all these years, but it had faded over time. She walked to Hermione's dressing table and got a brush and hair ribbon. "Come sit next to me." She patted the side of the bed.

"Ginny said you wanted to see me?" Severus asked as he came into the bedroom.

"Do you have a midwife available?" Narcissa asked.

Severus looked at Hermione. "Yes. She is in the guest suite. I didn't want to chance not having one available so she is staying until the baby is born."

Narcissa nodded at his foresight. "You might want to send for her to examine Hermione."

Severus blanched and left the room.

"Mother, there was no need to scare him," Hermione said quietly. She bit her lip when she felt a sharp pain lance through her lower back and stomach.

"And, you didn't just grab my hand in a death grip," Narcissa retorted gently as she pulled her hand from her daughter's grasp. She pulled Hermione's hair back with the ribbon to help keep it out of her face.

"Thank you, Mother. I am so glad you are here. I am a little bit scared," Hermione admitted.

"Don't worry, dear. I was terrified." Both women turned when the door opened again. This time, the midwife and Minerva entered the room.

"Where is Severus?" Hermione asked.

"I believe he said he needed to make sure Draco is okay," Minerva said with a smile.

"Please leave me to examine Lady Snape," the midwife said with quiet authority. The women left the room after promising to return shortly.

They waited in the hall until the door opened again. Minerva and Narcissa looked up when the door opened again. The midwife requested that Narcissa join her and sent Minerva down to the game room to join the others.

Lucius was shown into the drawing room later that day. He looked around at the tense faces and frowned. He noticed his daughter and wife were absent. He took at Severus's drawn face and smiled.

"Severus, you really should relax. It could be hours," he said as he poured himself a brandy.

"Thank you for those comforting words," Severus growled. He took the snifter that Lucius had poured.

Lucius raised an eyebrow and poured another. "Would you like this one too?"

Severus glared at his friend. Lucius laughed. *This is such fun*, he thought.

"How long has Narcissa been with Hermione?" he asked seriously.

"Five hours, sir," Ginny said quietly. She sat with Draco reading a book of poetry.

Lucius smiled at the domestic scene. "Thank you. If that is the case, you really should sit. Draco and Hermione were much longer than that." He grimaced as he remembered the anxiety he had gone through at the time.

He had no sooner said that when Narcissa opened the door and beckoned Severus to her. She spoke softly and Severus almost ran from the room. She smiled wistfully after him. She turned to everyone else and smiled tiredly. Lucius went to his wife and kissed her temple as he drew her into the room.

"You ruined my fun, love. I was just telling Severus it would be hours yet," he said softly.

"You really are wicked. He will be down shortly with the new addition to the Snape family," Narcissa said. Happiness shone in her blue eyes.

"Aren't you going to tell us if it is a girl or a boy?" Draco asked. He wanted to know if he had a new niece to spoil or a nephew to play with.

"That is for Severus to let us know," his mother said gently.

Upstairs, Severus stood outside the door. He was nervous, elated, and anxious. He wiped his palms on his trousers, took a deep breath, and pushed the door open. He squinted a bit in the dark of the room and then saw his wife sitting up in bed. He quietly walked over to her side.

"Severus," she said quietly.

He leaned down to kiss her. The midwife came over and laid a little bundle in his arms. He looked down at the sleeping infant. He felt tears burn his eyes. The little baby was warm and smelled of lightly scented powder. A dark fuzz covered the top of the baby's head. He gently ran his finger over the cheek and lowered his head to kiss the baby. Turning, he showed Hermione the baby.

Hermione smiled with love as she looked at Severus and her new baby. Her heart felt like it would burst with happiness.

She touched his hand and smiled. Just as she started to say something, she felt a sickening lurch. When she opened her eyes again, she saw that she was in a different room. She looked into the shocked face of Professor Severus Snape. They were back at the library of Hogwarts.

Author's Notes: Sorry, I felt like a cliffhanger! Hope you all enjoyed this chapter. Many thanks to Tinnidawg, my very dedicated beta. Without her help, this story would never have been posted!

Chapter 18 - Where To From Here?

Chapter 18 of 18

Hermione and Severus have returned to their own time.

Chapter 18 – Where To From Here?

Severus looked at Hermione in shock. He looked around quickly and noticed they were in the Hogwarts library. He saw she was in her dusty robe. A book lay at her feet. He looked at her again.

"Miss Granger?" he started hesitantly.

"Professor Snape?"

"Did you? Did we?" he asked hesitantly.

"Did we what?" she asked softly. Hope rising in her that he had experienced that odd dream with her. If it was a dream. She didn't remember being asleep.

He took a deep breath. "Never mind." He turned to go from the library.

"Wait!" she exclaimed. "I just had the strangest dream, sensation, what have you. And, you were in it." This was just too important for her to let go.

"Really?" he asked. He didn't turn around. "Do continue."

"We were married, in Regency England. We were to have a baby..." She broke off hesitantly when she saw his shoulders stiffen.

"It is true then?" he asked in a very quiet voice.

"Do you know what I am talking about?" *Please say yes*, she prayed.

"Yes." He turned around to face her.

"Oh Merlin!" she breathed.

Severus swept up to her. "What happened?"

"I don't know. I believe that book..."

"No. We already discussed the book. The baby," he prompted.

"Oh. It was a girl," she said with tears in her eyes.

Severus felt like he had just flown a hippogriff through a cyclone. He felt forlorn and saddened that he would never know that little girl.

"Was it real, Severus?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said absently. He turned his attention to Hermione when she laid a hand on his arm. "I wish I knew."

"So do I. Why do I feel like I left part of myself where ever we were?" she asked sadly.

"Because I feel that way too," he said. "Come. Let's go to my chambers. We have much to discuss." He didn't want to be overheard by the students that were starting to wander through the library on their way to dinner.

Hermione nodded and kept her hand on his arm as they walked together towards the dungeons. Hermione felt hope start to blossom in her. A hope for a future like the one she had seen.

Severus didn't know what to think. He was not an emotional person and didn't know how he felt about Miss Granger. But from what he had experienced with her, he found himself looking forward to getting to know her better. He had a brief thought that he might have a future with a family and a loving wife. It was a small hope, but one that refused to leave him. He smiled at the thought.

Neither noticed the stares and whispers that followed them nor would they have cared if they had known. Together they dared hope to have a romance worthy of any novel.

FIN

Author's Notes: A million thank you to all of my readers! I am amazed at the show of support and involvement from all of you. I hope you enjoyed reading as much as I did writing. I could not have done this without you.

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