

Denial

by little beloved

Five years after the fall of Voldemort, Hermione and Severus receive unhappy news.

Decisions and Revisions

Chapter 1 of 34

Five years after the fall of Voldemort, Hermione and Severus receive unhappy news.

A/N: Before we begin, I suppose I owe you something of an explanation, Dear Reader. Yes, this is the same *Denial* that I posted and completed in 2008. And yes, I did remove it from the archives in October 2010. Within months of beginning this story, I was overwhelmed by the readership, reviews and awards it attracted. I still am. Just as amazing has been the response to its removal from the internet.

For the past two years, I have received weekly, often daily requests for copies of this story. I've had countless e-mails asking where and why it has gone. And rather than explain the entire story here (which is very long), I'll be brief. One of the reasons I removed *Denial* was because I was unhappy with some aspects of the writing. And now, due to demand, I have decided to edit and rewrite. And repost. My fabulous betas, Robisonrocket and Ladyinthecloak, hardly let a single error slip through their expert nets when I wrote this story. It is not with their editing I have issue, but rather my own style, which I hope has improved over the past three years.

The story will not change; the characters will not change. Some of the language with which it is told may change, and I hope to trim the overall length a little.

I did not take the decision to remove this story lightly. I shed a tear when I took it down, in the knowledge that all my thousands of lovely, kind, encouraging reviews would be lost. I hope, during the course of this second draft, I may recover some of them. I will try to have at least two chapters corrected and reposted each week, so you won't have too long to wait.

If you are new to *Denial*, I hope you enjoy it. If you are reading again, I hope you enjoy this version more than you enjoyed the first.

LB xxx

□

Do I dare

Disturb the universe?

In a minute there is time

For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

- T. S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

Hermione Granger sipped at her coffee. The late afternoon sunshine streamed through the kitchen windows, illuminating the polished surface of the wooden table at which she sat. She nibbled at a slice of toast before placing it back on a willow-pattern plate. She'd lost her appetite.

A scroll of parchment lying to the right of her discarded breakfast drew her unwilling gaze, and she sighed as she looked at it. Her reverie had been interrupted some five minutes earlier by an insistent tapping at the kitchen window. With a sinking heart she had recognised the brown owl as one of those used by the Ministry of Magic. It had been less than forty-eight hours since her return to Britain; she had hoped to evade the inevitable for just a little longer.

It was Wednesday morning, and she had graduated from the Sorbonne only two days before. She had enjoyed every moment of her four years in Paris, studying at the *Département de la Sorcellerie*, the wizarding university hidden within the Sorbonne itself. Her parents had supported her decision to pursue a degree abroad and had proudly attended the graduation ceremony, where their daughter had received a double honours degree in Charms and Potions. Her final day in the French capital had been a happy one, although she'd been plagued by doubts about the wisdom of the decision to return to her native land, her resolve to re-enter British wizarding society weakened by the knowledge of all that her return would entail. She had known the Ministry would track her down; she just hadn't expected them to do it quite this quickly.

Eyeing the parchment on the table, she remembered her last year at Hogwarts. Her return to school after the war had been tinged by more than a little sadness. The initial euphoria at Harry's triumph over Lord Voldemort had faded, and many of the students had been left to grieve for the loved ones they had lost. Once Fred had been buried, she and Ron had travelled to Australia to find her parents and restore their memories, returning to Britain only days before resuming their NEWT-level studies.

While her parents had resumed their lives as dentists, she had happily resumed hers as a student, revelling in the renewed sense of security and the academic demands of her seven subjects. The first few weeks had passed by in a blur of memorial services, and she and Ron had been happy for a time, but that had been before the Ministry of Magic had changed everything. In retrospect, it was hard to believe she hadn't seen it coming. She had continued to read the *Daily Prophet*, and although she had found the articles on falling birth rates among pure-bloods interesting and the stories on the increased incidences of squib births alarming, she had never, in her wildest imaginings, foreseen the course of action that the Ministry would eventually take.

It had been on a cold February morning that she and Ginny had entered the Great Hall to find the teachers huddled together at the staff table, whispering and gesturing to the newspaper in front of them. There had been few students yet awake, but those who had already made it to breakfast were also absorbed by the news. Raising an eyebrow at Ginny, Hermione was in the process of pouring herself some pumpkin juice when an owl dropped her copy of the *Daily Prophet* in front of her. Her heart had hammered in anticipation as she'd unfolded the newspaper, where she'd been greeted by a photograph of Kingsley Shacklebolt holding aloft a lengthy scroll.

MINISTRY OF MAGIC MARRIAGE ACT

Minister for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, last night unveiled the Ministry of Magic's plans for tackling the wizarding birth crisis. Birth rates have been in sharp decline among wizarding families for the past ten years, while numbers of squib births have risen to an all-time high. The crisis has been compounded by the huge loss of life sustained previous to the defeat of Lord Voldemort and the subsequent sentencing to Azkaban of scores of witches and wizards, the vast majority of whom were pure-bloods. The recent census of the magical population has revealed numbers to be at their lowest since 1374.

In response to this predicament, the Minister has announced the Marriage Act, whereby all those between the ages of seventeen and fifty who are currently single will be required to wed within six weeks. The decree is further complicated by the stipulation that pure-bloods are only permitted to marry half-bloods or Muggle-borns, while Muggle-borns are required to marry either half-bloods or pure-bloods. Half-bloods are unrestricted and may marry as they see fit. Inter-marriage among pure-blood families has been blamed for the increase in squib births, and has thus been outlawed. The Department of Births and Marriages has been extended to deal with these emergency measures. Witches and wizards who refuse to abide by the new law will have their wands confiscated and will effectively be expelled from wizarding society.

Hermione had passed the newspaper to Ginny with trembling fingers. She didn't want to get married; she wanted to go to college ... to have a career. Further along the Gryffindor table, Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil had arrived and had squealed in excitement over their copy of the paper. Hermione had glanced up at the staff table to find Minerva McGonagall's gaze upon her. Harry and Ron had arrived a few minutes later and had found the whole thing amusing.

"Honestly, Hermione," Ron had said. "What's the problem? Most pure-bloods still have arranged marriages; this Act thing just means they can't marry each other anymore. What's the big deal? Me and you'll just have to get married a bit sooner ... that's all."

Hermione had promptly choked on her toast. "Merlin's beard, Ron! Are you out of your mind? I'm only nineteen; you're only eighteen! I'm *not* getting married!"

Harry and Ginny had discreetly escaped from the Hall, leaving Ron and Hermione to their bickering. Ron had taken Hermione's refusal to marry him as a personal affront, and they'd argued for the remainder of the day. The ill-feeling between them had been exacerbated by Harry and Ginny, who'd seemed pleased about the whole situation. Harry had even transfigured a teaspoon into a makeshift engagement ring for Ginny. What had astonished Hermione most was the way in which everyone around her had so readily accepted the *Marriage Act*. The pure-bloods and half-bloods had taken it all in their stride; only Neville had been subdued.

Having endured Ron's sulking and Harry and Ginny's happiness for three full days, she'd decided she could take no more. On the Saturday night after the decree had been announced, she had packed her trunk in secret, and after much struggling had caged a reluctant Crookshanks. She'd lain awake for hours, staring at the red velvet drapes above her bed: she'd never felt particularly fond of them until then, when she was about to leave them for good.

At two o'clock in the morning she had placed a Silencing Charm on her vexed feline, and, levitating her trunk, she'd tip-toed down to the Gryffindor common room. She had just reached the bottom of the stairs when she had almost collided with another late-night prowler. Neville Longbottom had stood before her, Trevor the toad clutched in his left hand, his wand in his right, his trunk floating in the air behind him.

"Hermione!" he'd gasped. "What are you doing?"

"What am I doing? What are *you* doing?"

Neville had looked around before whispering, "I'm leaving. I'll explain on the way out. I want to go now, before I lose my nerve."

Hermione had nodded and followed him through the portrait hole. As soon as it had swung shut behind them, Neville had lit his wand and turned his pale face towards her.

"My Gran's going to kill me," he'd whispered. "She'll say it's my duty to marry and continue the bloodline, but I'm not being forced into marrying someone against my will. If I have to, I'll live like a Muggle."

Hermione had met his gaze through the wandlit gloom. "I feel the same. I want to go to university. There's no way I'm settling down at nineteen."

"But, I thought with you and Ron being together ... you'd ... I don't know. Come to some sort of agreement, I suppose."

"Yes, well, Ron thought so, too," she'd said with a grunt. "He's been in a complete sulk since I've told him I'm not getting married. There's no way my parents would agree to me marrying at nineteen. I don't really understand why *you're* leaving, though, Neville. Most pure-bloods still marry by arrangement."

"There's only one witch I'd want to marry," he'd said, and even in the dull light she could see the flush of his cheeks. "And I can't because she's a pure-blood."

Hermione had known immediately. She'd suspected the truth for months. "Luna. It's Luna, isn't it, Neville?"

Neville had nodded and continued through the corridor in silence, the only sound the echoing of their steps on the cold, stone floor. When they'd reached the front doors of the castle, they'd paused and looked around, savouring their last moment at Hogwarts. With an encouraging nod from Neville, Hermione had reached forward to tap her wand upon the heavy, iron bolt, but had frozen, mid-action, at the sound of a familiar cough. Their eyes wide with alarm, they'd turned to find Minerva McGonagall peering at them over her little spectacles, her arms folded across her chest.

"I understand precisely why you've chosen to leave, but I would beseech you both to remain for one more week," she'd said.

"Professor," Hermione had begun. "I've no intention of getting married. Certainly not now, and maybe ... maybe never. I'll live as a Muggle if I have to. The *Marriage Act* is a violation of basic human rights, and I want nothing to do with it."

McGonagall had smiled. "Miss Granger, I would expect no less of you, but I ask two things of both you and Mr Longbottom: First, I'd like you to put yourself in the Ministry's position. Desperate times often call for desperate measures, no matter how rash they may appear. Second, I'll repeat my request that you stay for one more week. I've been in negotiations with Kingsley Shacklebolt over the past few hours, and you may find that the situation evolves to your advantage in the coming days. If it fails to do so, I'll not stop either of you from leaving a second time."

She and Neville had agreed and had returned to the Gryffindor common room, where they'd stayed awake through the night, discussing in whispers what might possibly change over the coming week. The suspense had not lasted long: the following Tuesday had brought a new development, the details of which had been splashed across the front page of the *Daily Prophet*.

MINISTRY OF MAGIC AMMENDS MARRIAGE ACT

The Ministry of Magic announced a major amendment to the new Marriage Act early this morning. Speaking to reporters at his London Office, Kingsley Shacklebolt revealed that there had been a veritable avalanche of objections from the concerned parents of scores of young witches and wizards around the country. Bearing the unmistakable scorch-marks of innumerable Howlers, the Minister wearily outlined the planned change to the new Act.

Witches and Wizards below the age of twenty-five years, who are enrolled in full-time education, will be exempt from the new law until such time as they cease to be students, or until they reach the age of twenty-five; whichever may come sooner. The announcement was greeted with great enthusiasm from the majority of parents and by Hogwarts Headmistress, Minerva McGonagall.

Hermione had glanced towards the staff table and had exchanged a small, conspiratorial smile with McGonagall. Her eyes had next sought out Neville, who had given her a big thumbs-up from the end of the Gryffindor table. She'd reread the newspaper article with a smile and a lighter heart: she'd always intended pursuing a degree after her NEWTs, and her ambitions would buy her more time.

But now, sitting in her parents' kitchen in the warmth of the July afternoon, she finally conceded that her time had run out. She could hide behind her studies no longer. The time had come to make her decision. With shaking hands, she picked up the scroll of parchment and broke the Ministry of Magic seal.

It was as she'd feared: she had been summoned to London.

I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,

And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,

And in short, I was afraid.

- T. S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

Severus Snape scowled as he sipped his tea. The light of the full moon streamed through the long windows of his study, painting his oaken desk with strips of bluish light. He picked up his quill, and his hand hovered above the ink-well for a moment before he finally tossed the quill to one side and laced his fingers, all thought of continuing his notes forgotten. He moved his gaze to the scroll that lay to his right. His work had been interrupted some five minutes earlier by an insistent tapping at the study window. With a flash of irritation he had recognised the brown owl as one of those used by the Ministry of Magic. He'd hoped to evade his responsibilities for just one more year.

Ignoring the scroll, he rose from his desk and crossed the room to a large cabinet, from which he extracted a crystal decanter and poured himself a generous Firewhisky. When he'd emptied the glass, he unbuttoned the neck of his black robes and massaged his aching neck. After pouring another measure of spirits, he crossed to the unlit fireplace above which hung a large, ornate mirror. He flicked his wand and two large candles on either side of the mantelpiece blazed with sudden light, casting a warm glow on his pale, pointed face. Gazing at his image in the mirror, he directed his scrutiny towards his neck and, pointing his wand at his throat, he whispered *Finite Incantatum*, lifting the charm that concealed his wounds.

Even after all these years the huge puncture wounds were an angry, livid red against his ashen skin. He'd been cured of the effects of the venom, but the lacerations themselves had never quite healed. Although the searing pain with which they had initially tortured him had subsided, his neck still throbbed with a dull ache. With a flick, he replaced the screening charm. Despite having wed over four years previously, he'd never permitted his wife to see the damage to his neck; she had no idea the lesions existed.

He crossed to the window and regarded the moonlit street below. The London square on which they lived was more than handsome; the small park at its centre was lush and well-manicured. His wife's family owned three properties on this square alone and numerous others around the city, and he always felt self-congratulatory when he surveyed the vista below the window of his study. There was no doubt that his marriage had been a lucrative manoeuvre on his part; he'd often wondered what his wife imagined she had gained in return.

He had been convalescent in Spinner's End when the Ministry had announced the *Marriage Act*. He'd been furious that his bachelorhood was to be forcefully ended at the not inconsiderable age of thirty-nine. Gripped by panic, he'd contemplated leaving the country rather than search for a wife and had been in the process of closing the sale of his family home when he had come across Cordelia.

A damp Wednesday afternoon had found him exploring Westminster Abbey. He'd been perusing the names of the interred at Poets' Corner when she had alerted him to her presence with a gentle hand upon his shoulder. She'd been widowed during the war and so was subject to the *Marriage Act*. Standing in front of the memorial to William Shakespeare, he'd returned her hesitant smile, and the way forward had seemed suddenly incontrovertible. They had wed within three weeks.

Cordelia's pure-blood lineage included two Hogwarts headmasters, wizarding scholars, poets and even a world-renowned philosopher. Most of them had been Sorted into Ravenclaw or Slytherin, and despite their preference for marrying other pure-bloods, they'd never subscribed to the service of the Dark Lord. They were more interested in the pursuits of the intellect than in world domination.

Cordelia's first husband, however, had been an exception, and although she'd tried to keep his loyalties concealed from her family, his eventual arrest for Death Eater activities had brought dishonour not just upon his wife and only son, but upon her entire family. She and her husband had remained estranged following his release from Azkaban, and his death at the Battle of Hogwarts had been welcomed by her family, although she and her son had mourned their loss.

Severus presumed her enthusiastic acceptance of his proposal had much to do with his notoriety as war-hero and Death Eater redeemed. She'd not been permitted, by the restrictions of the *Marriage Act*, to marry another pure-blood. Thus, his status as a half-blood and something of an academic in Potions circles had made him a desirable match. Cordelia was five years his senior and had been a Slytherin prefect when he'd first arrived at Hogwarts. She was not beautiful, but she was handsome, groomed and learned. All things considered, he thought he'd done rather well for himself.

Resuming his seat with a sigh, he picked up the scroll. He had managed to avoid the inhabitants of Hogwarts and the majority of his former pupils for the past four years, but time had run out. He could no longer avoid the duty requested of him by Kingsley Shacklebolt. With unwilling fingers he broke the Ministry of Magic seal.

It was as he'd feared: he had been summoned to the Ministry.

Dying Generations

Chapter 2 of 34

Hermione and Severus meet for the first time after many years.

A/N: Thank you all so much for your lovely reviews of the first chapter, and for your delightful enthusiasm at the return of Denial. It really is a pleasure to be back, and your kindness has warmed my heart. Hello, too, to my first-time readers. If you haven't already left a review, please do they are a balm to my writer's soul, and every single one of them gives me a flutter of joy.

As I said before, the story and the characters will not change in any way from the first draft of Denial. It is mainly my writing that will be improved, I hope, in spots. Either way, I hope you enjoy what is to come. LB x

That is no country for old men. The young

In one another's arms, birds in the trees,

- Those dying generations at their song,

The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,

Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long

Whatever is begotten, born and dies.

Caught in that sensual music all neglect

Monuments of unageing intellect.

- W. B. Yeats, *Sailing to Byzantium*

Severus Snape surveyed what was to be his office for the six long, tedious weeks to come. He ran his slender fingers across the surface of his mahogany desk: it was a handsome piece of furniture, inlaid with green leather to match the sizable chair in which he sat. The walls of the room were oak-panelled, with the exception of the wall to his right, which was home to an extensive collection of books on Wizarding Law. The air was rich with the scent of paper and ink and leather.

The room was to his satisfaction; the task that lay before him was not. He turned his attention to the sheet of parchment in his hand. There were only sixteen names on his list. A satisfied smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth: He was lucky; his forerunners had had much longer lists than this.

The owl he'd received from the Ministry of Magic five days earlier had requested his execution of the post of Marriage Liaison Officer. Each July, scores of witches and wizards completed their full-time education and became subject to the new *Marriage Act*. Accordingly, a Liaison Officer was appointed at that time each year to aid in the proper, legal fulfilment of all offers, declines and acceptances of marriage among the still-single graduates.

As an ex-teacher and former Headmaster of Hogwarts, someone at the ministry had assumed he'd be familiar with many of the young adults. He'd been considered an obvious choice for the position. Now, glancing through the list of graduates, Severus could see it was true: he'd taught every single one of them. Five had been in Slytherin. His smirk faltered: six of his new charges had been Gryffindors. Two of them in particular gave him good reason to clench his jaw. Still, he counted himself fortunate: Minerva McGonagall had acted as Liaison the previous summer when the list had totalled over thirty. *Thirty!* He shuddered at the thought.

It was almost ten o'clock. His ex-pupils were due for an orientation seminar with the head of the Department of Births and Marriages, after which, one by one, they were scheduled to meet him for a discussion about their marriage prospects. A perusal of the schedule on his desk confirmed Neville Longbottom to be the first appointment of the day. He'd no doubt the boy would be late.

Moving to the window, Severus glanced at the street below. The prestigious Belgrave Square premises were owned by the Department of Magical Law and had been home to the Marriage Liaison Offices since the inception of the *Marriage Act*. Severus watched as two familiar faces approached the building and ascended the steps: Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini. At least the Slytherins were punctual.

With a swish of his black robes, he returned to his desk and glared at the list of candidates. Neville Longbottom would be painful enough, but there was one name that made him grind his teeth. *Her*. It was going to be a long, tedious summer.

Hermione smiled as she spotted her approaching friend through the steamy window of the café. Padma Patil looked prettier than ever, her long mane of lustrous, black hair streaming behind her as she negotiated the traffic in the busy street. She spotted Hermione sitting by the window and waved.

Hermione had barely known Padma at Hogwarts. She'd been disappointed to find out that Padma, too, had been accepted to the Sorbonne. Padma had chosen to pursue a degree in Charms and Transfiguration, so they'd shared many classes. At first, they'd been wary of one another: Hermione had assumed Padma might be every bit as frivolous as her twin sister, while Padma, still smarting from Ron's treatment of her at the Yule Ball, had been reluctant to befriend anyone who'd spent seven years in the constant company of Ronald Weasley. But before the end of the first term, they'd become close friends. During their third and fourth years they'd even shared a flat.

Motioning to the waitress, Hermione ordered tea and toast for two while Padma shrugged out of her light summer jacket and took the seat opposite.

"Your hair's lovely!" Padma exclaimed, breathless after her walk. "You've used Sleekeazy's or something."

Hermione nodded. "Sleekeazy's. It's a life-saver. They may take my wand, but they'll never take my Sleekeazy's. Anyway," she said, eyeing the darker girl, "I don't look nearly as good as you ... I'm impressed with the makeup."

"I've been up since five o'clock this morning, wondering what to wear and trying to transfigure my eye-shadow into a colour that matches this blouse." Padma frowned. "I couldn't sleep last night. Big day today ... meeting our future husbands."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I went for a drink with Ginny last night. She said there's only going to be sixteen of us at Belgrave this year. That means eight guys to choose from. At least you could marry a Muggle if you hate them all. If I don't go for a pure-blood or a half-blood, I'm going to have to run away. I'm damned if the Ministry is going to force some random old widower on me." She sighed. "Let's talk about something else: Tell me about your trip to Dublin."

The waitress brought their tray, and Hermione poured the tea.

"Parvati looks absolutely fantastic," Padma said as she buttered a slice of toast. "I can't believe she only gave birth five weeks ago. I hope it's genetic ... I'd love to be able to get my figure back that quickly when the time comes. The baby's adorable. I was afraid he'd look like Seamus," she said, grinning, "but he's like my dad big mop of dark hair and sallow skin. They've called him Aidan, after Seamus's father."

Hermione nibbled her toast. She'd little experience of babies. "How's she finding it? Being at home must be a big change after working in wizarding fashion."

Padma shrugged. "So far, so good. They both seem really happy, to be honest. I've never seen either of them smile so much. Aidan is such a gorgeous little thing ... I didn't want to leave."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Clucky, Miss Patil?"

Padma laughed. "A bit, I suppose. Maybe you should go and visit them ... Seeing them so happy together has definitely made me more hopeful about this whole marriage thing." She sipped at her tea before asking, "Have you heard from anyone in Paris?"

"I had an owl from Sophie last week; she's going to take that job in the Apothecary near Tuilleries. Marie-Anne wrote three days ago to say that she's totally miserable at her parent's house in Marseille. She's just found out that her ex is engaged, and, well ... that's about it, really," she finished, blushing. She'd had one other letter, but she wasn't sure Padma wanted to hear about it.

Padma smiled. "You were never much of a liar, Hermione. You've had a letter from Philippe, haven't you?"

Hermione looked apologetic. "Yesterday. He said he misses you."

Padma gave a sad sigh. Hermione felt a throb of sympathy for her: she'd been seeing a handsome Belgian wizard for two years, but they'd broken up a few months before graduation. She reached out and patted her on the arm.

"I'm okay, Hermione. Honest."

"Are you sure you made the right decision? He would have married you if you'd stayed in Paris. I know he would."

Padma shook her head. "It had run its course. We were too different in the end, I think. It's strange," she added, cocking her head to one side. "I just didn't feel like I wanted to settle down when I was with Philippe. I shared a bed with him; I shared two whole years with him. I couldn't picture myself staying with someone I was intimate with, but here I am, willing to abide by the law and enter into an arranged marriage with a man I don't know yet. Doesn't that seem strange?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes," she agreed. "But this whole situation is strange. It didn't really hit me until I got my summons from the Ministry. We could pretend none of it was real while we were at the Sorbonne, but reality caught up with us in the end. Just think: we could be married within six weeks ..."

They fell silent for a moment, lost in their own thoughts until Hermione said, "If this doesn't work out, I'm going abroad again."

Padma grunted. "Not much point: mainland Europe is on the verge of introducing their own *Marriage Act*."

"But birth rates are looking much better in the States," Hermione said. "I might try my luck over there."

Padma put down her cup. "Hermione, you can't keep running away. And this will never work out if you make some half-hearted effort at it. Either we commit ourselves to this and live in Britain, or we leave now, this morning. I'll come to the States with you. But we either throw ourselves into this one-hundred per cent, or we leave. Which is it?"

"Are you serious? You'd really be prepared to leave England for good?"

Padma nodded. "Completely serious. After seeing Parvati and Seamus so happy, I'm prepared to just get married and give it my all. But if my best friend can't face it, I'm also prepared to start a new life in America. Your choice."

Hermione chewed her lower lip and looked out at the busy street. She'd missed home so much over the last few years. Would she really be prepared to leave all over again? She tried to imagine herself with a nameless, faceless husband, engaging in the wizarding society she'd been so thrilled to discover when she was eleven years old. There were good jobs here ... friends here ... people she loved. It might be quite an adventure, really. Maybe marriage would be every bit as exciting as a new life in America. She returned her gaze to Padma and grinned.

"Let's do it," she said. "Let's stay and get married!" She put out her hand, and they shook on it. She glanced at her watch and gasped.

"We're supposed to be there in ten minutes." She was suddenly nervous. "How's my hair? Is this top alright?"

Padma chuckled. "You look really nice. Come on, let's go."

When they reached the Belgrave offices, they found Neville Longbottom loitering at the top of the steps. He beamed when he saw them.

"Neville!" Hermione cried, throwing her arms around him. "I haven't seen you for ages. You look well."

They pulled apart and regarded each other affectionately. "You look well, too, Hermione," he replied, turning to shake Padma's hand.

"We should go up," said Hermione with another glance at her watch. "The introductory meeting's on the fifth floor, so we can talk as we climb." They pushed open the heavy wooden door and made for the staircase. "How have you been, Neville?"

Neville shrugged. "Fine, I suppose. I only finished my course a week ago, and I was offered a job yesterday."

Hermione smiled at him. "That's brilliant, Neville! What sort of job?"

"Professor Sprout's taken me on as her apprentice. She's retiring two years from now, so I'll take over as Professor of Herbology when she leaves."

Hermione and Padma gaped. "Congratulations, Neville! That's incredible; you must be thrilled," said Padma.

Hermione gave Neville a wink. "I think Neville's marriage prospects just went through the roof," she said. Neville's cheeks turned red.

The other marriage candidates were already waiting when they arrived. At the top of the room stood a small, raised dais, on which two women sat. The first Hermione recognised as Hestia Jones, whom she knew from the Order of the Phoenix. The second was Minerva McGonagall, who gave them a brief smile, followed by a frown as she gestured at her watch.

They took the nearest seats. With a wave of her wand, Hestia closed the door with a thud, and silence fell.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," she began, smiling. "I'm Hestia Jones, and I'm in charge of Marriage Law Enforcement. I'd like to thank you all for coming voluntarily. It's a pleasure to have you all attend of your own free will, rather than have us come and force you to attend under threat of imprisonment." A nervous laugh ran through her audience.

"You'll notice that numbers are uncommonly small this year, and that there are no candidates below the age of nineteen. This is largely due to the increased uptake of third level courses, and the unusually high number of Hogwarts graduates who were already betrothed upon the completion of their NEWTs."

Hermione glanced quickly around the room and saw a few of her former classmates, including Dean Thomas. She gave him a discreet wave.

"Each year," Hestia continued, "we run pre-marriage courses. Not only do these prepare you for married life, they also give you the opportunity to socialise with one another, aiding in your search for a husband or wife."

Hermione and Padma exchanged a furtive look.

"We'd like you to treat Belgrave House as your base for the next six weeks. There's a comfortable common room on the second floor, which will be open to you from eight in the morning until ten in the evening. There you'll find a small library and a continuous supply of refreshments. You're not under any obligation to spend your days there, but it's an excellent place in which to get to know your fellow candidates."

Hermione scrutinised the heads in the rows in front of her. She was almost certain one of them was Susan Bones, in front of whom she was surprised to spot the unmistakable blond hair of Draco Malfoy.

Hestia continued, "I trust most of you are familiar with how the new marriage system works. Later today you'll have your scheduled appointments with the Marriage Liaison Officer. Thereafter, you'll have weekly meetings with your Liaison to discuss your progress and to go through the details of any offers you wish to make or to accept. No matter how well acquainted you may be with your prospective partner, you must go through the formal ritual of offering and accepting marriage proposals, which will be done through the Liaison Officer."

Hermione assumed Minerva McGonagall was to act as Liaison. She knew the Hogwarts Headmistress had done it twice since the introduction of the *Marriage Act*.

"Your attendance is also required each day for a two-hour class. Due to the small numbers involved this year, you'll attend classes as a mixed group, with the exception of your class on Thursdays, when you'll be gender-segregated for Male and Female Health classes. Classes will take place at ten in the morning, most of these in the conference room. Monday's class will be Family Law; Tuesdays you will have Magical Cookery classes, to take place in the basement kitchen."

Hermione couldn't help the exclamation of disgust that escaped her. Cookery? She clapped a hand over her own mouth as every head in the room turned to stare at her.

Hestia raised an eyebrow. "Is there a problem with that, Miss Granger?"

Hermione, completely scarlet, shook her head and tried to disappear into her chair. To her surprise, Draco Malfoy chuckled.

Hestia gave him an amused look. "Attendance is compulsory for both sexes, Mr. Malfoy. In addition to this, you'll have classes in Domestic Magic on Wednesdays; Male and Female Health on Thursdays; and Pre-marriage Counselling on Fridays. Attendance at the Pre-marriage Counselling is only compulsory until you have formally arranged your marriage, at which time you'll be offered a session of private counselling with your prospective spouse. I'll be available over the next six weeks if you wish to speak to me, and your Liaison Officer will be available to you on a daily basis. If you haven't completed your marriage arrangements by the time the six week period has elapsed, we at the Ministry of Magic reserve the right to either choose a spouse for you, or to confiscate your wand. We'll proceed momentarily to a reception in the common room. Before we depart, I'd like to hand you over to Professor McGonagall."

Minerva McGonagall rose from her chair and peered over her glasses at her former students. "I wanted to attend this morning to congratulate all of you on the completion of your studies. Many of you have attained the highest of qualifications. Not only will you have to find spouses this summer; many of you will also be seeking employment. I'd like you to know that I will remain at Hogwarts for the summer should you wish to contact me for any reason."

To Hermione's surprise, Padma's hand shot into the air. "Professor McGonagall, sorry for interrupting, but I presumed you were to be our Liaison Officer. If you're at Hogwarts, who's our Liaison?"

A small smile lifted the corner of McGonagall's mouth. "I'm sure you'll all be delighted to know that your Liaison for this year is to be your former professor, Severus Snape."

Hermione's mouth fell open. She turned to Padma and Neville, whose eyes were wide with shock. There was a sudden urgent mumbling around the room.

Hestia Jones rose from her seat. "Ladies and Gentlemen, might I suggest we retire to the common room?"

Hermione was enchanted by the common room. It was beautifully furnished, with velvet drapes, gleaming coffee tables and an abundance of plush armchairs; but what she liked most was the well-stocked bookshelves at one end of the room. They'd been at the reception for almost an hour when she finally managed to detach herself from the others in order to examine the small library.

She made her way to the bookshelves and then looked back at the crowd: she knew practically all the candidates. Many of them had been her classmates: Susan Bones, Hannah Abbot, Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabini in addition to Draco and Dean. There was a tall, lanky guy she was certain had been in her year, but whose name she couldn't recall. Katie Bell, who'd been a year above, was there too, and although she recognised the remainder of the candidates, they'd all been a year or two below her.

She moved her gaze to the shelves and ran her finger along the spines of the leather-bound books. There were many she hadn't read, including a host of Muggle literature. She could picture herself curled up in an armchair in the handsome room, reading for hours. She opened a book of poetry, but was interrupted only seconds later by Draco Malfoy. As he casually flung himself into the nearest armchair, she felt her muscles instinctively stiffen in defense.

"Hello, Granger," he said, a wolfish grin on his face.

Hermione nodded without smiling. "Malfoy," she replied.

He laughed. "Oh come on, Granger. You can do better than that. Can't we let bygones be bygones?"

Hermione took the armchair opposite him and tried to read his expression. "Are you having me on, Malfoy?"

He raised a blond eyebrow. "I'm just being friendly. You know looking for a wife and all that."

Hermione snorted. "Well, I don't think you're going to find one at this end of the room, Draco."

Draco smirked. "Draco now, is it? You see? You like me better already."

Hermione laughed. "You're such a bloody Slytherin." She examined him, wondering what he was up to. "You seem to have developed a sense of humour, though."

He shrugged. "I always had a sense of humour, Granger. You just never knew it. Seriously, though, if you forgive me for all the times I called you a Mudblood, I'll forgive you for the time you punched me in the face."

"You deserved to be punched in the face. What about the time you hexed my teeth?"

"What about the time your best friend sliced my chest open in the girls' bathroom?" he countered.

"What about the time he saved your goddamn ass in the Room of Requirement?"

"What about the time my mother saved his goddamn ass in the Forbidden Forest?"

Hermione sniggered. "I think that's the end of my list."

"Mine too. Truce?" he asked, extending his hand.

"Truce," she agreed, taking his hand. It was slightly surreal.

"So what do you reckon, Granger? You and me; pure-blood and Muggle-born. Will you marry me?"

She laughed. "I don't think we're suited, Draco. Besides, I think your parents would disown you."

He shrugged. "They've changed. You'd be surprised." He let his gaze wander to the candidates at the other end of the room. "Your friend Padma's pretty hot. Damn shame she's a pure-blood."

Hermione watched Padma flirt with Dean. "She's too good for you anyway."

Draco pouted. "I thought we were letting bygones be bygones?"

"We are," she replied. "I'm just speaking the truth."

Draco watched Padma for a moment and said, "Well then, Granger; who should I go for?"

Hermione looked at the group. She knew Pansy Parkinson was a pure-blood, as was Demelza Robins. "I'm not sure about Katie Bell, but I know Susan's a half-blood and Hannah's a Muggle-born. I presume that younger Slytherin girl, Laura, is a pure-blood?"

"Great," Draco said, grimacing. "Now that you've spurned my advances, Granger, I've only got three to choose from." He returned his gaze to Hermione. "What about you? Want me to set you up with Blaise?"

Hermione choked on the tea she'd been drinking. "No, thank you. I don't think he's my type. And I've nearly as little choice as you, Malfoy: Dean, Terry Boot and Denis Creevey are all Muggle-borns, so they're out of the question."

They sat in silence for a moment, watching the animated group of people interact with one another. Hermione smiled as Neville left McGonagall's side and walked towards them, looking worried.

"I've got to go up and see Snape now," he mumbled, ignoring Draco's presence. "Why did it have to be him, of all people?"

"He's not so bad, Longbottom, once you get to know him," Draco said, looking amused. "His bark's worse than his bite."

"Snape hates me," Neville said sullenly, running his fingers through his thinning hair. "I'm late; I'd better go up."

"Good luck, Neville," said Hermione, patting him on the arm. "I'm sure you'll be fine."

Neville nodded and made for the door, looking like a man condemned.

An hour and a half later, Hermione climbed the stairs for her own appointment with her former Potions Professor. She hadn't seen him since the Christmas after the war, when she'd paid him a visit in St. Mungo's. They hadn't parted on good terms, and she hadn't seen him again. She didn't want to see him. Her hands shook with nerves as she climbed the stairs to his office.

When she reached it, she took a deep, steadying breath and rapped her knuckles on the oaken door. The unpleasantly familiar voice bade her enter, and she turned the knob, feeling like a terrified first-year all over again.

He was sitting behind a vast desk. Her first thought was how much better he looked than when she'd last seen him, better even, than he'd looked while she'd been at Hogwarts: he was not as pallid, not as thin and his hair was not so lank as it had been during her schooldays.

"Sit, Miss Granger," he growled without raising his gaze, continuing to scribble on a lengthy scroll of parchment.

Hermione approached the desk and sat on the chair that faced his own, folding her hands self-consciously in her lap. She didn't know what to feel as she took in the sight of the familiar scowl, the dark head and the defensive posture. Certainly not the instinctive dislike she'd felt as his student; more of a confused mixture of curiosity, fear and even, perhaps, pity. She could never think of him without remembering all that Harry had seen when he'd watched Snape's memories in the Pensieve on the night of the final battle.

She coloured brilliantly as he raised his eyes and caught her watching him.

"So, Miss Granger," he sneered. "Let us glance through your curriculum vitae and consider what your marriage prospects might be." He picked up a scroll. "Well, well, well: A double-honours degree from the Sorbonne in Charms and Potions. Whoever would have thought it? I never found you'd any sort of flair for my subject, Miss Granger, or is the mere regurgitation of information enough to secure one's degree these days?"

Hermione tried not to let him see the shock she felt. "You're no longer my Professor, *Mister* Snape," she said as calmly as she could. "So I'd appreciate if you treated me like an adult and dropped your classroom bullying tactics."

His eyes narrowed, and Hermione bravely held his stare until he returned his scrutiny to the sheet in front of him. Feeling as though she had won some sort of unspoken battle, she willed her thumping heart to slow.

"Have you found employment?" he inquired a moment later.

"Not yet," she replied, and then added, "sir," in the hope of regaining some civility. "I've applied for two positions: one as a Potioneer in St. Mungo's, the other as an assistant to a private Potion Maker in London."

He sniggered. "Yes, Miss Granger. I received your application three days ago. I was rather amused."

Hermione's jaw fell open in surprise. "You're the ... I mean, you're ..." she stammered.

"Why so surprised, Miss Granger? Did you think I'd been completely idle since retiring from Hogwarts?"

Hermione felt her cheeks colour again. "Well," she mumbled, "I'd heard ..." she stopped, unable to finish the sentence.

"Heard what, Miss Granger? That I was permanently incapacitated? That I was a kept man?"

She shrugged, embarrassed at the turn the conversation had taken and disappointed that one of her job applications was now null and void.

She watched as he took up his quill, hand poised above a blank sheet of parchment. "I must ask, Miss Granger, are there any of the candidates to whom you feel you could not be wed?"

"Well, I can't consider any of the other Muggle-borns," she began.

"Yes, thank you for pointing that out," he snapped. "I think you'll find I'm not nearly as intellectually challenged as your friends, Miss Granger. There's no need to state the obvious."

Hermione ground her teeth together. "I'm making an effort to remain civil," she hissed. "I'd appreciate it if you'd do the same."

They glared at one another, and Hermione thought she could actually see the tension shimmering in the air.

"With the exception of Neville, I don't know the remaining candidates well enough to judge whether or not they're suitable," she explained through still-gritted teeth. "So I'm not in a position to eliminate any of them."

"Thank you, Miss Granger," he responded, his voice laced with sarcasm. "As I have a copy of your curriculum vitae, that's all I require of you today. Your next appointment will be at noon on Tuesday. You may leave."

Quivering with anger, Hermione rose from her seat and strode to the door. He spoke again just as she reached for the doorknob.

"By the way, Miss Granger," he said quietly. "I'm afraid I won't be considering you for the position of Potions Assistant."

"That's *fine* by me," she retorted, opening the door. "I'd rather work for a mountain troll than work for you. And you might be a little more grateful, seeing as I saved your goddamn life."

She slammed the door as hard as she could behind her. Maybe she *should* have gone to America. Anything would be better than having to face that bad-tempered, bitter man every week.

Severus winced as Hermione slammed the door behind her, then he closed his eyes and put a hand to his aching temple. He already regretted his behaviour. He'd even been polite to Neville Longbottom that morning.

Cursing himself for his lack of control, he poured a brandy from the decanter on the desk. Why had Hermione Granger always irked him so? He wished it had been *anyone* but she who had saved his life.

Another Measure

Chapter 3 of 34

Much to Severus Snape's astonishment, Hermione receives an offer of marriage.

Alas! I have not hope nor health,

Nor peace within nor calm around,

Nor that content surpassing wealth

The sage in meditation found,

And walked with inward glory crowned

Nor fame, nor power, nor love, nor leisure.

Others I see whom these surround

Smiling they live, and call life pleasure; -

To me that cup has been dealt in another measure.

- Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Stanzas Written in Dejection near Naples*

Hermione reached out to stifle her insistent alarm clock: It was only seven o'clock she had plenty of time to snooze before she was due at Belgrave Square. A week had passed since their first meeting at Belgrave House, and despite her misgivings, she had to admit she was rather enjoying herself.

To her astonishment, Draco had turned out to be the life and soul of the group. She'd no idea if he'd changed completely since the end of the war or if she'd never really known him in the first place. Either way, she was actually enjoying his company. Draco Malfoy, of all people.

Snuggling further under her duvet, she thought about her first week at Belgrave. After her disastrous meeting with Severus Snape, she'd gone out for dinner with Padma, Dean and Neville. Padma and Dean had seemed rather taken with one another, and she was worried that her best friend was rushing things. Padma had been so besotted by her little nephew and so envious of her twin sister's happy marriage that Hermione feared she was latching on to Dean. Seamus was, after all, Dean's best friend; Parvati would be thrilled if her sister chose Dean as a husband.

Their first class in Magical Cookery had been hilarious. Their tutor was a batty old witch called Hortensia Splattermore. They'd been given the instructions for cooking a turkey and ham pie, and although most of them had found it easy enough, it had soon become obvious that Draco, Blaise and Pansy had never prepared a meal in their lives. The chaos at their respective desks had been the cause of much hilarity, and when the class had finished, Madam Splattermore had announced Dean's pie as the clear winner, earning him a beaming smile from Padma.

Domestic Magic was the dullerest class of all, although the two-hour long lecture on magical plumbing had given Hermione plenty of opportunity to inspect her prospective spouses from beneath her mane of curls. She'd watched Draco for ages; he was certainly good-looking, as was Blaise. Then she'd turned her scrutiny to Michael Corner, Ginny's ex-boyfriend. He was a bit of a colourless character, and not nearly as attractive as Draco. Besides Neville, her only other option was a tall, dark young man, whose name she still hadn't learned. He'd turned up to the classes, but she hadn't once spotted him in the common room.

Female Health was by far the worst of the classes. It was suspiciously like an ante-natal class. There'd been no mention at all of contraception, just two hours of 'babies are wonderful' propaganda and a lecture on the merits of the *Marriage Act*.

Their Friday morning class, Pre-Marriage Counselling, had been the most entertaining. Their counsellor had asked them to divide into two groups, male and female, and come up with a list of expectations they had about marriage. The girls' list had included 'love', 'security', 'support' and 'children'; the boys' list, on the other hand, was more along the lines of 'home-cooked meals', 'regular sex' and (she rather suspected Draco had been behind this one) 'full Swedish massages'. It had certainly provided an illuminating insight into the mind of the twenty-something male.

Peeping at her alarm clock through bleary eyes, she saw that it was after seven-thirty. Yawning, she grabbed a towel and headed for the bathroom, bestowing a good morning kiss on her father as he passed by. She brushed her teeth while she waited for the water to warm up and frowned at her reflection in the mirror: it was Tuesday, which meant she had her weekly meeting with Severus Snape. Stepping beneath the hot water, she scrubbed at her skin, trying to rid herself of the sudden, overwhelming feeling of anxiety.

Hermione dreaded seeing him again. Not one of the other candidates had complained about their meeting with him. Neville had even expressed surprise that Snape had been so polite. Hurt that he'd been so rude to her, Hermione hadn't mentioned his behaviour to the others, not even to Padma. He hated her because she'd saved his life. She was sure of it.

She'd never forget that day. As morning had broken in the hours after the defeat of Voldemort, she, Ron and Harry had been in the Headmaster's office when she'd finally realised. Harry had told Dumbledore's portrait that he was going to put the Elder Wand back in the white marble tomb, and they'd turned to leave the office. Hermione had given Dumbledore's portrait one last glance before she'd been struck by complete horror. She'd grabbed Harry's arm in shock.

"Hermione," he'd whispered. "What's wrong?"

"He's still alive!" she'd cried, clapping her hands over her mouth. "Oh, Merlin! He's still alive, and we just left him!"

Harry and Ron had exchanged a confused glance. "Hermione," Ron had said gently, "he's dead. Fred is gone ..."

She'd shaken her head. "No. Not Fred. Snape! Professor Snape is still alive!"

Harry had said, "Hermione, he's gone. We watched him die!"

"He was Headmaster, Harry. If he's dead, where's his portrait? You told us that Dumbledore's portrait was here only an hour or two after he'd died, didn't you?"

Harry and Ron had looked around the room. "Maybe he hadn't been Headmaster long enough or something?" Harry had suggested.

"No! It doesn't work like that. He should be here! He's alive!" She'd fled down the staircase, running blindly through the rubble-strewn corridors. Tears had started to flow. She couldn't believe they'd left him without even checking for a pulse. Ron and Harry had run after her, all of them heading for the front doors of the castle. Extracting her wand from beneath her robes as they ran, she'd cried, "*Accio Dittany!*"

They'd stopped by the doors, waited for the whoosh of the approaching bottle, but none had come. "Ron," she'd said urgently, "go and get Madam Pomfrey. Tell her to come and to bring Dittany and a Blood-Replenishing Potion."

"Harry," she'd ordered, "get Professor McGonagall and tell her what's happened. Tell her to summon the Healers from St. Mungo's and to meet us at the Shrieking Shack."

They'd nodded their understanding and had raced back to the Great Hall. Hermione had fled across the grounds to the Whomping Willow, her heart thumping in her chest, guilt and terror battling for supremacy in her mind. She'd reached the tree and had descended into the tunnel, running as fast as she had dared along the uneven passageway. When she'd reached the end, she'd pulled herself through the hole and into the room where her former teacher still lay, unmoving and white as death.

"Professor?" she'd whispered as she'd crawled towards him. "Professor Snape? Can you hear me?"

He'd made no movement. His eyes had been open, and a sob had escaped her throat. He'd certainly looked dead. With shaking hands, she'd reached out to grasp his wrist, her trembling fingers feeling for a pulse. For the first few seconds she'd felt nothing, and she'd thought it was too late. But then she'd felt it: the tiny flutter that had told her he was still alive.

"You're alive!" she'd cried and had bent down upon the filthy floor. She'd looked into his still-glassy eyes, searching for something, anything that might confirm his still-beating heart.

"Can you hear me, Professor?" She'd touched the side of his face; his skin had been cold. Taking her wand from beneath her robes, she'd whispered "*Ehnnervatel!*" Nothing. Was he paralysed? Could he even be still conscious, just unable to move? Looking in dismay at the pool of congealed blood all around her, she'd realised she'd been kneeling in it. There was so much of it that she couldn't believe there'd still been a pulse.

Not knowing what else she could do, she'd inched forward and gently lifted his head. Positioning her legs below him, she'd placed his head in her lap and had started to stroke his hair, tears flowing down her face and splashing on his ashen cheek.

"If you can hear this, Professor, I want you to know that I'm sorry," she'd whispered. "I'm sorry we left you; we just presumed you were dead!"

She'd stopped for a moment, trying to blink back the tears. "I was so stupid, Professor. I forgot that snake venom can paralyse without actually killing you. I'm so, so sorry."

"If you can hear me, I want you to know that you're the bravest man I ever knew." She'd looked into his black eyes for a moment, sure that he was already gone, certain he

wouldn't make it.

"I'm sorry for all the times I doubted you. Harry told us about what he saw in the Pensieve; I can't believe what you've gone through for so long ... all for Harry's sake ... for his mother's sake. Before he finished Voldemort, Harry told him that you'd loved his mother ... Lily. Voldemort knew which side you were on before he died; I hope that's some consolation, at least."

As the early morning light had seeped through the wooden slats of the shack, she'd heard voices approaching from the tunnel. She'd lowered her voice to a whisper. "Harry told Ron and me what he saw in your memories. I swear, Professor, we'll never tell another soul. They heard Harry tell Voldemort you'd loved his mother, but that's all they know. If you make it, I'll ... I'll return your memories to you when you're better. If you don't get better ..." she'd stifled a small sob, "I'll destroy the memories. I promise."

The voices in the tunnel had grown louder. She'd taken one last look into the empty depths of his black eyes and had wiped her tears with the sleeve of her grubby cardigan. He was so still, so white that she didn't dare believe he might make it. Leaning closer to his ear, she'd whispered, "Thank you, Professor Snape. Thank you for everything. I will always, *always* be sorry that we took so long to come back to you."

Then Ron had climbed through the hole and into the room, followed by Poppy Pomfrey.

"Out of my way, Ronald!" Madam Pomfrey had snapped, her eyes widening as she took in the sight of her colleague. Reaching for his wrist, she'd locked gazes with Hermione. "You were right. He's still alive." She looked at the blood on the floor. "Although goodness knows how; he should be dead."

Reaching into her robes, she'd extracted a small, clear bottle. "Hold his head back a little, that's it ... I'm going to apply the Dittany directly onto his neck. I hope he's unconscious because this will sting dreadfully."

There'd been a loud hissing when the drops of Dittany had fallen onto the wounds. To Hermione's dismay, they hadn't healed, although the thin trickle of blood that was still coming from his neck had stopped.

"There's not much we can do for a venomous bite like that; he needs to go straight to St. Mungo's." Madam Pomfrey had looked at Hermione once more. "Let's get some Blood-Replenishing Potion into him; it will keep him alive until he gets to London."

Hermione had elevated his head while Madam Pomfrey had poured as much of the potion as she could into his mouth and had massaged his punctured neck to get him to swallow. There had been a sudden ruckus from outside the shack.

"Hermione?" Harry had called.

"In here!" she'd replied before Harry, Minerva McGonagall and two Healers had burst into the room. Within seconds, they'd conjured a stretcher, levitated Severus Snape from the floor and had Apparated to St. Mungo's.

Hermione had stood, staring at the spot where they'd disappeared for what had felt like hours, tears of guilt and fatigue falling down her dirt-stained cheeks until Minerva McGonagall had put a gentle hand on her arm.

"Miss Granger," she'd murmured. "You are overwrought. Come ... let us return to the castle."

Hermione had turned anguished eyes towards the Headmistress. "I should've checked before we left him ... hours and ~~hours~~ ago! What if he's been lying here, conscious and in agony for all that time?"

"Miss Granger ... Hermione," she'd replied, her eyes kind, "so many people have died tonight. How many are still in pain up at the school? How many could we have saved if only we'd done things a little differently?" She had lifted Hermione's chin. "You saved his life, Hermione. That's enough."

Five years had passed since that day, and guilt still gnawed at her from time to time. She stepped out of the shower and wrapped a fluffy towel around her shoulders, wondering if he hated her because she had saved his life, or because she hadn't saved it quickly enough?

"Good morning, you two!" Hermione announced cheerily as she perched on the arm of the sofa next to Neville and Padma.

Neville's cheeks turned bright pink, and he murmured something about needing the bathroom before practically leaping from the sofa and sprinting through the common room door.

Hermione and Padma shared a bewildered look. "What was that about?" asked Padma.

"No idea," Hermione replied. "What were you talking about before I came over?"

Padma shrugged. "Nothing, really. Hogwarts ... plants ... that sort of thing."

Still puzzling over Neville's strange behaviour, they made their way to Magical Cookery class, where this week's task was apple and blackberry pie.

"Can't she cook anything other than pies?" Draco hissed to Hermione.

Hermione smiled. "You're one to talk, Draco. Can't you cook anything other than toast?"

"Can't even cook toast," he replied, smirking. "In fact, I couldn't even tell you where our kitchen is."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You'll make a wonderful husband."

"You see, Granger," he whispered, "my domestic talents lie elsewhere: in the bedroom, for instance."

Hermione sniggered, earning a glare from Madam Splattermore and a raised eyebrow from Padma. At the end of the class, Padma's pie was pronounced the winner.

"I knew it!" said Dean while they removed their aprons. "We're a match made in heaven. We could get married and open a pie shop!"

Padma giggled and blushed prettily. Hermione, feeling rather surplus to requirements, looked at her watch and gasped.

"What's wrong?" asked Padma.

"We ran over. I'm ten minutes late for my meeting with Snape!"

Flinging her apron onto the worktop, she fled through the door and took the stairs two at a time. When she arrived at the office door, she was panting heavily. Tucking her stray curls behind her ears in an effort to look respectable, she knocked and then opened the door.

Severus Snape was sitting behind his desk again, his arms folded and a frown of annoyance on his face.

"I'm sorry I'm late. Cookery class ran a few minutes over," she gushed, nervous already.

"I see," he muttered. "That would explain the flour on your nose."

Hermione's hand flew to her nose, her colour rising.

"Sit, Miss Granger," he spat, gesturing towards the empty seat.

She took the chair, self-consciously rubbing her floury hands on her jeans. He regarded her for a moment, a strange expression on his face. She tried not to bite at her nails while she waited for him to speak.

He opened a green folder lying on the desk and extracted a thick, official-looking document. His eyes moved over it and then he placed it back on the desk. Returning his gaze to her face, he leaned forward and laced his fingers. Hermione wondered for a second if he had reconsidered her for the position of Potions Assistant.

"It appears congratulations are in order, Miss Granger."

She looked into the black eyes of her former professor and frowned. "Excuse me, sir?"

"You heard me, Miss Granger," he said, returning her frown. "Astonishing as it may seem, you've become the first candidate to receive a formal offer of marriage."

Oblivious to his insult, Hermione felt the blood drain from her face. She opened her mouth to speak, but quickly snapped it shut again, not knowing what to say.

"Gryffindors," Snape muttered with a sneer. "Always blatantly transparent. I take it your astonishment indicates you were not aware the offer was to be made?"

She stared at him. Who on earth could have made an offer for her? "No, sir, I'd no idea."

He picked up the document and waved it at her. "A formal offer was made for your hand in marriage yesterday afternoon. I have the details for your perusal."

Hermione looked at the document as if it were a poisonous snake. She ran through the possibilities in her mind. Draco? No, it couldn't be ... He had been joking when he asked her to marry him. Michael Corner? She'd caught him looking at her on more than one occasion, but they'd barely even spoken. Blaise? No, they hated each other. She was mystified.

"Who?" she asked.

With obvious enjoyment, he answered, "Neville Longbottom."

"*What?*" she cried. Her breathing felt laboured, as though someone had thumped her in the chest. She put her face in her hands, suddenly understanding Neville's strange behaviour that morning. "What on earth is he *thinking!*"

Snape pushed the document across the desk towards her. "You have forty-eight hours to review the proposal. The formal offer includes all details of Mister Longbottom's family tree, wealth and curriculum vitae. You must report to me on..."

"No!" she interrupted, pushing the parchment back towards him across.

"How dare you interrupt, Miss Granger. What do you mean, 'no'?"

"I don't need to read it; the answer is no. I will not marry Neville Longbottom."

With a scowl he asked, "Might I venture to ask on what grounds you refuse the offer?"

"On all grounds! On the grounds that Neville and I are incompatible." She shook her head, pressing her fingertips to her temples. "I've no idea why he's done this!" She rose from her seat.

Snape glared at her. "Where do you think you're going, Miss Granger?"

She inched towards the door. "I have to find Neville. I have to speak to him."

"Sit down at once!" he ordered. "You will not leave this room until we've concluded this meeting."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "I'm no longer your student, and if you'll beg my pardon, sir, Neville's feelings are a little more important to me than ruffling your feathers." She opened the door.

Snape grunted. "Must we end every interview with an altercation?"

"So it seems," she replied, slamming the door behind her once more.

Hermione rushed down the stairs to the common room. She burst through the door and looked around. Practically the entire class were there. Padma looked up from her conversation with Katie Bell.

"Hermione? Is everything okay?"

Hermione nodded distractedly. Her gaze finally alighted on Neville, who was trying to look inconspicuous in an armchair near the bookshelves. Aware that most of the eyes in the room were upon her, she approached his chair and dropped her voice to a whisper.

"Neville, we need to talk," she murmured. He nodded, his cheeks scarlet.

"Will you meet me in the park across the road?" she asked. "I just want to clean all this flour from my hands before I leave." She didn't really care about the state of her hands, but she needed a moment to think.

Neville nodded again and shifted awkwardly in his seat. Refusing to meet Padma's stare, Hermione made straight for the bathroom on the same floor. She looked at herself in the mirror: her hair was a mess, and there was still flour on her nose. She wet a paper towel and pressed it to her flaming cheeks.

She felt sorry for Neville, but she still had to say no. For a moment she thought she couldn't face him. Should she have gone through the formal procedure of refusing his offer and left it at that? No ... she owed him an explanation. And she needed to know why he'd done this. Drying her hands, she left the building before anyone could stop her.

When she reached the park, she found Neville sitting on a bench. She sat beside him. He fidgeted awkwardly with the strap of his watch, still refusing to look at her.

"Why did you do it, Neville?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I thought it was worth a shot. You've always been kind to me. I thought ... I thought, maybe, you wouldn't ... you know ... be totally repulsed by me."

She put her hand on his arm. He finally met her gaze. "Neville, of course I'm not repulsed by you. I'm very, very fond of you and always have been. I just don't think that's enough of a basis for a marriage, do you?"

He sighed and shook his head. "What basis for a marriage do I have with anyone in there?" he asked, jerking his head in the direction of Belgrave House. "I presume you refused?"

"Neville, of course I refused! You're going to make somebody a wonderful husband, but not me. We're too different, Neville. We're just not compatible. Can't you see that?"

He frowned. "You mean that you're clever; I'm stupid. You're pretty; I'm dull. You're popular; I'm not."

"Don't be silly. You're just sulking now. You know you're perfectly clever: haven't you just landed a job at Hogwarts? You're certainly not dull, and since when have ~~ever~~ been popular?"

Neville pouted. "I'm sorry, okay? I'm just feeling sorry for myself. I *hate* this whole marriage thing, you know? I don't want a bloody wife."

Hermione had never seen him so depressed. "Neville, what's happened to you? I'll never forget the night we walked through that tunnel from the Hog's Head and into the Room of Requirement. You'd transformed! You were so brave. You stood up to Voldemort; you killed his snake with the sword of Godric Gryffindor, for goodness sake! If anybody has ever belonged in Gryffindor, it's you, Neville Longbottom. Where has all your bravery gone?"

Neville shrugged again, but suddenly he smiled and turned to her. "Voldemort and Nagini don't seem nearly as terrifying as finding a wife."

They both laughed. "Do you forgive me for refusing you?" Hermione asked.

He managed another smile. "Of course I do. I'm sorry for doing it without asking you; I don't know what came over me."

Hermione gave him an awkward hug. "Let's keep this between us, Neville. The other candidates don't need to know."

He seemed relieved. "Thanks, Hermione. I'd appreciate that. Will you tell Padma?"

She shook her head. "No. You were my friend before Padma, and this is your information. I won't tell anybody unless you want me to. Besides," she added, grinning. "I don't think any of them should know. Hannah has been checking you out for days; we don't want to put her off."

Neville raised an eyebrow. "Are you serious?"

"Yep. What's more, Susan Bones told me that Hannah is hoping to get a position as assistant librarian at Hogwarts. Convenient, eh?"

Neville looked hopeful for a moment until his shoulders slumped, and then he lowered his gaze.

Finally understanding, she asked, "What became of Luna, Neville?"

He sighed. "She decided to travel the world. She wrote for a while, but I've no idea where she's been for the past two years. She was in Tibet looking for yetis, last I heard."

Hermione chuckled. "I should've guessed. Did you two ever, you know ..."

"Hook up?" Neville asked. "No ... I was crazy about her, though. Still am. I know she thought of me as her friend, but I don't think she ... well, fancied me or anything."

"I think she did," Hermione said. "I just don't think she would have expressed *inormally*." They both laughed. "Why don't you just go and find her if this is making you so unhappy, Neville?"

"I can't, Hermione. I can't leave England."

"Why not? You could go find all sorts of exotic magical plants!"

He turned an anguished face towards her. "And leave my parents? My Gran isn't getting any younger; I couldn't leave full responsibility for them to her. I visit them every Sunday, no matter what. Who would do that if I left?"

Hermione suddenly felt very stupid. She'd forgotten about Neville's parents; he'd never mentioned them since the day they'd met him in St. Mungo's when they'd gone to visit Arthur Weasley. She'd forgotten what a heart-breaking life poor Neville had led.

"Mum's not been very well," he continued, looking at his shoes. "She's had pneumonia twice in the past year. I know she probably doesn't know who I am at all, but I couldn't leave her; she looks so happy when she gets a visitor."

"I'm sorry, Neville," she apologised. "It was silly of me to suggest you just up and leave. Of course you couldn't abandon them."

"I know I'm acting like a spoilt child, Hermione. I know we've all lost people we love in the war, but in a way it's worse, having my parents like this. I can't grieve for them because they're still here, but at the same time, I'm a kind of orphan."

He rose from the bench. "I just look at you all in there, at Belgrave House, and you all look happy. And all I can think about is Luna Lovegood and how there's no way out of this situation."

"I'm so sorry, Neville. I hope this works out, and I hope you find some happiness because if anyone deserves it, it's you," Hermione said miserably. "Do you truly forgive me for refusing you?"

"Of course I do," he replied. "I'm sorry I put you in an awkward position. Now, I better go," he announced. "I promised Gran I'd bring her shopping."

With a brief wave, he left the park. Hermione watched him go, an ache in her chest. She was the first candidate to receive an offer of marriage. She supposed she should have been happy, but it had been a long time since she'd felt so terribly sad.

The Eyes of the Doe

Chapter 4 of 34

Hermione receives another offer of marriage, and Severus remembers.

White sky, over the hemlocks bowed with snow,
Saw you not at the beginning of evening the antlered buck and his doe
Standing in the apple-orchard? I saw them. I saw them suddenly go,
Tails up, with long leaps lovely and slow,
Over the stone-wall into the wood of hemlocks bowed with snow.
Now lies he here, his wild blood scalding the snow.
How strange a thing is death, bringing to his knees, bringing to his antlers
The buck in the snow.
How strange a thing, - a mile away by now, it may be,
Under the heavy hemlocks that as the moments pass
Shift their loads a little, letting fall a feather of snow-
Life, looking out attentive from the eyes of the doe.

Edna St. Vincent Millay *The Buck in the Snow*

Almost two weeks had passed since Hermione had refused Neville's offer of marriage. He'd looked disgruntled for a day or two, but he'd cheered up eventually, when he'd finally noticed the regular admiring looks being directed his way by Hannah Abbott.

Neville wasn't the only one who'd found an admirer. Dennis Creevey never seemed to leaved Demelza Robins' side. Hermione was delighted for them; they were by far the youngest candidates, and they seemed genuinely fond of one another.

But there was only one real whirlwind romance at Belgrave: Padma and Dean. Despite her initial misgivings, Hermione had to admit that they were well suited. She couldn't quite explain it they just clicked. They looked good together; they'd lots in common; and they were both bloody good at baking pies. They were openly holding hands in the common room now, and everyone was expecting their engagement to be announced at any moment. Hermione wished they'd just get on with it; if she had to hear about how lovely Dean's eyes were once more, she was going to have to throttle her best friend.

She was the first to arrive at Belgrave House on Monday morning. After pouring herself a cup of tea, she settled into her favourite armchair in the common room with a copy of the *Daily Prophet* and scoured it for job notices. She'd been called for an interview for the Potioneer position at St. Mungo's, but it wasn't the job for her. She'd had lunch with Ginny two days before and had found out that some suitable positions would be coming up in the Department of Mysteries. It was definitely more enticing than the thought of whipping up batches of Pepperup Potion at St. Mungo's.

She'd just finished reading an article on Azkaban prison when Draco arrived with the lanky Slytherin whose name she still didn't know. It was the first time she'd seen the tall guy in the common room; he usually bolted after most of the classes and hadn't even turned up for half of them. He was well over six feet tall and very thin, with a pale face, hollow cheeks and dark, brooding eyes. She'd yet to hear the sound of his voice.

Draco grinned when he saw her and perched on the arm of her chair. "How are you this morning, light of my life?" he drawled.

Hermione sniggered. "Very well, thank you. I can't take you seriously at all, Draco."

"And nor should you. Make sure you bear that in mind," he said enigmatically, giving her a wink.

She frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Draco smirked. "You'll see. I just hope you won't be annoyed."

Hermione's frown deepened. "What are you up to?"

"All will be revealed this afternoon. I wanted to stir things up a bit; it's getting boring. I mean, we're into the fourth week now, and not a single proposal," he said, shaking his head.

Hermione was glad she'd told no-one about Neville's offer. "What do you intend to do about it?"

Draco tapped the side of his nose. "Patience, Granger. Just make sure you tell everybody when you find out. That way, my little joke will fulfil its purpose."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You're such a sly git." She gave a little wave as Hannah, Susan and Katie entered the room. "Draco," she asked in a whisper, "who's the guy that came in with you? I know he was at Hogwarts ..."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "I thought you knew everything, Granger? That's Theo he was in our year."

"Theo? You mean Theodore Nott?"

Draco nodded. "He's a decent skin. Just bashful, I think."

Hermione watched him at the other end of the room. "He looks different. I don't remember him being in any of my NEWT classes."

"He didn't come back to Hogwarts after the war; he sat his NEWTs with a private tutor. My Mum's friendly with his Mum. I think he did well in the exams he's damn clever." He turned to watch Theodore for a moment, who had his nose buried in a book. "What class have we got today, Granger?"

"Family Law," she said.

Draco put his face in his hands. "No! I can't stand the boredom!"

Hermione chuckled. "It's not so bad. Besides, I thought you'd studied Wizarding Law?"

"I did," he replied, "for four long, painful years. That's exactly why I don't want the agony prolonged any further."

Hermione smiled and watched Theodore Nott. Draco eventually left her side to talk to Pansy, and although she observed him for almost twenty minutes, Theodore didn't once raise his eyes from his book. Intrigued, she left for her class.

Family Law was a bore, just as Draco had said it would be. In fact, with the exception of Pre-marriage Counselling, most of their classes were utterly dull. Hermione had her suspicions that the courses were there to throw the candidates together, rather than to contribute to their future marriages in any meaningful way.

After their class, she and Padma stretched out on the grass of Belgrave Park, enjoying the sunshine. It was a perfect August day, and Hermione supposed there could be far worse things in the world than spending the summer looking for a husband.

"Where's Dean disappeared to?" she inquired of her friend. "He left class early."

"He's gone shopping," Padma replied, grinning.

Hermione sat up, shielding her eyes with her hand. "What do you mean, he's gone shopping? Why are you grinning like an idiot?" she asked, starting to grin like an idiot herself.

Padma sat up and crossed her legs. "He's gone to buy a ring," she whispered.

Hermione threw her arms around Padma and gave a squeal of pleasure. "I'm so, so happy for you!"

"I'm just so excited ... I really, really like him," she gushed, beaming. "Are you genuinely happy for us? I thought, maybe, you weren't so sure about him ..."

Hermione shook her head, still grinning. "I have to admit, at the start I thought you were interested in him just because he's such good friends with Seamus and Parvati. But I was wrong; you're really, truly good together. I'm thrilled for you. Honestly, I am."

They hugged again, and Padma sighed contentedly. "I told him I wasn't pushed about doing the whole engagement ring thing, but he insisted. He wants to ask me properly bended knee and all that. Then he wants to ask my parents' permission before he offers formally. We're having dinner with my folks on Thursday, so it should all become official on Friday."

"It's wonderful," said Hermione. "You'll be the first happy couple unless Dennis and Demelza beat you to it."

"What about you?" asked Padma. "I think Michael Corner's pretty interested he's been devouring you with his eyes!"

Hermione giggled. "I've noticed him staring a few times; I wish he wouldn't it's embarrassing. It's flattering and all, but I don't know ... I'm just not interested."

Hermione frowned as she watched Katie Bell open the little gate into the park and look about. Katie spotted them, and with a little wave, came racing over.

"Hermione," she said breathlessly, "Professor Snape wants to see you. He said it's urgent."

Hermione groaned as she rose to her feet. "What have I done to deserve this? I'm not scheduled to see him until tomorrow. Did he say what it was about?"

Katie shook her head, and all three of them made their way back to Belgrave House, where Hermione climbed the stairs to the Liaison Office. Curious, she tapped on the door and entered the room.

Severus Snape was standing with his back to the door, looking through the window onto the street below.

"You wanted to see me?" she asked, already bristling for a fight.

He turned and gave a curt nod. "Have a seat, Miss Granger," he murmured, returning his scrutiny to the world outside.

Hermione sat down, hating the way he began each of their meetings with a long silence, deliberately making her feel uncomfortable. To her surprise, he got to the point quickly this time.

"Were you aware that another offer was to be made for you, Miss Granger?" he asked, returning to his seat.

Hermione gasped. "No, I certainly wasn't."

Snape frowned. "Have you any idea why your suitors appear unwilling to approach you before submitting formal offers for your hand?"

"Are you suggesting I'm unapproachable?" she asked, amused. "Or terrifying?"

"I'm suggesting neither," he said. "I'm merely curious as to why you've received two offers of marriage without your prior knowledge."

He extracted a contract from the folder on his desk. Pushing it towards her, he said, "Draco Malfoy offered for you early this afternoon."

"You can't be serious?" she muttered, reaching for the parchment.

"I rarely jest, Miss Granger."

Hermione read the name on the parchment in disbelief. First Neville and now Draco she couldn't understand it. She thought back to her conversation with Draco that morning in the common room, and suddenly, she understood. She began to laugh.

"Do you think this is funny?" he snapped.

She continued to laugh for a moment. "Yes. It's meant to be funny. It's a joke."

"Why would this be a joke?" he growled, his ebony eyes shining with annoyance.

"Draco just wanted to stir things up a little," she explained. "Nobody knows about Neville's offer, you see. Draco thought things were getting boring, so this is his idea of a joke; his way of stirring things up."

"Are you suggesting that Mr Malfoy has deliberately wasted my time by coming in here and insisting he wants to marry you?"

Hermione nodded. "I'm afraid so. He told me this morning not to take him seriously; this is obviously what he meant."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "I must confess," he said, "I was quite astonished when he named *you*."

"Really?" she replied in clipped tones. "It may *astonish* you further to know that Draco and I have become rather good friends."

"Friendship is one thing, Miss Granger. Membership of the Malfoy family is quite another."

Hermione felt such a rush of anger that she almost considered accepting Draco's proposal just to spite him. A dozen angry retorts came to mind. Instead, she took a long, deep breath and leaned forward, placing her elbows on Snape's desk.

"Why do you hate me so, Professor?" she asked quietly.

He raised an eyebrow. "Hate is rather a strong word, Miss Granger. I don't hate you."

"From what I've heard," she continued, trying to stop her voice from shaking, "you've treated all the other candidates, even Neville, with respect. Why cannot the same courtesy be extended to me?"

"It was never my intention to disrespect you. Surely you've learned, over the years, that I'm an unpleasant man?" he asked, his brow furrowed.

"I don't expect you to be pleasant; I just expect to be treated with the civility you extend to the other candidates." She glared at him for a moment, trying to interpret the expression in his black eyes. "Do you hate me because I saved your life?"

Snape regarded her for a few seconds and then sat back in his chair. "Do you mean to imply that I didn't wish to live? Or, perhaps, that I resent you because I'm in your debt?"

Hermione shrugged. "You tell me."

"Would you have me lie prostrate before you in gratitude?" he drawled.

"I'll take that to mean you dislike owing me your life."

"Interpret it as you will," he said, lacing his fingers. His eyes returned to the folder on his desk. "Do you formally refuse Mr. Malfoy's offer?"

"Yes, I do," she confirmed. "May I leave?"

"You may."

She made her way to the door. Before she left, he spoke again.

"Before you slam my door, Miss Granger, I wonder if I could ask you a favour. Would you inform Mr. Malfoy that I'd like to see him immediately?"

She replied in the affirmative, and, just to annoy him, she closed his office door as gently as she could.

Severus grimaced; no sooner had she shut the door behind her than he was back there, in the Shrieking Shack. He knew by now not to fight it. Instead, he let the memories wash over him.

He remembered no pain from the moment when Nagini had struck him. He'd always regarded that as strange; he could distinctly recall the unpleasant sensation of the damned serpent sinking its fangs into his neck, yet at the time he had felt no pain. As he'd fallen to his knees, there were two emotions. The first was a sense of irony: the Head of Slytherin felled by the very creature that was the emblem of his own house. Then had come the panic. His final task should have been to warn Harry that he was a Horcrux, that he must sacrifice himself, but he had failed. Before he'd even hit the floor his fingers had gone numb as the venom had started its insidious work. He had failed in his task; he had failed Lily.

When Harry Potter had suddenly appeared before him seconds later, he'd thought the venom had caused him to hallucinate. With the last of his energy, he'd reached forward to grab this illusion of the boy by his shirt. His deadening fingers had found purchase on the material: it was no mere apparition the boy kneeling before him had been very real.

Staring into the green eyes that had mocked him for seven years, he'd willed Lily's son to understand what needed to be done as he'd poured forth his memories. He'd been only dimly aware of Hermione Granger in the background, and he'd known a moment of gratitude for her intellect as he'd watched her conjure a glass beaker and press it into Harry's hand.

As Harry had collected the last silvery wisps of his memories, every muscle in his body had succumbed to the powerful venom. With a final hissed command to the boy he'd sworn to protect, he had gazed upon the green eyes that were so very like Lily's. Paralysis had overcome him. His hand had thudded to the floor, and he'd even lost the ability to blink.

The trio had left him then, and, minutes from death, he'd held the image of those striking eyes in his mind, determined they'd be the last thing he would ever see.

The minutes had passed slowly, and still he did not die. As the shock had gradually worn off, the pain had begun. The venom had only acted on his motor nerves; his sensory nerves had been left unaffected, and the searing torture that was his injured neck could easily have rivalled the Cruciatus Curse.

Minutes had become hours, and through the haze of agony, he'd prayed for death. Finally, as dawn had approached, his breathing had become laboured, and he'd welcomed unconsciousness as it had stolen over him.

He'd become surrounded by mist; a thick, rolling fog that had swirled around his aching body. Suddenly, he'd been sitting upright, cocooned in a light, fresh breeze. In amazement he'd looked at his hands; he could move again, and the pain had disappeared.

He'd been sitting on a swing. As he'd looked about, the mist had cleared a little, revealing a slide and a see-saw. Through the murky air he'd been able to distinguish a single, huge chimney on the distant skyline. It was the old playground near Spinner's End.

The snap of a twig to his left had drawn his attention, then footsteps. Thrusting his hand inside his robes, he'd been horrified to discover his wand missing.

"You don't need your wand with me, Severus Snape," a gut-wrenchingly familiar voice had murmured.

Lily Evans had emerged through the mist, which evaporated as she approached. He'd feasted on the sight of her; drinking in the details of the face that he had so long yearned to see. She'd been dressed in simple clothes: a pair of jeans and a white shirt. Her glorious dark red hair had still framed her emerald eyes, and even after all these years, she had taken his breath away. She'd lowered herself onto the swing next to his, her gaze never leaving his own.

"But you're dead," he'd whispered.

"That I am," she'd concurred, smiling.

"Then ... I'm dead too?"

She'd shrugged. "Maybe ... Maybe not ..." Her smile had faltered a little. "Thank you, Severus, for saving my son."

"He lives?"

She'd nodded. "He lives. Voldemort killed him, yet he lives. What about you, Severus. Do you choose to live?"

"I have a choice?" he'd asked, confused.

She'd smiled again, nodding. "Yes, you have a choice."

"I want to die," he'd insisted.

"You want to die, when you've never really lived?"

"What is there to live for?" he had spat.

She'd given a gentle laugh of disbelief. "There is everything to live for, Severus. You're free now you've fulfilled your duty. Voldemort is gone; Dumbledore is gone; your father is gone. For the first time in your life, you are master of your own destiny. You are truly free even I am gone."

He'd flinched at this remark, but her expression had remained kindly. "I murdered you, Lily."

"No. Voldemort murdered me," she'd corrected him.

"Then I condemned you to death!"

"What's done is done, Severus. You made a mistake; you've spent the last seven years watching over my son. You helped him defeat the most evil wizard ever to have lived. You may consider the debt repaid."

He'd looked about him, over the remnants of the playground where he'd first summoned the courage to speak to the woman now seated beside him. If he chose to stay, she would surely still never be his? She'd married Potter; that could not be undone. He'd returned his scrutiny to her lovely face.

"Whether I stay or go back," he'd said, "you'll never be mine."

Her eyes had grown sad. "No, Severus, I will never be yours. I could have loved you, once, but you chose to go down a road where I could not follow."

He'd sighed deeply. "Maybe there is peace here. What is there back there, except for pain?"

"Oh, Severus," she said beseechingly. "There is so much more!"

"For me, Lily?" he'd said, filled with anger and self-pity. "There's nobody for me."

She had smiled a small, secretive smile. "There is somebody for you, Severus. You do not yet know it; nor does she. It will take time. Just remember this: love often comes to us in the most unlikely of places, and in the most unlikely of guises. If you choose to return, Severus, happiness will find you eventually."

He had grunted, looking away from her. He wanted *her*. He had always wanted her, but he would never have her.

Understanding, she had touched him gently on the arm. "You've got to let me go, Severus. Happiness waits for you, but only if you're willing to let go of the past."

"How is it possible for me to go back? I should be dead ... I've lost so much blood. How is it possible for me to be saved?"

She had smiled that knowing smile again. "Help is on the way," she'd murmured, rising from the swing. "The time has come to make your decision."

"Before I decide, tell me one last thing," he had said. "Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?"

She had laughed, and his heart had leapt at the sound. "Of course it's happening inside your head, Severus, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"

She'd smiled fondly at him, then. "Do you stay? Or do you return?" she had asked, offering him her outstretched hand.

He had looked at her white, slender fingers. He had wanted to touch his fingertips to hers before considering his answer. Not knowing whether he would stay or go, he'd reached out to touch her hand, when suddenly, he'd become surrounded by mist once more. Then he'd heard another familiar voice calling out his name.

"NO!" he had cried, but the sound had died in his throat even as the pain had returned to his neck.

He had been lying, paralysed, on the floor of the Shrieking Shack once more. Hermione Granger, of all people, had been kneeling before him, calling his name, tears coursing down her cheeks. Regret and pain had taken over again. Lily was gone.

By the time Hermione reached the common room, her anger at Severus Snape had calmed, and her amusement at Draco's little stunt had returned. She flung open the common room door to find most of the candidates inside.

"Draco Malfoy," she cried, spotting his blond head. "You completearse!"

Everyone turned to stare at her. Draco shot her a beaming smile.

"What's the matter, my darling?" he drawled.

Hermione giggled. "You know bloody well what the matter is!"

Padma looked from Hermione to Draco. "What's going on?"

Hermione grinned at her friend. "He offered for me, that's what's going on!"

"What!?" shrieked Pansy Parkinson, rising so quickly from her seat that she tipped her mug of coffee all over the carpet.

Practically everyone in the room stood up, their eyes wide with shock.

"Are you serious?" asked Dean, returned from his shopping excursion.

Draco raised a hand to his brow. "It's true," he said in feigned distress. "I offered for her this morning, and the heartless wench turned me down!"

Hermione raised her eyebrows in mock surprise. "Who said I turned you down?"

The smile slid from Draco's face. "Potter's hairy balls!" he moaned. "You never accepted?"

"Maybe I did ... Maybe I didn't," she said, struggling to keep a straight face. She couldn't help it she began to giggle. "Of course I didn't accept, you big Slytherin idiot!"

Draco gave a short, relieved laugh. "You had me going there, Granger," he said, pulling her into a hug.

The other candidates looked at one another, completely confused. After a moment, Hermione and Draco pulled apart.

"Potter's hairy balls?" asked Hermione.

Draco shrugged. "Well, you know ... He's practically as famous as Merlin, so why not?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Before I forget," she said, suddenly serious. "Snape wants to see you immediately."

Draco gave a sheepish grin. "Is he mad at me?"

Hermione nodded. "Livid."

He turned to walk through the door, but stopped when Pansy called after him.

"Draco," she said. "You're going nowhere until you explain what's going on here."

"It's quite simple, ladies and gentlemen. I wanted to stir things up a little. Last years' candidates had an offer a day coming through after the first week. Let this be a warning to you all!" Draco exclaimed dramatically. "If you've set your sights on somebody, act now, before it's too late!" With a theatrical bow, he left the room.

Many of the candidates laughed and resumed their conversations. Hermione looked around the room: Michael Corner looked annoyed; Susan Bones was worrying her lower lip; and Neville was darting covert glances at Hannah Abbot. Perhaps Draco's plan had worked, after all. Her gaze travelled to the back of the room, where she met Theodore Nott's dark eyes. He'd put down his book and was watching her. To her surprise, he smiled. She returned his smile and blushed to the very roots of her curls. The already sunny day seemed suddenly brighter.

All the Pleasures Prove

Chapter 5 of 34

Hermione sets her sights on one of the marriage candidates.

Come live with me and be my love

And we will all the pleasures prove

Of a marriage conducted with economy

In the Twentieth Century Anno Donomy.

We'll live in a dear little walk-up flat

With practically room to swing a cat

And a potted cactus to give it hauteur

And a bathtub equipped with dark brown water.

We'll eat, without undue discouragement,

Foods low in cost and good in nouragement

And quaff with pleasure, while chatting wittily,

The peculiar wine of little Italy.

We'll remind each other it's smart to be thrifty

And buy our clothes for something-fifty.

We'll stand in line on holidays

For seats at unpopular matinees

And every Sunday we'll have a lark

And take a walk in Central Park

And one of these days not too remote

I'll probably up and cut your throat.

- **Ogden Nash, *Love Under the Republicans (or Democrats)***

Severus Snape poured himself another cup of coffee. A further hour of leisure was left to him before he was due at Belgrave House, and he intended savouring every minute of it.

Only two weeks remained until the tiresome job of Marriage Liaison Officer was finished, and at long last some progress had been made. On the previous Friday, Padma Patil had accepted an offer from Dean Thomas, and Demelza Robins had accepted Dennis Creevey. Only twelve candidates remained unspoken for, and he had high hopes that the future of at least another six would be settled by the weekend.

The only fly in the ointment, so far he was concerned, was Hermione Granger. He didn't understand how any of the candidates could find her remotely attractive. Perhaps

remotely attractive was a little strong; even he had to admit that in the full flush of womanhood, she was no longer unattractive. She had a pretty face, he supposed; a pleasing figure.

He just didn't see how any of the candidates could muscle past her vexatious personality, to say nothing of that highly objectionable mane of hair. He supposed her only chance of marriage now lay with Michael Corner. Surely none of the Slytherins would want anything to do with her? He certainly couldn't envisage Blaise Zabini shackled to her for the rest of his life.

Shaking his head, he picked up the most recent copy of *Alchemy Today*, determined not to dwell on the subject of Hermione Granger and her appalling lack of marriage prospects.

"Good morning, Severus," his wife said with a smile as she took her usual seat at the dining table. "I trust you slept well?"

He raised his gaze from the journal. "Good morning, Cordelia. I slept very well, thank you," he lied, grateful that their separate sleeping quarters meant his wife never witnessed his regular nightmares. "And you?"

"Very soundly, thank you," she replied.

Severus watched as she buttered her toast with impeccably manicured hands. She was not a beautiful woman, his wife, but with her aristocratic features and immaculate grooming she rather gave the impression of beauty. This morning she was dressed in Muggle attire: an ankle-length tweed skirt and a white silk blouse. She was close to her family, and the circles in which they moved included famous Muggle artists, philosophers and academics. Thus, they often wore well-tailored Muggle clothes instead of traditional wizarding garb. Her dark brown hair was worn tied up in an elegant knot, and her ears were adorned with simple pearl earrings.

She smiled at him as she sipped her tea. "I get the impression you're not entirely relishing your position at Belgrave, Severus."

He grunted. "I'd expected a certain amount of maturity from my charges. I was sadly mistaken: they still behave like hormonal adolescents."

Cordelia chuckled. "I heard about Draco's little prank. I'm surprised you didn't Apparate straight to Wiltshire and take the matter up with Lucius."

"It crossed my mind, believe me. I came dangerously close to hexing Draco with something nasty." He paused to pour himself another cup of coffee. "To be honest, I was relieved it was all a hoax; I thought the chap had lost his mind."

His wife looked at him. "What was so disagreeable about the young woman?"

He scowled. "Draco was far from fond of Miss Granger while at Hogwarts."

Cordelia laughed. "I'm sure the feeling was mutual, Severus. I've always liked Narcissa, but I found Draco to be an unbearable bore when he was a teenager. He was so arrogant! I must admit, he has improved immeasurably the past few years."

"He's certainly changed since the war. I was still appalled to think he would select Miss Granger as a bride."

"What have you got against her, Severus? From what I've heard, she sounds like an intelligent young woman."

"She was the most infuriating student I ever taught," he said, picking up his journal once more.

"Have you had any luck with the interviewees for the position of assistant?" she inquired a moment later, changing the subject.

He raised his gaze again. "Idiots, every single one of them. I know my expectations may be a little high, but I refuse to lower my standards."

"Severus, you're possibly the most intolerant man I've ever met."

"I daresay I am. Don't you find it endearing?" he asked with a smirk.

She laughed and stood up. "I was considering spending the weekend in the cottage in Edinburgh. Would you have any objections?"

He shook his head. "None at all. Will you be going alone?"

"Yes," she said, smiling. "I thought I'd catch up on some reading. See you tonight, Severus."

He smirked as he watched his wife leave the room. She was a worthy Slytherin: she could tell a lie while wearing an expression of complete innocence. He knew damn well she wouldn't be spending the weekend alone.

Hermione smiled as she climbed the steps to Belgrave House. It was not yet nine o'clock, which meant she had more than an hour of reading time left before Magical Cookery class. Humming contentedly, she was halfway across the room before she realised she was, unusually, not the first to have arrived. Theodore Nott sat in an armchair at the far end of the common room. She stopped in her tracks.

"Good morning," she said, suddenly flustered.

He raised his eyes from his book. "Good morning," he replied, his cheeks colouring.

Willing herself to appear casual, Hermione chose a book and poured a cup of tea. With a second glance at Theodore, she made the brave decision to join him. Setting her teacup on a small table, she took the armchair nearest his and opened her book. She risked another glance at him and saw he was reading the collected sonnets of William Shakespeare.

"You're reading Shakespeare!" she exclaimed.

He looked up again, and his colour deepened. "Yes, I am. You sound surprised."

She'd never heard him speak before. He had a gentle, lyrical voice. "I am surprised. Not many wizards have an interest in Muggle literature."

"I studied English Literature at university," he explained.

Her curiosity piqued, she forgot her shyness and leaned forward in her chair. "Are you serious? You studied at a Muggle university?"

He nodded and gave her a small smile. "Cambridge."

"Oooh!" she said, grinning. "My parents went to Cambridge. Which college?"

"Trinity. I specialised in Shakespearean tragedies. Draco said you studied at the Sorbonne."

"Yes. Double degree in Potions and Charms." She smiled, admiring his eyes. They were an unusually dark shade of blue almost navy. Silence fell, and she opened her

book. But then he spoke again.

"Your name is Shakespearian," he mumbled, sounding embarrassed. "It's very pretty."

She looked up, knowing it must have taken a lot of courage for someone so shy to offer such a compliment. "Thank you."

He returned his gaze to his book, and they read in a reasonably comfortable silence. After a few minutes, Theodore looked as though he was absorbed in his poetry. She was glad that she'd chosen to wear her hair loose that day, so she could watch him from beneath her curls. Despite the gauntness of his face, his features were not harsh. His eyes were deeply set, and there was something aristocratic about his mouth that she couldn't quite define. He wasn't handsome, really, but she thought there was something beautiful about him, nonetheless.

It was kind of nice, sitting there, reading by his side. Her tranquillity was soon shattered by the arrival of Draco Malfoy.

"Isn't that sweet?" he gushed, entering the common room. "The only intellectuals in our little gang reading together!"

"Sod off, Draco," Theodore said, without looking up from his book.

Draco and Hermione laughed. "So, Granger. What pie do you reckon we'll be making today?"

Magical Cookery had become something of a joke. Pies seemed to be the only thing in Madam Splattermore's limited repertory. "Well, it was steak and kidney last week, so I'd say it'll be something with fruit today. Rhubarb, perhaps?"

Draco pulled a face. "I can't stand rhubarb not fit for human consumption if you ask me. My money's on pumpkin or pork. My pie was bloody good last week ... I bet you were sorry you'd rejected me, Granger, when you discovered my hitherto unsuspected culinary talents."

Hermione gave him a withering look. "Draco, your pie was inedible. I couldn't believe Madam Splattermore actually made me taste it. The pastry was completely was black, but the inside was raw. I thought I'd been poisoned."

"It actually looked like a pie, though," he countered, "which is more than can be said for my previous efforts."

Within a few minutes the common room started to fill. Demelza appeared wearing a huge engagement ring, to shrieks of excitement from the other girls. While everyone was busy exclaiming over the diamond, Draco tapped Hermione on the shoulder and gestured to the opposite end of the room. Hoping he wasn't going to offer to play match maker between her and Theodore, she followed him.

"I know I've been playing the class clown over the past few weeks," he whispered, casting a glance towards the gang at the other end of the room, "but on a serious note, I'd really like to ask your opinion."

"Sure go ahead," she whispered.

He swallowed nervously, his eyes darting towards the rest of the candidates again. "I've decided who I'm going to marry, but I've no idea whether or not she's interested. I want your help."

Hermione grinned. "Well, I *have* noticed someone checking you out since the day you offered for me. Tell me who it is, and I'll tell you if you're right."

Draco looked stricken. "No! I can't! You tell me first ... Please, Hermione," he begged.

She chuckled, amused at this new, uncertain Draco. "Alright ... It's Susan Bones."

"Are you serious? You're not having me on?"

"I'm not having you on. She looked really upset the day you offered for me, so I've been keeping an eye on her. She's been watching you like a hawk especially when you've been talking to me or Pansy. Do you like her, Draco?"

"Completely smitten. I've tried to pluck up the courage to ask her for lunch or something, but I just can't do it. I know I usually swan around like I'm Merlin or something, but I'm a nervous wreck around her."

Hermione frowned. "I'm partnered with you for cookery today; she's partnered with Neville. I could tell her that I really want to talk to Neville and ask her to swap, if you'd like?"

Draco looked suddenly hopeful. "Would you? I don't know if she'll want anything to do with me, with what happened to her aunt and everything," he said, his gaze moving to his forearm, where the Dark Mark had been branded.

"Draco, you and your family have been forgiven for the things you did in the past. Susan's lovely; I'm certain she won't hold it against you."

"I hope you're right," he said with a deep sigh.

When they arrived at the kitchens, Susan agreed to swap when Hermione asked her, although she blushed brilliantly when she realised she'd be working with Draco. Draco, on the other hand, looked so pale that Hermione was certain he was on the verge of throwing up. By the end of the class, however, she was thrilled to discover them so absorbed in their own conversation that they didn't notice the rest of the candidates had left. Draco offered for Susan the following afternoon, and much to everyone's delight, she accepted.

Three mornings in a row, Theodore Nott was in the common room before Hermione arrived. They didn't talk much, but she still found herself thinking about him all the time. Yes, he was painfully shy, but at the same time she got the impression that he was possessed of a quiet self-confidence very different from anyone she had ever known.

On Thursday afternoon, she left Female Health class and Apparated straight to Hogsmeade, and smiled at the sight of the wizarding village. She hadn't been here since her graduation, and as she approached the large, ornate gates of Hogwarts, she realised she'd missed the place.

Closing the gates behind her, she turned and gazed up at the castle. It was a sight she'd seen so many times before, yet it still had the power to affect her. Embarrassed by her own sentimentality, she blinked back the tears that threatened to ruin her makeup. She'd found a wonderful friend in Padma and a close confidante in Ginny Weasley, yet now more than ever, she felt the loss of the camaraderie she'd once shared with Harry and Ron.

There were twenty minutes left before she was due to have lunch with the headmistress, so she decided to stroll along the grounds towards Hagrid's hut. The sky was overcast, but the breeze was warm, and the sweet fragrance of heather drifted on the air. Peering through the gloom of the dense forest, she detected movement. To her delight, about thirty feet away, a pair of blank, white, shining eyes appeared from behind a tree trunk. A moment later the skeletal body of a great, black winged horse became fully visible in the dim light. The creature regarded her for a few seconds before turning away with a swish of its long black tail and making its way back to the deeper reaches of the forest.

It was only the second time she'd ever seen a Thestral, and she recalled the day in her fifth year when Hagrid had brought their class into the forest and had drawn the Thestrals with the carcass of a cow. She'd been unable to see them at the time, before she'd seen so many die in the war, and she remembered with a start that Theodore

Nott had been one of only three who could see them back then. With a frown she wondered who he'd seen die at such a young age. For the first time, she realised she really knew nothing about his past. She knew his father had been a Death Eater, but Theo hadn't. Surely a Muggle-hater would not have attended a Muggle university?

As she watched the black, winged horse's retreating form, she gave a small laugh: she'd well and truly begun to view Theodore Nott as a potential husband. She shook her head at the thought of the bizarre twist her life had taken, and leant her forehead against the rough bark of the nearest tree. He intrigued her; he was reasonably attractive; according to Draco, he was clever. What other options did she have left to her? Blaise Zabini was out of the question. Michael Corner was, by all accounts, a decent bloke. But she couldn't picture them together.

With a firm resolution not to mention the name of Theodore Nott to the headmistress, she made her way towards the castle.

There was something restful about the company of Minerva McGonagall. Sitting in her office, surrounded by the sleeping portraits of generations of Hogwarts headmasters and headmistresses, Hermione quite forgot her worries about her marriage prospects. The headmistress was eager to hear all about her years at the Sorbonne, and she enjoyed telling tales about her Parisian adventures. McGonagall smiled at the mention of Padma Patil.

"Miss Patil has become engaged to Dean Thomas, I hear?" she asked.

"Yes, just last week," Hermione answered. "They're really well suited."

McGonagall sat back and sipped at her tea. "I was always fond of Dean," she said with a small smile. "He deserves some happiness. You Muggle-borns had it rough during the war – you all deserve a little happiness."

"I was offered the Potions post at St. Mungo's at the weekend," Hermione announced, steering the topic away from marriage. "But I don't know what to do. They've given me until Monday to think about it."

"Before I tender my view," the headmistress replied, "I'd like to ask you a question, if I may. You were a uniquely gifted Charms student, but I never got the impression that Potions was your forte, Miss Granger. Given that you seemed to possess a more natural aptitude for Transfiguration, Arithmancy and even Ancient Runes, I've often wondered why it was you chose to pursue a degree in Potions? A degree in Charms I understand. But Potions?"

Hermione smiled. "Charms was an easy option, in a way. It was my strongest subject. I was going to take Transfiguration as my second subject at the Sorbonne, but nothing attracts me more than a good challenge. I've never had an instinctive flair for Potions, and I decided that if I lacked innate ability, I'd work hard until I became a Potions Mistress to compensate for my shortcomings."

"Has it brought you happiness?" McGonagall inquired.

Hermione shrugged. "Not happiness. A sense of achievement, perhaps."

"But now that you've conquered your demons, so to speak," the older woman continued, "is it really what you'd like to do for the rest of your life?"

"I'm not sure," Hermione replied, frowning deeply. "Ideally, I'd like something that combines Charms and Potions."

"Can you see yourself working long-term in the Potions Laboratory at St. Mungo's?" the headmistress asked.

"I don't think so," she confessed.

McGonagall gave a small nod. "There lies your answer, Miss Granger. I think you'd be wasted in St. Mungo's. Whether your future lies in Potions or Charms, I'd hate to see someone with your abilities languishing in that hospital."

Hermione blushed at the compliment. "Thank you, Professor. I've applied for a few other positions, but I've not yet secured any of them."

"What are the other positions?"

"One is in the Department of Mysteries; the second is in an apothecary in Geneva; and the third ..." She looked away, feeling foolish for having mentioned it.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"Well, it ... the other application was for a position as a Potions Assistant in London. I didn't know it at the time, but the advertisement was posted by Professor Snape. Needless to say," she added, "he's declined to consider me for the position."

McGonagall pursed her lips. "And how are you coping with having Severus as your Liaison Officer?"

"Not well at all," Hermione answered, rubbing her brow. "Nobody else – not even Neville – seems to have a problem with him. But he's been horrible to me, and I've absolutely no idea why."

"Really?" asked the headmistress, raising her eyebrows. "No idea whatsoever?"

"Well," Hermione said, not sure she liked where the conversation was leading. "I presume it's because I saved his life, and he hates feeling like he owes me something."

"I'm sure that has something to do with it, in part ..."

"In part?" she asked. "What do you mean?"

"Harry Potter told me that Severus had given him his memories in the Shrieking Shack; Harry also told me he'd left them in Dumbledore's Pensieve on the night of the final battle. When I returned here, to this office, I tried to siphon Severus's memories from the Pensieve, lest they should fall into the wrong hands. I was too late – the memories were already gone."

Hermione started guiltily. It was obvious that one of the portraits had told McGonagall what had happened. "I ... I took them," she stammered. "As soon as we got back from the shack I came up here and took them. I'd promised him I would, Professor, that morning – at the Shrieking Shack. I didn't know whether or not he could hear me, but I promised him I'd retrieve the memories and return them to him if he lived. I said I'd destroy them if he died."

"I see," McGonagall murmured. "You returned them to him?"

She nodded. "A few weeks later, I visited him at St. Mungo's. I brought them with me."

"And how did he react?"

Hermione couldn't remember that day without blushing. "He was ... well, angry. He'd only just recovered the power of speech, so it was difficult to make out what he was trying to say. I held the glass beaker containing the memories out to him, and he grabbed his wand, pointed it straight at me and made the beaker to explode," she explained, running her thumb along the thin, white scar she still bore on her left hand from the incident.

"Did you ever view those memories, Miss Granger?"

"No!" she replied, her eyes wide. "I would never have done that!"

"I didn't mean to offend you, Miss Granger," McGonagall reassured her. "I'm just trying to see where Severus might be coming from on this. Did Harry tell you what the memories showed?"

"Yes," she said. "He told Ron and I everything, just before we realised Professor Snape was still alive."

"And is there any way Severus could know you're aware of the details of those memories?"

Hermione thought back to the morning she had saved him, and she began to understand. "Yes. At the Shrieking Shack I ... I thought he was unconscious, but I wasn't sure. I told him help was on the way, and I think I ... I said that Harry had told Ron and me what he'd seen in the memories. I promised him that I would never tell another living soul."

McGonagall smiled. "I think you've hit the nail on the head. Severus Snape has always been a fiercely private man. Not one of us, with the exception of Dumbledore, had a clue how he felt about Lily Potter. Maybe I'm wrong, but I suspect his behaviour stems from the fact that you *know*, Miss Granger. You're one of three who know what those memories contain, and he resents you deeply for it."

"It's really that simple?" Hermione asked. "He hates me because I know?"

McGonagall nodded. "I'd bet on it. You make him feel vulnerable, and if there is one thing that Severus cannot bear, it's vulnerability."

"I see," she said. It made sense, really. "I'm relieved he wouldn't consider me for the Potions position, in that case."

McGonagall chuckled. "Indeed! A fine pair you would have made. Speaking of pairs, Miss Granger, I'm interested to know how you've been getting along with the other candidates."

Hermione managed to escape a quarter of an hour later without having once mentioned the name of Theodore Nott. She was rather proud of herself.

The following evening, she met Padma and Dean for a drink in the Leaky Cauldron. Hermione sat opposite her friends, smiling fondly at their entwined hands.

"We've set the wedding date," Padma announced as she sipped her wine. "Two weeks from tonight, on the last day of the pre-marriage course. It'll be a small affair, of course, mainly family but we wanted to ask you if you'd be bridesmaid?"

Hermione beamed. "Of course I would! I'd be delighted!" She stood up and threw her arms around Padma and then leaned forward to kiss Dean on the cheek.

"I presume Parvati will be matron of honour?" she asked.

Padma nodded. "Dean's younger brother will be best man, and Seamus will be the other groomsman."

"And have you heard anything from the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes?"

Padma's grin widened. "I had an owl from them two hours ago. I'm officially an Obliviator! And what's more," she added before Hermione could respond, "Dean's just been offered a job in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, so we'll both be working at the Ministry."

They raised their glasses and toasted their respective futures. Dean looked curiously at Hermione. "What about you, Hermione?" he asked. "What about St. Mungo's?"

"I owled them this morning to decline. I've applied for that position in the Department of Mysteries, but they aren't holding the interviews for another four weeks."

"By which time," Dean said, "you'll be married."

Padma chuckled beside him. "But to who? That's the question!"

"Michael Corner keeps gazing at you with big, hopeful eyes," Dean said.

"He told Dennis he thinks you're just playing hard to get," said Padma.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Ginny would kill me if I married Michael Corner. Besides I'm just not interested."

Dean frowned. "Is he really all that bad? He was in the D.A., and he always struck me as a nice bloke."

Hermione shrugged.

Padma gave her a knowing smile. "I believe Hermione's cast her net in another direction."

Hermione met Padma's gaze and felt her cheeks grow warm. "And what direction would that be?"

"In the direction of the mysterious Mr Nott," Padma whispered, glancing around the pub.

"Are you serious?" Dean asked, leaning forward. "You like Theo?"

Hermione put her scarlet face in her hands, unable to deny it. "Am I that transparent?" she muttered.

Padma laughed. "You're not transparent at all, really. I've just been watching you. I've seen you looking at him. He's been watching you, too."

"What am I playing at?" Hermione asked with a groan. "I don't know a single thing about him, yet I've started to imagine walking up the aisle with him. I've completely and utterly lost my mind."

"I was partnered with him in Herbology in sixth year," said Dean. "So I know him a little."

Hermione's face brightened. "Tell me everything you know."

Dean put down his drink. "He's very quiet, very intelligent and a little bit on the eccentric side. I know Draco's changed a lot and he's quite likeable now, but all I can say is that Theo was the only Slytherin I genuinely liked while we were at school."

She felt hope and excitement start to simmer inside her. Surely if Dean, a fellow Muggle-born, liked Theodore, he must be alright? "But what about his father?" she asked desperately.

Dean shook his head. "You can't judge anybody by their parents, Hermione. As far as I could tell, he never had anything to do with the Death Eaters. He never hung around with Malfoy, Crabbe or Goyle. He kept to himself."

"And," Padma chipped in, "his mother's name was never on any of the Death Eater lists issued after the war."

Hermione realised for the first time that she'd be gaining a family-in-law as well as a spouse.

"I think you could do a whole lot worse than Theodore Nott," Padma said. "He's a lot quieter than your previous boyfriends, but he's the clever, bookish sort ... Just like you!"

She looked at the heartening expressions on Padma and Dean's faces. They were so happy together; they wanted her to be happy too. She couldn't stop the smile that spread across her face. "Has he really been watching me?" she asked, feeling like a sixteen-year-old again.

Padma nodded. "Practically every time I've looked his way. He keeps sitting at the back of the classroom so he can watch you."

Hermione spent the following weekend daydreaming about the kind of husband Theodore Nott would make. In her daydreams, he always made the good kind.

On Monday morning, Hermione arrived at Belgrave House at precisely nine o'clock. She'd taken extra care with her makeup that day and had plaited her hair so that it lay halfway down her back. But her heart sank when she pushed open the common room door and found the place empty; she'd been so certain that Theodore would be there first waiting for her. Taking a random book from the shelf without even looking at the title, she wandered to the tea service and poured a cup of tea. Maybe he was just running late.

A few minutes later she heard footsteps outside and quickly opened the book that lay in her lap. Without taking in any of the words, she scanned a page, her heart hammering painfully against her ribs. The door opened, and she glanced up in expectation, but it was Michael Corner. She tried not to let the disappointment show on her face.

"Hi, Hermione," he said brightly, an eager look in his eyes.

"Hi, Michael," she replied, returning her gaze to her book. She'd no intention of encouraging a conversation.

He poured himself a coffee while she pretended to read. She held the book up a little higher as he walked towards her, as though it might somehow help to ward off the unwanted attention. It failed: he took the armchair next to hers Theodore's armchair.

After a few seconds, Michael began to snigger quietly. She frowned; what was so funny? His snigger turned into an increasingly loud chuckle. She'd no choice but to look up at him.

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

He gestured towards her book. "Interesting reading material," he said, his voice choked.

She turned the book over and looked in horror at the title: *Magical Masturbation for Lonely Witches: Ten Hot Tips for You and Your Wand*.

She dropped the book on the floor as if she'd been burned. "Merlin's beard!" she exclaimed. "What the hell are they thinking, putting a book like that in here?"

Michael continued to chuckle as she gingerly picked up the book and walked across the room, shoving it back onto the shelf. Her face flaming, she made her way to the door.

"Hopefully somebody will save you from the loneliness, and you'll never need that book again," he muttered with a grin as she excused herself and fled from the room.

She stayed in the bathroom, thoroughly mortified, until it was time to leave for their Family Law class. Determinedly not looking at Michael Corner, she quickly scanned the classroom. Theodore Nott wasn't there. The buoyant mood of her weekend began to evaporate.

After class, she had lunch in Belgrave Park with Padma, Dean, Susan and Draco. She'd just recounted her embarrassing episode with Michael Corner, and her friends were literally rolling on the grass with laughter.

"Granger, that's the most hilarious thing I've heard for a long time," Draco declared, brushing grass from his jeans. "He's bound to think you're all kinky he'll have offered for you within the hour."

Hermione frowned. "I was rather hoping it might put him off."

"No chance," said Padma, wiping tears of amusement from her eyes. "He'll want to know exactly what those ten hot tips were."

They all guffawed again. Even Hermione had to join in. Her smile quickly turned to a glower as she spotted Dennis Creevey hurrying towards them.

"Hermione," Dennis said, panting, "Professor Snape would like to see you in his office."

She rose from the grass and shot Padma a worried look.

"I didn't really think he'd offer within the hour," Draco said.

Padma and Hermione locked gazes again. "It mightn't be an offer at all ... It might be ... something else," Padma said.

Worried, Hermione turned to follow Dennis back to the house. As she walked away she heard Draco's next comment.

"If it is an offer," he said quietly, "it mightn't necessarily be from Michael Corner. Maybe it's from someone who's made themselves scarce today, if you catch my drift."

She cursed under her breath; did everybody know she fancied Theodore Nott? As she climbed the steps to Belgrave House, she wondered if Draco could be right. Maybe Theo *had* offered for her, and maybe that's why he hadn't shown up today. He was terribly shy, after all. Hoping desperately that the offer was not from Michael, she tapped on Snape's door, and he bade her enter.

She could tell from the smug expression on his face that she'd definitely received an offer. Her heart racing, she took the seat in front of Snape's desk and waited for him to speak. The sooner she was engaged, the sooner she would never have to see Severus Snape again.

He cleared his throat. "Your popularity among the male candidates confounds me, Miss Granger," he drawled.

She glared at him. He just couldn't seem to resist an opportunity to belittle her.

"You've received yet another offer of marriage. Let us hope that it will be third time lucky."

Her heart was thumping. She hated these little games of cat and mouse he insisted on playing; why couldn't he just spit it out?

"The young man has admitted this offer is being made without your prior knowledge, but he seems assured that you will accept."

"I really would appreciate if you'd get to the point and stop toying with me," she said, her voice shaking.

"Michael Corner offered for you an hour ago," he said, pushing the contract and a quill across the table.

With a groan, Hermione put her face in her hands.

"Is there a problem, Miss Granger?" Snape asked through clenched teeth.

She nodded and lowered her hands. Annoyed as she was at Michael Corner's cheek, all she could think of was Theodore Nott. Why had he disappeared? She'd had three offers of marriage, and the only wizard whose proposal she would entertain didn't seem to want her. She suddenly knew what she must do: if Theodore Nott didn't offer for her, she would wait until the night of Padma and Dean's wedding and flee the country. She was not going to accept Michael Corner as a last resort.

"I'm sorry, sir. I just can't accept that offer," she said, aware that Snape was now clenching his jaw and that they were only moments away from yet another argument.

In a flash of fury he tossed the contract into the waste paper bin on his left. "On what grounds, Miss Granger?" he snarled.

Hermione gave a depressed shrug. "On the grounds that we're unsuitable."

"Unsuitable?" he snapped. "This is a Marriage Law, Miss Granger. It necessitates members of the wizarding community to marry in order to preserve our people and our way of life. It is not Ollivander's; you don't get to try out all the wizards until you find the one you were destined to be bound to. You're expected to behave like a good citizen and do the best you can with the options before you."

"There are other options before me."

He raised his eyebrows. "You have received *three* offers of marriage; everybody else has managed to accept after *only one*. Not the mighty Miss Granger, though," he spat. "She's far too good for all these ordinary wizards."

"I never said I was too good for them, I said I was unsuited to them," she said.

"You only have eleven days left before the Ministry chooses a husband for you. Tell me, Miss Granger. Is there any wizard in the whole of Britain whose offer you would be willing to accept, or am I completely wasting my time here?"

She blushed. "There's one wizard whose offer I would be willing to accept," she admitted.

"Well, then? Is it somebody who's within my jurisdiction or is it some European you've met on your travels? I wish to know now, for you have wasted quite enough of my time with your persistent refusals."

She was flustered. Should she tell him or should she keep her mouth shut? He was meant to be Liaison Officer after all, and she knew that he'd signed a guarantee of privacy; what she said was supposed to stay in this office. "It's one of the candidates," she said, embarrassed.

"And pray tell, Miss Granger, just who might that be?"

She fidgeted with the end of her plait. "What I'm about to say won't leave this room?"

He nodded. "I'm magically bound to adhere to a full privacy agreement."

Reassured, she looked at her hands before mumbling, "I'd be willing to accept Theodore Nott."

There was complete silence. After a moment, surprised he hadn't spoken, Hermione raised her gaze. Snape was staring at her, utterly thunderstruck, and she'd no idea why.

"Is there a problem with that? I had reason to believe he was a pure-blood," she said, frowning.

He continued to stare at her. "Theo? Is this a joke, Miss Granger?"

Even in her confusion she was surprised he'd used the shortened form of Theodore's name.

"Of course it's not a joke. Why would it be?" she asked.

"Are you honestly telling me you'd expect Theodore Nott to marry you?" he asked.

Anger suddenly burned within her. "How dare you treat me like some second class citizen? You think a pure-blood would want nothing to do with me?"

"It's nothing to with Theo being a pure-blood, it's to do with you not knowing one another at all," he said in an unexpectedly patient tone.

She gaped at him, feeling wrong-footed. How would he know whether or not she knew Theodore Nott? What was going on? "I've gotten to know him over the past week or two. And anyway, what business is it of yours?"

He regarded her for a moment, his expression perplexed. "Miss Granger, it's quite obvious to me that you know nothing whatsoever about Theodore Nott. If you knew him at all, you would be well aware that he is my stepson."

Hermione almost physically recoiled at his words. "But but I remember reading your marriage announcement in the *Daily Prophet*," she stammered. "Your ... your wife's name isn't Nott."

"When Cordelia, my wife, was widowed at the end of the war, she reverted to her maiden name, which is Mill. Theodore is her only child."

Hermione felt her hopes and dreams shatter into a million pieces. She was a complete and utter fool. He was right: she knew nothing whatsoever about Theodore Nott.

"There's no question of you marrying Theo," Snape said..

"And why is that?" she asked, suddenly annoyed again. "You've admitted he's a pure-blood; is he already engaged?"

"Theo was my student for many years, and he has been my stepson for over four. Believe me, Miss Granger there's nobody to whom you could possibly be less well suited."

She started to feel defiant. "And why are we not suited?"

He waved a hand as if to dismiss her question. "I cannot think of a single way in which you are compatible."

"You might know Theodore," she said. "But you don't know me. You're not in a position to judge whether or not we're suited. You just don't want to consider the possibility because you hate me."

He looked at her so intently that she was forced to look away. He pressed the tips of his fingers together and said, "I've told you before that I've never hated you, Miss Granger. Look, you are an intelligent young woman," he said in an unexpectedly gentle tone.

Hermione returned her gaze to his face.

"And now I appeal to that intelligence. Believe me when I say that a marriage between yourself and Theodore Nott would not be a success."

She blinked back tears of frustration. Theodore Nott had been her only hope. It was true that she couldn't stand being in the same room as Severus Snape, but she didn't care if he was Theo's stepfather. She wasn't going to be pressurised into marrying Michael Corner just because she disliked her prospective father-in-law, and he disliked her. He wasn't going to ruin her life just because she knew about Lily Evans. She turned and cast a Privacy Charm on the room, causing him to raise an eyebrow.

"You cannot possibly know whether a marriage between us would be a success or not. You don't want to consider this because you couldn't bear the thought of having to associate with me," she said, her voice shaking. "I thought I was doing the right thing when I saved your life, Professor Snape, and when Harry told me what he'd seen in your memories, he thought you were dead! If I did the wrong thing in saving your life, I'm sorry. If I offended you with the things I said that day, I'm sorry. But it's not my fault that I know about you and Lily Evans. I've given you my word that I'll never say anything to anyone, and that includes Theodore Nott. If my word is not good enough, I'll allow you to Obliviate the relevant memories from my mind."

He shook his head. "Miss Granger, this is not about you and me. I don't deny that there are problems between us that extend back very many years. I admit I've not been kind in my treatment of you over these past few weeks, but I am appealing to you now as your Marriage Liaison Officer. I am putting aside all personal differences and speaking to you directly as someone who knows Theodore Nott. I urge you to reconsider."

Her lower lip was quivering, and she knew she was only seconds away from tears. "I don't mean to offend you, but I believe you cannot bear the thought of me marrying your stepson and are trying to change my mind."

A tear rolled down her left cheek. With a sigh, he conjured a handkerchief and tossed it across the table to her. She picked it up and dabbed at her eyes.

"Miss Granger, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to have you betrothed and out of my hands as soon as possible ... believe me. But there are fundamental differences between you and Theo that would be problematic. That's all I will say for the moment. You are upset, and I've no wish to distress you further."

"Was he a Death Eater?" she asked.

Snape grunted. "No. He was never a Death Eater, nor associated with them in any way, despite the activities of his father."

Hermione dabbed at her eyes again. She ashamed that Snape, of all people, should have been the one to see her cry. "I'd like to leave now. I've a lot to think about."

He nodded his assent. "You are scheduled to see me at noon tomorrow, Miss Granger. I'd appreciate if you would keep that appointment."

"I'll be here," she mumbled as she turned to leave the room. She flicked her wand to lift the Privacy Charm she'd placed on the room. When she reached the door something occurred to her: he would know where Theodore had gone. "Where has Theo gone?" she asked in a constricted voice. "He wasn't at class today."

"He was visiting friends in Berlin over the weekend," he answered. "He'll return early tomorrow."

She left the room and leaned her back against the closed door. Despite what she had just learned, she was glad Theodore's absence was only temporary. All was not lost; the situation could be resolved. A flutter of excitement began to build in her chest at the thought of seeing him the following day. He was the only one she would accept, and the words of a bitter, resentful, unpleasant ex-teacher were not going to persuade her otherwise.

The Fool's Triumph

Chapter 6 of 34

Hermione digests the news about Theodore Nott.

Dance there upon the shore;

What need have you to care

For wind or water's roar?

And tumble out your hair

That the salt drops have wet;

Being young you have not known

The fool's triumph, nor yet

Love lost as soon as won,

Nor the best labourer dead

And all the sheaves to bind.

What need have you to dread

The monstrous crying of the wind?

- **W. B Yeats, *To a Child Dancing in the Wind***

After her discussion with Severus Snape, Hermione Apparated directly home. She knew her friends were waiting for her in Belgrave Park, but she didn't feel as though she could face them. It was only now, when her hopes had come crashing down around her, that she realised just how much she'd begun to imagine a future in which Theodore Nott featured significantly. She went straight to bed and fell into a fitful sleep.

When she woke, the house was quiet her parents had left for the theatre. She made a sandwich and a steaming mug of tea and took them to the living room. A serious thinking session was in order. The time had come to choose what she must do.

She thought about what Severus Snape had said, but no matter how familiar he was with Theo, he did not know her at all. Therefore, she concluded, he was not in any position to know how their relationship might or might not work out. His concerns, be they real or contrived, were not relevant.

Theo was Snape's stepson. Hermione shook her head, hardly able to believe it. Why, exactly, had nobody thought to fill her in on that pertinent detail? Surely Draco had known? Severus Snape, of all people ... There were so many unresolved issues between them, so many resentments and feelings of contempt. How could she trust that he would act in her best interests? Of course Snape wouldn't want her in his life. Was he trying to put her off Theo because of his own agenda, or did he have genuine reason to believe Theo was unsuitable? She couldn't tell.

Merlin only knew she did not relish the thought of having Severus Snape as a father-in-law. On the other hand, she'd put up with his stinging sarcasm for six years at Hogwarts. Could she endure the company of her former teacher on family occasions? Yes ... She believed she could. It was definitely better than having to tolerate him as a teacher.

By the time she'd finished her sandwich, she'd made her decision: she would pursue Theodore Nott to the best of her ability. If Theo offered for her, she would accept. If not, she would leave the country after Padma and Dean had wed. Satisfied with her conclusion, she tidied up the kitchen and ran herself a bath she had every intention of looking her absolute best the next morning. She had a husband to catch.

Hermione met Padma for breakfast at eight o'clock the following morning.

"I can't believe it!" Padma exclaimed, shaking her head. "Snape's stepson! How come none of us knew?"

"I'm sure somebody knew. I'll bet the Slytherins did."

"Dean certainly would have said something if he'd known. I wonder when Snape got married?" Padma mused.

"I remember reading the notice in the paper it was only a few weeks after the *Marriage Act* was introduced. Theo's mother reverted to her maiden name after her first husband died. Hill, or Mill, or something ..."

"No wonder we didn't know. Gosh," Padma said, her eyes wide. "It doesn't really change anything though, does it?"

Hermione paused. She'd never told Padma about the day she'd saved Snape's life. "No," she said. "It doesn't really change a thing. Snape seems to think Theo and I aren't suited, but I don't really care."

Padma put down her knife and fork. "I don't understand. Snape doesn't know you any better than he knows any of us, and if Theo has spent the last four years at Cambridge, I'm sure he doesn't know him too well either. How would he know whether or not you're suited? And why would he be so concerned?"

Hermione's eyes suddenly filled with tears. "Am I crazy, Padma? Should I have accepted Michael Corner? I don't know Theo at all maybe Snape is hinting that there's something dreadful I don't know about him."

Padma put her hand on Hermione's. "Of course you're not crazy you don't really know Michael Corner any better than you know Theodore Nott. And at the end of the day, how well do I know Dean?"

Hermione wiped at her eyes with a napkin. It was *not* a good day to have streaks of mascara running down her face.

"My parents had never even met when they married, and they're one of the happiest couples I know," said Padma. "My aunt, on the other hand, went out with some bloke for eleven years before they got married, and they divorced a few months later. You never can tell how a marriage is going to work out, Hermione. It's pot luck, really."

Hermione sighed. "I hope you're right. There's just something that draws me to Theodore Nott; I can't really explain it, but I know it's there. I feel like he's my only option."

"If you feel like he's your only option, then go get him," Padma said, smiling. "Despite the tears, you look dead sexy today; he'll be drooling all over you."

Hermione laughed and wiped away the rest of the tears. "You're a really good friend, you know that? I don't know what I'd do without you."

"I don't like seeing you unhappy, and if Theodore Nott would make you happy, then I'm all for it." Padma extracted a few five pound notes from her wallet and tossed them onto the table. "Would having Snape as an in-law bother you?"

"I don't know ... Not enough to put me off the idea of marrying Theo. But what if Theo's just not interested?"

"Of course he's interested. Why do you think he's started turning up at the common room so early every day?"

Hermione visibly brightened. "Do you think it's just to see me?"

Padma rolled her eyes. "For someone so intelligent you can be bloody thick sometimes. Of course it's so he can see you! It's nine o'clock. He'll probably be at Belgrave by now. Do you want me to scarper and let the two of you have some time alone?"

Hermione felt suddenly sick. "No, I'm too nervous today. Come with me, please!"

Padma nodded, and they left the restaurant. They paused at the steps of Belgrave House, and Hermione ran a shaking hand through her tousled hair. "Do I look okay?" she asked.

"You look lovely. You sure you want me to come in?"

Hermione nodded. "He mightn't even be there, and then I'll be totally depressed."

They climbed the granite steps. Just before they reached the common room, the door opened and Theodore Nott emerged. Hermione couldn't help but gasp at the sight of him. He looked awkward.

"Good morning, Theo!" Padma said brightly. "You're here nice and early. Would you care to join us for a cup of tea?"

Hermione was completely dumbstruck all she could do was smile weakly. No words would come out.

"I can't, I'm afraid," he answered, looking embarrassed. He pointed at the ceiling. "I've been summoned." He looked at Hermione and smiled shyly before striding up the staircase.

Padma grabbed her by the arm and dragged her through the door and into the empty common room. "Now, stay calm," she ordered, thrusting Hermione into an armchair. "You need strong coffee."

"Merlin's cat!" Hermione exclaimed in a panicked voice. "Why's he been summoned? You don't think Snape will say something, do you?"

Padma frowned as she carried two steaming coffees across the room. "He can't say anything. He's agreed."

"But why does he want to speak to him?"

Padma shook her head. "It could be anything: some trivial family thing, perhaps? Maybe he just wants to ask him how his weekend went."

Hermione put her head in her hands. "No. It's to do with what I said yesterday I just know it."

"Maybe not. Yesterday, after you'd left, Terry Boot offered for Laura Wallace that Slytherin girl with the blond hair. She accepted. And Blaise and Katy have hooked up."

Hermione frowned. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"It means that there are only six of you left unaccounted for: Neville, Theo, Michael, Hannah, Pansy and you."

"And Neville and Hannah are looking very likely," Hermione muttered.

"Exactly," Padma said. "Which only leaves four of you. Theo and Pansy can't marry because they're both pure-bloods. That means unless you and Theo get together, and Michael and Pansy, Snape will be left with four of you on his hands. There's only a matter of days left now he'll be eager to try to get everybody sorted out."

"So," Hermione continued, "you think he's asking Theo what his intentions are?"

"I'd say so," she replied. "If he's going to offer for you, it will be today."

Hermione leaned forward and put her head on her knees. "I think I'm going to be sick," she whispered.

Severus Snape nodded in greeting as his stepson entered the office. "Good morning, Theo. Thank you for coming so quickly."

"Morning, Severus," Theo replied, settling himself in the chair opposite.

"How was Berlin?" he asked, regarding the younger man.

"It was fine, thanks," he replied.

He knew Theo well enough to know that he kept his emotions carefully hidden at all times. "I wasn't sure whether or not you'd return."

Theo smiled. "I've decided there's nothing in Berlin to make me stay. There's more worth coming home for."

Severus tapped his desk impatiently. "And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

Theo shrugged. "Nothing in particular."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. Theodore was so like his mother: evasive in the extreme. "Theo, you told me four weeks ago that this *Marriage Act* was a waste of your time and that there was no-one worth marrying on the course. All of a sudden your attendance has improved dramatically, and you've been the first to arrive every morning. What's going on? I thought you wanted to travel the world?"

Theo leaned forward in his seat. "I still want to travel the world, but I'd also like to have the option of returning home. Unless I marry, I'll face the possibility of imprisonment every time I return to this country."

"I'm well aware of that," Severus replied through gritted teeth. "That's precisely what I pointed out to you four weeks ago. At that time you assured me there was nobody on this course with whom you felt compatible. Has the situation changed?"

Theo's cheek grew red. "Yes, the situation has changed."

Severus felt his pulse quicken in disbelief. Surely this conversation was not leading where he feared it might? "Well, you've certainly left it a little late. There are precious few of the candidates left from which to choose a wife."

"The wife I've chosen is still available as far as I'm aware," he muttered, his colour deepening.

Severus's eyes widened. He'd been sure Theo would flee the country rather than marry. He could hardly believe this was happening. "The wife you've chosen?" he snapped. "Who?"

Theodore looked at the floor. "Hermione Granger," he said in a whisper.

Severus could hear the blood pounding in his ears. "Hermione Granger? Is Miss Granger aware of your intentions?"

Theo chuckled. "Not exactly."

"Do you think this is funny?" Severus snarled, instantly wiping the smile from Theo's face. "Have you ever even had a conversation with her?"

"Yes, actually, I have," Theo said, crossing his arms. "I've spoken to her almost every day for over a week."

"And you think that's enough of a firm foundation for a marriage?"

Theodore scowled. "How many deep and meaningful conversations did you have with my mother before you married her?"

Severus slapped the desk with the palm of his hand. "Theo, this is not about me and your mother. You don't know anything about Hermione Granger."

"Did you know anything about Cordelia? Would you call your marriage successful?"

"This is *not* about Cordelia, Theo. It's about you. You're overstepping a dangerous boundary here."

Theodore held up his hands. "Sorry, Severus. I'm just trying to point out that knowing your spouse does not guarantee marital success. What about Draco and Susan? They knew nothing at all about one another, yet they're happy."

"Time will tell whether or not Draco and Susan are happy. What can you possibly imagine you and Miss Granger have in common?"

Theodore shrugged. "We've lots of things in common. We both like to read; we're both clever; we're both quiet ..."

"Quiet?" Severus asked. "You're under the illusion that Hermione Granger is *quiet*?"

"Perhaps quiet isn't the word. Antisocial, maybe ..."

"Hermione Granger never knows when to keep her mouth shut, Theo. That's one of her principal faults. She almost drove me insane at Hogwarts."

"Yes," Theodore answered with a smile, "I know. But as you so rightly pointed out, this is about me, not you."

Severus rubbed his brow in irritation. The Mill family were almost impossible to argue with. "Let us imagine you've offered for her and she has accepted. What do you do then, Theo? I can't picture you of all people settling down to a life of happily married bliss."

"I've no intention of settling down to a life of happily married bliss," he replied.

"Then what the devil do you think you're doing messing around with Hermione Granger?" Severus asked angrily.

"I'm hoping she'll want to travel the world with me. Why would anyone want to be stuck here forever? She studied in Paris; I'm certain she won't want to stay in England."

"Have you asked her what she wants? If you intend offering for her, why don't you go and find out what she wants? Maybe she's accepted a job by now. Maybe she wants to settle down and have a family."

Theodore shook his head. "I'm certain she won't want to have a family yet, at any rate. I don't want to discuss this with her unless she accepts."

Severus looked at his stepson in disbelief. "You're not willing to open up and have a proper conversation with her unless she has already committed herself to becoming your wife?"

"Pretty much," he answered, his jaw clenched.

Severus knew by the expression on Theo's face that the interview was as good as over. "Will you commit yourself to this, Theo?"

"As best I can," he replied.

"As your Liaison Officer I have to confess I have grave misgivings about this match."

Theo looked suddenly vexed. "Misgivings about this match or misgivings about my ability to commit?"

"About both," Severus confessed.

"I'd like to draw up an official offer of marriage," Theo announced stubbornly.

Severus leaned forward across his desk. "Don't just use her like a passport to ensure your continued entry into Britain, Theo. I wouldn't like to see Miss Granger treated so lightly. She's an intelligent young woman."

"I always got the impression you disliked her, Severus," he said. "Why the sudden concern?"

Severus paused before answering. "I have my reasons," he said simply.

Avoiding the questioning look in his stepson's eyes, he conjured a marriage contract with a flick of his wand and extracted a quill from the drawer beneath his desk. This would not end well. He knew it.

"Hermione, will you please sit down?" Padma begged. "You're in a state! I swear I'll put you in a full Body-Bind unless you calm down."

Hermione gave up and threw herself onto the sofa next to her friend. "I can't stand this. I'm a nervous wreck. Maybe I should just go home?"

"And miss the pie? Are you mad? Splattermore's promised us deep-dish pork pie this week. It's the staple of any marriage, so you'd better not miss it."

Hermione smiled. "How can you be funny at a time like this?"

"Do you want me to charm your hair straight? It's gone all fuzzy because you keep running your hands through it."

Hermione nodded. "Go on. Anything to keep my mind off what's going on upstairs." She turned her back, and Padma extracted her wand.

Padma was halfway through her task when Draco arrived. "Good morning, my lovelies," he said cheerily.

Hermione rounded on him immediately. "Malfoy!" she spat. "Just the person I wanted to see."

Draco exchanged a wary glance with Padma. "What have I done?" he asked.

"Why didn't you tell me Snape was Theo's stepfather?" she demanded.

"Why didn't I tell you? Everybody knows that Theo is his stepson! Severus married Cordelia years ago."

"Maybe you Slytherins knew but the rest of us didn't!" she said angrily.

Draco looked at Padma, who shrugged. "How was I meant to know?" he asked. "Why does it matter, anyway? Theo's made it fairly obvious he has designs on you. I don't see what Severus has to do with it."

"I'm not Snape's favourite person in the world. I'm fairly sure he'd rather hex his own arm off than have me as a daughter-in-law."

"Well, then, you won't be the only one having in-law problems," Draco muttered.

Padma looked up from Hermione's hair. "What's happened?"

Draco sat down and uttered a heavy sigh. "I met Susan's parents for dinner last night. It didn't go well."

"Oh, no!" Hermione said, her annoyance forgotten. "What happened?"

"They hated me. Kept asking questions about why I'd been a Death Eater."

"You're joking?" Padma asked.

He frowned. "I'm not trying to justify what I did; I was stupid and naïve and there's no getting away from that. But I wasn't in much of a position to refuse the Dark Lord, with him threatening to do my mum in and my dad in Azkaban."

"We know that," Hermione reassured him. "So many people were forced into doing terrible things during the war."

"My mum never wanted to be a Death Eater; it was my dad's doing, really. He's changed a lot since the war he's made an effort to make up for the things he did wrong."

Hermione rather suspected that Lucius Malfoy's recent large donations to various wizarding charities had more to do with keeping himself out of jail than repenting for his wicked past. But that wasn't necessarily Draco's fault. "Was Susan upset?" she asked.

Draco nodded. "Very upset. We're thinking of just eloping at the weekend and not involving either set of parents," he confided.

"Are you serious?" asked Padma. "That's a great idea!"

Draco grinned. "Do you think so? It was Susan's idea. I think she wants me for my fantastic bod nothing to do with my over-large purse."

The girls giggled. Padma finished the last strand of Hermione's curls. "There you go," she said. "Stand up and give us a twirl."

Hermione ran her hand through her straightened hair and stood. "Well?" she asked shyly.

"Rasputin's nipples!" Draco said. "You look like a mermaid. Your hair's down to your pert little ass, Granger."

Padma was doubled over. "Rasputin's nipples? You're right though she looks lovely. Theo will have a fit!"

Draco looked around the empty room. "Where is he, anyway? I thought he'd be here early to woo you."

Padma gestured upstairs. "He's been summoned."

"Ah," murmured Draco knowingly. "Today's the day, then!"

Hermione was suddenly nauseous again. She glanced at her watch: it was nearly ten o'clock. Theo had been in Snape's office for almost an hour. What was taking him so long?

By the end of their cookery class, Hermione felt like crying. Theodore hadn't shown up, and she was certain it did not bode well. She wiped her hands on a tea towel and surveyed the charred disaster that was her pork pie. The stench of the singed pastry made her stomach heave.

"Are you alright?" Padma whispered.

Hermione shook her head. "Not really. Where is he? What do think's going on?"

Padma grinned. "I'd say he's been drafting a proposal."

"Does that really take three hours?" Hermione practically screeched. "I doubt it! I'd say it's much more likely that bloody Severus Snape has put him off and he's done a runner."

Padma glanced at the belt of Hermione's jeans, where red sparks had begun to issue from the tip of her wand. "Hermione, you need to compose yourself you're sparking. Come on bathroom."

She pulled Hermione by the hand towards the kitchen door. When they got there, they found the way was blocked by a little house-elf wearing a pink apron.

"Is you being Miss Granger?" squeaked the elf, her large, solemn eyes trained on Hermione's face.

"Yes, I'm Hermione Granger."

"Master Snape is wanting to see you immediately in his office, Miss," said the elf before disappearing with a snap of her tiny fingers.

Hermione clutched at Padma's t-shirt as if she was drowning. "What do I do?"

"Hermione," Padma said, exasperated. "You go up there and see what he wants. I thought you were scheduled to see him now anyway?"

"I was! Why did he send the elf?"

"I've no idea," Padma replied. "Do you want me to walk you up?"

Hermione nodded, and they climbed the stairs. By the time they'd reached the third floor, Hermione was shaking.

"Hermione!" Padma said gently. "I've never seen you like this. What's the matter?"

"I'm so nervous. I feel like this is my last chance."

Padma gave her an encouraging hug. "It'll all come good in the end you'll see. Will you definitely accept if he's offered?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes if he's offered."

Padma beamed. "I'll wait for you in the common room. Good luck!"

She pushed Hermione towards the office door, and with a toss of her long, black hair, she skipped down the staircase.

Taking a deep breath, and feeling like she was about to face a firing squad, Hermione tapped on the door and entered Snape's office for what she hoped would be the final time.

He was standing at the window, and he immediately bade her take a seat. He did something of a double take when he saw her, and her hand flew self-consciously to her hair; she'd forgotten it was different today.

"Are you quite alright, Miss Granger?" he asked, a frown creasing his forehead.

"Yes, I'm fine," she said, trying to sound confident. "Why do you ask?"

"Your hands are shaking," he said, his eyes flicking downwards to her hands that lay quivering in her lap.

"I'm a nervous wreck, to be honest," she snapped. Her nerves had been stretched to their limit. "I can't take any more of your games, so please don't toy with me."

"I've no intention of toying with you, Miss Granger," he assured her in a surprisingly benevolent voice. "With your permission, I'd like to ask you a number of questions, if I may."

Without waiting for her reply, he strode across the room to a mahogany drinks cabinet set against the wall to her left. With a wave of his wand, the cabinet flew open. "Might I interest you in a drink? I imagine you could do with one."

"I'll have a double Firewhisky, please."

"A double?" he asked, an amused smirk on his face.

"Yes, a double," she replied defiantly.

He poured a double measure of the dark liquor into a tumbler and levitated it across the room, watching as she accepted the drink and began to sip at it.

Hermione began to relax as the warming fluid ran down her throat. She turned her attention to Severus Snape, trying to read what his expression might mean for her future. His dark eyes gave nothing away.

He poured himself a generous measure from the same bottle and resumed his seat behind his desk.

"What do you expect of marriage, Miss Granger?" he asked.

"This is the type of nonsense we've already covered in pre-marriage counselling," she replied with a frown.

He raised an eyebrow. "Nonsense, you call it? Your hopes for the future should not be so flagrantly dismissed when on the precipice of such an important decision."

The precipice of an important decision? Did that mean that Theodore had offered for her? "I expect many things. Companionship, emotional security, mutual respect ..." she trailed off, not knowing what he wanted of her.

"Love?" he asked.

Her eyes widened. Severus Snape, of all people, speaking to her of love? "I'm not entirely naïve this is an arranged marriage. It would be an added bonus to love and to be loved in return. I don't necessarily think a lack of romantic love would mean an unworkable marriage. Perhaps love would develop, some day."

There was a pause. "On a more practical note have you yet secured employment?"

Hermione's cheeks grew pink; she was still smarting from his refusal to grant her an interview. "I was offered a post in St. Mungo's, but I refused."

He smirked. "You seem to have a peculiar habit of refusing the offers made to you," he said, not unkindly.

She returned his smirk. She might as well take advantage of his unexpectedly good humour. "I couldn't see myself staying there long term. I'm awaiting two further interviews: one in Geneva and one in the Department of Mysteries. The interviews are weeks away. I was hoping to have settled my future by then and to be in a better position to judge what career option would suit best."

He pressed the tips of his fingers together and contemplated her for a moment. "Would you like to settle in London?"

Hermione considered the question for a few seconds before nodding. "Yes, I believe so. I'm very interested in the job at the Department of Mysteries."

"That would be quite an achievement; the Ministry only recruit for the Department of Mysteries every three or four years. It has coincided nicely with the termination of your university education."

"It has," she agreed, wondering what he was playing at this time.

"Do you wish to have children?" he asked.

"Yes, of course I wish to have children ... eventually. I've invested a lot of time in my education, so I'd like to have a career first. But I'd like to have children one day." She looked at him. "Isn't that the whole point of the *Marriage Act*?"

"It is indeed, Miss Granger," he replied. "As far as most people are concerned, that is the whole point of the *Marriage Act*, and many of them are willing to fulfil their duty to ensure the continued existence of the wizarding community in this country. To a certain minority, however, the *Marriage Act* is nothing more than an inconvenience with which it is necessary for them to comply in order to enjoy continued residency in Britain."

Hermione shook her head impatiently and placed her whisky on the desk. "You promised not to toy with me, Professor. Why don't you put me out of my misery and tell me where this is going?"

He stared at his now empty tumbler for almost an entire minute before emitting a deep sigh and extracting a sheet of parchment from the drawer beneath his desk. He tossed the document onto the table.

With a renewed trembling in her fingers and her heart hammering in her chest, she reached forward and picked up the parchment. She found the names written at the top of the contract just as he spoke again.

"Contrary to my advice, Theodore offered for you this morning," he said.

Her first sensation was of relief; relief that she wouldn't have to flee the country after Padma's wedding. Then she was overcome by a sense of joy. She read the names of Hermione Granger and Theodore Nott at the beginning of the document, and a broad smile spread slowly across her face.

"I accept," she said breathily.

He held up a hand. "Please do not be too hasty. I'd appreciate if you would hear me out, Miss Granger."

She shook her head. "You won't change my mind. I accept."

He glared at her. "Fools step in where angels fear to tread, as you Muggles say. I would like you to listen to what I have to say."

"Are you calling me a fool?" she snapped.

He thumped the table. "No, I'm not. Could we please leave our mutual dislike out of this? I'd like to speak to you as your Liaison Officer and in complete confidence as someone who knows Theodore Nott."

She matched his glare. "Fine."

"The answers you have given to my questions have convinced me further that a match between yourself and Theo would be unwise."

She scowled. That was why he had been so uncharacteristically nice to her. Feeling like a fly caught in a web, she downed the remainder of her whisky in one shot and narrowed her watering eyes at her former professor. "Go on, then."

"You're angry with me," he said.

"Yes," she spat, "I'm angry with you. I'm sick of your games. You asked me those questions just so you could use my own answers against me."

"I asked those questions," he stated clearly, "to confirm what I had already suspected to be true. Miss Granger, I'm begging you to ignore our personal differences and listen to what I have to say about Theodore. Can you do that?"

She nodded, her throat burning from the whisky.

"Thank you. I'm not going to dispute the fact that you and Theo appear to have a certain amount in common: you're both bookish and intelligent. But that is where the similarities end. He comes from a fabulously wealthy family, Miss Granger, and his upbringing has had a profound effect on his personality."

"My parents are reasonably wealthy," she interrupted. "I've never wanted for anything!"

He shook his head. "There's a distinct difference. Theodore has never had to work, nor will he ever have to. He's of aristocratic stock and has a guaranteed private family income for the rest of his life. He currently occupies the bottom two stories of a property in Kensington Square, while his great uncle occupies the upper floors. The entire property will pass to Theo on his death."

"And this is a problem how, exactly?" she asked.

"He has no reason to stay, Miss Granger. He's ungrounded. He's unrealistic. He imagines that he can breeze around the world and not commit himself to anything. He has no intention of settling down any time soon."

"I've just told you that I don't want children in the near future. I don't understand why any of this is an issue!" she said, puzzled.

Severus sighed and rubbed his brow. "I don't claim to know you in any detail, Miss Granger, but I was your teacher, and teachers generally form an impression of their student's personalities. I know many years have passed since last I taught you, and that you've matured since your Hogwarts days, but I'd rather like to think that I have a general impression of the kind of woman you've become."

She gestured for him to continue.

"Harry Potter was watched more closely than you can imagine while at Hogwarts. As one of his closest friends, you were also watched. You were always the voice of reason in your little trio - you're ruled by logic, realism and clarity of thought. You've said yourself that you wish to pursue a satisfying career. Your intelligence demands that the knowledge you've amassed be put to use. Theodore will not be tied down to one place in order to satisfy his wife's intellectual pursuits."

Hermione shook her head. "These are all hypothetical details that have yet to be explored!"

"I assure you, Miss Granger; he will not stay in London or Geneva, or be confined to any one place. He has a bohemian streak in his personality that he's learned to indulge. He detests routine and order; the very things you seem to admire. Would you be content, traipsing around the world, never committing yourself to anything? Would you be happy to forsake your career to live the life of a wanderer?"

"Most people I know would give their wand arm to have the opportunity to travel the world. I honestly don't see what the problem is, Professor."

He clicked his tongue in exasperation. "I assure you, Miss Granger. You and Theodore are not compatible."

She rolled her eyes. "Has he any sort of prejudice against Muggles or Muggle-borns?" she asked.

"No. That is not the point."

"Is he already married or betrothed?"

"No."

"Is he homosexual?"

"Godammit, Miss Granger!"

"Is he homosexual?" she repeated.

"Not that I know of," he snarled.

"Then I really don't see what the problem is."

He sighed. "Gryffindors are sadly lacking in subtlety. It is nothing nearly so dramatic. He'll be unhappy if you wish to pursue a career, start a family or settle down in any way. I speculate that you, Miss Granger, will be equally unhappy, after a time, of travelling without having some sort of routine or meaningful occupation in your life. That's the bottom line."

"You are just trying to dissuade me because you couldn't bear to have me as an in-law," she insisted.

"This is nothing to do with me. I'm warning you: he will not stay with you."

His words stung. "Do you find me so repulsive that you couldn't imagine he'd want me, or want to stay with me?"

He gave a long, pained sigh. "I don't think there's anything wrong with you, or that there is any fault on your side, Miss Granger. The fault lies with Theodore."

She cocked her head to the side. "Why are you telling me this, Professor. Why do you care?"

He stared at her for a moment, a strange, open look on his face. "You saved my life," he said in an awkward voice. "I owe you a life debt. I fear that Theodore would eventually cause you great unhappiness, and I see it as my duty to warn you."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak and then closed it again. She was completely blown away by his answer. He had never before given any indication that he was grateful for what she'd done. "Thank you for your concern," she managed eventually, "but I believe that Theo and I like one another, and I would like to try my hardest to make this work, Professor. Your concerns have been duly noted, but I wish to accept Theo's offer."

He looked at her with an intense expression in his eyes. She was sure that he was going to argue his point further, but to her surprise, he tossed his quill on the desk.

"In that case, your signature is required," he said in a defeated tone, gesturing towards the contract.

She glanced through the preliminary offer of marriage and signed her name at the bottom of the sheet. When she'd completed her signature, the parchment glowed bright

blue for a second or two before fading to white once more.

"The offer is now binding," he muttered, avoiding her gaze. "You're officially betrothed to Theodore Nott. I will inform him immediately."

"Thank you, sir," she said, excited now. "May I leave?"

"You may," he answered, still refusing to look her in the eye.

When she reached the door, she turned towards him once more. "Sir?" she asked and waited for him to look at her before she continued. "The offer I made yesterday still stands. You have my word that I'll never betray your confidence with regard to your memories, but if that's not enough, I'm willing to allow you to Obliviate the relevant memories. I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable by marrying Theo in light of the ... the things I know."

He held her gaze for a moment. "Your word will suffice, Miss Granger," he said. He dropped his gaze to his desk once more. "I wish you every happiness in your marriage."

"Thank you," she said and left the room. She sat for a moment on the stairs, as a wide grin spread across her face. She was engaged. To Theodore Nott. She could scarcely believe it.

The moment she closed the door behind her, Severus put his head in his hands. He had tried.

Theodore, although shy, was filled with self-confidence in many ways. Like his mother, Theo was self-obsessed to the point of cruelty as far other people were concerned. He wasn't deliberately hurtful he would just out his own desires and comforts far above the wishes and feelings of anybody else.

Severus rather suspected that Hermione Granger, on the other hand, lacked self-confidence. She was certainly self-assured when it came to her intellectual abilities of that there was little doubt. But he'd always formed the impression that she was much less confident when it came to the opposite sex.

A marriage between them would never last.

Hermione Granger had saved his life; he owed her a life debt. It was his duty to warn her. She seemed enamoured with Theodore Nott; what effect would it have on her already brittle self-image if her husband was to leave her?

Severus sighed deeply. He'd done what he could. She would not listen. He picked up the marriage contract and examined their signatures. He sincerely hoped, for her sake, that he was wrong.

Hermione spent ten minutes in the bathroom, grinning at herself in the mirror. She hadn't felt so elated for an awfully long time. In a few short weeks she would become Hermione Granger Nott. She said the name out loud and smiled at her reflection again; it rather suited her, she thought. She left the bathroom and headed for the common room, not entirely sure what she would say or do when she got there.

She pushed open the door and scanned the room for Theodore. Almost the entire class were there, and her eyes alighted instead on Padma. When their gazes locked, Padma arched her eyebrow in an unspoken question. Hermione beamed and gave her a nod. Padma sprang from the sofa with such a scream that Neville managed to upend his tea all over his jeans in alarm.

The girls threw their arms around one another squealed. After a few seconds, Padma relinquished her hold on her friend and burst into tears. Hermione quickly did the same, and, all pretence of dignity forgotten, she embraced Padma again.

Not knowing whether his fiancée was happy or sad, Dean exchanged a confused glance with Neville. Rising from the sofa he asked, "Girls? Is everything okay?"

They pulled apart, and Padma wiped at her eyes with the end of her sleeve. "Hermione's engaged to Theo!"

He looked even more bewildered. "And you could tell that just from the squealing?"

They both laughed. "It's true," Hermione said, conjuring two handkerchiefs and handing one to Padma. "He offered for me this morning, and I accepted."

When Hermione had been hugged and congratulated, she looked around for Theodore.

"Has anybody seen Theo?" she asked.

"He was here when we came up from cookery," Draco said, "but then Snape sent for him."

She remembered that Snape had said he would inform Theo of her acceptance immediately. She turned to Padma and Dean. "I'm going to look for a phone box I can't wait to tell Mum and Dad! If Theo comes back will you tell him I'll only be a few minutes?"

She left the room, rummaging in her pockets for coins. She'd just reached the front steps when she ran headfirst into a broad torso. Raising startled eyes from the grey-clad chest in front of her, she found herself looking into the equally startled eyes of Theodore Nott.

Even though he was standing on the step below her, his face was still many inches above hers. They gazed at one another for a few seconds, neither of them knowing what to say when, much to her pleasure, Theodore smiled. She beamed at him.

"Thank you for offering," she said.

"Thank you for accepting," he countered.

Her smile widened. "I was just on my way to ring my parents," she explained.

"I just sent an owl to my mum," he said. He suddenly looked a little nervous. "I suppose we should meet tomorrow to talk, or something?" he asked.

Hermione nodded. "We could have lunch after Domestic Magic class?"

"Okay," he agreed, smiling again. "I'll see you in class."

Hermione grinned. "See you tomorrow."

She felt an impulse to touch his hand, or maybe his chest, but resisted the urge. Somehow, it didn't seem appropriate yet. With a little wave, she stepped around him and skipped down the stone steps, still grinning. She couldn't wait to tell her parents the news.

During the days that followed, she never once reflected on the warnings that Severus Snape had given her.

Shy One

Chapter 7 of 34

Hermione and Theo start the process of getting to know one another.

*Shy one, shy one,
Shy one of my heart,
She moves in the firelight
Pensively apart.
She carries in the dishes,
And lays them in a row.
To an isle in the water
With her I would go.
She carries in the candles,
And lights the curtained room,
Shy in the doorway
And shy in the gloom;
And shy as a rabbit,
Helpful and shy.
To an isle in the water
With her I would fly.*

- **W. B. Yeats, *To an Isle in the Water***

With sleep-heavy lids, Hermione Granger soon to be Nott peered at her alarm clock. She was exhausted; she'd stayed up well into the night debating her future with her mother. Although, at first, her parents had accepted her decision to abide by the *Marriage Act*., the sudden betrothal of their only child to a man they'd never even met had brought the reality of the situation swiftly home to them.

In an effort to be supportive of her decision, her father had ordered a take-away and had opened a bottle of champagne, and they'd chatted quite merrily through their meal. It wasn't until the arrival of a Ministry of Magic owl that her parents had begun to voice their doubts. The owl had come with papers for her perusal official records of Theodore's wealth and predicted yearly income.

The result had been a barrage of questions about Theodore and his family that Hermione, at this incipient stage in their relationship, had found she was unable to answer. Her mother and father, rather than finding Theodore's wealth heartening, had been thoroughly alarmed. Even his degree from Cambridge hadn't appeased them, and her father had tactfully retired to bed early, leaving mother and daughter to have a lengthy heart-to-heart. She had eventually promised to leave as long a gap as was legally possible between her engagement and her wedding, and to invite Theo for dinner at the weekend.

She was so besotted by the image in her head of her and Theo as a couple that her parents' worries annoyed her. Their mollicoddling reminded her, in a sense, of Molly Weasley. She could only hope that on meeting Theo they'd calm down.

Still, this morning, despite her fatigue, she couldn't help but grin. She was excited at the prospect of learning all about her prospective in-laws. With the exception of Severus Snape, that was.

She got up and rifled through her wardrobe, trying to imagine what Theo might like. He always dressed plainly, so she chose her favourite pair of jeans and a flowing, grey silk t-shirt she'd bought in Paris. She wondered where they would eat that afternoon. Would her plain clothes suit? Quite suddenly, the idea of an entire afternoon alone with her fiancé seemed daunting. Putting her hand on her nervous stomach, she looked at her reflection in the bedroom mirror, then she picked up her mascara and set to work on her appearance; she'd no wish to disappoint her soon-to-be spouse.

When Hermione arrived at Belgrave House, Theo was pacing the floor of the common room.

"Hi. Good morning," he said shyly.

"Good morning," she replied. He was also dressed in jeans and a grey t-shirt. The sight made her laugh. "We sort of match."

He smiled. "Maybe it's a good omen?"

"Maybe it is," she agreed. A slightly awkward pause ensued.

"Have you had breakfast?" he asked.

Hermione shook her head. "I didn't feel hungry. I was just going to have a cup of tea. Would you like one?"

"Look," he muttered, "I haven't eaten either. Why don't we just get out of here?"

She frowned. "Now? But we have Domestic Magic class at ten."

Theo rolled his eyes. "It's such a waste of time let's just leave for the say," he said, walking towards the door.

Hermione stood uncertainly in the middle of the room. She'd never, in her whole life, willingly skipped a class. She agreed that Domestic Magic was utterly pointless, but what if this was the very week they learned something useful? "But what if we miss something important?" she pleaded.

"I've only been to one of the Domestic Magic classes, and it was a complete joke. Don't you think it's more important that we get to know one another?" he asked.

He was right, she decided: it was much more important that they get to know one another than learn how to magically unblock a drain. She smiled at him and joined him at the door. "You're right. Let's go!"

He rewarded her with a broad smile, and she knew she'd done the right thing. She had never heard him speak so much, and with such little embarrassment.

The sky was overcast, but the breeze was warm. They strolled along Chapel Street in amiable silence for a few minutes until they came to the outskirts of Buckingham Palace Gardens. Theodore glanced up and down the quiet road and then turned to Hermione.

"There's a safe Apparition point in the grounds of Westminster Abbey. Will you come with me?"

"Okay," she replied, intrigued.

After pausing to allow an approaching car to pass by, they turned on the spot and reappeared in the shadows of the north wall of the abbey. Hermione smiled as she took in the familiar sight of the London landmarks. The Houses of Parliament lay to their right, and across the Thames loomed the London Eye.

Theodore turned his attention to the abbey behind him. "A lot of my ancestors are interred in Westminster Abbey," he said.

She raised an eyebrow; not just anybody was interred in Westminster Abbey. They both jumped as Big Ben suddenly announced ten o'clock. Theo turned to her with a smile. "I know the perfect place for breakfast," he said, gesturing towards the Thames.

She followed him, marvelling at the way he was completely at ease in Muggle London; Ron would have panicked at the prospect of crossing the road. But Theo looked more relaxed among the camera-toting tourists than he was in the company of fellow wizards. When they reached Westminster Bridge, she saw where he was headed: the small hut serving crêpes at the corner of the bridge.

"If you spent four years in Paris, you must like crêpes?" he asked.

Hermione laughed. "Yes! They were a staple of my diet."

They hurried across the busy street and joined the short queue at the hut, both of them gazing back towards the Houses of Parliament. "It's strange to think that all kinds of important things might be going on in there, right now," Hermione mused.

Theo shrugged. "Well, not *right* now. Parliament is in Summer Recess, and Tony Blair's in Canada."

She gaped at him. "If there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's that the vast majority of pure-bloods and half-bloods don't even know who Tony Blair is."

He chuckled. "I've lived in London all my life I know a thing or two about Westminster. My mother's great, great-uncle was a member of parliament."

"Was he a Muggle?" she asked, fascinated.

"No. He was a wizard, but nobody in government knew. He was quite famous, actually: John Stuart Mill."

Hermione's eyes widened. "John Stuart Mill? You're joking! The famous philosopher?"

"The very one," he said with a smile. "He had great notions about how Muggle Britain should be managed, so he got all political. It didn't go down very well with the Ministry of Magic; in fact, we're almost certain that the Minister for Magic had him assassinated in 1873, but we've never been able to prove it."

She remembered having seen a plaque dedicated to John Stuart Mill. "Didn't he live in Kensington Square?" she asked. "And don't you live there, too?"

He nodded. "I do, but he lived in number eighteen there's a plaque beside the door. Severus and my mother, Cordelia, live there now."

Hermione's stomach lurched. "Snape lives in Kensington Square, too?"

Theo gave her an apologetic look. "They live across the square from me. I don't see them very often, though, don't worry."

They paid for their breakfast and ate as they strolled along Victoria Embankment. Hermione watched him out of the corner of her eye as they walked. She was captivated by the change in his personality since they'd left Belgrave Square. Even Padma wasn't completely comfortable in Muggle society, not as comfortable as Theo. It boded well for his upcoming visit to her parents' house. As if he'd read her mind, he turned to her.

"How did your parents react?" he asked. "I'd imagine it's difficult for them to understand the situation, being Muggles."

She shrugged. "They're a little worried. I'm an only child, so it's a natural reaction, I suppose. What did your mum think?"

"She was pleased. I'm an only child, too, but she's read a few articles about you, so she knows you're clever."

Hermione blushed, hoping his mother had never read Rita Skeeter's comments in the *Daily Prophet* during the Triwizard Tournament. "My parents would like you to come to tea on Saturday," she said apologetically.

He smirked. "My mum's invited you to dinner on Friday, so you get interrogated first."

She chuckled. This was turning out to be one hell of a week.

They strolled through London for almost two hours, chatting easily about family, friends and their years at university. Although much of his shyness had disappeared, she noticed that Theo would sometimes remain completely silent for minutes on end. He didn't seem bothered, but it made her uncomfortable. She wrestled with the urge to fill the silences, and the simultaneous fear of babbling too much.

And not once did he mention his father or his father's family. She wanted to acknowledge it somehow, but was afraid to broach the subject in case she offended him. In an effort to forget about it, she concentrated instead on committing every detail of their first real date to memory.

The time passed quickly, and soon they were hungry once again.

"Where would you like to eat?" Theo asked.

"I've no idea," she replied. "You seem to know London even better than I do, so you choose."

He looked around; they were in Oxford Street. "How about the Ivy?" he asked.

She laughed. "We'll never get a table in the Ivy. It's lunchtime and you have to book weeks in advance."

He smiled. "Not if your family has their own private table there."

She raised her eyebrows. "Your family has a private table at the Ivy? A famous Muggle restaurant? I can't believe you're pure-bloods!"

He grinned. "It's a little unorthodox, I suppose. We have a table at Pierre's in Diagon Alley, too. We like to keep one foot in both worlds."

They walked in the direction of the upmarket restaurant until Theo stopped to look in the window of a jewellery store.

"Would you like an engagement ring?" he asked, turning to her.

Hermione blushed and shook her head. "No. I know they're not traditional in wizarding society. I'd like for us to have nice wedding bands, though," she added. "I know they're central to the ceremony."

"A lot of the girls in our group have engagement rings," he said, returning his scrutiny to the jewellery.

"Honestly, Theo. I don't need for one."

He pressed his finger to the glass. "What about that one there?"

She followed the direction of his gaze. It was a solitaire ring with a large diamond set in platinum. "Theo," she said, shaking her head, "that ring costs twelve thousand pounds. I worked in a café in Paris, and that's more than my entire year's salary!"

He frowned. "Is that a lot? I'm not overly familiar with Muggle currency. I have a funny plastic card that always gets me what I want. Mum's accountant takes care of it" He looked at the ring again. "Don't you think it's beautiful?"

"Yes, it is beautiful but it isn't edible, and right now all I can think about is my stomach!"

When they reached the restaurant, Hermione could hardly believe the familiar way in which Theo was greeted by many of the staff. They were ushered immediately to their table and had ordered lunch within minutes. The Mill family were evidently important people in the Muggle and wizarding worlds alike.

Theo seemed to be in a pensive mood during their meal, and Hermione did most of the talking. She didn't really mind; she was enjoying the plush surroundings, and Theo seemed interested in tales of her Muggle upbringing. They shared a bottle of red wine, and the conversation soon turned to the European cities they'd visited. They found that there were many countries they both wanted to explore: Japan, New Zealand and South Africa. When Hermione finally glanced at her watch, she could hardly believe it was almost six o'clock.

"You have plans?" Theo asked.

She gave him an apologetic look. "I arranged to meet Harry and Ginny for a drink at the Leaky Cauldron. I wouldn't have agreed to it if I'd thought ... well ..."

"That we'd get along so well?"

She grinned. "Yes."

He smiled. "Severus thinks we aren't suited at all."

She was surprised he'd raised the subject. "Well, we'll just have to prove him wrong, then."

Theo added the bill to his family's tab, and they left. The clouds had cleared, and the evening sunshine was glorious. He offered to walk her to the Leaky Cauldron, and she accepted gratefully. Reassured by the conversations they'd, and emboldened by the wine, Hermione slipped her hand into his. He laced his fingers through hers and gave her a shy smile from beneath his brown, wavy hair. She sighed happily; things were going better than she'd dared to hope.

When Hermione entered the pub, she found Ginny and Harry at their favourite table in the corner. She smiled as she approached; they'd been married for almost three years now, but they were still as engrossed in each other as any newly married couple.

"Hi, Harry," she said as she embraced her friend. "I haven't seen you since Christmas." She turned and gave Ginny a brief hug.

Harry motioned to the barmaid, who crossed the busy room to take their order.

Ginny grinned across the table. "So? Any significant news? I heard Draco and Susan got engaged, and Neville told me on Monday that he's going to offer for Hannah."

Hermione nodded. "Nearly everybody's sorted now. Katie Bell has accepted Blaise Zabini, and Terry Boot is engaged to a girl called Laura Wallace."

"And ..." Harry said, smiling, "What about you? Why have you gone so pink?"

Hermione grinned and pressed the palms of her hands to her warm cheeks. "That might have something to do with the three glasses of wine I had with lunch."

Ginny raised an eyebrow. "I assume you weren't dining alone, then?"

She shook her head, suddenly nervous about telling them. What if they didn't approve? "I had lunch with my fiancé; I got engaged yesterday."

Ginny squealed so loudly that she clapped a hand over her own mouth. "Sorry!" she said, lowering her voice to a whisper. "Oh, Hermione! Who?"

Hermione smiled. "Theodore Nott." She chuckled at their matching expressions of complete astonishment.

"I don't believe it!" Harry exclaimed, thumping the table with his fist. "I owe Ron twenty Galleons!"

"I told you she'd never marry Michael Corner!" Ginny said, sticking her tongue out at her husband.

Hermione looked from one to the other. "You and Ron placed bets on who I'd marry?"

"Yes, they did the fools," said Ginny. "You know what they're like. I had a copy of the list of candidates, and Harry insisted you'd go for Michael Corner. Ron said there was no way you'd go for Michael he reckoned your only option was Theodore Nott. Harry said hell would freeze over before you married Theodore, with Snape being his stepfather and all that."

Hermione gasped. "You knew Snape was his stepfather and you never told me?"

Ginny frowned. "Everyone knows Snape is his stepfather!"

"With the rather important exceptions of me, Padma and Dean," she said.

"Can we skip to the part about how the hell you and Theo got together?" Harry asked, frowning.

Hermione shrugged. "There's not much to tell, really. I like him; he likes me. He's really shy, so we'd only talked a little before today. I think we're really well suited, though."

The barmaid arrived with their drinks, and they waited until she'd left again.

"D'you know, Hermione, I think you might be right," Harry muttered, sipping his mead. "I didn't reckon you'd want Snape as a father-in-law, but you're suited to Theo he practically lived in the library."

Ginny smiled. "You really like him, don't you?"

Hermione blushed and nodded. "I don't know him well yet or anything, but yes I really like him."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "How do you feel about having Snape as an in-law? Will it be a problem?"

She sighed. She hadn't been able to talk this problem through with Padma or her parents. Her vow to protect Severus Snape's privacy had robbed her of anyone to talk to. But here she knew she could talk openly: Harry, after all, knew all the details of Snape's memories, and he had no secrets from Ginny.

"He's so hostile to me, most of the time. I know it must be difficult for him when we, of all people, know about his past, but he's been so horrible to me since my first day at Belgrave. Since my first day at Hogwarts, really. I suppose I should be used to it by now." She sipped her drink and bit at her lower lip. "When he told me he was Theo's stepfather, I was ... appalled. He's been much nicer to me since then, which is weird. He doesn't think we're suited he thinks me and Theo will never work out."

"What?" Ginny asked. "Why would he think that?"

Hermione shrugged, trying not to get upset. "He gave me lots of reasons, but they all seemed trivial to me. The thing is, I don't even know whether or not to believe what he says. Is he really concerned that it wouldn't work out, or is he trying to put me off because he couldn't bear to have me as a daughter-in-law?"

Harry and Ginny exchanged a glance. "Do you think it won't work out?" Harry asked.

Hermione shook her head. "I'm not going to pretend I know him well, but even after spending today with him, I'm confident that we're suited. And he won't have any problems with my parents he's more knowledgeable about Muggle politics than I am, and he knows London like the back of his hand. I can't see any reason why it wouldn't work out perfectly well."

"It seems to me," Ginny muttered, leaning forward, "that it's not so much a matter of what Snape thinks, as a matter of whether or not you're willing to put up with having Snape as an in-law."

Hermione stared into her drink for a moment. "After the day I've just spent with Theo," she said, feeling suddenly cheered, "I'd be willing to put up with much more than Severus Snape and his bad behaviour. I think there's every chance that Theo and I could be very, very happy."

Harry grinned and raised his glass. "Well you know I always hoped you and Ron would end up together, but I'm just glad you're happy. To Hermione and Theo," he said.

They all clinked their glasses together.

Ginny gave her an impish grin. "Have you slept with him yet?"

Harry choked on his mead. "Couldn't you two discuss this when I'm not around?"

They both ignored him. "Of course I haven't! Haven't even kissed him yet," Hermione said.

Ginny looked thoughtful. "I always reckoned he'd be a great kisser dark and mysterious and all that."

"You always reckoned Theodore Nott would be a great kisser?" Harry asked, looking horrified.

"Not as good as you, obviously," Ginny said, poking him.

Hermione laughed. She often felt uncomfortable around other couples, but not Harry and Ginny. She'd known them too long. She looked at their drinks on the table and frowned. "Why are you drinking orange juice?" she asked Ginny. "You always drink mead."

Harry and Ginny looked at one another and smiled. "You're not the only one with news," Harry said.

"I'm six weeks pregnant," Ginny whispered, a broad smile on her suddenly radiant face.

"No way! Congratulations!" Hermione pushed back her chair and hugged them simultaneously.

The conversation moved inevitably into the realms of all things baby-related. As Hermione watched her friends from across the table, she was envious of their happiness. Harry kept looking at Ginny with such an expression of protectiveness that it almost brought tears to her eyes. She'd never, in her whole life, felt at all broody. But now, confronted as she was with their joy, she imagined her and Theo sharing the same news with friends and family. And the idea was not entirely unwelcome.

Hermione had just finished dressing for bed that evening when there was a faint tapping at her bedroom window. There was a large brown owl on her ledge. She knew a moment of panic when she recognised the Ministry of Magic seal on the scroll in its beak, but gave a relieved sigh to find that it was just from the Department of Mysteries about her job application.

A grin spread across her face as she read the letter: she was the only applicant whose submission they were prepared to consider and, as a result, they wished to move the process forward and interview her on Friday morning. She took a quill from the drawer in her writing desk and hurriedly scribbled a note to Theo. There were only thirty-six hours to go until her interview; they needed to talk.

My Own Way

Chapter 8 of 34

Meet the Parents.

A/N: Just a quick note to thank you all for your continued support and reviews. Your kind words make my day every time. LB x

Let me have my own way,

Let others promulge the laws, I will make no account of the law,

Let others praise eminent men and hold up peace, I hold up agitation and conflict,

I praise no eminent man, I rebuke to his face the one that was thought most worthy.

(Who are you? and what are you secretly guilty of all your life?

Will you turn aside all your life? will you grub and chatter all your life?

And who are you, blabbing by rote, years, pages, languages, reminiscences,

Unwitting to-day that you do not know how to speak properly a single word?)

- **Walt Whitman, *Myself and Mine***

Hermione arrived at Belgrave House the following morning on the dot of nine. She poured herself a cup of tea and waited for Theo; he'd replied to her note with a promise to arrive early, and he did not disappoint.

"Hi," he said, closing the common room door behind him. "What's up?"

She extracted the Department of Mysteries letter from her pocket and held it out. "Take a look at this."

He quickly scanned the parchment and handed it back to her with a sigh of relief. "Is that it? I thought you'd had second thoughts or something."

"Of course I haven't!" she said, touched that he'd been worried. "What do you think about the interview?"

She expected him to congratulate her, but instead he frowned. "You know once we're married, you'll never need to work?"

"I'm beginning to understand that, yes. But what if I want to work?" she said, mildly disappointed by his lack of enthusiasm.

He shrugged. "I'd hoped you might want to visit all the places we talked about yesterday."

"I do! But why can't we do both? I'll have plenty of holidays if I'm even offered the job, that is."

He glanced through the window at the street outside, then turned back to her and grinned. "Let's go for a picnic."

Hermione looked at him as if he were insane. "We've class in less than an hour, Theo."

He took her right hand and started to pull her towards the door. "How could you possibly want to stay here on a day like today?"

"Theo, no!" she said, shaking her head. "I didn't mind skipping class once, but not two days in a row!"

"But we're segregated for health classes today, so we won't even see each other. Come on, Hermione. It's a beautiful day. We'll make a picnic at my house and go to Hyde Park."

As soon as he mentioned his house, Hermione's resolve began to weaken. It might very well become her home soon, and the chance to see where Theo lived was too tempting to refuse. She gave him a mock glare. "You're going to be a very bad influence on me I can tell."

"Is that a yes, then?" he asked, squeezing her hand.

"If you promise to go to every single class next week."

"I promise," he said, rewarding her with a broad smile. "Come on. You'll get to meet my mad uncle."

He pulled her to the steps outside and Apparated them both to the front of his house in Kensington Square.

Hermione looked around, taking in the handsome square. The small park at its centre was lush and well-tended; the houses were neat and perfectly maintained. The cars parked along the street were almost all Mercedes and BMWs. She turned and examined the door to Theodore's house; it was painted dark green. She'd expected the knocker on the door to be fashioned in the shape of a serpent or something, like the one in Grimmauld Place, but it was just a plain brass door-knocker. In fact, nothing at all about the exterior of the house hinted that the occupants were wizards.

Theo watched as she took in her new surroundings. "Do you like it?"

"Yes it's lovely. I've always liked this part of London."

He pressed the tip of his wand to the brass knocker, and it gave a faint green glow before she heard the clunk of the opening lock inside. Theo pushed open the door and stood aside to let her enter. The interior was exactly as she'd imagined: the walls were painted white; the ceiling was decorated with intricate coving; and a magnificent chandelier hung from an ornate centre rose. Underfoot there was a luxurious deep-pile carpet in red, and the walls were hung with portraits of what she presumed were Theo's ancestors all of whom were peering at her. A gleaming mahogany staircase rose to the next floor.

"It's not as impressive as my mum's house, but I like it." Theo closed the door behind him.

"It's wonderful!" she said, trying to avoid the gaze of one of the portraits a grey-haired old lady who had extracted a pair of opera glasses to get a better look at her. "Do I get a tour?"

"If you like. I'll just fetch Moe and ask her to put a picnic together."

No sooner had he said the words than there was a loud crack, and a tiny house-elf appeared. It was the same elf that had summoned Hermione to Snape's office two days previously she was wearing a smart, pink apron.

"Moe, this is Hermione she's my fiancée," Theo announced. "Hermione, this is Moe. She's been working for my family for almost a century."

"How do you do," Hermione said, offering her hand to the elderly elf.

Moe gave her a searching look, and then a small smile. With a little curtsy she accepted Hermione's hand and shook it. Her movements were stiff, and her face was deeply lined.

"Is there any chance you could make us up a picnic, Moe?" Theo asked. "Just something simple?"

The elf looked at him with her large, doleful eyes and nodded. With a snap of her fingers, she disappeared again.

Hermione frowned. "Why was she wearing an apron?"

"She was presented to my Great Uncle Lance on his seventeenth birthday. He was a bit of an elvish welfare activist at the time, so he immediately presented Moe with clothes and all the Galleons he had in his pockets."

"He set her free?" Hermione asked, rather liking the sound of Great Uncle Lance.

"Yep. Moe was really upset, but he explained his reasons to her, and she left. She spent the galleons on that pink apron and returned the next morning, telling him that she would like to work for him as a free elf. He accepted on the condition that she would allow him to give her a monthly salary, and she's been with us ever since."

"Wow. Professor Snape sent that elf to summon me on Tuesday," Hermione said, confused.

Theo nodded. "She doesn't have much to do, with it just being Uncle Lance and I here, so she works at their house across the square, too. Any one of us can summon her when we wish."

A loud thumping came from above, and Theo looked at the ceiling. "That's the man himself he's probably keen to meet you. Come on." He took Hermione by the hand and pulled her up the mahogany staircase. "I only own the ground floor and the basement; Uncle Lance lives on the upper floors. He keeps to himself, most of the time."

When they'd reached the top of the grand staircase, Theo opened a broad white door to their left, and Hermione stepped into the darkened room, where a thick pair of red velvet drapes had been drawn across the window.

"Morning, Uncle," Theo said. "Do you mind if we open the curtains?"

"Not at all, not at all," croaked a voice from the far corner of the room.

Hermione followed the sound to find a small man huddled over a desk, a book open in front of him and a large, white candle burning at his side. As Theo opened the heavy drapes, she saw a large pool of hardened wax on the desk.

She raised her gaze to the man's face to find he was peering intently at her over his little round spectacles.

"Why have you the curtains pulled and a candle lit when it's a sunny day?" Theo asked his uncle.

The man grunted. "I've been reading since three o'clock in the morning. Wasn't so sunny then, let me tell you. Insomnia ... I've been plagued by it since I turned one-hundred."

He reached for an ebony walking-stick that was leaning against his desk and wrapped a gnarled hand around the top of it. With great effort, he pushed himself to his feet and began to hobble towards Hermione.

"I take it this is Miss Hermione Granger?" he asked, his free hand outstretched. He took her right hand in a surprisingly vice-like grip and shook it. "I'm Lancelot Mill. The name was a ridiculous extravagance on the part of my mother, so please call me Lance. Lancelot seems a trifle inflated when one is only five foot two. All my brothers were six feet tall I'm a genetic anomaly."

He chuckled merrily, and Hermione immediately warmed to him. He was a tiny man his head only reached her nose. He had the same dark blue eyes as Theodore, and a shock of long, grey hair which he wore in an eccentric plait. His neatly trimmed beard was also grey, and he was dressed in wizarding robes of rich, dark brown that were appliquéd with golden crescent moons.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Hermione said with a smile.

"So you've agreed to marry old Theo, eh?" he said, punching his great nephew on the arm. He stepped back and looked her up and down. "Let's have a look at you, then."

She could feel her cheeks redden under his scrutiny.

"Uncle Lance, don't torment her," Theo said.

"Hmmm ... Good child-bearing hips," Lance said, his tone serious.

Hermione laughed at the look of horror on Theo's face.

"Right, we're leaving before you give her good reason to break off our engagement," Theo said, shaking his head. He took Hermione's hand and pulled her towards the door.

"It was nice to meet you," she said over her shoulder.

"The feeling is entirely mutual, dear," Lance replied. "And Theo's not too bad, never fear. He might be an idiot, but he means well!"

"Sorry about that," Theo whispered when they reached the bottom of the stairs.

Hermione grinned. "That's okay. I quite like him, I think."

"Come on, I'll show you around," he said, heading for the nearest door. "This can be our home when we're in London, if you'd like."

She followed him into the room, which was a large dining room that ran the entire length of the house. It had a handsome parquet floor and a highly polished dining table. A chandelier to rival the one in the hallway hung from the ceiling, and glass cases displaying antique china and other treasures ran along one wall.

"This is the dining room, obviously. Mum's had hers magically enlarged into a ballroom. It's incredible." Theo allowed her a moment to look around and then motioned for her to follow him back into the hall, where he crossed to another room. "This is the sitting room."

The décor in this room was entirely more modern. The walls were painted a rich cream, and the floor was covered in a shaggy beige carpet. There was a large fireplace,

an upright piano and a brown leather suite of furniture. In one corner sat a games table, upon which there was a wizards' chess set. The most recent game had obviously been interrupted, and the abandoned figures yawned and tapped their feet impatiently, many of them turning to glare at Theodore.

A door at the far end of the room led to a cosy study.

"Oooh, I like this room," Hermione said as she took in the wood-panelled walls and the lengthy bookcase. There were two well-worn armchairs, a grand French window, and a writing bureau in one corner, complete with a stack of fresh parchment and an array of differently coloured inks and quills. She crossed to the window and looked out into the back garden. There was a cobbled terrace with wrought-iron garden furniture, and the immaculate lawn led to a little orchard.

There was a tap on the door, and Moe entered, levitating a large picnic basket behind her. "I's finished packing your lunch, Master Theodore," she whispered, quickly scurrying away again as soon as the wicker basket had touched the floor.

"Thanks, Moe," he called after her. Pulling his wand from his jeans, he shrunk the heavy basket until it was the size of a wallet and slipped it into his pocket. "Shall we go? There's just the kitchen and the bedrooms downstairs you can see those another time."

Hermione nodded, and they left the house. It was after ten o'clock and the streets were quiet. They strolled through Kensington Gardens, neither one of them paying any particular attention to where they were going. Theo was in one of his bashful moods. She found it difficult to read his emotions: there were times when he seemed solemn, but then he would surprise her by laughing at something she'd said and become quite cheerful again.

As the morning wore on, they settled beneath the boughs of a large beech tree in Hyde Park. Theo took the picnic basket from his pocket and returned it to its original size. Once he'd spread a huge, tartan blanket on the grass, they knelt down and began to lay out their meal. Hermione could hardly believe at the amount of food Moe had packed. There were crackers and rolls, cheeses and pâtés, salads and cold meats, pies, pastries and a bottle of Dom Perignon.

"So," Hermione began nervously after they'd eaten. "What do you think about the job at the Department of Mysteries?"

Theo lay back on his elbows and looked at the cloudless sky. "I think if you're the only candidate they've decided to interview, they'll offer you the job."

She was pleased. "Do you really think so?"

He nodded. After a minute he turned to face her and said, "What do you want from life, Hermione?"

She met his gaze. "I'm not entirely sure that I know lots of things, really. I'd like to be happy, have a rewarding career ..."

"Children?" he interrupted.

She examined his face, wondering what he was thinking. "Eventually ... yes."

He frowned. "Some of my friends have had kids. I just don't see the attraction they tie you down, limit your freedom," he said, shaking his head.

"I've never really seen the attraction either," Hermione agreed. "I think I'm beginning to understand it, just a little, but I know it's not something I'd want to do any time soon. I've other things I'd like to do first."

"What other things? Would you like to see more of the world?"

"Yes, of course. I'd like to spend time getting to know you and your family; I'd like to travel; I'd like to have a career ..."

He suddenly sat up and moved closer to her. "In that case, I have a proposition," he said.

She raised an eyebrow. "Go on ..."

"If you don't get the job tomorrow, then it's not really an issue. We could spend a year or two travelling the world and then return to England."

"And if I get the job?" she asked.

"If you get the job, that means they're very keen to have you work for them. In that case, why not ask them to allow you to postpone for a year? If they agree, we can go see the world and return this time next year," he finished, looking excited.

She picked at a blade of grass as she considered his idea. She really wasn't sure; there was nothing she hated more than being idle. Then again, as she'd said to Severus Snape, most of her friends would have given anything to travel the world for a year. There were so many countries she wanted to visit; wouldn't she be rather foolish to refuse such a wonderful opportunity?

"What if they won't let me have a year off?" she asked.

"Then we'll need to talk it through again," he said.

She tried to imagine what it would be like, touring the world with Theo by her side. Would any of her friends have such a privileged start to their marriage? She and Theo would have an entire year to get to know one another without the demands of their family or career. Surely anybody would jump at a chance like that?

She smiled at her husband-to-be. "Okay," she agreed. "If the people at the Department of Mysteries say yes, let's do it."

Theo beamed at her. Reaching into the wicker basket, he took out the champagne and two glasses. "I think this calls for a celebration," he said, uncorking the bottle with a pop. He handed her a glass and raised his own. "To us."

Hermione touched her glass to his. "To us."

Theo refilled their glasses and then reached into his pocket. "Close your eyes," he said.

Hermione put her glass down on the tartan blanket and did as she was told.

After a moment, he said, "Okay, you can open them now."

She opened her eyes to find he was holding a black velvet box on the palm of his hand. The box was open, and nestled inside on a bed of blue satin was the diamond ring they'd seen in the jewellery shop the previous afternoon. Swallowing rapidly, she tore her eyes away from the sparkling gem and met his gaze. He looked nervous, his usually pale face flushed.

"I'm not very good at this sort of thing," he said awkwardly, "but since it's all been handled formally until now, I thought I should ask you myself."

He took the platinum ring from the box and placed it gently on her ring finger. It was an almost perfect fit. Still holding her hand, he asked, "Will you marry me, Hermione Granger?"

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out; she hadn't been expecting something like this at all. She looked in disbelief at the glistening ring on her finger and raised her gaze to his again. It suddenly seemed absurd that she'd just accepted an engagement ring from a man she'd never even kissed before. Inching forward until their knees

were touching, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his.

His lips were cold, and for a second or two, he didn't respond, and she thought she'd made a dreadful mistake. She was just about to pull away again when he raised his hand and entangled it in her hair. Then he kissed her back. He kissed her with more passion than she'd expected of him. He pulled her flush against him, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. After a moment they moved apart.

"Yes, I will marry you," she said breathlessly, her heart hammering.

He smiled, and much to her pleasure, he kissed her again. She sighed when he pulled away from her.

"Let's get married as soon as possible," he whispered, leaning his forehead against hers. "Why wait? Let's make it next Friday, after sunset. Most of the other couples are getting married that day."

Carried away as she was by the moment, she forgot she'd promised her parents she would wait. "Yes. Friday. Let's do it."

"I'm so sorry about this, Theo," Hermione said as she emerged from the fireplace in his living room, wiping soot and Floo powder from her robes. She glanced at the clock on his mantelpiece and gasped. "It's nearly six! We'll be late!"

"It's fine," he reassured her. "I've sent Moe to let mum know we might be running late. What happened?"

"Can I tell you while I freshen up?" she asked, searching in the folds of her robes for her beaded handbag.

"Sure, follow me," he replied, leading her into the hallway and down the stairs to the basement.

He led her to the master bedroom, where a dozen candles blazed into life as he passed. Feeling harassed, Hermione headed straight for the ornate dressing table. She sat before an oval mirror and sighed at her reflection. Her once-elegant chignon was now a fuzzy disaster.

Theo sat on the bed, watching as she undid the clip in her hair and took a brush from her bag. "How was the interview?"

"Good, although 'interview' is something of an understatement. For the first hour it was just a straightforward grilling with three Unspeakables and a woman from the recruitment division. Just when I thought they were wrapping up, one of them, Henry Baffleton, asked me to follow him to the next room, where they gave me a series of aptitude tests. They were bloody gruelling," she said with a sigh.

"What sort of tests?"

"The first two were just multiple choice questionnaires about all sorts of things, really. That took almost two hours, and then we broke for lunch. We had a quick bite to eat in the canteen, and I got to chat to another one of the Unspeakables: Primrose Chuckley. She's only three years older than me; she seemed really nice."

"And then?"

"After lunch, they asked me to solve puzzles using only my wand. Some of them were really, really difficult, but I think I did okay. At about half past four, they asked me to retire to the waiting room while they graded all my tests. Then, an hour ago, they called me back in and ..."

"And?"

"They offered me the job!" She turned and grinned at him.

Theo gave her what she thought was a forced-looking smile. "Well done," he said, without much enthusiasm.

Hermione was so delighted at having been offered a position as an Unspeakable that she wasn't really bothered by his lacklustre response. "We haggled over the pay and conditions, and then I asked them about the possibility of taking a year out before I begin my training. They didn't seem overjoyed, but they agreed to confer after I'd left, and they've promised to owl me with their decision later this evening."

She returned her gaze to the mirror and pinned her hair back into a dignified knot at the nape of her neck. "I thought I'd have hours and hours to go home and get changed before meeting your mum. I didn't want to wear such formal robes."

Theo smiled as she rose from the dressing table. "You look really nice," he said.

She returned his smile. "I suppose we should get going," she said, finally looking around his elegantly furnished bedroom. It would be hers, too, soon enough. "I'm so nervous!"

"There's no need to be nervous. I'm sure Mum will like you, and you already know Severus."

She grimaced at the mention of his name. She'd almost forgotten this was the first time they'd meet as future stepfather and daughter-in-law. They left Theo's house and walked hand-in-hand around the square to number eighteen, where Hermione paused on the steps to read the plaque to John Stuart Mill.

Theo rapped loudly on the door with the heavy knocker, and it was opened a few seconds later by the little elf in the tiny, pink apron.

"Hello, Moe," Theo said with a smile. "Did you tell Mum we were running late?"

Moe stood aside. "Yes, Master Theodore, sir. They're waiting in the back dining room."

Hermione admired the hallway. The houses along this side of the square were larger than Theo's, and as she passed an open door to her left, she had a glimpse of Cordelia's magically enlarged ballroom. Theo took her hand again and led further down the hallway.

They found Cordelia and Severus standing at the dining room fireplace; the lengthy dining table set cosily for four at one end. Severus Snape was, of course, dressed in his usual black robes. Cordelia was also dressed in wizarding robes in a light shade of blue. Hermione was glad she wouldn't look out of place in her interview clothes.

Cordelia crossed the room with a smile, and Hermione was struck by how very like her son she was. They shared similar bone structure and almost identical colouring. Cordelia's face, although thin, was not as gaunt as Theo's, and despite the fact that she was slim, her build was entirely more feminine. She shook Hermione's hand warmly and kissed her on both cheeks.

"It's lovely to meet you, Hermione," Cordelia said, her dark blue eyes sparkling. "Theo has told me so much about you. I'm sure Severus knows you well, after all these years, but he's remained characteristically tight-lipped on the subject." She flashed Hermione a conspiratorial grin.

Hermione returned the smile with an apprehensive glance at her former professor, who'd crossed the room to join them. He met Hermione's gaze with a crooked smile and inclined his head. "Good evening, Miss Granger," he said. "Might I interest you in a glass of wine?"

"That would be lovely, thank you," she replied, examining his face. He sounded almost amused, as if this were some kind of role-playing game. She supposed it was, in a way.

He returned to the fireplace, where a bottle of wine and three empty glasses sat on the mantelpiece.

"I believe you had an interview today at the Department of Mysteries?" Cordelia asked.

"It went on for over seven hours, which is why we're late," Hermione explained. "It went well, though."

Theo placed his hand protectively at the small of her back. Accepting a glass of wine from Severus, he announced, "It obviously went very well they've offered Hermione the job." He shot his stepfather a challenging look.

"Most impressive," Severus remarked, handing Hermione a glass of wine. "Congratulations, Miss Granger."

Cordelia looked confused. "That's wonderful news, but I thought you intended traveling for a year or two?" she asked, her gaze flicking to her son.

"We still hope to," Theo said. "Hermione's asked them to keep her position at the Ministry open for a year. They're considering, and they're going to owl her sometime later on with their decision."

"Well, let us hope they acquiesce," Severus muttered.

Hermione raised her gaze to his and found him examining her closely. They both knew that Theodore wouldn't be happy if the Department of Mysteries wanted her to start work immediately.

Dinner was soon served, and they took their places at the table: Hermione opposite Severus, and Theo opposite his mother. The first hour passed pleasantly enough: the food was wonderful, and Hermione found Cordelia, who wasn't nearly as shy as her son, easy to chat to. Theo and Severus seemed content to let the women do most of the talking.

Hermione knew Severus was watching her every move, but still, she was more relaxed in his company than she'd imagined she would be. He was on his best behaviour, and she thought he seemed very comfortable with his wife. They behaved more formally toward one another than did her own parents, but they were at perfect ease. She'd never seen this side of the Potions master before.

The conversation soon turned to the subject of the wedding

"We must set a date as soon as possible," Cordelia said. "I know weddings are usually intimate affairs since the *Marriage Act*, but there's still so much to organise."

"We've already set a date," Theo said, smiling sheepishly at Hermione and taking her hand. "We'd like to get married next Friday, after sunset. Hermione's friend Padma is getting married that afternoon. Hermione's her bridesmaid, so we'll have to make it a late ceremony."

Cordelia looked pleased, but Severus looked horrified.

"Next Friday?" he said, aghast. "But you only got engaged three days ago!"

Theo shrugged. "Why wait?"

"It might allow you to get to know one another a little better."

Cordelia turned to her husband. "Do you really think an extra week or two would make any difference, Severus? I think they're right. Why wait?"

"Hermione knows lots about me now, don't you?" Theo said, smiling at her. "What's my favourite colour?"

Hermione frowned, looking at his grey shirt. "Grey?" she asked.

"You see?" Theo said, turning back to Severus and Cordelia. "My favourite colour was actually green, but I changed my mind about twenty minutes ago, and Hermione picked up on that instinctively."

Cordelia and Hermione laughed, and even Severus managed a smirk.

"So, Mum. What's Severus' favourite colour?" asked Theo.

"Black," Cordelia and Hermione answered in unison.

"Ah, that's where you're wrong, ladies," Severus drawled. "It's pink."

Hermione nearly inhaled her wine as she tried to imagine Severus Snape dressed entirely in pink. She was shocked to discover he had a sense of humour. When they'd stopped laughing, Cordelia returned to the topic of the wedding.

"Why not have the wedding on the Thames?" she asked. "Two friends of mine have barges moored at Embankment, and one of them would be perfect for the ceremony."

Hermione and Theo looked at one another. She liked the sound of a sunset wedding on the Thames.

"Do you think your parents would agree, Hermione?" Cordelia asked.

"I'm sure they'd be delighted," she replied with an instant pang of guilt. Here she was, settling the details without having even informed her mother and father of the date.

"You could have the reception on board, too. A simple champagne buffet rather than a formal meal," Cordelia suggested.

"Sounds good. What do you think?" Theo asked, turning to Hermione.

"I think it sounds wonderful! I can't invite my extended family, as they've no idea I'm a witch, but my parents, godparents and my grandmother are all in on the secret, so I'd very like to have them there. And my friends, of course," she added, catching Severus's sudden scowl from the corner of her eye. She knew he wouldn't relish the thought of having to socialise with Harry Potter for an evening.

"That settles it, then," Cordelia said, pleased. "I'll arrange the details tonight, and the two of you can arrange your wedding robes."

Hermione nodded. "I've a fitting at Madam Malkin's for my bridesmaid's dress tomorrow, so I'll look through some patterns then."

"Wonderful! Theo, you and I will take a trip to that tailor in Bond Street tomorrow. Have you thought about your wedding bands yet?"

"No," Theo replied with a shake of his head. "We can't choose them until we decide what kind of vows we'll make. We're scheduled to meet the Marriage Counsellor on Monday. We'll choose our vows then and get the rings in Diagon Alley that day."

Hermione stole a peep at her wristwatch. It was almost eight o'clock, and she still hadn't heard from her interviewers. She wondered how Theo would react if they refused her request for a year off. It suddenly seemed foolish to have asked them to let her know that evening. A refusal would be difficult enough to deal with, but it would be dreadful to receive a no in front of Severus and Cordelia.

She didn't have long to wait: they'd just been served dessert when there was a rapping at the dining room window.

She turned, eyes wide, to Theo. "It's the owl from the Ministry!"

"Do you want me to take the note?" he asked.

She nodded, and he went to the window. When he'd detached the scroll from the brown owl, he returned to the table and handed her the parchment. She took it from him with trembling fingers and tried to break the seal.

"I can't do it!" she said, tossing the scroll to him as if it were a hot potato. "My hands are shaking."

Theo chuckled as he broke open the seal. "Do you want me to read it?"

Hermione nodded, her face in her hands. Her heart was racing. There was silence as Theodore's gaze raked over the contents of the letter. After a minute, she finally turned to look at him. He lowered the scroll and grinned at her.

"They've agreed," he said.

Hardly daring to believe him, she snatched the letter from his hands and stood up. He stood beside her, and when she'd finished reading, she let the parchment fall to the floor and threw her arms around her fiancé. He returned the embrace, and they both laughed with delight.

She saw Cordelia and Severus exchanged a small smile.

"Where will we go first?" Theo asked, pulling away from her. "Japan?"

She nodded enthusiastically. "Japan." Realising she was being rude, she released her hold on Theo and took her seat with a muttered apology.

"What wonderful news," Cordelia said with an indulgent smile at her son. "You must be relieved."

"Wonderful news as long as Miss Granger doesn't mind delaying such an interesting career for an entire year," Severus remarked.

"Of course I don't mind," Hermione insisted. "Who wouldn't appreciate the opportunity to travel the world?"

"Severus is just a bit of a home bird. Aren't you, Severus?" Theo asked playfully.

"Some of us actually have work to do, Theo. Your mother, on the other hand, seems to have caught your travel bug," he said with a sideways glance at Cordelia. "She travels to Scotland so often that I'm expecting her to announce her permanent relocation there any day now."

Theo raised his eyebrows, and Hermione formed the impression that this was, for some reason, an inappropriate remark. Cordelia directed a cold look at Severus and for a few seconds she looked annoyed. But the moment soon passed, and Cordelia was all smiles again.

The rest of the evening passed by quickly. Having assured Cordelia that she would return the following Wednesday to finalise details for the wedding, she made her way to the front of the house with Theo, where she prepared to Apparate home.

"How did I do?" she asked with a grin.

"Very, very well," Theo assured her. "I think Mum really likes you. And you got on perfectly well with Severus."

"He was fine, really. He's much more relaxed when he's not playing the teacher. Your turn tomorrow! Mum said that dinner will be ready at seven."

"I'll be there," Theo replied, putting his arms around her and lowering his head for a kiss.

From the window of his study, Severus watched Theo and Hermione talk on the front steps. He'd regarded them closely during dinner, and to all intents and purposes, they'd behaved like any other courting couple. They'd interacted naturally, appeared to be genuinely fond of one another, and their mutual excitement upon receiving the letter from the Ministry had been almost touching.

He looked at them on the steps below and wondered if, maybe, he'd been wrong. Perhaps they'd as much chance of having a successful marriage as did anybody else. But for some reason, knowing Theo as he did, he could not see it lasting.

His thought about her new position at the Department of Mysteries. He knew she must have performed admirably well in their tests to have secured a job as an Unspeakable. On top of that she'd somehow persuaded them to hold the position for her for an entire year. He'd always known she was a clever girl, but he thought her years at the Sorbonne must have sharpened her intellect even further.

Through the window, he saw Theo draw Hermione towards him and kiss her. Suddenly annoyed, he turned from the window and took his seat behind his desk.

"Damn you, Theo," he said to the empty room.

She was a gifted witch, and he hated the thought she might go unappreciated by her spouse. He owed her a life debt, and he did not want to see her destroyed.

Surely that was the only reason he was so thoroughly vexed by the sight of their embrace?

Tested and Tasted

Chapter 9 of 34

Hermione prepares for her wedding.

We have tested and tasted too much, lover

Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.

But here in the Advent-darkened room

Where the dry black bread and the sugarless tea

Of penance will charm back the luxury

Of a child's soul, we'll return to Doom

The knowledge we stole but could not use.

- Patrick Kavanagh, *Advent*

After breakfast with her parents on Saturday, Hermione met Padma and Parvati at Madam Malkin's shop in Diagon Alley. She loved her bridesmaid's robes: they were a deep shade of lilac and cut in a flattering style. When Padma emerged from the dressing room in her wedding dress, both Parvati and Hermione were moved to tears. She had chosen a simple, glistening white silk gown, styled somewhere between traditional wizarding robes and an Indian sari. She was, without a doubt, the most beautiful bride Hermione had ever seen.

Parvati left after the fitting to return home to tend to her infant son, and Hermione and Padma remained to leaf through the catalogues. Padma and Ginny were to be Hermione's bridesmaids, so choosing a colour that would suit both of them was difficult. After looking through swatches of cloth for almost an hour, she finally settled on a bronze satin.

Hermione had finally told her parents about the wedding date that morning and, much to her dismay, her mother had burst into tears. She'd tried to reassure her that all wizarding marriages happened quickly these days, but her mother was distraught.

After settling on the details of the bridesmaids' gowns, Hermione bade Padma farewell and left Diagon Alley to meet her still red-eyed mother. After a pleasant lunch in Harrod's, they prepared to start the search for a wedding dress. With only six days to go until she wed, Hermione doubted she'd find anything in the Muggle shops that would fit. Many of the boutiques insisted on dresses being ordered sixteen weeks in advance.

"Why don't we have a look in the bridal gallery here before we head to Oxford Street?" Jane Granger asked her daughter.

"Here? In Harrod's?" Hermione said. "Mum, you know that any dress in here will be outrageously expensive!"

Her mother shrugged. "It won't hurt to have a peep; at least we'll get some idea of what styles are in at the moment."

When they reached the gallery, Hermione stopped at the first mannequin they came to. The dress on the stand had immediately caught her eye. Her mother also stopped to admire the beautiful gown.

"That is a stunning dress," Jane announced, running her fingers through the material.

Hermione was surprised her mother liked the gown. It was well, there was no other word for it sexy. The dress was a deep ivory that would go well with both her brown hair and eyes and the bronze material she had chosen for her bridesmaids. The neckline was gently scooped and wouldn't reveal too much; the material was of a heavy, shimmering satin that fell to the ground and pooled elegantly at the back in a short train. It was figure-hugging, but not tight, and Hermione knew it would flatter her shape to perfection. The front of the dress was perfectly demure. It was the back of the dress that made it sexy, or rather, the lack of a back to the dress. The satin swooped so low at the back as to be almost indecent.

"I don't know, Mum," Hermione said, frowning. "It's beautiful, but wizards are conservative when it comes to clothes. I think the low-cut back might be too much."

"Yes, but there'll be people at your wedding who aren't wizards, and they matter, too," her mother said with a sniff. "Why not try it on, at least?"

Determined not to start a row, Hermione went to speak to the sales assistant, and once the woman had confirmed they had the dress in her size, she went into the plush fitting rooms to change. As soon as she'd slipped it over her head, she knew it was just perfect. The assistant brought her a pair of bronze sandals and a hair clasp to match, and once Hermione was looking every inch a bride, she emerged from the dressing room.

"Well? What do you think?" she asked, doing a twirl.

Her mother immediately burst into tears. The shop assistant was quickly on hand with tissues and a cup of tea: this was evidently a common reaction.

"Oh, Mum," she said, hugging her mother and feeling rather tearful herself. "Do you really like it?"

Her mother nodded. "You look so grown up. It's very elegant very Audrey Hepburn."

Hermione returned her gaze to the full-length mirror. She didn't look as beautiful as Padma, but she certainly looked more attractive than she ever had before. She hadn't felt like this since the Yule Ball in her fourth year. She turned around and looked over her shoulder at the back of the dress; there was no denying that it was sultry in the extreme. She had to admit, she had a nice back. She smiled to think it had been hidden away all these years, undiscovered.

"My only worry is the back, Mum," she said, frowning at her reflection. "Don't you think it's a bit ... provocative? Even for a Muggle wedding?"

Her mother took her glasses from her handbag. Scrutinizing the dress closely, she turned to check they wouldn't be overheard by the shop assistant and said, "Couldn't you get the woman who owns that shop in Diagon Alley to make you a cloak in the same material? One that drapes from your shoulders? That would cover the back, but it still wouldn't spoil the shape of the dress."

Hermione looked in the mirror, trying to imagine it with a cloak added. Padma was wearing a cloak that fell from her shoulders, and it didn't spoil the effect of her sari. She grinned. "Mum, you're a genius. That's exactly what I'll do."

She picked up the price tag on the dress and then dropped it as if she had been burned. "It's ridiculously expensive, Mum. I couldn't let you pay that much for a dress!"

Her mother looked at the tag and raised her eyebrows. "Hermione," she said, taking her daughter's hand, "you're my only child. When you went to Hogwarts, you became part of a world to which we would never really belong. Now, you're about to be married to a wizard, and I feel like the whole situation has been taken out of my hands. I don't care how much this dress costs; I've never seen you look so beautiful, and it's my chance to contribute something to your wedding. I want you to have this dress."

Hermione nodded, overwhelmed. "Thanks, Mum," she murmured, tears starting.

Jane Granger laughed and wiped her eyes. "Now take it off before we get mascara all over it!"

On Monday morning, Hermione Apparated to Belgrave House for the final week of the pre-marriage course. She could hardly believe that by the weekend, she'd be married.

When she'd arrived home from shopping with her mother on Saturday afternoon, there'd only been a few hours left until Theo was due to arrive for dinner. She'd been anxious about how he would get along with her parents, but within an hour, her fears had vanished. Theo looked like a Muggle, he acted like a Muggle, and he was well versed in the intricacies of international politics, much to her father's delight. His perfect manners had won her mother's approval, and Hermione knew her parents had slept more soundly that night for having met their future son-in-law.

Hermione had met Theo in Diagon Alley for lunch on Sunday, and they'd spent four hours poring over travel guides in Flourish and Blott's, plotting the destinations they'd include on their tour of the world. She was looking forward to their globe-trotting adventures, but as she climbed the steps to Belgrave House on Monday morning, she knew a moment of slight regret: she would be sorry to leave her friends behind. This time next week, she'd be in Kyoto with her husband, and it would be many months before she saw her friends again.

When she got to the common room, Neville had already arrived. He turned to her with a smile.

"Hermione! Where did you disappear to last week? You haven't been in class since Tuesday," Neville said.

Hermione chewed her lower lip guiltily. "I know I hope we didn't miss anything worthwhile."

Neville smiled. "Have any of these classes been worthwhile?"

"I suppose not. You seem in much better form, Neville. I presume that means Hannah accepted your offer?"

Neville nodded. "She accepted last Wednesday. We're getting married next Monday, and three days later we'll both start at Hogwarts."

"Congratulations, Neville," Hermione said warmly, crossing the room to give him a hug. "She's always been a lovely girl. I hope you'll both be very happy."

He hugged her back. "Thanks, Hermione. I hope you and Theo will be happy, too."

Terry Boot and Laura Wallace arrived a few minutes later, and Terry told them that Michael Corner and Pansy Parkinson had agreed to wed the previous Friday. Now that everybody was spoken for, the conversation turned to the dates and times of the various weddings.

Almost all the candidates had gathered in the common room when a barn owl appeared at the window. Dean was the first to spot it and crossed the common room to open the latch. When he'd broken the seal on the letter, he called for silence.

"This is addressed to all of us, so listen up!" he shouted.

"Dear Friends,

We're sorry we cannot be with you today, but we are otherwise engaged. When I say 'otherwise engaged' I do, of course, mean shagging one another senseless, but Susan would not approve of my saying that, so let us just refer to it as 'otherwise engaged'.

For various reasons, namely Susan's parents' refusal to acknowledge my finer points, we decided to elope and were wed on Saturday afternoon. Who needs families anyway? We are both very happy and would like to wish you all well. We're sorry that circumstances have conspired to rob you all of our company during the final week at Belgrave, although we may see some of you on Friday night, as Theo has asked me to act as his best man.

Fondest regards,

Draco and Susan Malfoy."

There was silence for a moment, and then a burst of applause and excited chatter. The first of the couples had wed, and the final week of the pre-marriage course was underway.

Hermione was livid. Theo had promised he wouldn't miss any of the classes during their final week, but he hadn't turned up for Family Law. When she left the classroom, she found him leaning casually against the wall opposite, waiting for her.

"Hey," he said with a lazy grin.

"Theo, where the hell have you been?" she asked angrily. "You promised you wouldn't miss any classes this week."

"Oh, come on, Hermione. It's all a load of rubbish!"

"I don't care if it's all a load of rubbish you promised that if I skipped class last Thursday, you'd attend all the classes this week!"

"I'd more important things to do," he said, taking some papers from his back pocket and presenting them to her. "Have a look at this."

She took the documents from him. They were airline tickets.

"Japan's too far away for safe Apparition, and I decided there was no point hanging around after the wedding I booked a flight for Tokyo at midnight on Friday. We can go straight to the airport after the wedding."

Hermione clenched a fist. "That's all very well and good, but didn't you think you should have asked me first?"

"I thought you'd be happy," he said, frowning.

She sighed, suddenly more tired than angry. "Come on. We have our appointment with the marriage counsellor."

As they climbed the stairs to the marriage counsellor's office in silence, Hermione tried to fight the deep disappointment she felt. He had broken a promise so very early in their relationship. Her heart sank.

They took their seats in the counsellor's office without speaking or even looking at one another. The marriage counsellor was a jolly, rotund woman who seemed to sense there was an argument underway and did her best to put them at their ease by focusing immediately on the details of the wizarding marriage ceremony.

"So, in a nutshell," the counsellor explained, "there are three sets of vows from which to choose. First, there's the straightforward civil vow, which makes it little different from a Muggle wedding," she said, giving a small sniff of disapproval. "The second option is the most popular. In addition to making civil vows, the couple make magical vows of their own creation. These vows may relate to any aspect of the marriage, and although not as powerfully binding as something like an Unbreakable Vow, there would need to be significant magical reversal should the couple decide, for some reason, to terminate their marriage."

As she discussed the options, the counsellor handed them Ministry of Magic pamphlets detailing the particulars of each type of vow. The pamphlets were coloured in lurid pink, with smiling couples waving from the glossy covers. Hermione stuck her tongue out at the man and woman on the front of the second pamphlet and smiled as they shook their heads in disgust.

"The final option takes the magical vows a little further," the counsellor continued. "In this ceremony, the wedding rings are charmed to become part of the vow-making process. The vows can be of the couple's own composition, but one of the vows must include a promise of absolute fidelity. The promise of life-long faithfulness is magically transferred to the wedding bands and, should either of the couple ever stray, their partner will be alerted to their infidelity by the ring. The rings cannot be removed while the marriage lasts, and they must be Goblin-wrought. Goblin-wrought rings are incredibly expensive, and as a result, the third option isn't very common."

"If the unthinkable should happen, and the marriage breaks down," Hermione asked, curious, "are all of the options open to reversal?"

The counsellor nodded. "The first option requires only a divorce. The second and third options vary, depending on the vows adopted. The third option is further complicated by the nature of the rings, but yes, all three ceremonies can be magically reversed. Magical reversals require participation and full consent of both parties."

Hermione and Theo looked at one another. "What do you think?" she asked, thinking the second option might be best.

Theo reached out and took her by the hand. "I like the sound of the Goblin-wrought rings."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Are you serious? You'd be willing to take a vow of complete fidelity?"

Theo nodded. "If we're going to do this, let's do it one-hundred per-cent, Hermione. I can afford the Goblin-wrought rings, so why not commit to this completely? I'm agreeing to spend the rest of my life with you, and I'd like everyone to know that I want to do it properly."

Hermione felt a huge rush of affection for him. First he'd surprised her with an engagement ring, and now this. She'd had no idea he was so romantic. Her annoyance at his broken promise vanished.

He raised her hand to his mouth and brushed her fingers against his lips. "Let's just do it," he whispered.

"Okay," she agreed, feeling swept off her feet.

The counsellor clapped her hands in delight. "Wonderful! You're the only couple to opt for the serious vows this year. I'll give you the name of the only jeweller in London who stocks the Goblin-wrought rings. You'll probably have to see him straight away. After all, you've only four days until your wedding!"

They did as the counsellor had suggested, and by that evening they were the proud owners of two Goblin-wrought, platinum wedding rings. The bands were intricately decorated with Celtic runes and symbols and had already been charmed with the fidelity vow, which would become binding once they completed the wedding ceremony. Hermione agreed to keep the rings in her possession until Friday, and she couldn't help running up to her bedroom every now and again to admire the rings, nestled in their little wooden box.

She was touched that Theo had wanted to make such a serious commitment. But it was, perhaps, a sign of her deep unease that she didn't tell anybody else about the rings or the serious vows to which she was about to pledge herself.

On Wednesday evening, Hermione Apparated to Cordelia's house in Kensington Square. There were details to be finalised, invitations to be owled, and formal papers to be signed.

Cordelia insisted on opening a bottle of wine. It took an hour to sort through all the items on Cordelia's list, and while Hermione liked her future mother-in-law, she had to admit that Cordelia was something of a control freak. She had the knack of making Hermione agree that Cordelia's suggestions were infinitely superior to her own.

As Hermione read through the list of delicacies that had been ordered for the buffet, she was relieved her mother had talked her into buying the expensive dress from Harrod's. If the Mill family were used to beluga caviar, paté de foie gras and Dom Perignon, they would surely have scorned any wedding robe that was not couture. For the first time since she had become engaged, she felt uncomfortable around such wealth.

Theodore and Severus soon arrived back from a fitting in Bond Street. Severus looked harassed.

"Cordelia, we're going to be late for our engagement with the Malfoys," he said.

Cordelia turned to Hermione with an apologetic smile. "I'm sure you and Theo can finish the remainder of the invitations. It's imperative they be sent tonight." She took her cloak from the back of her armchair and fastened it around her shoulders. "We'll see you both later."

Hermione watched them walk to the door while Theo took the seat beside her on the sofa. Severus turned back to face them before he left.

"Behave yourselves," he said with a smirk.

Theo chuckled, and Hermione blushed. They said nothing as they listened for the click of the latch on the front door. As soon as they heard it, their gazes locked, and Hermione felt a faint ripple of desire run through her at the expression in Theo's eyes. It was the first time they'd been alone for days, and he wasted no time in entangling his hands in her hair and pulling her towards him.

They'd only shared a few brief kisses since their afternoon in Hyde Park, and she'd fretted that he didn't desire her. But now, at last, she finally felt as though he found her attractive. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her closer to where he sat.

Suddenly determined to take the initiative, she straddled his lap. She was rewarded for her effort with a groan, and felt rather smug when she discerned his erection against the inside of her thigh.

He gripped her waist with both his hands and pulled her tighter still against his chest. She moved her lips along his jaw and down to his neck, pleased at his sharp intake of breath. He slipped his hands beneath her light, cotton t-shirt, and she gasped as his fingers met the bare skin of her back, causing her arms to become instantly covered in goose pimples. He ran his palms up her sides, until his thumbs brushed over her nipples.

The room suddenly echoed with a loud crack, and they jumped apart.

"What the hell?" Theo grumbled

Hermione turned. Standing before them was Moe, a tea tray balanced on one hand. Her lips were pursed in disapproval, and Hermione practically leapt from Theo's lap, her cheeks flaming.

"I brought tea for Master Theodore and his fiancée, sir," she announced, darting a glare at Hermione and setting the tray on the coffee table. "They're needing food, I said to myself, with their wedding being only *two days away*," she said pointedly. With a stern glance at Theo, she clicked her bony fingers and disappeared.

"Well," Theo said, clearing his throat. "That's us told." He gave Hermione a timid smile from beneath his hair as he reached forward and plucked a sandwich from the tray.

Her cheeks were still flushed. "I thought house-elves were supposed to be discreet?"

Theo shrugged. "I suppose she thought she was acting in our best interests, with the wedding being so close. Either that or Severus told her to act as chaperone."

Hermione shook her head. "How absolutely mortifying," she muttered, pouring the tea. She was certain Severus Snape was to blame.

"I suppose she's right though we should wait, with the wedding only two days away," Theo said, looking uncomfortable.

Hermione was simultaneously relieved and irritated: irritated that he didn't find her desirable enough to want to take things further, and at the same time relieved that they'd wait until their wedding night. It wasn't that she found Theo unattractive, but she knew there was no true passion. Not yet.

"You're right. We should wait although," she added, grinning, "our wedding night will be spent on board an airplane."

"We'll have to wait until we're in Tokyo," he muttered, looking bashful.

Hermione met his embarrassed gaze. He was shy, and she'd never known him to have a girlfriend at Hogwarts. "Theo, you're not a, well ... you know ..." she trailed off, not knowing how to ask.

He raised an amused eyebrow. "A virgin? No definitely, absolutely not. You?"

She shook her head. "I had two fairly serious relationships while I lived in Paris."

"Only two?" he asked. "Nobody at Hogwarts?"

"No, I ... I never slept with Ron. And what do you mean *only* two? How many people have you slept with?"

He shrugged and looked awkward. "More than two."

She was surprised. "How many more than two?"

He laughed. "Would you like all the sordid details?"

She frowned. "I don't think so." She was surprised, but she was relieved he wasn't a virgin.

They spent the remainder of the evening writing and owling the wedding invitations. Cordelia was inviting dozens of friends, in addition to almost the entire Mill family, and Hermione knew a moment of sadness when she glanced through her own, short list. In a sudden fit of annoyance at Cordelia, she added the names of the entire Weasley family and their spouses. She hadn't seen Ron since Harry and Ginny's wedding, and she'd never met his Muggle wife, Rose. But maybe the time had come to let bygones be bygones.

When Theo's owl had departed with the last of the scrolls, Hermione yawned and looked at her watch. It was almost midnight.

"Theo!" she exclaimed. "It's nearly midnight. It'll be Thursday in a few minutes, and I'm not supposed to see you the day before the wedding!"

He nodded. "I know. We'd better get you home."

He walked her to the front steps of the house, where he held both her hands in his. Hermione was suddenly tearful. It had all happened so quickly. "The next time I see you, I'll be walking up the aisle," she whispered.

"I know," he replied, giving her a chaste kiss on the forehead. "It's hard to believe."

She raised her glistening eyes to his. "Do you think we'll be alright, Theo? Do you think it will work out?"

He nodded. "Yes at least, I hope so. I'm very fond of you, you know. I'm sure, in time, it will become more."

She looked into his sincere eyes and was thankful for his honesty. It was so much better than empty declarations of love. A tear rolled down her cheek, and he brushed it gently away with his thumb.

"I'm fond of you, too," she murmured, not really knowing why she was crying. "I'll miss you tomorrow it will be the first day we haven't seen one another since our engagement."

There were footsteps to their right, and they turned to see Cordelia and Severus returning home from their engagement. Hermione quickly wiped at her tear-stained face and bade them goodnight. With a whispered farewell to Theo, she turned on the spot and Apparated home.

Cordelia opened the door and left Severus outside with Theo, who leaned against the railings and raised defiant eyes to his stepfather.

Severus frowned. "Why was she crying, Theo?"

"Because we won't see one another until the wedding," he said.

Severus arched his eyebrows. "No other reason?"

"No, Severus," Theo spat. "Do you really find it beyond the realms of possibility that she might actually like me?"

Severus was silent for a moment as he considered his reply. "I apologise. I didn't mean to offend you."

"No offence taken," Theo said, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Severus turned and pushed open the front door. But then he turned to his stepson once more. He felt he should give some additional warning, say something to make Theodore think this through before lives were changed irrevocably. But words failed him, and he simply said, "Goodnight, Theo."

Many miles away, Hermione sat on the edge of her bed and looked around the room that had been hers for as long as she could remember. She picked up a framed photograph of her, Harry and Ron, taken by Arthur Weasley during the summer before the Triwizard Tournament. She'd looked so young so happy, waving excitedly at the camera. Life had been so much simpler then, and with a wave of regret she wished she was back in Hogwarts with Harry and Ron.

She ran her hands over the familiar surface of her patchwork quilt. Soon she would be Hermione Granger Nott, and she would leave her old life behind. Tomorrow night would be the last night she spent in this small, single bed. Padma, Neville, all the candidates would soon be married, beginning new lives with new partners. But she was the only one who would be leaving her friends and family so very far behind to go and travel the world with a man she barely knew.

She wanted this to work; she wanted to give it everything she had. She was excited about her wedding and the adventures they would have while they traveled the world, but her heart was breaking to think of everything she would have to relinquish as she became Mrs Theodore Nott. Wrapping her quilt around her shoulders, she sank onto her bed and cried herself to sleep.

In at the Eye

Chapter 10 of 34

Hermione's wedding day arrives.

Wine comes in at the mouth

And love comes in at the eye;

That's all we shall know for truth

Before we grow old and die.

I lift the glass to my mouth,

I look at you, and I sigh.

- **W. B. Yeats, A Drinking Song**

The day had come at last for Hermione Granger to be wed. She planted her feet on the plush carpet and wriggled her bare toes. Today she was a girl in the pink-and-white bedroom of her adolescence. Tomorrow she would be somebody's wife.

She stretched her arms above her head and shook her mane of brown curls. It was a beautiful day. There would be sunshine and blue skies for Padma's wedding; there would be a balmy August evening for hers, with a full moon and a star-strewn sky. The tears were gone, and she was full of hope.

The atmosphere in the Patils' house was one of good-humoured chaos. Parvati had brought little baby Aidan with her, and he was doted on by everyone. Hermione had never seen such a beautiful baby; she wondered idly what her children would look like. She tried to picture a little boy who looked like Theo, but she just couldn't imagine it.

Padma was the very essence of calm. Hermione peered at her friend as she adjusted the waist of her lilac gown.

"How can you be so calm?" she asked. "I'll be in a complete state later on."

Padma smiled at her in the mirror and put down her lipstick. "Ginny and I will be there to keep you from freaking out. And if we don't manage it, I'm sure a bottle of champagne will do the trick."

Hermione sat next to Padma in front of her dressing table. "You look happy," she said, glancing at the radiant face beside hers in the mirror.

Parvati giggled behind them. "She'll be even happier tomorrow morning. D'you reckon Dean'll be any good?"

Padma looked smug. "I already *know* he'll be good."

Hermione gave a gasp. "Already?"

"Oooh!" Parvati said, grinning. "Sampled the goods already, have you?"

"Seriously?" Hermione asked. "You've already slept with him?"

Padma shrugged. "Try before you buy and all that!"

"Try before you buy what?" Mrs Patil asked, opening the door.

Padma's jaw dropped. She frantically scanned the cluttered dressing table. "This perfume!" she replied, grabbing a bottle. Hermione and Parvati guffawed.

Half an hour later, Padma was fully robed and ready to go. Hermione crossed the room and hugged her.

"You look stunning, Padma," she whispered. "I hope you'll both be very happy."

Padma beamed at her. "Thanks, Hermione. I'm really going to miss you. I don't know what I would have done without you these past few years."

Hermione was close to tears again. Padma had been the best friend she'd ever had, with the exceptions of Harry and Ron. "It's only one year, and then I'll be back."

They hugged again, and Hermione went downstairs, leaving Padma to have a final word with her twin sister.

The town hall in which Padma and Dean were to be wed was small and quaint. It looked pretty, decorated from one end to the other with bunches of white and purple flowers. But the flowers were put to shame by the extravagant dress of the Patil family. Wearing an attractive mixture of colourful robes and saris, they made quite a picture.

On the other side sat Dean's immediate family. Being a Muggle-born, he couldn't invite many of his relations, but a huge Hogwarts turn-out helped to fill his side of the hall. Theo had been forced to decline the invitation, as he and Hermione were not supposed to see one another until their own wedding.

Hermione waved excitedly at people she hadn't seen for many years: Seamus Finnegan, Lavender Brown, Ernie Macmillan, Angelina Johnson and there, right at the back with his wife, sat Ron. Their eyes met, and he gave her a small smile. She nodded in return and wondered whether or not he would turn up for her wedding that night when, as if in answer to her unspoken question, he gave her a huge grin and a thumbs-up. Suddenly, she felt as though a huge weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She returned his grin and thought everything was going to be just fine. Ron, sitting with his pretty, blond wife, would be her friend once more. The day seemed suddenly brighter.

The weather was beautiful, the hall looked beautiful, the guests looked beautiful, but nothing was nearly as beautiful as Padma Patil as she walked up the aisle to meet her

husband.

Severus Snape frowned as he fastened his cuff links. If there was one thing he detested more than Gryffindors, it was weddings. Gryffindor weddings were, therefore, excruciating. He had no doubt that boy-wonder Potter would be there, along with the entire compliment of Weasleys. Charming. He needed a nice, stiff brandy.

He'd just picked up the crystal decanter when there was a loud crack, and Moe appeared before him.

"Excuse me, Master Severus, sir, but Mistress Cordelia is wanting to see you in her room," she said.

"Tell her I'll be there in a moment," he replied, replacing the crystal stopper in the decanter with a sigh.

When he reached her bedroom, he found Cordelia standing before her mirror, experimenting with her hair. She had not yet changed into her robes and was wrapped in a dressing gown.

"Severus! Thank you for coming so quickly. I'm in rather a fix," she explained, looking strained. "I'd completely forgotten that it's tradition to present Hermione with a family heirloom." She crossed to a chest of drawers beside the mirror and extracted a silver box from within. "This pendant dates from the sixteenth century and was presented to me on my own wedding day. As I have no daughters, it must pass to Hermione."

He took the silver box from her and looked inside. The pendant was a large, heavy emerald set in overworked gold. It was obviously extremely valuable, but he didn't imagine it was the type of necklace a young woman would desire, if given the choice.

"Why are you giving it to me?"

She looked at him as if he were a child. "Because I'd like you to present it to Hermione."

He frowned. "After the wedding?"

"No, Severus," she said, looking annoyed. "Now."

"You expect me to travel to Hermione Granger's house and present her with this necklace?" he asked, incredulous. "Surely that's your domain?"

She glanced at the slender golden watch on her wrist. "Severus, I've not the time. I've yet to have my hair done."

"Ask Moe to deliver it."

"I can't spare Moe right now; I need her to help with my hair."

He pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. His wife could be selfish to the point of obnoxiousness sometimes. "I'll ask Draco to do it. He's Theo's best man."

"Not Draco!" she exclaimed. "Tradition dictates it has to be a family member."

"Lance, then," he said through gritted teeth.

"She doesn't know Lance! Besides, he's bound to say something inappropriate and frighten the poor girl away."

He would not give in. "This is ludicrous, Cordelia! I'm not about to call unannounced on a former student who is in all probability *everbusier* than you are. This is an errand for a woman."

She glared at him.

He glared back.

All of a sudden, she changed her strategy, and he knew the battle was lost.

"Please, Severus. Please!" she begged. "I'm the one who's made all the arrangements for the wedding, and I've been so busy that this little detail just slipped my mind."

"Cordelia," he said with as much patience as he could muster, "it is inappropriate."

"Nonsense! It's not every day my only child gets married," she said, her eyes glistening with tears. "My only son! Please, Severus ..."

He could not bear it when she behaved like this.

"Fine!" he spat, storming from the room. He could sense Cordelia's satisfied smirk behind him.

"Her address is written in my notebook!" she called cheerily after him as he descended the stairs.

He found the notebook in the sitting room and quickly flicked to the required page, his jaw clenched. Once he'd memorised Hermione's address, he left the house, banging the door behind him, and Apparated to the destination.

When he opened his eyes, he found he was standing before a neat row of large, detached houses opposite a leafy park. Number four was in front of him. It was a handsome, Tudor-fronted house with a well-kept, mature garden. The Grangers had indeed done well for themselves, he thought, but this was not even the tip of the iceberg when compared to the vast wealth of the Mill family.

There were no cars parked in the driveway, and as he rapped upon the door he knew a moment of hope: maybe there would be nobody at home.

His hopes were dashed mere seconds later when the door was flung open by a smiling Ginny Weasley. Her smile quickly disappeared as they regarded one another in surprise.

"Well," Ginny managed eventually. "You're clearly not Hermione's godmother."

"Very well-deduced, Miss Weasley," he sneered.

"Mrs Potter, actually," she snapped.

"Forgive me. I'd forgotten that particular misfortune had befallen you," he said with a smirk

She looked angry for a moment, but then she grinned and began to laugh.

"Do I amuse you, Mrs Potter?"

"You do, actually," she said, still smiling. "I'm glad to see you haven't changed."

She gestured for him to come in, and he crossed the threshold, wishing he was anywhere but here. He felt guilty for having given reign to his sarcastic tongue; Ginny had always been an excellent student.

"I see congratulations are in order," he said quietly in an effort to compensate.

She looked bewildered. "What do you mean?"

"You are with child?"

Her hand flew protectively to her still-flat stomach. "We've hardly told anyone! How did you know?" she whispered.

"You're a Gryffindor," he said simply. "It's written all over your face."

She remained silent, looking at him in astonishment.

"Might I speak with Miss Granger?" he asked, amused at her reaction.

She nodded, glancing at the silver box in his hand. "She's upstairs: first door on the left."

He began to climb the stairs and then hesitated. "Is she decent?" he asked, turning to Ginny once more.

"If by decent you mean dressed, then, yes, she is. She's already in her wedding gown." She turned and walked into the kitchen, where he could hear her whispering to Padma Patil.

He climbed the steps and found the door to his left ajar. With a gentle tap of his knuckles, he pushed it open.

Hermione Granger was standing in front of a full-length mirror, her back to him. When she heard the door open, she looked over her shoulder.

Severus's first reaction was one of complete shock. The girl's dress was well completely wanton. The line of the material scooped so low at the back as to be positively indecent; one could practically see her derriere. A well-shaped derriere, he had to admit, but still, it was shameless.

She turned to meet his shocked gaze, and as he took in the sight of her perfect makeup and the gentle wisps of hair that had escaped from the elegant twist at the back of her head, he realised that she didn't look wanton; she looked beautiful. Surely this could not be the same Hermione Granger that had driven him to distraction with her endless, irritating questions at Hogwarts? The person who stood before him was an undeniably attractive young woman.

She gasped, and her hands flew to her throat in a fit of self-consciousness.

"What on earth are *you* doing here?" she stammered, looking frantically about her.

"That's beside the point!" he said, trying to regain his composure. "What are you thinking, Miss Granger? You can't possibly marry a wizard in a dress like that. It's ... well ..."

"I had no intention of letting anyone see the back of this dress," she said, her cheeks colouring. She snatched a cape from her bed and fastened it to her shoulders with trembling fingers. "Nobody was supposed to see it except my husband. Will this do?" she asked angrily, showing him the back of her cape.

He nodded, uncharacteristically lost for words. The bare skin of her back was now hidden, but she still looked more beautiful than she ever had before.

"Have you come to try to talk me out of marrying Theo again?"

"No, Miss Granger," he answered. "The time for that has long since passed."

"Well?" she asked, her gaze travelling to the silver box in his hand.

"Forgive my intrusion, but Cordelia asked that I present you with a Mill heirloom. It is a family tradition, by all accounts," he explained.

He crossed the room and handed her the box.

"Why didn't Cordelia bring it herself?" she asked, taking it from him.

He was annoyed at his wife for having let down her daughter-in-law before she had even married her son. "She was otherwise engaged," he said, his lips pressed together in a line. "Hair arrangements and so on."

"I see," said Hermione. She opened the box and extracted the pendant, holding it up to the light. She smirked. "It's rather Slytherin."

"It's rather hideous," he added.

A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, and their eyes met in a brief and unexpected moment of camaraderie. They were both, after all, relatively new additions to the Mill family.

"Would you do the honours?" she asked, holding the necklace out to him.

"The honours?" he asked, confused.

"I mean would you mind doing the clasp," she said, turning her back to him.

He accepted the dangling pendant from her fingers and took a step towards her, feeling nervous and foolish. He placed the chain around her neck and, making a great effort not to allow his fingertips to brush against her skin, he secured the clasp at the back of her neck, trying to banish the still-fresh image of her bare back from his mind. His fingers shook as the scent of her perfume washed over him.

They both looked at the reflection of the necklace in the mirror.

"It doesn't look so bad once it's on," she said, tilting her head to the side.

He gave her a curt nod. "It does not detract from your gown."

She turned to face him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'll leave you to your preparations." He turned to leave the room, anxious to escape her suddenly disturbing presence.

"Actually," she said, making him stop. "Maybe I could ask a favour ..." She reached for a wooden box on her dressing table. "Would you mind giving our wedding rings to Draco? It would save me having to ask Ginny to do it when we get to the barge."

Merlin, was he nothing but a courier to these women? He took the box from her outstretched hand. "Certainly, Miss Granger."

He'd almost reached the door when a moment of curiosity made him open the box. When he saw the rings inside, he whirled to face her.

"Are these Goblin-wrought rings?" he asked. He'd seen a ring like this before. He'd hoped never to see one again. "Tell me they are not, Miss Granger."

"Yes," she answered. "They are. They're Goblin-wrought."

His eyes narrowed, and he looked at her with mounting incredulity. "Do you mean to tell me that you've decided to take a vow of fidelity?"

"Yes, we have. I don't see why it's any of your business."

"Have you any idea what you're doing?" he hissed. He'd known she was naïve, but not so stupid as this.

"We want to commit to making this marriage work."

"You don't need to adopt such powerful, ancient charms in order to commit to each other. Miss Granger, where is the intelligence for which you are so renowned? Have you completely lost your mind?"

She put her hands on her hips. "We've decided to take a vow of fidelity. The rings will activate if one of us is ever unfaithful. I thought it was quite sweet."

"Sweet?" he asked, his mouth curled in a sneer. "Do you know what happens when the rings are activated?"

"You feel it."

"Yes, you feel it! It burns, Miss Granger. It burns, and there's nothing you can do to stop it. Once that ring is placed upon your finger, you cannot remove it unless your marriage vows are magically reversed or one of you dies. It will burn with great intensity until the *act* of infidelity is over," he finished.

She bravely held his glare. "Neither one of us intends being unfaithful."

He pursed his lips. She was the very essence of naivety. "I knew a woman who entered into such foolish vows. Like you, she was carried away by romantic notions of what her marriage would be. I watched her cry every time her bastard of a husband gave cause for her wedding ring to burn, Miss Granger. Why would you subject yourself to such a fate?"

"I would hope that Theo, or I for that matter, would have the decency to divorce before taking up with somebody else, Professor Snape. If our marriage fails, we'll behave like mature adults and have our vows magically reversed."

He looked at her upturned face, so earnest and innocent. How could such a clever girl be so, so stupid? "Miss Granger, you are a fool."

Her eyes filled. "You've come all the way here to call me a fool? On my wedding day?"

He held her gaze for a moment and was sorry; he hadn't come here with any intention of upsetting her. She had saved his life, and all he could ever do was argue with her. Battling his dislike of physical contact, he reached out and lifted her chin with his finger.

"I know you are not a fool. I will leave before I cause further upset." He withdrew his finger from beneath her chin and walked to the door, pocketing the Goblin-wrought rings as he went. "I hope you and Theo will prove my worries to be without foundation, Miss Granger. And if it's any consolation ..." He paused, already regretting what he was about to say. "You look very ... lovely."

She stared at him. "I ... Thank you," she managed.

He closed the door behind him and made for the stairs. He needed that brandy.

Hermione Granger stood before Theodore Nott, moments away from becoming his wife. He smiled at her, and she felt her heart soar.

He was handsome in his black wedding robes, and she could tell he liked her wedding gown. But even as she stood before him, in front of all their guests, she remembered her conversation with Severus Snape. Could he be right? Were they doing the wrong thing by opting for the fidelity vow? No. Snape was wrong. If their marriage did not work out, they would file for divorce and have the vows reversed. It was simple. And besides, they would *make* this marriage work; she was sure of it. Theo would not have wanted the fidelity vow unless he had every intention of upholding it.

She allowed her gaze to drift over the people gathered on the open deck of the barge. It was a beautiful evening; the stars were beginning to emerge through the dusk, and the lights of the London Eye glittered in the background. She could not imagine a more romantic setting for a wedding.

The little wizard from the Department of Births and Marriages who was conducting the ceremony reached for her hand, and she entwined her fingers with Theo's as they committed to each of their vows, the minister tapping his wand against their hands every time a vow was spoken.

When they had completed their binding, Draco came forward with the rings and gave her a wink as he presented them to the minister. They slid the rings onto each other's fingers and prepared for the final vows. Hermione could feel the powerful magic emanating from the Goblin-wrought ring and, for the first time, she blanched at what she was about to do. The tiny wizard held his wand over the rings and muttered the incantation for the fidelity vow.

"Theodore Nott. Do you commit yourself fully to this final vow?"

"I commit myself," Theo replied.

The minister tapped both their rings, and they glowed with an intense white light. Hermione felt a burning sensation on her finger, and panic suddenly rose within her.

"Hermione Granger," the minister continued. "Do you commit yourself fully to this final vow?"

Every pair of eyes in the room was upon her as her finger tingled. She looked at the minister, looked at Theodore, and finally she looked out at the crowd, where her gaze fell upon the austere figure of Severus Snape. She could hear her heart pounding in her ears.

"I commit myself," she replied, tearing her gaze away from her former professor and back to Theo.

The minister tapped their rings once more, and the white light faded along with the burning. She smiled hesitantly at Theo, and he beamed in return.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," the minister said. "You may kiss the bride."

They shared their first kiss as a married couple, and a loud cheer went up from their guests. There was an ear-splitting wolf-whistle from George Weasley. Hermione giggled.

Theo grinned at her. "My wife," he whispered into her ear.

"My husband," she whispered back with a sense of great relief. It was done. There would be no more conjecture. For better or worse, it was done. They turned and made

their way to their well-wishers as man and wife.

Hermione was completely and utterly drained. It was only ten o'clock, but she'd had her fill of mingling with the guests. It was almost time for them to change and leave for the airport, and she'd already bade her mother and father an emotional farewell. She looked at them over her shoulder as she walked away; they seemed to be enjoying themselves they were talking to Arthur Weasley, who was interrogating them about the workings of microwave ovens.

She was stopped by Padma, who flung her arms around Hermione's neck.

"You were a lovely bridesmaid and an even lovelier bride," her friend said.

"You were the loveliest bride I've ever seen," Hermione countered, blinking back yet another bout of tears.

"I'm crying now. Sorry," Padma muttered into Hermione's hair.

"That's okay. So am I."

"Will we be alright?" Padma asked.

"Of course we will," Hermione replied. "Aren't we always?"

Dean coughed and then peeled his wife away from Hermione with a roll of his eyes. "We've only been married nine hours and you're in tears already?"

Padma laughed and gave Hermione a final hug.

As Hermione made her way to the upper deck, she bumped into Neville.

"Neville, I'm so sorry we won't be there for your wedding."

"That's okay. It's only going to be a small affair anyway. I want Mum and Dad to be there, and Merlin only knows what they'll do!"

Hermione smiled at him affectionately. "I hope you'll be very happy with Hannah, and I just know you'll be a great professor."

"Thanks, Hermione," he said, giving her a hug. "Look us up when you get back. And ..." he looked at her uncertainly.

"And, what?"

He dropped his voice to a whisper. "If you should come across Luna on your travels, tell her ... Tell her I had no choice," he finished, looking troubled.

"Don't you think you'll be happy with Hannah, Neville?"

He looked across the crowded boat to where his fiancée chatted with Susan Bones. He smiled. "I hope we'll be happy. Don't get me wrong, Hermione; I won't be sitting around pining for Luna. I just want her to know. That's all."

Hermione nodded, and with a pat on the arm, she left him and climbed the stairs. At the top she found Harry and Ron, each of them puffing away at a cigar. When they saw her, they immediately hid them behind their backs. She put her hands on her hips.

"Cigars?" she said, trying not to smile. "Have you any idea how bad they are for you?"

Harry and Ron exchanged an anxious glance.

Hermione laughed. "I'll let your wives worry about it." She turned to Ron and felt suddenly shy. "Hello, Ron. I'm really glad you came."

Ron handed Harry his cigar and pulled her into a tight hug. "Ah, Herms," he said. "Of course I came. It's all water under the bridge, eh?"

She started to cry again; she couldn't help it. Harry handed her a handkerchief and flashed her a beaming smile. She knew he'd waited a long time to see his two best friends reconciled.

She dabbed at her eyes. "Ronald Weasley. Don't you remember what happened the last time you called me 'Herms'?"

"I still have the scars," he said, grinning. "I'm glad you married Theo. I'm twenty Galleons richer for it." He punched Harry on the arm.

Hermione smiled. "I met Rose downstairs. She's really lovely. Where on earth did you find her?"

"She worked in a shop in Ottery St. Catchpole," he explained. "Fred and George both fancied her and used to show her card tricks. A few months into Auror training, George dragged me down to the village to take a look at her, and the rest is history! She wasn't too impressed when she found out that they'd been using real magic to do all the card tricks, though."

"Your Dad must have been thrilled when you married a Muggle," she added.

Ron chuckled. "He's had her poor father plagued with questions about toasters and kettles. He's obsessed with Muggle kitchens."

Hermione promised to visit them both on her return and made her way to Theo, who was deep in discussion with his uncle Lance. She waited patiently by the gangway, not wanting to interrupt them. After a moment, she turned to find Severus Snape at her side. She managed a smile, worried about what he might say.

"I wanted to congratulate you," he said.

She examined his face, but he seemed genuine. "Thank you. Aren't you going to welcome me to the family?"

He gave a wry laugh. "I would if I felt in any position to do so. You'll soon find that you and I will never be anywhere but on the very periphery of the Mill family. We'll be tolerated, but never properly admitted."

She glanced at Theo and Lance. They did appear to be a very close family. She returned her gaze to Severus Snape and extended her right hand.

"Truce?" she asked.

He hesitated for a second and then took her hand in his. "Truce," he agreed with a small smile.

Her gaze moved to the champagne flute in his hand. "Have you had a lot to drink?" she asked, surprised by his geniality.

He arched an eyebrow. "I should take points from Gryffindor for such cheek, Miss ..."

She cocked her head to the side. "So, what do you call me now?"

"Mrs Nott?" he asked.

She laughed. "I don't think so. How about Hermione?"

He regarded her for a moment, and she wished she could tell what he was thinking. "Hermione it is," he said.

She smiled. He'd never called her anything other than 'Miss Granger' before, and she found she rather liked the sound of her name on his lips.

"Do I get to call you Dad?" she asked, trying to look serious.

He grunted. "Absolutely not!"

She laughed. "I didn't think so."

"But you may call me Severus," he added. "If you wish."

For some reason she found this olive branch from the man whose life she had saved more touching than anything anyone else had said to her all evening. "Severus," she said, battling tears again.

Luckily, she was saved by her husband, who took her by the hand. "We really need to go if we're going to make it to Heathrow on time," he announced.

She nodded and smiled up at him.

Theo extended his hand to Severus. "Goodbye, Severus," he said, and they shook.

"Goodbye, Theo," Severus replied and then moved his gaze to her again. "Goodbye, Hermione."

She smiled at him one more time and then, arm in arm with her spouse, she descended the gangway and departed for her honeymoon. An entire year would pass before she set eyes on Severus Snape again.

Severus watched Theo and Hermione walk along the gangway, admiring the way her satin cape moved in the warm breeze. In many ways, he supposed his stepson was a lucky man.

He lifted his glass to his mouth and sighed. Try as he might, he could not rid his traitorous mind of the image of Hermione Granger in her backless dress.

A/N: So, there we are. The deed is done, and the backless wedding dress has made quite an impression on our favourite professor. The next chapter, which should be up on Friday, takes place a year after the wedding, on Hermione and Theo's return from their honeymoon.

Thank you all, again, for your support and reviews. I do make an effort to respond to every review, although sometimes it takes longer than usual when RL gets in the way. But please do keep the reviews coming. They are a joy. They feed me and make me edit faster. :)

More soon, LB x

This Sense of Sorrow

Chapter 11 of 34

Hermione and Theo return from their honeymoon.

A/N: Dear Reader. Thank you for your kind reviews. It is very lovely to feel I am getting to know so many of you, and your words make me smile every time. :)

Some years ago, the wonderful Droxy did some stunning fanart to go with Denial a picture of the Backless Wedding Dress that our favourite Potions Professor liked so much in the last chapter. If you would like to see it, it can be found here: <http://droxy.deviantart.com/art/The-Backless-Wedding-Dress-177734942>

LB x

O Sweet to-morrow

After to-day

There will away

This sense of sorrow.

Then let us borrow

Hope, for a gleaming

Soon will be streaming,

Dimmed by no gray

No gray!

- Thomas Hardy, *Song of Hope*

Hermione Granger Nott smiled in anticipation as the twinkling lights on the ground below signalled their approach to Heathrow Airport. Today was her first wedding anniversary, and she didn't mind spending it on an airplane. Not if it meant she was coming home at last.

Theo had sulked practically all the way to England. They could have arranged to take a Portkey to London from Toronto, but she'd always hated travelling by Portkey over such long distances, so they'd arranged to fly instead.

Theo's petulance had begun well before they'd boarded the plane. They'd been in Kiev when she had received an owl from the Ministry of Magic a month earlier, requesting confirmation that she would begin work as an Unspeakable on the first of September. She'd immediately put quill to parchment to reply in the affirmative, but Theo had reached out to still her hand.

"Hermione, you don't have to do this," he'd said.

"I might not *have* to, Theo, but I *want* to," she'd replied, gritting her teeth. She had expected this.

"But why? We're only twenty-four. Why would you want to tie us down?"

She'd lost her temper. "I want stability, Theo. I want a career, a house, the opportunity to go and have a coffee with my friends. I miss Britain; I miss my mum and dad; I miss my friends!"

He'd scowled at her and crossed his arms. "How come you were willing to give all those things up when you spent four years in Paris?"

"That was different! Paris is close enough to London for Apparition, and I spent a month at home every Christmas and three months at home every summer. At the Sorbonne I had my studies to keep me busy. And lots of company!"

"Am I not company enough for you?" he'd asked, pouting.

"That's not the point. Anyone who knows me knows that I *need* to work, Theo. I need my books; I need to be challenged. I can't function without some kind of focus in my life!"

"Well, I'm sorry I'm not as thought-provoking as your precious books," he'd snarled. "What if I don't want to go back?"

She'd stamped her foot in sheer frustration. "Theo, you promised! You gave me your word that we'd return to London after a year of travelling."

"Yes, but maybe I want to take it back."

She'd fled from the room in anger, slamming the door behind her. She'd wandered the dark streets of Kiev for over two hours. He hadn't followed her.

And so it had continued for four weeks. They'd bickered constantly. When they hadn't been quarrelling, there had been empty silences, filled only by the alien sounds of whatever part of the world they happened to be in. They hadn't had sex for over a month. Happy anniversary, indeed.

Hermione had enjoyed the first few months of their extended honeymoon. Japan had been wonderful. She had particularly enjoyed Kyoto, where she'd learned so much about Japanese cultural history. The sex had been, she supposed, rather good for an arranged marriage – certainly not the disaster she'd feared it might be. Theo, for his part, seemed to find her attractive, and she was attracted to him, too. But seven months after their wedding, they'd visited Amsterdam, and things had not been the same since.

And now, as they headed towards Heathrow, Hermione stole a sideward glance at her husband. He hadn't said a word since they'd boarded the plane, but to her surprise, he took her hand as the plane began its descent.

"I'm sorry for the way I've behaved in the past few weeks," he whispered. "I just ... the thought of sitting in Kensington Square all week is hardly appealing."

She gave his hand a squeeze. "You don't *have* to sit in Kensington Square all week. Why don't you reconsider taking up a career? You have a degree from a Muggle university – you've so many opportunities open to you in both worlds. You could even go back and study for a postgraduate degree."

He shrugged. "We'll see. I just wanted to say I'll give it a shot. I know you want a career. Let's see how we feel in six months. We can review the situation then."

She nodded at him and smiled, suddenly looking forward to embarking on yet another new start. The last few weeks hadn't looked good for the future of their marriage, but she truly believed that things would be better when they were surrounded by the people they loved.

The plane landed, and she felt her excitement increase. Her parents were waiting for them in the arrivals hall, and she couldn't wait to see them. She hadn't felt so hopeless since the year she'd been on the run from the Death Eaters with Harry and Ron.

Surely a year abroad with her husband should have been a lot more fun than life in a tent, hiding from Voldemort?

After her reunion with her parents, Hermione returned to her new home in Kensington Square with Theo. She had four days to settle in before beginning work as an Unspeakable, and those days were to be spent in a whirlwind of reunions with her friends. The first on her list was Harry and Ginny. Their son was almost five months old, and she'd yet to set eyes on him.

The Potters had built a large cottage in Godric's Hollow, and Hermione drew in the fragrance of honeysuckle as she and Theo approached the door.

"Isn't it gorgeous?" she asked, admiring the roses and the thatched roof.

Theo snorted. "I wouldn't live this far from civilisation for all the Galleons in Gringotts."

Hermione darted him an irritated glance, already regretting her decision to bring him along. She'd met many of his friends and extended family in Germany and the Netherlands, and she had been perfectly cordial. She knew she'd be upset if he failed to reciprocate.

Harry flung open the door before she'd even reached for the knocker. She bounded the last few feet to the doorstep and threw her arms around him.

"Hello, Harry," she said, grinning. "It's really, really good to see you."

"You too," he replied, pulling away from her. "You look well – a life of leisure suits you."

"You look like you were born to be a father," she remarked, taking in the tiny pair of blue socks he held in one hand and the Chudley Cannons bib in the other. "Gift from Ron, I presume?" she said, gesturing to the bib.

Harry rolled his eyes and nodded. "Yes, and before you ask, they're still bottom of the league, although Ron swears this will be their year."

Hermione handed him a heavy, colourfully wrapped package. "I'm afraid my gift is equally predictable."

Harry ran his hand over the smooth package. "*Hogwarts: A History?*" he asked.

"Illustrated and newly updated version," she said. "Includes all the details of the battle and an excellent photo of you receiving your Order of Merlin."

Harry shook his head and reached out to shake Theo's hand. "Welcome, both of you. Come on in. Ginny's been dying to see you."

They followed him to the living room, where they found Ginny bent over a white crib. She turned to them with a beaming smile. "He's just woken up, so you don't have to whisper." She straightened and pulled Hermione into a hug. "I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you too. I really have." Hermione turned her gaze to the crib while Ginny greeted Theo, where the baby was frantically waving his arms and legs. She smiled at the sight of him.

"He's one-hundred per-cent Weasley," she said, gazing at the red-headed infant. "Not a trace of Potter."

Harry joined her and peered fondly at his son. "I'm hoping he'll be short-sighted. Glasses might make him look a little more like me. Or maybe we could tattoo a scar onto his forehead ..."

"We most certainly will not," Ginny said, lifting the baby from his crib and turning him towards the visitors. "Well, say hello to James Frederick."

Hermione reached out and touched his rosy cheek. "Hello, little James," she whispered. The little boy grabbed her finger and gave her a gummy smile.

Ginny raised an eyebrow. "Well, he's certainly taken a shine to you. Would you like to hold him?"

"Can I sit down before I take him? I've not had much experience with babies."

She sat on the sofa, and Ginny handed her the baby. He was a sturdy little thing, and Hermione found she wasn't as nervous and uncomfortable as she'd thought she would be. Harry went to make them tea, and Theo sat as far from little James as he possibly could.

They chatted for a time about the countries she and Theo had visited, although Theo hardly said a word. When Ginny plucked little James from Hermione's lap and announced it was time for him to be fed, Theo left to have a look around the village. Hermione was relieved. She couldn't imagine somebody as shy as Theo being comfortable around a breastfeeding mother.

She watched as Ginny put her son to her breast and began to nurse him. She and Harry seemed so at ease in their new occupation; it was almost as if they'd been doing it all their lives.

"Does it hurt?" Hermione asked as she watched the baby suckle.

"It did at first, but Mum taught me a few handy Soothing Spells, and it was all fine after a few weeks. I'm trying to get him weaned at the moment. I have to go back to work next month."

"Speaking of work," Harry said, handing Hermione a mug of tea, "when do you start at the Department of Mysteries?"

"On Monday," she said. "I'm looking forward to it. Travelling is all very well and good, but you know me. I need something to get my teeth into."

"And what about Theo?" Ginny asked. "Does he have something lined up?"

Hermione shook her head and avoided their gaze. "He doesn't need to work, so I think he's a little bit lost, to be honest. He would have preferred to travel a bit longer," she added with a sigh.

Harry and Ginny exchanged a glance. "Is everything okay?" Harry asked. "Have you two been getting along alright?"

She gave him a forced smile. "It's been fine. He wasn't looking forward to coming home, but other than that it's been great," she lied.

Luckily, Theo soon returned from the village, and she was spared further interrogation.

Hermione looked at her reflection in the mirror that night and wondered what type of mother she would make. Would she be as good at it as Ginny? Harry and Ginny had always been so comfortable together, but now that they had James they were a real family. Her own marriage seemed so cold, so empty in comparison. For the very first time in her life, she found that the idea of a child was a welcome one.

The next stop on her list was Padma and Dean. She arranged to visit them on Saturday morning, and Theo decided to look up some of his friends from Cambridge. Hermione was glad; after an entire year, she felt like she could do with a break from Theo. She was also looking forward to having a good heart-to-heart with Padma. Ginny wouldn't have understood: Harry and Ginny had married for love, not because of the *Marriage Act*.

But after only five minutes in their company, Hermione could tell that Padma and Dean were every bit as much a happy couple as Harry and Ginny. What had begun as mutual attraction had blossomed into love, and it was obvious that they cared for each other deeply.

Dean stayed to chat for a few minutes before leaving to watch a football match, and alone with her closest friend, Hermione finally let her guard down.

"Oh, Padma! I'm so delighted to see how happy you and Dean are together, but it makes it even more obvious that things are not good with me and Theo."

Padma put a pot of tea and a plate of biscuits on the table and frowned. "What do you mean? You sounded quite happy in your letters. At first, anyway."

Hermione shrugged. "We *were* happy. I really enjoyed the first few months of travelling, and Theo was good company. Things were fine ..."

"How was everything in the bedroom?" Padma asked with a crooked smile.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I knew you'd ask. Things in the bedroom were far better than I'd thought they would be. Okay, it wasn't pure passion like it was with you and Philippe, but it was fine. Better than fine. We were compatible, attracted to one another, and for the first six or seven months it was ... good. Not just the sex, everything was good."

"What happened to make it change?"

Hermione shook her head. "Lots of things, I guess. By March, I began to get restless. We'd been to Japan, China, India, New Zealand and Australia. I'd enjoyed it, but I was missing everybody dreadfully, and I just felt at such a loose end. You know what I'm like. I need my books, and even though I'd brought as many as possible with me, I needed something to *do*."

Padma picked up a biscuit. "And Theo?"

Hermione sighed. "When I decided I wanted a few days off to read, he sulked! I know I might be boring, but all I wanted was to curl up with a few good books for a while. Even when we did go sight-seeing, we wanted to see different things, and it began to cause friction."

"Two people holed up together in hotel rooms for months? Things were bound to get claustrophobic."

"You're right, but it's just ... He can't compromise at all, Padma. And if he's going to be like this about bloody sight-seeing, what's he going to be like about my career? What's he going to be like about whose parents we eat with for Christmas, and whether or not we have children?"

"Hermione, it's only been a year, and because you've been away, you haven't had a chance to settle down properly as a married couple." She patted her friend on the hand. "We were almost the exact opposite: we fought like cat and dog for the first few months silly things like toilet seats and washing the dishes but then it got better. You and Theo have been living in this unnatural environment for a year. Things were bound to get tough!"

"I know, Padma, I do. But I'm beginning to think we might just be too different. I've been thinking about all the things Severus Snape said me, and I'm starting to wonder if he was right."

"But ... Is it just all these little things, or did something bad happen?"

Hermione regarded her friend, wondering how much she should tell her. "Do I have your word that what I say will stay in this room?"

"Of course! Do you even have to ask?"

Hermione sipped her tea and took a deep breath. "When we'd finished touring South Africa, we decided to come back to Europe. Theo wanted to head for the Netherlands, because his cousins live there. We booked into our hotel room in Amsterdam, and while I took a shower, Theo went out for a walk. When he came back, he had a big bag of marijuana."

Padma looked surprised, but motioned for Hermione to continue.

"I know that it's not against the law over there, and I know that half our classmates in Paris smoked it, but I just can't stand it! I know I'm a prude, but it's illegal in my country, and so I just can't abide it." She paused and nibbled at a biscuit. "We had a big row, and right in front of me, completely against my wishes, he lit up and got stoned. I was so angry, but it got even worse the next day."

"He didn't hurt you or anything, did he, Hermione?"

"No! Nothing like that he's very laid back, even more so when he's been smoking that dreadful stuff. We met his second cousin a wizard called Hans Michelob Schneiderlidl. Bit of a mouthful, that name. Anyway, I couldn't stand the sight of him. He reminded me of Lucius Malfoy, in a way. Don't get me wrong I'm very fond of Draco now, but I'll never like Lucius. Hans is cut of a similar cloth; I could tell he didn't like me because I'm Muggle-born. He invited us to his apartment, and all he and Theo did that evening was smoke joints. I had to put up with endless jibes from Hans about what a killjoy I am, and Theo didn't defend me once. I was so upset that I left. Theo spent most of the week hanging out with him, and I stayed in my hotel room, reading."

"How long did you stay?" Padma asked.

"Just for a week. We went to visit friends of his in Berlin after that, and they were much nicer, but there were far too many joints and illegal potions and stuff around for my liking. Seriously, the kind of friends Theo has set alarm bells ringing. They're all from fantastically rich families, and they've nothing better to do than sit around getting wasted all day."

Padma frowned. "This isn't sounding good, Hermione. Where did you go next?"

"We stayed in Berlin for two weeks and then headed to Chile. Things got better for a while he hasn't touched marijuana since we left Berlin, thankfully. I was a bit more optimistic once we were away from his friends, and things were okay until we got my letter from the Ministry."

"Let me guess. He didn't want to come home?"

"Precisely. All we did was bicker for the rest of the holiday. I didn't enjoy the States or Canada at all, and we mostly just did our own thing." She put her cup down and looked at Padma. "Have I made the biggest mistake of my life?"

Padma shook her head. "I don't know. You've been living in an artificial situation for the past year. It was bound to be a strain. It's impossible to tell how things will be, now that you're home again. And you're not the only ones who've found it tough. Not from what I've heard."

"Really? What have you heard?" Hermione asked.

"Blaise has been having an affair for the past three months. He's working near Dean's office at the ministry, and by all accounts it's common knowledge."

"That bastard!" Hermione exclaimed, her eyes wide. "Does Katie know?"

"I've no idea. I don't know either of them very well. But the point is that things might change for the better, now that you're about to settle down. Give it more time, Hermione. I'm sure you can work things out with Theo. Look at poor Katie things could be much worse!"

Hermione smiled. "I suppose you're right. Anyway enough about me and Theo! How have you been? I really enjoyed your letters; it sounds like you're happy at the Obliviation Board."

Padma grinned. "I love it! It's such an interesting job. I even got to work with Dean last week. Some idiot up in York's been breeding two-headed chickens, and twenty-four of them escaped last week there was complete chaos! Dean's lot had to round them up while we modified all the Muggle neighbours' memories ..."

Padma suddenly stopped and clapped a hand over her mouth. Muttering an apology, she rose from the table and fled from the kitchen.

Hermione watched in confusion as her friend flung open the door of the little bathroom beneath the stairs and disappeared inside. Within seconds she could hear the sounds of retching. She ran to the sink and filled a glass with some water.

She heard the toilet flush, and Padma emerged from the bathroom.

"Are you alright?" she asked, handing her the glass of water.

Padma nodded weakly and accepted the glass. She crossed to the kitchen sink, where she took a mouthful of the water and then spat it into the sink. She turned to Hermione and smiled.

"I'm three months pregnant," she said. "I didn't want to tell you in a letter; I wanted to wait until you came home."

Hermione squealed and threw her arms around Padma. "I can't believe it! I've been sitting there ranting on about me and Theo and you were pregnant all that time?"

Padma chuckled and patted her tummy. "I wore a loose top so you wouldn't notice I have a bump already see?"

She smoothed her blouse over her stomach, and sure enough, there was a gentle swell.

Hermione frowned. "Are you sure you're only three months?"

Padma nodded. "It's twins twin girls. That's why I've been so ill."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "No way!"

"Well, twins do run in the family, so it wasn't too much of a shock." She patted her bump again. "And you won't believe it, but Parvati is pregnant again, and she's due on the same day as me!"

They hugged once more, and Hermione couldn't stop the tears that came to her eyes. It felt as though all her friends were having babies, and they all seemed so happy and fulfilled. Her life was so empty in comparison. She hoped her new career would help to fill it.

The evening before Hermione was due to begin work at the Department of Mysteries, she and Theo were invited to dinner with Cordelia and Severus. Hermione looked forward to it with a mixture of apprehension and curiosity; she was worried that they'd pick up on the tension between her and Theo, but she was also looking forward to seeing Severus Snape again. They'd parted on friendly terms, and she was interested to see whether or not their 'truce' still held.

When they arrived, she was delighted to find Lance there, too; he was always entertaining, and she was sure he would divert some of the attention away from her and Theo. Cordelia greeted her warmly, and she crossed the room to shake Severus's hand. While he wasn't quite smiling, he wasn't scowling either, and she decided their ceasefire hadn't been a mere figment of her imagination.

"Hello, Severus," she said, testing the waters.

He inclined his head. "Hermione," he replied.

"Did you miss me?" she asked playfully.

He raised an eyebrow. "Just because I've allowed you to call me by my given name doesn't mean I've any intention of engaging in meaningless repartee."

She chuckled. "Well, you haven't hexed me, so we appear to have made progress."

He regarded her as if she was unhinged. "Might I interest you in a glass of wine?"

She nodded, and he turned to pour her a glass of red.

"Did you enjoy your year abroad?"

She met his inquisitive gaze. "Yes, I did. But I'm glad to be home."

"I rather thought you might be," he said in such an I-told-you-so voice that she very much regretted not keeping her mouth shut.

Hermione could hardly believe she was actually enjoying her evening. Cordelia was full of questions about their travels, and although her inquiries were directed largely at her son, she included Hermione in the conversation at every turn. It was amazing: she managed to keep the dialogue impersonal far away from the subject of how she and Theo were getting along. It was obvious she was an experienced hostess who knew how to keep her guests comfortable.

Severus, however, was analysing their every nuance. Hermione was certain he wasn't fooled by their light-hearted banter. She'd always felt as though the Potions master could see through everything his students said or did, and things hadn't changed. She knew her body language probably spoke volumes, and she was painfully aware that she and Theo had not once made eye-contact during the meal.

The subject soon turned to the latest wave of *Marriage Act* offspring.

"I believe Pansy Parkinson and her husband had a baby boy last week," Cordelia announced.

Hermione was genuinely surprised. "Really? I hadn't heard that!"

Cordelia nodded. "I had tea with Narcissa Malfoy last week. I get the impression Narcissa is itching for a grandchild, but there seems to be no news from Draco yet."

"Pah!" Lancelot exclaimed. "There were never good breeders, those Malfoys!"

Hermione nearly inhaled her wine at the expression of horror on Cordelia's face.

"Uncle Lance, really! Must you put it in such equestrian terms?" Cordelia asked.

Lance was not to be thwarted. "Horses, hippogriffs, dragons, wizards ... All the same when you get down to basics."

Cordelia shot Hermione an apologetic look. "I read some time ago that your friend, Harry, had also had a son?"

Hermione smiled. "That's right. We visited them on Thursday. They've called him James Frederick Potter."

Severus choked on a mouthful of salmon. "Another James Potter. How delightful."

Hermione grinned. "If it's any consolation, he looks nothing like Harry or James he's a Weasley through and through. He has a big mop of red hair, and I'm sure he'll be covered in freckles within a few years. He's very like the twins."

Severus smirked. "Ah, the Weasley twins. I'm quite devastated that I won't be at Hogwarts to deal with another generation of miscreants."

"Ants?" Lance asked, looking confused. "Ants at Hogwarts?"

Everybody laughed. "Severus said *miscreants*, Uncle Lance," Theo explained.

"Do you remember my bridesmaid, Padma Patil?" Hermione asked Cordelia.

Cordelia nodded. "Yes, indeed pretty girl with an identical twin sister."

"That's the one," she said with a smile. "I went to visit her yesterday; she's expecting twin daughters."

"Oh, how lovely!" Cordelia said with what seemed to be genuine delight. "I'm sure they'll be just like her and her sister!"

"Yes, well, enough about all these strangers. What about you and young Theodore, eh? What's your breeding strategy?" Lance asked, prodding the air in front of him with a crooked finger.

Hermione gaped at him for a moment and then started to giggle. Theo and Cordelia looked scandalized, while Severus remained quiet, his black eyes glittering with amusement.

"Lancelot Mill! If you do not behave yourself, I will have to ask you to leave the table." Cordelia turned to Hermione. "I do apologise, my dear."

"That's quite alright," Hermione said, grinning.

"I didn't mean any offence," Lancelot insisted. "Look at her! She's a great girl fertile as they come, these Muggle-borns. She'll be churning out the tots before too long!"

Hermione giggled until she was near tears. Cordelia and Theo looked at one another, shaking their heads.

"Lance, I think Hermione has heard quite enough on the topic of breeding for this evening," Severus said with barely concealed amusement. "I imagine she would like to try her hand at a career before she considers adding to the Mill dynasty."

Cordelia flashed her husband a smile of gratitude. "I believe you start work in the morning, Hermione? It must be very disappointing to have to come home so soon. What a pity they refused to grant you another year!"

Hermione frowned. "I didn't want another year. I'm looking forward to starting as an Unspeakable."

Cordelia looked surprised. Her gaze moved to her son. "I'd formed the impression you both would have liked to continue your travels."

Hermione sensed Theo stiffen beside her. "Theo might have wished to travel some more, but I was glad to come home."

She was glad when Severus came to her rescue and asked, "I believe the new Unspeakables are apprenticed to a more experienced colleague. Have you been told to whom you'll be assigned?"

Hermione nodded. "I've been assigned to Primrose Chuckley. She was three or four years ahead of us at Hogwarts; I met her at my interview. She seemed nice."

Severus gave a nod. "I remember her. Powell was her maiden name. She was in Ravenclaw: a reasonably gifted Potions student."

Hermione suddenly remembered something. "Did you ever fill the Potions position you advertised last summer?" she asked, slightly embarrassed.

"I did not. It appears the greater London area is devoid of competent Potioneers."

"Did you receive many applications?" She remembered the salary had been more than ample for such a position. She'd been certain it would attract many qualified Potion makers.

Before Severus could answer, Cordelia said, "He got seventy-two applications."

"Oh! How many did you interview?" Hermione asked.

"Three," Severus said.

"Two of them left in tears," Cordelia explained.

Hermione grinned; it wasn't difficult to imagine why the interviewees might have been reduced to tears. "Where's your laboratory?" she asked.

"In the basement beneath this house," he replied.

"Really? Could I see it?"

His looked taken aback, and she suspected the pause meant he was looking for some reason to refuse.

"Of course you can!" Cordelia answered for him. "Why not give her a quick tour, Severus, while we wait for dessert?"

"Only if you wouldn't mind," Hermione added, not wanting to jeopardise their fragile truce.

He gave a soft sigh and pushed back his chair. "Not at all. Follow me."

Hermione rose quickly and followed his flurry of black robes from the room. She couldn't wait to see his laboratory. His Potions classroom had always been impeccable, and she was sure his laboratory would be the same.

He did not speak as they descended the stairs, and she wondered if he resented her curiosity. They reached a wooden door inlaid with an intricate wrought-iron design.

"I apologise for being so nosy," she whispered. "Please don't feel you have let me in if you really don't want to."

He unlocked the door with a flick of his wand. "I wouldn't have agreed to let you see the laboratory if I'd no wish to do so."

He pushed open the door and gestured for her to precede him. The moment she stepped over the threshold, torches flamed into life around the walls. She couldn't help but gasp as the room lit up: the walls were of light grey granite, not entirely unlike his dungeon classroom at Hogwarts, and they were lined with shelf after shelf of labelled Potions ingredients.

There were dozens of phials of brightly coloured liquids, jars of pickled ingredients and numerous tins of powder. One wall was covered with Potions books, and at the centre of the room were two broad wooden work benches. On both of these sat three cauldrons, all of them spaced perfectly apart. The positioning of the cauldrons was so precise that she was certain he must have used a spell to place them so.

"It's exactly the way I'd imagined," she said, smiling.

"How predictable I must be."

She knew by the tone of his voice that he was amused rather than annoyed. "May I look around?"

He nodded. "Be my guest."

She wandered around the room, reading the names of the ingredients scrawled upon the labels of the jars and tins, aware all the while that he was watching her.

"The more volatile ingredients are stored in the small room to your left," he said, indicating a heavy iron door. "It has been imbued with extra magical protection to protect the rooms above, in case of a mishap."

"I see," she replied, glancing at the door before moving to the centre of the room. She examined the first set of three cauldrons. "All pewter, but of varying thicknesses?"

He nodded. "Simple and functional the other three are more interesting."

She crossed to the second bench. "This one is wrought iron lined with platinum," she said, trying to calculate what it might have cost. A lot, she guessed.

"Very good," he answered in the voice she had known him to reserve exclusively for his Slytherin students.

She moved to the next one by far the prettiest of the six. "Solid gold?"

He nodded, and she scrutinised the base of the cauldron more closely. There were markings along the lower rim unmistakably Chinese.

"I don't believe it!" she said. "It's a Xiao Tiang Mei cauldron!"

The corner of his mouth curled in a slight smile. "Well done, Hermione. It appears you know your cauldrons."

"We had a Xiao Tiang Mei cauldron at the Sorbonne but it certainly wasn't as big as this one." She knew that these cauldrons were very rare and highly sought-after; the Mill family obviously had some serious contacts as well as copious funds at their disposal.

"Let's see if you can tell me anything about the final one," he said, gesturing to the last cauldron on the bench the smallest of the three.

She examined it; she didn't recognise the material with which it was made, and its shape was unusual too it was more belled in the centre than were the others.

She shook her head. "This one has me stumped, I'm afraid."

"Let me give you a clue: It was bequeathed to me by Albus Dumbledore, who in turn received it from Nicolas Flamel."

She frowned for a moment and then her jaw dropped in surprise. "You're not serious! This is a Telenium cauldron?"

He nodded, his expression smug.

"But there are only three of these in the whole world!"

"Indeed," he drawled.

The possibilities were racing through her mind. There were rare potions that could be brewed only in a Telenium cauldron if Severus Snape had the ability to brew them, he was surely a rich man.

She ran her fingertip along the rim of the cauldron, feeling as though she was in the presence of greatness. This laboratory would be a fascinating place to work. She turned to face him.

"Why didn't you fill the position?"

"My standards were unrealistically high, perhaps. Now that you've seen my equipment, though, maybe you understand why I'm reluctant to employ somebody who does not meet my expectations as regards proper qualification for the position."

She frowned. "Were none of the applicants suitably qualified?"

He paused before answering. "Only one of the applicants was educated to the standard I would demand."

"And what standard did you demand? The advertisement didn't specify."

"Master's level."

She raised her eyebrows, feeling suddenly annoyed. "But I'm qualified to master's level!"

He inclined his head. "I'm aware of that. You are the one of whom I spoke."

"And you wouldn't even consider my application?"

He gave a wry laugh. "Do you really think you and I could work together?"

"I suppose not," she said grudgingly.

"Despite your undoubted abilities in the field, your constant chatter would drive me to distraction. My universally acknowledged lack of tolerance would exacerbate the problem further, and we would come to blows within a month."

She chuckled. "You'd give us a whole month? I'd give us a week." She returned to the door, no longer annoyed, and he stood aside to allow her exit. "Sincere thanks for allowing me access to your laboratory, Severus," she said with mock formality.

He smirked at her. "You're welcome. You might make rather an amusing dinner guest, Hermione, but I'm certain you would make an infuriating colleague."

Amusing dinner guest? She was so pleased that she practically bounced back up the stairs.

It was after eleven o'clock when Theo and Hermione left. They walked around the square in silence.

"Tired?" Theo asked as they approached their front door.

"Yes," she replied with a weary smile.

"Nervous about tomorrow?"

She nodded. "A little. I'd like to get to bed and try to sleep before I begin fretting."

Theo pushed open the door, and they found Moe waiting for them in the hallway. Her thin little lips were pressed tightly together in a line of disapproval.

"Is something the matter, Moe?" Hermione asked.

Moe glared at Theo and folded her arms across her chest. "Master Theodore is having a visitor," she announced, gesturing to the sitting room with a jerk of her head. She clicked her fingers and disappeared.

Hermione and Theo looked at one another. She could tell by the expression on his face that he was as surprised as she was to have received a guest at this late hour. Before she could express her dismay, the sitting room door opened and Hans Michelob Schneiderlidl stood grinning at them, a large bottle of Firewhisky in his hand.

Hermione's heart sank.

"Theo!" he exclaimed, a broad grin on his face.

"Hans!" Theo responded, embracing his cousin. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Hermione's hopes of an early night diminished as she took in the look of delight on her husband's face.

"I was in London for the weekend and thought I'd join you for a few days." His gaze flicked challengingly to Hermione.

"Hello, Hans," she said coldly, extending her hand.

He shook her hand limply, a slight sneer on his face. "Mrs Nott."

Hermione dropped his hand and fought the temptation to correct him. He knew damn well that she'd chosen to be known as Granger Nott.

"I hope you'll excuse me," she said, turning to Theo. "I begin work in the morning, so I'd like to get to bed. Goodnight."

When she reached the sanctuary of her room, she sank onto the bed and put her head in her hands. She'd enjoyed her evening. She liked Cordelia; she very fond of Lance; and she'd even enjoyed the company of Severus Snape. Theo had relaxed in the company of his family, and for a few hours she'd felt hope for their future. But now Hans was in their sitting room. She couldn't stand him, and as his raucous laughter rang out above the bedroom, she knew she wasn't going to get much sleep that night.

She suddenly felt claustrophobic, despite the grandeur of the room. She needed fresh air. Taking her cloak from a hook and tiptoed up the stairs and out through the front door, closing it gently behind her. She crossed the road and opened the small, wrought-iron gate that led to the park at the centre of the handsome square.

Taking a seat on a wooden bench, she looked at Cordelia and Severus's house, wondering how they'd managed to make such an amiable marriage. From what Theo had told her, they'd barely known one another when they'd wed, yet they gave the impression of a comfortable couple. Formal, perhaps, but comfortable nonetheless. Surely if Cordelia could get along with a man as difficult as Severus Snape, she could do the same with Theodore Nott?

She heard somebody approach from behind her and, expecting to find her husband, she turned to find Lance hobbling towards her with the help of his walking-stick. She mustered as genuine a smile as she could.

"Hello," she whispered, moving to make room for him on the bench.

He lowered himself stiffly to sit next to her and placed his ebony cane across his lap. He turned and inspected her over his little round glasses.

"I've never liked the Schneiderlidl family," he muttered, "but even by their standards, Hans is something of a rotten egg."

"I'm so glad to hear you say that," she said. "I don't like him at all, and I'm convinced he hates me. Theo changes completely when Hans is around."

Lance patted her hand. "In many ways Theodore's an intelligent boy, but in very many more, he's his father all over again."

Hermione shook her head. "I've tried to get Theo to talk about his father so many times over the past year, but it's almost as though he's decided to wipe all traces of him from his memory."

"Theo's a fool, Hermione, and although I've no wish to excuse his behaviour, it has to be admitted that he's suffered because of his father. Cordelia hasn't helped matters by indulging him, either. He's a product of his upbringing."

They both cast the direction of their gaze towards Cordelia's house, and a comfortable silence fell between them.

Eventually, Hermione turned to him and said, "How come you're suddenly so lucid? You came across as positively batty during dinner."

Lance chuckled. "I like to put on an act for the rest of the family. They're so obsessed with keeping up appearances; it gives an old man great pleasure to watch them squirm when I misbehave in company."

Hermione giggled. "Don't worry. Your secret's safe with me."

"I'm not the only one playing pretend, Hermione Granger," he said with a wink and a nod at Cordelia and Severus's house. "People have always played pretend; it's become a veritable epidemic since the introduction of the *Marriage Act*."

Hermione looked across the manicured lawn and wondered whether or not she would be doomed to play pretend for the rest of her married life. But tomorrow was another new beginning. There was still hope for her marriage. There was time to make it work. She'd never failed a test in her entire life, and she absolutely refused to fail at this one.

Without Ceremony

Chapter 12 of 34

Padma's twins arrive, and Hermione rethinks her marriage.

It was your way, my dear

To vanish without a word

When callers, friends or kin

Had left, and I hastened in

To rejoin you, as I inferred.

And when you'd a mind to career

Off anywhere say to town

You were all on a sudden gone

Before I had thought thereon

Or noticed your trunks were down.

So, now that you disappear

For ever in that swift style

Your meaning seems to me

Just as it used to be:

"Good-bye is not worth while!"

- **Thomas Hardy, *Without Ceremony***

Severus Snape looked around the crowded room until his gaze alighted at last upon Hermione Granger. He allowed the curtain of his black hair to fall forward, obscuring his face from view in order to watch her unobserved.

Almost six months had passed since the girl had returned from her honeymoon, and the dark shadows beneath her eyes belied her malcontent. He reflected a moment on her Gryffindor nature. He'd often believed her better suited to Ravenclaw, but he had to admit that other aspects of her personality proclaimed her a Gryffindor through and through. She wore her heart on her sleeve, and while her pathetic efforts at playing happy families might have fooled many of her friends, he instinctively knew her to be deeply unhappy. But there she was, trying to put on a brave face. It seemed the Sorting Hat had placed her aptly, after all.

It didn't take a skilled Legilimens to decipher the clues in the body language between Hermione and her husband. Although they were seated next to one another, they had not touched once throughout dinner. There had been no pat on the hand; no tap on the knee or a hand placed gently upon a forearm. In fact, they had barely even looked at one another. The only time he had noticed any eye-contact between the pair had been when Theo had poured himself a fifth glass of wine, and Hermione had flashed him a look of annoyance. It hardly bespoke the happiest of couples.

He watched as Hermione nodded politely to some comment Theo's great aunt Jemima had made. He knew a moment of sympathy for her: with the exception of Lance, he had always found the older generation of the Mill family to be tedious in the extreme, and Cordelia had developed a habit of placing her daughter-in-law next to the most boring relation she could find at family events.

While Severus looked on, Hermione's face suddenly broke into a beaming smile. He followed the direction of her gaze and found she was looking across the table at Lance, who gave her a theatrical wink before recommencing his conversation with an acquaintance to his right. Hermione giggled, and for an instant he fancied her transformed. Her laughter lit up her features, but he had only the briefest of moments to admire her thus, before her eyes became anxious once more.

His observations were soon interrupted by his wife's tinkling laughter. She was flirting shamelessly with a new associate of hers: a Welsh wizard by the name of Zebulum Williams. He knew the reason for the dinner party now. There was something Cordelia wanted from this man, and he knew full well that she would stop at nothing to get it. The unfortunate Zebulum was putty in her hands; the little man seemed shocked to find himself at the receiving end of such copious attention from an attractive witch. Severus wondered what Cordelia was after.

Refilling his wine glass, he turned his scrutiny to Hermione once more. She was lost in thought, and he was almost tempted to use Legilimency to discover the subject of her reverie. But as if she had sensed his thoughts, she raised her eyes to his. She held his gaze for a few seconds, and he knew they were both recalling the warnings he'd given her about Theo. A slight flicker of her eyes towards her spouse confirmed his suspicions.

Severus took a deep draft of wine from his glass and sighed. Hermione's marriage to Theodore Nott would not last the year. He would have bet everything he owned on it.

Hermione walked through the Atrium at the Ministry of Magic and queued at one of the many fireplaces. The rush hour at the Ministry always reminded her of the London Underground. She'd always hated the Muggle train system, particularly at rush hour. She remembered a busy evening before Christmas when she and her mother had gone shopping: it had been shortly after her sixteenth birthday, and she had sat on the packed train and felt enormous relief that she would never have to join the millions of Muggles who commuted to and from their places of work each day. She had been so smug in the belief that hers would surely be a life less ordinary; an existence more meaningful than that of the multitude of men and women on the Tube who never questioned what, exactly, was the point of it all.

But here she was, just another number at the Ministry of Magic. She, and hundreds of others like her, arriving with their newspapers and umbrellas for work each morning, making up the numbers and wading through the red tape of wizarding bureaucracy. She'd thought that a position in the Department of Mysteries would be something ... well ... more mysterious. But she had quickly learned that *she* would not be the one contemplating the fabric of time and space, the questions of life and death or the power of love and hate. That would not be her lot until she'd worked as an Unspeakable for some twenty years. Her work to date had been monotonous in the extreme. She had romanticised her career just as she had romanticised her marriage, but she was damned if she was going to let Theo know of her unhappiness.

As she waited patiently in line to Floo home to Kensington Square, she lowered her gaze to her wristwatch and considered today's date with a worried sigh: in less than a week it would be six months since she and Theo had returned to England, and they had agreed to review their plans after that time.

Much as she disliked her work as an Unspeakable, there was no way she was taking off around the globe again with Theo. They hadn't fought once since their return, but a cold civility had settled between them, and she felt powerless to alter the course their relationship had taken. She wondered how it would proceed. Would they live out their lives in a marriage of convenience, or would they divorce? Maybe there was still a way to rescue her failing marriage. Failure was a word that simply wasn't in her vocabulary.

She stepped up to the fireplace in the Atrium and took a fistful of Floo Powder. As she raised her hand and prepared to travel home, she suddenly changed her mind and spoke Padma's address instead of her own. Her friend was on maternity leave, and Hermione was certain she would be at home. Padma's cosy house would be much more welcoming than her own.

When she'd stopped spinning, she stepped out of the fireplace and dusted down her robes. Padma was looking at her with raised eyebrows above the edge of her parenting book, a pair of charmed knitting needles on her lap busily producing a tiny pink hat. Her swollen feet were perched on a footstool, and her yellow maternity robes did little to disguise the inflated mass that was her once-petite midriff.

"I'm very happy to see you, Hermione, but given that you usually send an owl before you arrive, I'm now thinking somebody has died," Padma said with a frown.

Hermione chuckled. "Nobody has died. I'm sorry I didn't owl, but I just decided to come and see you on the spur of the moment. Is it a bad time?"

Padma grinned. "It's a wonderful time. Dean's on a top secret mission to Cornwall, and I'm not expecting him much before midnight. I've made a big pot of chicken stew, and I've nobody to share it with."

Hermione sat down next to her greatly enlarged friend. "How are you feeling? I thought you'd have gone before now. Don't twins usually arrive early?"

"I have another two weeks before I'm officially due, but twins generally arrive a fortnight early, so I guess that means I'm due today," she said, patting her bump.

"Well, I'm not sure I'll be much help as a midwife, but I make a smashing cup of tea. Fancy one?"

"Oh, I'd love one. I've wanted one for the past hour, but getting up from the sofa is such an ordeal that I decided I could do without."

Hermione headed for the kitchen. She already felt cheered; this was real life. She'd always thought of herself as a career woman, but now that she had decided jobs were overrated, she realised that this was what it was all about: family and the people you loved. Her best friend was about to begin the biggest adventure of her life. What could be more important?

As she filled the kettle and heated it with a flick of her wand, she gazed out at the darkness of Padma's back garden.

"It's snowing!" she called to Padma.

"Oh, no!" Padma cried from the front room. "Poor Dean. I hope he brought his dragon-hide gloves."

Just as she was loading the tray, Padma waddled into the kitchen. Hermione scowled.

"You were meant to be keeping your feet up while I brought this in to you," she reprimanded, setting the tray on the kitchen table and pulling out a chair.

Padma smiled. "Apart from trips to the loo, I've practically been living in the front room. I wanted a change of scenery." She sank into the chair and poured them both a cup of tea. "Do you want to heat up that stew?"

Hermione nodded and lit the stove from where she sat. "I bet you've gotten really, really good at Summoning Spells over the past few weeks."

Padma smirked. "I've even become an expert at making a sandwich from the front room and levitating it to the sofa. I've no idea how Muggle women cope when they're pregnant."

They sipped their tea in companionable silence, and when the stew began to bubble, Hermione ladled it into a pair of bowls and brought them to the table.

"You're so bloody good at domestic magic. This is delicious," she said enviously, enjoying the stew.

"Well, my domestic skills are about to be tested to the hilt, so let's hope they're up to scratch," Padma muttered, rubbing her bump. All of a sudden, she winced.

"Are you okay?" Hermione asked.

Padma nodded. "I just got kicked in the bladder, that's all." She put down her spoon and made a great effort to rise from the table. "Another loo trip," she announced with a sigh.

Hermione watched her friend struggle out to the tiny bathroom beneath the stairs and wondered how she would cope with it all when her time came. She hoped she'd have one baby at a time and never two together. It looked much too uncomfortable. Padma spent a long time in the toilet, and Hermione was just beginning to worry when she reappeared, an anxious expression on her face.

"I think my waters have broken," Padma whispered as if she was scared to say it aloud.

Hermione practically leapt from her seat. "Are you serious? Merlin! What do we do?"

Padma giggled at Hermione's alarm. "Not much, for a while. I haven't had any contractions yet, so we just wait, I suppose. Will you send our owl to Dean, though? Tell him it's nothing urgent, but just let him know he might be needed soon."

Hermione nodded and summoned a piece of parchment. After scribbling a note to Dean, she fetched Padma's snowy owl from its perch and led it to the kitchen window. The snow had gotten heavier and there was quite a gale. The owl would have a long way to go if Dean was in Cornwall, and she didn't give the unfortunate bird much of a chance in this weather. As if it agreed, the owl gave her a reproachful hiss and took off into the darkness. She closed the window with a shiver and turned to find Padma clutching the back of her chair, her eyes closed.

"What?" Hermione screeched. "What is it?"

"Pain," Padma gasped. After a moment, she released her grip on the chair. "It's gone now. Let's walk around and see if it comes back."

Trying to quell her shaking hands, Hermione offered Padma her arm, and they walked slowly around the kitchen. Within ten minutes the pain had returned, and Padma burst into tears. "I'm in labour," she wailed. "What if Dean doesn't make it back in time?"

Realising she would have to take charge of the situation, Hermione took her gently by the shoulders. "Of course he'll make it in time. We'd better get you to St. Mungo's, though. Have you packed your bag?"

Padma nodded. "It's upstairs in the baby room. I'll just summon it."

When they had the necessary bag and both of them were warmly cloaked, Hermione took Padma by the hand. "Will you be able to Apparate?"

Padma nodded, but then doubled over in pain again, gripping Hermione by the arm. "I don't think I will, to be honest," she said when the contraction had passed. "If I get a contraction while Apparating, my concentration will never hold and I'll get splinched. Can you Apparate us both?"

Hermione remembered the last time she'd Apparated with somebody while she was in a panic she'd splinched Ron, and she'd no desire to do the same to a pregnant woman. "I'd be afraid you'd get hurt. Can't we Floo there?"

Padma shook her head, her eyes welling up. "The mid-witch said I shouldn't during the last month. It's risky when you're carrying twins."

Hermione glanced once more into the garden. The snow had become a blizzard, and she doubted many taxi firms would send a car. She looked helplessly around the kitchen. "Don't St. Mungo's have some sort of plan for when this happens?"

Padma shrugged. "Most witches give birth at home. They only go to St. Mungo's when they're having multiple births or if there are complications."

"Do you have a Muggle telephone?"

"Yes. Dean wanted one so he could call his family. How does that help? Can you travel by phone?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Spoken like a true pure-blood. No, you can't travel by phone, silly. But my Mum is only about twenty minutes away by car, so I'm going to see if

she'll drive us. My Dad has snow tyres on the car, because they go skiing in Andorra every January I'm sure he hasn't gotten around to taking them off yet."

"I've no idea what skiing is, but if your Mum will get us to the hospital, I'll love her forever," Padma replied.

Within half an hour, Jane Granger had arrived, and they made their way through the heavy snow to St. Mungo's. Hermione knew there was no way Padma's owl was going to make it through the storm; if the bird had any sense at all it would be sheltering in a warm barn somewhere. Wiping the condensation from the car window, she looked into the night and wondered how long it would take her Patronus to reach Cornwall. She darted an apprehensive glance at Padma; her contractions were coming every six minutes now, and Hermione was worried Dean wouldn't make it in time.

They arrived at St. Mungo's without incident, and Padma was quickly rushed to the maternity wing. While she was assessed, Hermione found the nearest open window and sent a message to Dean with her Patronus. As she watched the silvery otter gambol away into the darkness, a piercing scream rent the air from the room to her left. A neatly dressed mid-witch met Hermione's gaze and shook her head.

"Somebody's forgotten to cast a Silencing Spell," the little witch whispered, pointing to the room. "Poor girl's having quads!"

Hermione gasped. "Four babies? At once?"

The mid-witch nodded. "It's all the rage now; older witches having children later and later thanks to new fertility spells. This poor dear is sixty-five!"

Hermione shuddered at the thought. She hoped there would be less screaming in Padma's room. Padma looked up hopefully as Hermione entered the delivery suite.

"Any word from Dean?" she asked.

Hermione shook her head and gave her an encouraging smile. "I've sent my Patronus to him in case the owl gets delayed. He'll get here, Padma. Don't worry. You just concentrate on getting through your contractions."

"You'll stay until he gets here, won't you?"

"You know I'll stay, no matter how long it takes."

The minutes passed slowly, and soon they turned into hours. By ten o'clock Padma was having contractions every two minutes and was clearly in a good deal of pain. Hermione was becoming increasingly stressed by the ordeal of having to watch her very best friend in agony.

"Isn't there something you can do?" she asked the mid-witch in disbelief. "Muggles have drugs and epidurals. Isn't there a spell or a potion or something?"

The witch gave her a bewildered smile. "Pain-relieving spells and potions interfere with the delicate balance of nature. This is a natural process, and it should be borne as nature intended. The pain of childbirth is a necessary biological message; it allows the mind and body to prepare for the event of moving from pregnancy to motherhood. Preparation is the key!"

Padma snorted. "Preparation be damned! I think I'll have a Muggle birth next time, thanks."

An hour later, just after eleven, Padma had made more progress than the mid-witch had expected and was ready to start pushing. As Hermione and the witch helped her into a sitting position, she shot Hermione a frightened look.

"Dean's not going to make it, is he?"

Before Hermione had a chance to answer, the door of the room was thrown open.

"He bloody well *is* going to make it," Dean announced as he flung his travelling cloak on a chair and crossed the room to kiss his sweat-soaked wife. "I got your Patronus two minutes ago, Hermione. I can tell our daughters are going to be trouble; they would choose the stormiest day of the year to arrive."

"It's your genes," Padma said through gritted teeth. "I can tell."

Dean chuckled good-naturedly and took both her hands. Hermione decided it was time for her to go.

"I'll leave you to it," she whispered. "I'll be just outside. Let me know if there's anything I can do."

Hermione closed the door behind her and gave a long sigh of relief; it was a horrible thing to witness such intense pain.

Another hour passed while she paced the corridor. While she was glad the Silencing Spell on the room meant she couldn't hear Padma's cries of pain, she desperately wanted some news of how the delivery was progressing. She stopped and leaned her head against the window. The snow had finally stopped, and a full moon lit the wintry streets below. The glass was cold against her forehead, and she realised that she was weak with hunger and thirst.

She was just about to go in search of some caffeine when the door opened, and the beaming mid-witch emerged.

"Two beautiful, healthy little girls," she announced proudly, as if she herself had conjured them into being.

Hermione returned her smile, all thought of food and drink forgotten. "Thank Merlin! Is she okay?"

"They're all doing perfectly. Give them a few minutes alone, and then pop in and see for yourself."

The mid-witch lifted the Silencing Spell with a flick of her wand and strode away. Suddenly, from within the room, there came the whimpering cry of a new-born. Without knowing exactly why, Hermione began to cry. Relief, exhaustion, happiness, sadness ... She couldn't decide which emotion was the strongest.

She'd just wiped her face when Dean tapped her gently on the shoulder. Hermione could tell that it would be many hours before he stopped grinning.

"Come and meet the babies," he whispered.

He led her back to the room, where she found a miraculously calm and smiling Padma with two pink-swaddled bundles held reverently in each arm.

Hermione had never been particularly impressed by new-born babies before. She had, in fact, found them almost repulsive. But not this time. As her gaze settled on the two tiny faces, one sleeping, one awake, she was so struck by their beauty that she gasped aloud.

"Oh, Padma," she whispered in a trembling voice. "They're so beautiful!" She reached forward and tenderly ran her finger along the cheek of the nearest baby. She raised her gaze to her friend. "How do you feel?"

Padma smiled. "Very sore, but incredibly happy."

Dean took the sleeping child from his wife. "This little one was born one minute after midnight, the other ten minutes before, so they have different birth dates. This is Shivani Elizabeth middle name after my Mum," he explained.

"This one our first-born," Padma said, "is to be called Preeya Hermione, to thank you for getting all three of us here safely. We'd be honoured if you'd be her Godmother."

Hermione was so overcome that she didn't know what to say. Struggling to hold back tears, she nodded. "I'd love to be her Godmother."

Padma held out the wide-eyed infant. "Would you like to hold her?"

Hermione accepted the bundle of pink, and as soon as the baby was in her arms, she experienced a throb of longing like nothing she had ever felt before. She couldn't help it: the tears spilled over.

Padma dabbed at her own eyes. "Don't cry, Hermione. You're setting me off again."

Hermione gave her a watery smile. "I just can't help it she's so perfect."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Do you two have to cry at every turn? You'll set me off in a minute."

Hermione laughed through her tears. "I'm just so very happy for you both."

It was the truth: she was pleased for them. But at the same time, it wasn't the whole truth: she was also saddened for herself. She wanted this. She wanted all the things that Padma had, and she was heart-broken because she didn't know if she would ever be a part of such intoxicating happiness.

Hermione was glad the following day was a Saturday; she couldn't have faced a day at the Ministry after such a draining night. She'd arrived home shortly before two in the morning and, not wanting to wake Theo, had slept in the guest bedroom. Despite her fatigue, she'd lain awake for hours, her thoughts still full of Padma's beautiful babies.

She'd enjoyed watching the new parents admire their offspring: Dean had repeatedly peppered their little faces with kisses, while Padma had counted their tiny toes. There was a certain look that had kept passing between Padma and Dean. Hermione recognised that look. She'd seen that same glance pass between Parvati and Seamus at her wedding; she'd seen it pass between Harry and Ginny since the arrival of little James. It was a look that communicated great fondness and affection for a child, as if to say 'we did this, you and me'. The look filled her with envy.

She wanted a baby. From somewhere deep within her had emerged an unlooked-for tidal wave of maternal instinct. Surely *this* was what her marriage lacked? There was no love between her and Theo. But she would lavish her child with unconditional love; she was almost certain Theo would do the same. Perhaps, if they had a child to love, it would engender the beginnings of true affection for one another. Maybe that glance would pass between them, and something more than civility would blossom.

A glance at her watch told her that it was almost midday. She had managed a few hours sleep. She sat on the edge of the bed and thought about what she should do. She would talk to Theo. Today. The future of their marriage had to be confronted.

Already nervous, she slid her feet into a pair of slippers, wrapped her fluffy white bathrobe around her and went in search of breakfast. When she got to the kitchen, Moe was at the stove.

"Good morning, Moe. Would it be too much trouble to ask for some breakfast?"

Without speaking, the little elf levitated a plate of toast to the table, where a pot of tea and a mug already sat.

"Miss Hermione was very late home last night," she said with a sniff of disapproval.

Hermione smiled. "I went to visit my friend, Padma. She went into labour and I had to bring her to St. Mungo's. She didn't have her babies until midnight, and I wanted to stay to see them for a while. I'm sorry if I woke you, Moe."

Moe tried to hide her interest. "Your friend is having more than one baby?" she asked, bringing a plate of sausages to the table.

"Yes, she had two lovely little twin girls," Hermione said, her mouth full of toast. She finished her breakfast in silence, watching as Moe busied herself about the already gleaming kitchen. "Thank you for breakfast, Moe. Is Theo upstairs?"

Moe nodded. "He is being in the sitting room."

Hermione was about to leave the room when she stopped. "Moe, I don't suppose you'd have the time to do me a huge favour? I'm hopeless at sewing and crocheting and things like that, despite having a wand," Hermione confessed. "I was wondering, if you had any spare time, would you consider knitting something as a gift for Padma's babies?"

She held her breath for a moment, wondering if she'd overstepped some boundary, when, much to her delight, Moe's face broke into a radiant smile.

"Would the babies be liking pink or white, Miss Hermione?" she asked excitedly, clasping her bony hands together.

Hermione smiled. "I'd say they've plenty of pink! White would be lovely just some little hats or something."

"And some cardigans and booties and mittens," Moe added. "Babies should be being kept warm!"

Moe bustled happily away, muttering to herself about all the things the babies would need. Hermione left the kitchen and climbed the stairs, glad she'd made her request. When she reached the door of the sitting room, she paused for a moment, not looking forward to the conversation she was about to have with her husband.

Inside, she found Theo sprawled in an armchair. She glanced at the title of the book he was reading: it was about the magical communities of Polynesia. She gave a soft sigh. It didn't bode well for the coming discussion. Apparently, he was as intent as ever on travelling the globe.

"Good morning," she said, settling herself in the armchair opposite, her mug of tea still warm in her hands.

"Morning," he replied, glancing at her dressing-gown. "You're up late."

Hermione smiled. "I didn't get in until two in the morning I had to take Padma to St. Mungo's."

Theo put down his book. "Is she all right?"

She nodded. "She's fine. She had her babies last night."

Theo looked confused for a moment. "Oh, yes ... I'd forgotten she was pregnant. Twins, wasn't it?"

"Yes, twin girls," she said, frowning at the fact that he hadn't even remembered her best friend's pregnancy. "They've called them Shivani Elizabeth and Preeya Hermione."

"That's nice," he said, picking up his book once more.

"Theo, we need to talk. I can't go on like this."

He put down his book again and sat up straight. "I agree. Let's go travelling again."

"Theo, I'm not going to take off around the world. That's not going to solve any of our problems."

He frowned. "You'd prefer to continue living like this?"

"No, but there are alternatives to just running away from our problems!"

He folded his arms. "Alternatives? Such as?"

"The alternative is that we stay here and try to make this work. This is a sham of a marriage, Theo. We've hardly spoken since we returned; ~~since~~*before* we returned! The moment I signed that form for my job at the Ministry, you started to sulk. You've been sulking for seven months now. When's it going to stop?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm the one doing the sulking? You started sulking a long time before I did, and all over a little bit of weed."

She shook her head. "You knew I didn't want you to smoke it, Theo, but you did it anyway."

"You knew I didn't want to return here, but you signed that contract anyway," he countered.

"We'd agreed in advance we'd come home after a year," she said angrily.

He fell silent for a moment. "Have you any idea how difficult it is for me here?"

"What do you mean? How is it difficult for you?"

He got up and walked to the window, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "You're not the child of a Death Eater."

It was the first time he'd ever brought up the subject of his father. She chose her next words carefully. "Theo, I know you've suffered because of your father, but I've never once seen anyone treat you badly because of it. *You* were never a Death Eater."

He turned to her. "I'm still tainted by his name."

"Your mother was married to him, and she moves in the highest circles of London society!"

"His blood does not course through her veins," he said angrily. "She made a mistake when she married him, but she's not genetically related to such filth."

She was shocked at the venom in his voice. "What about Draco? He was a Death Eater, as were both his parents, and he still lives here!"

"Yes," Theo spat, "and just look how he was treated by Susan's family. They had to elope!"

"I've never, ever seen you being mistreated by anyone because of your father, Theo."

"What would you know about it," he said, turning once more to the window. "I feel more comfortable when I'm out of this country."

Hermione was suddenly furious. "Why didn't you tell me all of this before we got married? I tried to raise the subject on more than one occasion. You're just using this as an excuse."

After a minute, he returned to the armchair. "Explain to me, Hermione, what exactly there is to keep you here? What's so important about this job?"

"It doesn't have as much to do with my career as the people I love. Yes, I like my job," she lied, "but I want to be near my friends and my family. I like it here. I like stability and occupation. I like to keep my mind busy."

He shook his head. "We both love reading and knowledge, Hermione, but not everything can be learned from a book."

"I've no objection to exploring the world, Theo, but at the same time I want to have a home and a career and I want a ... I want ..."

"What?"

"A family," she said, not daring to meet his gaze. "I want a baby, Theo."

When she finally looked up, he was staring at her in disbelief. "You cannot be serious, Hermione?"

She felt tears come to her eyes. "Is it so wrong to want what everyone else has? I didn't think I'd want a child this early, but I do. I can't help the way I feel."

He sat back in his chair, an expression of utter shock on his face. "I don't want children. Now or in the future. Never."

Her mouth fell open in surprise. "You never said you didn't want children, you said you didn't want ~~them~~*yet*!"

He shook his head. "Look at all the people around us who have kids. Why would you want to be anything like them? They can't do anything they want anymore. They can't even pop in to Diagon Alley for a stroll, never mind explore Brazil."

Her hopes of salvaging her marriage were disintegrating. "Haven't you seen how happy all those people are? They love their children more than anything! It doesn't matter to them that they've had to give up a certain amount of freedom. If you are honestly telling me you never want children, Theo, this marriage has reached crisis point."

He leaned forward, his eyes narrowed. "This marriage reached crisis point the day you threw a goddamn fit over a harmless bit of fucking hash."

She recoiled, stung by his words. He'd never sworn at her before. With a burning sensation in her stomach, she finally accepted what Severus Snape had told her many, many months before: There was a gulf of irreconcilable differences between her and Theo, and that gulf was too vast to be bridged. A tear rolled down her cheek.

Theo stood up. "I'm going out," he announced angrily.

She wiped her face. "You can't keep running away, Theo. Getting stoned and travelling the world isn't going to solve anything."

He stopped at the door and turned to her. "And you think having a child is? You think dragging an innocent baby into this mess is going to fix anything?"

She put her face in her hands. A moment later she heard him summon his cloak and slam the front door behind him. Then she cried.

The day passed slowly. Hermione sat in the front room for almost four hours. Her head swam with the tragedy that was her marriage.

At first, she blamed Theo, but little by little, she came to accept that the fault lay equally with her. She had been warned; she had not listened. Theo was not a bad person. He was immature and self-centred, yes, but he wasn't bad. They were, quite simply, incompatible.

Running away was not the answer; getting stoned was definitely not the answer; having a child was not the answer either. Was there an answer? She didn't know any more. If they divorced, she would have to remarry within six months if she wanted to stay in the country. Could they compromise enough to work things out? Maybe Theo could travel during the week while she worked at the Ministry.

When darkness fell, she grew hungry. Theo hadn't yet returned, and she descended to the basement in search of food. She reached the kitchen and exclaimed in delight. Moe had outdone herself: there were tiny white socks, booties, cardigans, shawls, hats and miniscule mittens all over the table. Moe was tending the pots on the stove.

"Moe!" Hermione exclaimed. "Thank you so much! They're beautiful absolutely beautiful."

"They are just little trinkets," Moe said modestly. "When you are having babies, Miss Hermione, I am making them a whole wardrobe."

Hermione's stomach clenched at her words, and she sank into the nearest chair, fingering a tiny pair of mittens. She could not stop the tears that began again. Theo didn't want children. Moe was never going to have the opportunity to create such a wardrobe.

The elf placed a steaming plate of chicken casserole in front of her. To Hermione's surprise, she felt a bony hand on top of her own.

"Don't cry, Miss Hermione," Moe whispered, her large eyes solemn. "You are having babies soon. Muggle-borns are always having lots of babies."

"Thank you, Moe," she replied in a choked voice, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

Moe left the kitchen to take some dinner up to Lance, and Hermione helped herself to a glass of wine. By the time she had finished her food, her stomach had settled, but her head was throbbing. There was little point in trying to come up with a solution to her problems while she was exhausted. Wanting nothing better than to climb beneath a warm duvet, she left the kitchen and headed once more for the guest bedroom. Within minutes she'd fallen into a deep sleep.

She heard Theo return during the night, but she was so drained that she hadn't the strength to look at her watch. She could hear him bustling around in the master bedroom, and although she thought she should go to him, she soon fell back asleep. Tomorrow would be time enough to try to piece back together the shards of their broken marriage.

When she woke, it was to find rays of sunlight streaming through the tiny basement window. Outside she could hear birds singing and the trickle of thawing snow. It was already nine o'clock, and the silence of the house struck her as odd. Theo was in the habit of rising early on Sundays, and by this time the smell of bacon usually filled the air.

Pulling on her dressing-gown, she tip-toed to the kitchen, where she found Moe seated at the table, wringing her little hands.

"Moe," Hermione said quietly, "where's Theo? Is he still in bed?"

The elf turned to face her, and she saw that her dark eyes were filled with tears. She didn't answer.

"Moe, has something happened? Are you all right?" Hermione asked, kneeling before her.

Moe shook her head and returned her gaze to her restless hands. "I don't know where Master Theodore is, Miss," she whispered.

"Has he gone out again?"

Moe buried her face in her pink apron and shook her head once more, sobs wracking her frail body.

Hermione's heart started to race; something was desperately wrong. With an increasing sense of dread, she stood and walked slowly to the master bedroom. Before she had even pushed open the door, she knew what awaited her.

The quilt lay in a heap on the floor, and the wardrobe doors were lying open. Theo's trunk had disappeared from the foot of the bed. She crossed to the dressing table and started pulling open the drawers, which had been emptied of all Theo's belongings.

She was about to call for Moe when she spotted it: a note addressed to her was sitting on the dressing table, propped up against the mirror by a small bottle of perfume that Theo had bought for her in France.

With trembling fingers, she broke the seal on the small piece of parchment and scanned the contents of the letter with wide eyes. After a moment, she allowed the note to slip from her grasp and flutter to the floor.

Her marriage was over.

Without fuss, without ceremony, her husband had left her.

And he wasn't coming back.

A Barbarous Tongue

Chapter 13 of 34

Severus has a visit from Harry and Draco

Has no one said those daring

Kind eyes should be more learn'd?

Or warned you how despairing

The moths are when they are burned?

I could have warned you; but you are young,

So we speak a different tongue

O you will take whatever's offered

And dream that all the world's a friend,

Suffer as your mother suffered,

Be as broken in the end.

But I am old and you are young,

And I speak a barbarous tongue.

- **W. B. Yeats, *Two Years Later***

Severus lowered his wand and checked the flame beneath his simmering cauldron. It was Saturday afternoon, and he hadn't been expecting any visitors. He could feel the muscles in his jaw tighten: he hated it when his work was disturbed. The ingredients for this particular draught were horrendously expensive, and he would not be pleased if his entire morning of brewing came to naught.

"Moe?" he called as the thump of the door-knocker echoed through the empty house.

What the devil was wrong with the house-elf? He hadn't seen her for almost two weeks, and this was the third time she'd failed to answer his summons. He would have to pay a visit to Lance.

With an angry grunt, he threw open the door of his laboratory and headed for the stairs. The volume of the knocking increased, and he swore under his breath. If Cordelia hadn't had so many Muggle friends, he would have been able to place a Muggle Repelling Charm on the house, but as it was, he was forced to suffer the tedious interruptions of salesmen and charity do-gooders on a regular basis.

With a cutting diatribe on the tip of his tongue about the value of his time, he flung open the front door.

It wasn't a Muggle in a cheap suit holding a clipboard that stood outside his house, however, and the unexpected sight of Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy on his doorstep was enough to rob him, albeit momentarily, of his legendary sarcasm. Had either one of them stood there alone, he might not have felt so wrong-footed. But the spectacle of them united made him wonder if the fumes from his cauldron had affected his usually razor-sharp wit.

"Hello, Severus," Draco said with a cheeky smile.

"Well," Severus managed, recovering the power of speech. "Mr Malfoy and Mr Potter. What a charming couple you make. To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

"It's about Hermione, Professor Snape," Harry said quietly with a glance across the square. "I wonder if we could speak to you inside?"

Severus looked from Draco to Harry, still finding it difficult to believe that such an unlikely pair stood before him. He'd had no idea they were even on speaking terms.

Trying to hide his curiosity, he stood aside and gestured for them to enter. "Be my guest." He led them to the front room. "Can I offer you a drink?" he asked, crossing to the cabinet.

Draco shook his head. "No, thanks. Susan will murder me if she finds out I had a drink this early in the day."

Severus's lip curled in amusement. "I see. How very Hufflepuff of you, Draco. And you, Mr Potter?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm sure one won't hurt. A Firewhisky, please."

Severus regarded Harry as he poured their drinks. They'd only spoken once since the defeat of Voldemort, and as he poured two generous measures of Firewhisky, he noted the premature flecks of grey in Harry's hair. Although he still looked like his father, the Potter boy had aged beyond his years. Harry returned his inquisitive gaze, and Severus was relieved to find that he was no longer held hostage by Lily Potter's eyes.

He crossed the room and handed Harry his drink. "Well, gentlemen," he said, taking the armchair opposite them. "What is it that concerns you about the former Miss Granger?"

Draco and Harry exchanged a glance.

"Susan accepted a job as an administrative assistant in the Department of Mysteries just before Christmas," Draco began.

Severus nodded. "Yes, Cordelia has mentioned it."

"I shouldn't be telling you this, Severus. I could really get Susan into trouble, but we don't know what else there is to be done ..."

"You know I wouldn't betray your confidence, Draco," Severus said impatiently, gesturing for him to continue. His mouth had gone dry, and he knew something was very wrong.

"Hermione hasn't turned up at work for the past two weeks," Draco explained. "She hasn't contacted them to explain, and their owls have gone unanswered. Primrose Chuckley has called to the house twice, but the house-elf has told her nobody's home. On Friday evening they issued Hermione with a full dismissal."

Severus frowned.

"Ginny and Susan work on the same floor at the Ministry and are quite good friends, so they got talking about it all," Harry said. "We sent Hermione and Theo an invitation to dinner about ten days ago, and when we didn't hear from them, we got worried. You know what Hermione's like, sir, she's over-efficient if anything, and it's not at all like her to fail to reply to an owl."

"Perhaps they've decided to take off around the world again," Severus suggested. "It's not unlike Theo to disappear without letting us know."

"But it *is* unlike Hermione," Harry insisted. "What's more, Susan and Ginny called to the house last weekend, but were told by the house-elf that Theo had gone away. Ginny tried to ask her about Hermione, but she told them to leave and shut the door in their faces."

Draco continued, "Harry and Ron know Hermione's parents quite well, so they called there yesterday. The Grangers don't know where she is either. I've sent numerous owls to Theo, but he hasn't answered any of them."

"Our wives suggested that Draco and I approach them together. We called to their house a few minutes ago," Harry said, "and the elf, Moe, said that Theo has gone away

and Hermione is not receiving any visitors."

Severus pressed tips of his fingers together and looked at his guests. "What's your conclusion, gentlemen?"

"I think they've broken up,' Draco said. "Theo's fucked off, and Hermione has locked herself in the house. She's either bollixed drunk or gone as batty as a ... well, a bat."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Very eloquently put, Draco. And your opinion, Mr Potter?"

"I think Draco's probably right. I'm very, very worried about Hermione, sir. She's an over-achiever who's never failed a test in her life. If her marriage has fallen apart, I think she'll take it as a failure on her part. I don't think she'll handle it well. She's rather ... highly strung."

Severus was impressed. It seemed that this mature Harry Potter knew his friend well. He looked from Harry to Draco. "Why have you come here to tell me this?"

"We were hoping you might know what was going on. More importantly, you're family," Draco said. "The elf has put up some sort of magical barrier, but you'll be able to cross it. We couldn't get a foot in the door."

"I know you and Hermione haven't seen eye to eye in the past, sir," Harry added, "but I know you're on speaking terms now, and I'm very worried about her. Things must be pretty bad for her to just not turn up at work."

Severus was inclined to agree. "I haven't seen either of them for some three weeks, I admit, but you must understand that this isn't unusual. We do not live in each other's pockets, despite the fact that they are only across the road. But still, I find it hard to believe that Theo would have just left his wife without saying anything to his mother." But was that really so difficult to imagine? Would it actually surprise him at all if Theo had just left without having the courage to face ridicule or disapproval? He sighed. "What do you expect me to do?"

Draco raised an eyebrow. "We expect you to find out what's going on. You're his step-father."

Severus's eyes narrowed. "I became his step-father when he was already a man, Draco. He does not see me as a father."

"Well, where's Cordelia, then?" Draco asked.

"She's visiting friends. I don't expect her back until Monday evening."

Draco smiled. "Well then, Severus, it's all up to you!"

Severus grunted. "You think Hermione Granger will speak to me, of all people?"

"You're the only one who can get in," Draco said with a shrug.

Harry said, "Sometimes when people are feeling hopeless, they respond to someone, well ..."

"Yes?" Severus asked, amused.

"Authoritative," Harry finished.

"I see you've mastered the art of political correctness." Severus uttered another sigh. "Very well. I will try to determine what's going on."

"Thank you very much, sir," Harry said.

"Severus," Draco drawled. "You're my knight in shining armour."

"Do you want me to change my mind, Draco?"

"No, sorry," Draco said, thumping Harry on the arm. "Let's go, Potter, before my big gob gets us in trouble."

Harry rose and looked at Severus once more. "If you talk to her, would you ask her to contact us, please?"

Severus gave a curt nod and then showed them to the front door. He would get little brewing accomplished today, and the clients he supplied would not be happy. But it couldn't be helped; he had Hermione, Theo, and the apparently shattered pieces of their marriage to deal with first.

Severus had been knocking on Hermione and Theo's front door for over two minutes. What little patience he possessed was dwindling, and he was on the verge of blasting the lock apart. He stepped away from the door and glanced at the windows of the upper floors. Where on earth was Lance? He reached for the brass knocker once more, but before his fingers had found purchase, the door opened. He looked down to find a rather sheepish-looking Moe peering through the gap.

"Moe! What is the meaning of this? What is going on?"

Moe looked up at him with her big, solemn eyes. "I don't know what you is talking about, Master Severus, sir."

He scowled. "You know all too well what I'm talking about, Moe. I've summoned you three times over the past few days, and you've not once responded. Hermione's friends have called here on a number of occasions and have been refused entry. Would you care to explain?"

The house-elf crossed her arms stubbornly. "I is busy, Master Severus. Miss Hermione is busy, too."

"Really?" he sneered. This was ludicrous. Here he was, standing on the street, arguing with a house-elf. "Where is Theo?"

An expression of anger came over the elf's wrinkled face. "He is gone away, sir."

"Gone away where? And where is Hermione?"

"Miss Hermione is not feeling well and is not wanting any visitors."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. "Moe. I know you've placed enchantments on the house to stop anyone from entering, but I am family, and you have no right to refuse me entry. Do you understand?"

Moe looked suddenly distressed, and he could sense the magical barriers she had placed on the house falter. She pressed her lips together in a stubborn line, but took a step backwards to allow him enter.

"Thank you, Moe," he said gently. He looked about him as he stepped into the hallway. The little sideboards were coated in a thin layer of dust. He frowned. Whatever the elf had been up to, she'd been neglecting her usual duties. He had never seen this house in anything other than pristine order.

He returned his scrutiny to Moe. She stood with her hands behind her back and her head bowed, looking intently at the carpet and avoiding his gaze.

"What's been going on, Moe?"

She just shrugged.

"Is Lance home?" he asked.

"No, sir," she replied. "He is gone to his friend in Wales: Newt Scamander."

"Is he, indeed? How long has he been gone?"

Moe still refused to meet his gaze. "Three weeks. They is gone looking for Dugbogs and Clabberts."

Severus shook his head. "Lancelot Mill has gone looking for Dugbogs at his age? I would have thought he'd have more sense." He looked at the frail old elf and felt a stab of sympathy for her. "Moe, I know something is going on. Theo has left Hermione, hasn't he?"

She covered her face with her bony hands and began to sob, her little shoulders heaving. Severus lowered himself to one knee, his face level with Moe's.

"Is it true, Moe? Has he left her?"

Moe gave a nod. "Master Theodore is a bad, bad boy!" she said, blowing her nose on a corner of her little pink apron. "He is not deserving Miss Hermione. All she is wanting is babies! He is a bad, bad husband."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "It's very important that I speak with Hermione, Moe. Is she here?"

The house-elf started to sob again. "She is not coming out of her room. I is giving her all her favourite things to eat, but she is not eating any of it. She is just sad."

"Everything will be fine, Moe," he said, patting her awkwardly on the shoulder. "You've done very well. I'm going to go downstairs and try to talk to her, all right?"

Moe nodded miserably.

"Theo was making her sad, Moe," he added. "She will come to realise that she's better off without him."

She dried her tears on her apron and looked at him with her round eyes. "You is making her happy again?"

"I will try," he said.

He headed for the stairs, hardly able to believe he was doing this. Surely this was a task for a woman? Damn Theo! He would have thought the boy might have had a little more decency than to just flee the scene unannounced. With a deep sigh, he headed for the basement.

When he reached the door of the master bedroom, he paused; he had the uncanny knack of making Hermione Granger to cry, and he guessed she had probably done little else for the past two weeks. With a reminder to himself to curb his biting tongue, he knocked softly on the door. There was no response. He knocked louder.

"Miss Granger, I know you're in there, and I would like a word, if you please," he said.

He could hear the creak of the bedsprings, but there was no response.

"Hermione, there are quite a few people who are concerned for your well-being, and if you do not open the door, I'll be forced to enter against your wishes."

He hadn't really expected her to respond, but before he'd lifted his wand to open the lock, the sound of footsteps was followed by a loud click. The door was flung open, and he was confronted by a tangled mass of brown curly hair.

"Have you no respect for my privacy?" she snapped.

"Have you no respect for your friends' and family's peace-of-mind?" he responded.

"I doubt you've been fretting about me, Severus Snape," she said, her voice shaking.

"I have not been fretting about you, that is true, but what about Harry and Ginny? Your other friends? Your parents?" he asked. "What about Primrose Chuckley and your employers?"

She leaned against the frame of the door, and he used her momentary silence as an opportunity to examine her. Her hair was often wild, but he'd never seen it in such an unkempt state. There were dark circles beneath her eyes, and despite the fact that she was dressed in a pair of baggy silk pyjamas, he could tell she'd lost weight.

"Primrose Chuckley and my employers?" she hissed. "So people have been talking behind my back?"

He could tell by the trembling of her lower lip that she was close to tears. "Has Theo left you, Hermione?" he asked as kindly as he could.

She met his gaze, the set of her jaw defiant. "Yes, he has," she said, a catch in her voice. "Have you come to gloat? To say 'I told you so'?"

He shook his head. "I may not be a pleasant man, Hermione Granger, but it gives me no pleasure to see a young woman in distress. I may have once made the misguided decision to become a Death Eater, but I've never derived enjoyment from other people's pain."

A tear rolled down her cheek, and she brushed it away with the sleeve of her pyjamas. "I don't want any visitors, thank you. I just want to be left alone."

"I'm not a mere visitor. I've come to help," he explained. "I've not come to gloat. What's done is done, and there is little point in saying 'I told you so'. We have much to discuss, but your bedroom is certainly not the place for such a conversation. I will await you in the living room. You have ten minutes to dress while I prepare tea."

Without waiting for a reply, he turned and strode to the kitchen. Moe sat at the pine table, dabbing at her eyes and snuffling loudly. One end of the table was covered in tiny white baby clothes, and Severus knew a moment of panic: surely Hermione wasn't pregnant?

He gingerly picked up a little sock as if it were a Flobberworm. "What on earth is this, Moe?"

"They is for Padma's babies," Moe said with a loud sniff.

He breathed a sigh of relief and lifted an empty kettle from the stove.

"Master Severus!" Moe exclaimed, looking scandalised. "What do you think you is doing?"

"I'm preparing tea, Moe. I imagine Miss Hermione could rather use a cup."

The house-elf snatched the kettle from him. "I is making the best tea in London," she said, frowning. "You go."

Severus was relieved to see her restored to her usual officious self. "Perhaps something light to eat. Does she like toast, Moe?"

Moe shook her head. "She is liking crumpets with raspberry jam."

"That would be wonderful. We will be in the living room."

He left the kitchen and headed for the stairs. He could hear the shower running in the master bedroom. Satisfied that Hermione was pulling herself together, he ascended to the living room.

Moe soon arrived with a tray of tea and the promised crumpets, and Hermione followed a minute or two later. She had pulled her damp hair into a ponytail and was dressed in jeans and a blue jumper. The defiance with which she had confronted him when she had flung open her bedroom door had dissipated, and she took the armchair beside the fire with downcast eyes. He watched as she tucked her bare feet beneath her and started to chew nervously at her fingernails. Her jumper hung loosely from her thin shoulders.

He gestured to the tea tray on the table in front of her. "It would reassure me to see you eat something, Hermione."

She poured herself a cup of tea, ignoring the plate of crumpets. She sat back and sipped at the tea, avoiding his inquisitive gaze.

"I cannot understand why you've locked yourself away in this unbecoming fit of self-pity," he began.

Her gaze moved to meet his. "My husband has left me."

Severus shrugged. "You've been unhappy since you returned to England. You might have thought your regular public appearances were enough to hoodwink us all into thinking you blissfully wed, but your unhappiness has been all too evident to me."

"Does that alter the fact that I'm nothing more than an abandoned wife?" she asked.

"Spare me your pathetic self-indulgence, Hermione. It doesn't suit you." His words might have lacked sympathy, but he made sure the tone of voice was not unkind. "Is there not a part of you that recognises that you may, perhaps, be better off without your husband?"

She stared at him. "I've failed, Severus. We weren't even married two years!"

He gave a derisive grunt. Harry had diagnosed her correctly. "Marriage is not an exam. There's a subtle distinction between not succeeding and failing. Your marriage was not a success; it does not necessarily follow that you failed."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Very well. I didn't succeed, as you'd warned I would not. You were right. Well done."

He was annoyed. "I've already told you I didn't come here to gloat. Technically, I'm part of this family, and as such it gives me no joy to learn that you and Theo have parted company. Do you understand?"

She did not answer him, but sipped at her tea and stared at the carpet.

He sighed. "Are you going to tell me what's happened?"

"We had an argument about our future. Theo wanted to travel again; I wanted to stay here and have a ... a career," she explained. "He said he was unhappy in London, and I said I would be unhappy to go travelling again. He left and didn't return that evening. I slept in the guest room. I'd spent the previous night at St. Mungo's with Padma, so I was exhausted. I heard him return in the early hours of the morning, and when I woke up the next day, all his belongings were gone."

Severus frowned. "Did you argue regularly?"

She shook her head. "We've only ever argued three times. We fought once in Amsterdam when he got stoned; once in Kiev when I signed the Ministry of Magic employment contract; and once two weeks ago when I refused to leave England. We've only ever argued when Theo didn't get his own way. The rest of the time it was just ... well ..."

"Empty silences?" he asked.

She met his gaze with tear-filled eyes and nodded. "Empty silences."

Quickly Conjuring a handkerchief, he tossed it onto her lap. "Did he tell you where he was going? Did he leave a note?"

"I've no idea where he is, but yes, he did leave a note."

"Which said what, exactly?"

"Not much. He said he was sorry that our marriage had come to an end, but that he could no longer stand being stuck in England. He said he didn't want to be contacted and he would not return at any stage in the near future."

"I see. How very cowardly of him."

"How very Slytherin of him," she said.

He folded his arms across his chest and tried to subdue his sudden burst of anger. "Shall we descend to belittling our mutual Houses, Hermione, or shall we attempt to have a constructive debate as befits two adults?"

She pressed her fingers to her forehead. "I'm sorry, Severus. That was uncalled for. I'm just drained: I haven't eaten for days."

He crossed the room and placed a crumpet on a plate. He laid it carefully on the arm of her chair. "Then eat," he said, returning to his own chair in a flurry of black.

She picked up the crumpet and began to nibble at the edge.

"I don't wish to pry, Hermione, but I was dismayed to learn about your dismissal from the Department of Mysteries."

She gasped, her eyes wide. "Who told you about that?"

"I had a visit this morning from an unlikely couple: Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy. They were both anxious as to your wellbeing."

Her eyes narrowed. "They knew about my job? So the whole goddamn Ministry has been talking behind my back?"

"No, the whole goddamn Ministry has not been talking behind your back. As well you know, Susan has been working in the Department of Mysteries for a number of weeks. She and Ginny are friends. The only people who suspect that there's anything amiss are Harry, Draco and their mutual wives. Primrose Chuckley is also worried, by all accounts." He paused and sipped his tea. "Why did you do it, Hermione? Why did you throw away such a highly prized career?"

"I haven't admitted it to anybody, but I *hated* my job at the Department of Mysteries. It wasn't at all what I'd expected."

"It took you six months to reach that conclusion?"

She shook her head. "I realised within the first month that it wasn't for me. I didn't say anything because I didn't want to give Theodore Nott the satisfaction of knowing I'd made the wrong decision. He would have insisted we go travelling again, and much as I disliked working at the Ministry, I would much rather have continued there than leave England."

He fell silent for a moment. He was gratified to see her reach for another crumpet and slather it with a thick layer of jam. Her cheeks had begun to regain the faintest touch of colour, and she looked less defeated than she had when she'd entered the room. He considered his next question carefully.

"I fail to understand your behaviour since Theo has left. Did you love him?"

She looked at him aghast. "Of course I didn't love him! I mean ... I'd hoped that maybe I would, someday. But we were just too different, as you had tried to point out."

"Then why this theatrical production? Why have you curled into a ball and hidden from the world as if distraught?"

"Because I *am* distraught! Not because I have a broken heart, but because I've been left in limbo, Severus. Can't you understand?"

He snorted. "A limbo you have only intensified further by your casual abandonment of your job."

"Fuck the job!" she said angrily, making him raise an eyebrow. "The job is the least of my worries! He's left me without bothering to divorce me. I'm still his wife; I'm still wearing this bloody Goblin-wrought wedding ring, and I can't take it off! If we had divorced, I would have received a settlement, and I would have been able to afford somewhere to live. As it is, I carry his name; I'm still his wife! I've been left without a position in society and without a home. And you're right, I've made the whole thing worse, and now I have no income. But I hated the job, and I'm not sorry to have given it up."

Severus raised his hand to his brow. He had a headache brewing. "Hermione, I never would have believed you capable of such histrionics. Are you blind, girl? Can you not see that he's left you in the best possible circumstances?"

"How on earth can I be in the best possible circumstances? I'm an abandoned wife! People like Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabini will have a field day when they hear that a pure-blood couldn't stick with a Mudblood like me for more than a year and a half."

He gave a short laugh. "Since when have you given a damn what people like Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabini think? Do you really think you're the first victim of the Marriage Act? Have you even considered the relationships of the very couples who were with you at Belgrave House?"

"I've heard rumours about Blaise and Katie, but I thought everybody else was doing fine."

"Well, that's where you were very wrong. Dennis Creevey and Demelza Robbins have filed for divorce, and I'm almost certain that one of your fellow Gryffindors will soon follow."

"What?" she asked. "Who?"

"I had matters to discuss with Minerva McGonagale last week. I was invited to dine with the rest of the Hogwarts staff, and it is obvious that Neville Longbottom and Hannah Abbott are not at all content. You're incredibly naive if you think you're the only one whose arranged marriage has come to naught. There have been a number of successful marriages, it's true: Draco and Susan among them. But they've been greatly outweighed by those that have failed. Yes, the Marriage Act has been a triumph as regards birth rates, but it has been a dismal failure as regards divorce and separation rates."

"I still can't see why you think Theo has left me in a good position."

Severus gave an exasperated sigh. "If you'd divorced two weeks ago, what would you have been legally obliged to do?" he asked as if speaking to a first-year.

"What do you mean?"

"Merlin give me patience," he muttered. "You would have been legally obliged to remarry within six months! Your estranged husband has granted you immunity from the Marriage Act while simultaneously ridding you of his objectionable presence."

"That is true," she admitted. "But where am I meant to go? What am I meant to do?"

"Theo has deserted you, so according to wizarding law, everything he has left behind is yours. He's a wealthy man: you'll want for nothing."

Hermione looked disgusted. "I don't want his money. I don't want anyone's money!"

"Then find another job and reassert your independence," he said.

"But where am I supposed to go?" she asked. "I'm not moving back to my parents' house. I ... I just couldn't do it. I love them, but they didn't approve of any of this. I want to stay in the wizarding world."

"Then continue to live here. The moment he left you, this property became yours, with the exception of Lance's half of the building, obviously. You are still, in the eyes of wizarding law and society, part of this family, while Theo, being the one legally in the wrong, is considered an outcast."

"He abandons me, but I'm still meant to be one of the Mill family? I'm meant to believe that?"

"Hermione," he said, gritting his teeth, "you're viewing things from a Muggle perspective. Wizarding society is much more archaic. The Mill family will be horrified at what Theo has done. They will continue to regard you as part of the family. I once told you that you and I would never be anywhere but on the periphery of the Mill family and that is true, but they are an old wizarding family who uphold ancient wizarding values, and they will sympathise with you and not with Theo, I assure you."

She looked around the sitting room. "I like it here," she admitted, "and I'm awfully fond of Moe and Lance, but I can't accept ~~money~~ money from them."

"Then get another job," he said impatiently.

Hermione gave a deep sigh. "That's easier said than done in wizarding London. I've been looking for another job behind Theo's back for months."

Suddenly desirous for this interview to be at an end, he stood and looked out the window across Kensington Square, his thoughts on his laboratory and the ever-increasing backlog of potions that required brewing.

It was then, unbidden, that the solution came to him. Hermione. He needed an assistant; she needed a job. She was the only applicant who had been sufficiently qualified for the position, and she had seemed genuinely fascinated by his laboratory.

No sooner had the idea occurred to him than he dismissed it. It was ludicrous. He had meant what he'd said many months previously: she would make an infuriating colleague. He lacked tolerance, and her constant chatter would surely drive anyone to distraction.

He turned and observed her from across the room. There was no doubt that she had changed greatly since her time as his student. He had read the references in her job application, and he had been genuinely impressed. She was the only graduate in her year to have been awarded her degree at master's level: she would make a skilled apprentice.

And there was something else: He owed her a debt. She had saved his life; he owed her a favour. Surely he could not just sit back and do nothing when he held a solution in the palm of his hand? It irked him to see such an intelligent young witch so despondent. He looked at her hollowed cheeks and the dark circles beneath her eyes, and he remembered how she had looked when he'd opened the door of her bedroom on the night of her wedding. She had been so beautiful, standing there in her backless gown.

With uncharacteristic speed, he made his decision.

"I may have the answer to your problem," he said, taking his seat once more.

She poured herself another cup of tea. "I'm listening," she said.

He laced his fingers. "I would consider offering you the position of Potions assistant, if you're still interested."

She sat forward, eyes wide. "Are you serious? You'd really consider taking me on as your apprentice?"

He gave a curt nod. "Purely on a trial basis. I'm sure the salary exceeds that of a first-year Unspeakable."

She nodded eagerly. "Yes, it does. At least, the salary you advertised did. But I ... I thought you said we'd be incompatible? You said that I made an interesting dinner guest, but I'd make a terrible colleague."

He shrugged. "Prove me wrong."

"What if it was a complete disaster?"

"That's precisely why we would have a trial period of three months. If after that time either of us is dissatisfied, we can terminate the contract."

"I ... I'm very tempted to accept, but I have to ask ... why are you doing this?"

"You need a job; I need an assistant. It's as simple as that, Hermione. I'm sincere when I tell you that I'm in dire need of a second pair of hands. I have many, many clients who are impatient to have their orders filled. I've resorted to brewing at the weekends, and I've no wish to continue under such pressure."

She frowned. "Might I have time to consider your offer?"

He was suddenly irritated. She should have been grovelling at his feet, not considering his offer. "I'll allow you until tomorrow night to make your decision," he said gruffly. "If you haven't accepted by then, I will have to advertise the position. I spoke the truth when I said I need a second pair of hands. My business has grown beyond my expectations, and I'm loath to discontinue any of my current contracts."

"Thank you very much for your offer, Severus, and I ..." Her eyes filled with tears again. "I would dearly love to take that job, but I'm still uncertain about continuing to live as one of the family. What will people think?"

He frowned at her. "Hermione, what has happened to you? You were often at the receiving end of prejudice at Hogwarts, but it rarely seemed to bother you. You wore your intelligence like a banner and didn't care what your classmates thought of you. And yet, since you became engaged to Theodore, you have not behaved at all like yourself."

She shrugged and picked up the handkerchief once more, dabbing at her eyes. "I know. I've been a fool. I should have listened to you."

"I must leave now," he announced, impatient to return to his work. "But let me reiterate once more: the Mills will be appalled by what Theodore has done. You will have their full support. I doubt very much that news of what has happened will spread beyond Cordelia and Lance. If you need any further evidence of their support, Moe's protection of you over the past fortnight should suffice."

He stood to leave, and she rose from her chair, her jumper hanging from her thin frame. She walked him to the door.

"Thank you, Severus. For everything. You've been more than kind."

He gave a brisk nod. "You have until midnight tomorrow to make your decision."

She nodded her understanding and toyed with her pendant. He looked down and realised she was wearing the heavy emerald necklace he had presented to her on her wedding day. Suddenly, she tore the pendant from her neck, breaking the delicate chain and hurling the piece of jewellery across the room.

Severus raised his eyebrows. "That was a Mill family heirloom. Have you any idea how much it's worth?"

"Quite frankly, Severus," she replied, "I don't give a fuck about Mill family heirlooms at the moment."

He smirked. "That's the spirit. I will gladly take righteous anger over indulgent self-pity. The latter does not become you, Hermione."

He turned from her and stepped into the early March sunshine.

"Just don't offer me the job out of pity," she said.

He turned to her. "I assure you, I'm offering you the job purely from a sense of mutual need." He began to walk down the steps to the footpath. "Besides," he added. "You have a choice. I had no choice but to accept your pity on the night you saved my life."

Before she could reply, he walked away, leaving her to make her decision.

When he got to his own house, he Summoned some parchment and a quill. He hurriedly scribbled two notes: one to Cordelia and one to Lance, requesting their immediate return to London.

Once the notes had been sent, he made his way to his laboratory, and as he attempted to reignite the flame beneath his platinum-lined cauldron, he realised that his hands were shaking. He closed his eyes for a moment and breathed deeply.

He had been a fool to offer her the job so impulsively. It was entirely out of character for him to act so hastily. While part of him hated seeing Hermione in her current state and wanted her to accept the position, another part of him desperately wanted her to decline, for he had no idea where such an improbable partnership would lead them.

Travel On

Chapter 14 of 34

Hermione considers whether or not she should accept Severus's offer.

*A traveller of thoughts and years, of peace and war,
Of youth long sped and middle age declining,
(As the first volume of a tale perused and laid away, and this the second,
Songs, ventures, speculations, presently to close,)
Lingering a moment here and now, to you I opposite turn,
As on the road or at some crevice door by chance, or open'd window,
Pausing, inclining, baring my head, you specially I greet,
To draw and clinch your soul for once inseparably with mine,
Then travel travel on.*

- **Walt Whitman, *Out from Behind this Mask***

After Severus had left, Hermione spent an hour curled up on the armchair in the sitting room. Biting her fingernails, she thought about the things he had said. It was the first time since Theo had left that she hadn't wallowed in the fact that she was an abandoned wife.

She was ashamed, now, of how she had behaved during the past two weeks. When she had read Theo's note, she'd climbed beneath the covers of what had been ~~the~~ her bed and wept. The weeping had continued for quite some time.

All she had thought about was how she'd failed; how she had overreacted to what Theo had insisted was just a 'harmless bit of weed'. She had slept fitfully, haunted even in her dreams by her estranged husband.

She'd dreamt frequently of the Forest of Dean of the night that Ron had returned to them. Except sometimes it hadn't been Ron at all; sometimes the man in the dream had assumed Theo's face. She had woken from these dreams in tears, but the other dreams had been far, far worse. She had dreamt that her Goblin-wrought ring had burned, and in these nightmares her entire arm had burst into flame. She'd woken screaming more than once.

On those occasions, Moe had come to her and had gently stroked her hand, telling her over and over again that it would be okay, that Master Theodore was just a bad husband. The worst of it was that Hermione knew Theo wasn't all bad. He was selfish and immature, yes, but he wasn't bad. Neither of them was really to blame; they had just made an enormous mistake when they'd decided to wed. Her marriage was over and there was nothing she could do about it. But it was just so very hard to accept.

She could hardly believe two whole weeks had passed. Now that Severus Snape had snapped her out of her trance of self-pity, she was mortified to have given her friends cause for distress. She'd been horribly self-centred. She hadn't answered any of their owls or let them into her house, and Moe had guarded her privacy with great dedication. Hermione knew that if the tables had been turned, if one of her friends had disappeared, she would have been dreadfully worried. She'd meant what she said about the Department of Mysteries: she was not sorry to have lost her job, but she was sorry to have given the people she loved reason to fret.

Severus was right: she had not been herself since she'd become engaged to Theodore Nott. It was time to stop focusing on what everybody expected of her and to concentrate instead on what would make her happy. The time to move forward had come. Decided, she headed to the kitchen. She couldn't act on an empty stomach. With a smile, she realised her appetite had finally returned.

It was dusk when Severus heard the slam of the front door. Cordelia had obviously received his owl, and, judging by the ferocity with which she had just closed the door, she was not at all pleased to have had her weekend interrupted.

Extinguishing the flame beneath two of his cauldrons and leaving a third to bubble, he stowed his wand beneath his cloak and ascended the stairs. Cordelia had more than one reason to be displeased. With many pure-blood families the Mills, Malfoys and Parkinsons among them discreet extra-marital affairs were commonplace. But appearances were of vital significance, and abandoning your wife of less than two years was not likely to gain much in the way of familial support. Theodore, like his father before him, had brought shame upon the family, and Cordelia would not be happy. He fully expected Theo to be on the receiving end of at least one irate Howler that night.

"Severus?" she called from the living room.

"Cordelia," he answered, joining her. "Thank you for returning so quickly."

"What is the meaning of this? I'd arranged to dine with friends this evening, and I've been forced to cancel!"

"I'm afraid there's a pressing matter at hand," he explained, crossing to the drinks cabinet. "Would you care for a brandy?"

She frowned. "No, I would not like a brandy. I would like to know why you've cut short my weekend."

He narrowed his eyes. "Believe me, Cordelia, I wouldn't have cut short your weekend if it had not been important. You're not going to like what I have to say, so I suggest you accept a drink."

"Fine!" she snapped, settling herself in an armchair. "I'll have a brandy."

He poured a generous measure of brandy into a crystal tumbler and reflected on how very like her son she was. He handed her the drink before taking his seat in the armchair opposite.

She raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you joining me in a drink?"

He shook his head. "I've had a few hours to absorb this veritable bombshell."

She flashed him a smirk. "You're being incredibly dramatic, Severus. Why not just explain what's going on?"

"Theodore has left Hermione. Permanently."

Cordelia's face paled. "What? What do you mean, permanently? I'm sure he's just gone travelling!"

Severus shook his head. "Their marriage has broken up. He left her a note in which he made it clear that he has absolutely no intention of returning."

Cordelia fell silent for a moment. She shook her head and, raising the crystal tumbler to her lips, knocked back the contents. She held out the empty glass.

"A double, please," she said.

He took the glass from her now quivering hand, feeling a pang of compassion for her. She had been bitterly disappointed by her first husband, and now her family had been dishonoured by her only son. He filled her glass with the dark liquid and returned to his seat.

"When did this happen?" she asked.

"Two weeks ago."

"Two weeks ago?" she asked, incredulous. "Why are we only finding out about it now?"

"I had a visit this morning from Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter. They were concerned about Hermione as she hasn't turned up for work this past fortnight. They had called to the house on a number of occasions and had been refused entry by Moe. I went to investigate and found Hermione in rather a state. With a little coercion, she eventually explained what had happened."

"And what exactly *has* happened?"

"It would seem they've realised they are ill-suited. Theo wants to travel the world, and Hermione wants to stay at home."

"They think it acceptable to just split up because they haven't the same taste in holidays? This is ludicrous!"

"It's a little bit more serious than a disagreement as to holiday destinations, Cordelia," he said. "And Hermione had no say in the matter. Theo left her in the middle of the night without any warning. He left her a note; she did not have a chance to dissuade him."

She tapped her painted nails on the arm of the chair. "I cannot believe he's done this! What was he thinking? She must surely have given him good reason to leave."

Severus gritted his teeth. "Cordelia, she did little more than refuse to take off around the world. Besides, the girl is hardly to blame for their incompatibility. They were never suited."

"I'm not trying to excuse Theo's behaviour, Severus. But you must agree that it's much more normal at their age to want to travel rather than to remain at home, shackled to a menial job," she said, wrinkling her nose.

"Not everyone wants to live the life of a nomad. Some of us thrive on hard work."

"I understand you enjoy your work," she said patiently, "and that's perfectly normal for somebody your age. I just think it's unusual for a twenty-five year old woman to be, well, so settled, I suppose."

She extracted her wand from her leather handbag and Summoned a piece of parchment and a quill. Severus watched as she began to scribble on the paper.

"What are your intentions?" he asked.

"I will send my son a rather angry Howler, after which I will return to Scotland."

"Cordelia," he said, losing his temper. "You will do no such thing until you have paid a visit to your daughter-in-law!"

"Severus, I'm certain I'm the very last person in the world poor Hermione would like to see right now. I'm sure you did an admirable job of patting her on the back."

"The girl has been languishing in that house and crying her eyes out because of *your son*," he said, his jaw clenched. "The least you could do is go over there and reassure her that she's still one of the family and will continue as such. She needs to know she is not the one in the wrong."

Cordelia looked surprised. "But I'm sure she's well aware of that, Severus. If they're not divorced, nothing need even be said. It stands to reason that she will continue to live as one of the family."

"Cordelia, I insist you pay Hermione a visit. You know very well that she was Muggle-raised; she does not fully understand that tradition dictates she is still a part of this family. You need to talk to her."

She held the tip of the quill between her teeth for a moment, then raised her gaze to his. "Fine. I'll speak to her once I've written to Theo."

"Good," he said, making his way to the door.

"Your concern for her welfare is touching, Severus," Cordelia muttered before he left the room.

He turned and looked at her, detecting a subtle challenge in her gaze. "Contrary to popular opinion," he drawled, "I'm not made entirely of ice. It's not pleasant to see an intelligent young woman in such a state of anxiety."

He closed the door loudly behind him, eager once more for the solitude of his laboratory.

Hermione was greedily tucking into her second helping of steak and kidney pie.

"Moe," she said, her mouth full, "you are the most wonderful cook in the whole of London. Possibly even in the whole world."

The house-elf looked pleasantly flustered. She waved her bony hands in the air. "And you is the silliest girl in the whole of London. You is skinny from not eating, Miss Hermione."

"I know," Hermione said, examining her frail wrists. She picked up her glass of pumpkin juice and drained the contents. "But I fully intend to regain every pound I've lost and probably a few more besides."

She was just scraping the last of her pie from the plate when the unmistakable creak of the front door came from the floor above them. She looked at Moe, eyes wide.

"Moe?" cried a familiar voice from the hallway. "Are you home?"

"It's Mistress Cordelia," Moe whispered. "Is I letting her in?"

Hermione sighed she certainly wasn't relishing the thought of this particular interview.

"She's family, so I don't think we've an awful lot of choice in the matter. Would you ask her to come down here, Moe?"

Moe nodded and disappeared with a click of her fingers. Hermione heard the crack as the elf reappeared at the top of the stairs, followed by a hushed conversation. Taking out the band holding her hair in a ponytail, she quickly scooped her unruly mane into a neat bun at the nape of her neck.

Cordelia entered the kitchen with a sympathetic smile.

"Oh, Hermione," she said breathily, crossing the room and kissing her daughter-in-law on both cheeks. "Severus told me everything!"

Hermione felt dishevelled next to her immaculately groomed mother-in-law. She didn't know what to say, so she just nodded.

Cordelia sat down and patted her on the hand. "While I understand Theo's love of travel, I'm appalled by his behaviour. It is truly reprehensible."

"Thank you," Hermione said, unsure of whose side Cordelia was really on. "It was something of a shock."

"I know, I know! Young men can be horribly unpredictable. I'm sure you'll be delighted to know that I've sent him a nasty Howler." She flashed Hermione an indulgent smile.

Hermione returned her smile uncertainly, thinking that the situation called for something more than a Howler some sort of castrating hex, perhaps.

"Severus thinks it would be possible for me to continue living here," she said.

"But of course!" Cordelia replied. "This is your home. You are legally entitled to all that is Theo's now that he has ... absented himself."

"But are you certain it's socially acceptable? That it won't embarrass you in front of the rest of the family?"

"Hermione, Hermione," Cordelia said, patting her on the hand again. "Most of the family are rather elderly, as you've probably noticed, and I'm sure they'll hardly even remark on Theo's absence it's not as though he's ever been a regular attendee at family gatherings."

"But what if they ask? What am I supposed to say? I don't want to cause you trouble."

"If people ask, I will tell them that Theodore has gone travelling, which is entirely truthful. Your answer is completely at your own discretion. You may tell them he is abroad or, if you insist, you are free to tell them the truth." Her tone of voice clearly implied that she would much prefer the former.

Hermione fiddled with the hem of her jumper, unsure of what to say next.

"I know this is awkward for you, Hermione. But we all have our crosses to bear we all have skeletons in the closet. You've done nothing wrong you must walk with that chin held high!"

Grateful, Hermione gave her mother-in-law a smile.

"That's better!" Cordelia said, rising from the table. "Now, I have a dinner engagement, so I really must be on my way. Look on the bright side, Hermione. You're looking wonderfully slim, and you know what they say: you can never be too thin or too rich!"

She kissed Hermione again and walked to the kitchen door. "I was delighted to hear you've resigned from the Department of Mysteries. I host a coffee morning in aid of St. Mungo's each Monday; now that you're a woman of leisure, you would be very welcome to attend."

Hermione frowned. "Well, I haven't made my decision yet I told Severus I'd let him know about the job by tomorrow night."

Cordelia looked puzzled. "The job?"

"Yes. I'm sorry; I presumed he would have told you. He offered me the job as his Potions Assistant."

"I see. For somebody so dour he can be very charitable at times," she said with a bemused smile.

With a little wave, she left the room, leaving Hermione to smart over her parting remark.

When the bang of the front door had signalled Cordelia's departure, Hermione walked down the corridor to the master bedroom. She took hold of the end of her jumper and pulled it over her head. Standing before the mirror in her jeans and bra, she examined her down-sized torso. Her ribs were visible, and her once-rounded breasts had shrunk. She had to disagree with her mother-in-law: you *could* be too thin.

She crossed to the dressing table and took her makeup bag from a drawer. She had letters of apology to write to her friends, and she had neglected Padma dreadfully. It was high time she paid her little goddaughter a visit.

Hermione knew by the look on Dean's face that he was angry with her.

"Hermione!" he whispered furiously. "Padma has enough on her plate at the moment without fretting over her best friend. Where the hell have you been?"

Hermione's eyes immediately filled. "Dean, I'm so, so sorry. I feel dreadfully guilty, and if you'll give me a chance, I'll explain everything."

He looked contrite. "Come on in," he said with a sigh. "I didn't mean to attack you we're just a bit worn out. Padma will be glad to see you."

He motioned for her to enter the front room, and she gently pushed open the door, afraid she might wake the babies. She couldn't help but smile at the sight of Padma's usually spotless sitting room. There were tiny items of pink clothing scattered everywhere; little socks dotted the sofa; and the smell of baby powder filled the air. Her smile widened when she saw Padma, who was rocking one baby in her arms while the other slept in a Moses basket at her feet.

"Hi," Hermione whispered, her guilt increasing at the expression of delighted relief on Padma's face.

"Hermione!" Padma said softly, quickly clearing the seat next to her of baby paraphernalia. "I'm so glad to see you! I've been really worried."

Hermione crossed the room and kissed her friend on the cheek. "Padma, I'm so sorry I haven't been in contact. It's probably been the most difficult time of your life, and I wasn't there for you. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Hermione, of course I forgive you. I just want to know what's been going on. Here," she said, handing the baby to Hermione. "I'd be glad of a rest from your goddaughter. She really likes being held, and she's getting heavy."

Hermione accepted the swaddled infant with a beaming smile. "My goodness," she said, gazing at Preeya. "They've grown so much in two weeks! They're even more gorgeous than when they were born."

Padma smiled and stretched her aching arms. "They're very good, to be honest. Thanks to Dean and a Muggle breast-pump, I've been getting about five hours sleep a night, which is pretty good for new-born twins!"

Hermione gazed at the beautiful baby in her arms and tenderly stroked her cheek. "Any news about Parvati?"

Padma nodded. "She had the baby on Wednesday night. Another boy! They've called him Liam." Padma tore her gaze from her daughter and looked at Hermione. "You've lost an awful lot of weight, Hermione. What's happened?"

She took a deep breath. "Theo and I have broken up."

Padma's face fell. "Oh, Hermione! I'm so sorry. When did this happen?"

"Two weeks ago, just after you'd had the girls."

Padma shook her head. "I knew something must be very wrong when I didn't hear from you. Are you going to divorce?"

Hermione sighed. "I don't know not yet at any rate. We had quite an argument about what we should do in the future. Theo, of course, wanted to take off around the world again, and I wanted to stay and try to work things out. When he didn't get his way, he left. Didn't even tell me where he was going he just left a note."

"What a selfish bastard! Have you any idea where he is?"

She shook her head. "I can't say for sure. I guess he's with friends in Germany or the Netherlands. I don't really care, to be honest."

The door swung open and Dean came in carrying a tray of tea and sandwiches.

"Hermione and Theo have broken up," Padma said as she took the tray from Dean and set it on the coffee table.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said, pouring her a cup of tea. "Did you hear about Dennis and Demelza?"

Hermione nodded. "Severus told me this morning. I could hardly believe it; they seemed so fond of each other."

Dean shrugged. "You never can tell, I suppose. I thought Michael Corner and Pansy Parkinson would have fallen apart by now, but they seem happy."

Padma handed Hermione a cheese sandwich and glanced at her daughter. "I think Preeya likes you she's asleep already!" She fetched the second Moses basket and moved to take the baby from Hermione.

"Could I hold her for a little longer?" Hermione asked. "She's just so lovely."

Padma beamed. "Of course you can. Let me know when you want to put her down." She sat back down and poured herself a cup of tea. "So, if you broke up two weeks ago, what's been going on since then?"

Hermione blushed. "I'm a little ashamed of how I've behaved. I just locked myself in my room for two weeks and hoped it was all a terrible dream."

Padma frowned. "What about work?"

"I've been dismissed. They sent me numerous owls, but I didn't answer any of them."

"What? Oh, Hermione! Why ever did you do that?"

"I hated the job," she insisted. "I was only staying there because I didn't want Theo to have an excuse to drag me off travelling again. Severus has offered me a job as his Potions Assistant."

"Are you serious? The position you applied for when we got back from Paris?" Padma asked.

Hermione nodded. "I know he probably only did it because he feels sorry for me, but I'm quite tempted. I've seen his laboratory it's unbelievable!"

Padma looked dubious. "Severus Snape, though. Do you think you could handle him?"

"I'm not sure," she confessed, "but I might give it a try. There aren't many jobs on offer, and I'd rather not accept money from the Mills. I'm nervous about taking the job, though. If it goes badly it could make my life very, very difficult."

They discussed her predicament for a further hour, until the babies woke up, demanding to be fed. It was almost ten by the time she left, having presented Moe's knitwear and two shiny new copies of *Hogwarts: A History*. She promised to return the following weekend and took her leave feeling no nearer to making a decision than she had when she had arrived. There were only twenty-four hours left before Severus Snape required an answer. She had a *lot* of thinking to do.

By four o'clock the following afternoon, Hermione was certain her mother would never speak to her again. When she had broken the news to her parents over Sunday lunch, her mother had wept. That her daughter should be a divorcee at such a tender age would have been bad enough, but that she should be shackled still to her estranged husband was simply too much for Jane Granger. Once the tears had passed, the shouting had begun.

Hermione had hoped for at least a little moral support from her parents, but her mother just couldn't understand why she wanted to remain living with her husband's family when he had abandoned her. Her mother had insisted she return to live with them, but remembering all too well the frustration of summer holidays away from the magical world, Hermione had refused. The shouting had continued until she had fled to the relative tranquillity of Kensington Square.

Hermione was completely drained when she returned from her disastrous visit to her parents' house. Ever the pragmatist, she headed straight for the study and took parchment and a quill from the mahogany bureau. Drawing a straight line down the middle of the page, she began to list the advantages and disadvantages of working for Severus Snape.

She had expected the negatives to far outweigh the positives, but as her list grew steadily longer, she realised that she had come to rather like Severus Snape. She liked his sarcasm; she liked his perfectionism; she even liked his lack of tolerance. There was no doubt he would be a difficult man to work for, but there was every chance he might make an exciting boss. And although she was an accomplished Potioneer, she had always lacked instinctive flair. If there was one thing that excited Hermione Granger, it was the prospect of learning, and she was convinced there was much to learn from the Half-Blood Prince.

But then again, she stood to lose much if their working partnership failed. In fact, there was every chance he might actually hex her into oblivion if her work was not to his liking. After an entire hour of scribbling on the parchment and gazing thoughtfully out at the darkening back garden, she totted up both columns on her page. The numbers were almost exactly equal. No nearing to reaching a decision, she descended to the basement in search of tea.

When she got to the kitchen, she found Lance at the table, a pot of tea and his ebony cane before him. His long grey hair hung loosely about his shoulders, and he was dressed in the most garish lavender robes Hermione had ever seen.

"Lance!" she said, crossing the room to hug him. "We weren't expecting you back until the end of the month."

He returned her embrace and motioned to the seat beside him. "I had an owl from Severus last night," he explained, peering at her above his little round spectacles. "He's rather worried about you, it would seem."

"I presume that means you've heard about Theo?"

He nodded and poured her a cup of tea. "Sod Theo, I say. The lad's an idiot. Let him go. Why on earth would an intelligent girl like you want to mix your genes up with a fool like Theodore Nott, eh?"

She looked at the elderly man, trying to figure out whether or not he was joking. She watched in silence as he added a fifth lump of sugar to his tea.

"What you need," he said, pointing a crooked finger at her, "is an intelligent man. A man not a boy."

Hermione chuckled. "Well, there's that small problem of still being Theo's wife."

Lance arched a grey eyebrow. "And why would that be a problem? Since when have spouses of the aristocracy ever been faithful? Much better to take a lover than to abandon your wife!"

She sipped at her tea, not knowing if Lance's outlook was incredibly archaic or frighteningly modern. "I think I'll spend a while getting over this marriage before I jump into another relationship."

"Moe and I were rather looking forward to some babies, weren't we, Moe?" he asked, turning to the elf, who was pottering about the stove.

Moe nodded. "There will be babies; Muggle-borns is always having babies."

Hermione grinned, wondering if Moe had any knowledge at all of the basics of human reproduction. There were not likely to be any babies in the near future. She quickly changed the subject.

"I'm sorry you had to cut your holiday short Severus shouldn't have bothered you. How was Newt Scamander? Did you have fun?"

"Not nearly as much fun as we used to have when we were young," he said, giving her a wink, "and not a Clabbert in sight!"

"That's a pity," she said, reaching for a biscuit. "Were you and Newt at Hogwarts together?"

He waved a gnarled hand in the air. "We didn't really know one another at school, but his brother Horatio and I were lovers in our late twenties."

Hermione promptly choked on her tea.

Lance chuckled. "My dear girl, is it such a shock? Do you think heterosexual wizards dress like this? Hmmm?"

Her coughing fit subsided. "I don't know ... I just never ..."

"My mother always said it was obvious from about the age of ten that I was as gay as Christmas. Anyway, it's all null and void when you get to my age," he said with a sigh. "The arthritis generally gets in the way of one's exploits."

Desirous not to hear about Lance's exploits, she groped for another topic. "Have you spoken with Severus since you got back?"

"Yes. He told me he offered you a job."

Hermione nodded and began to nibble at a fingernail. "He wants an answer by tonight, and I've no idea what to do."

Lance regarded her with a most curious expression on his face. "Do you like Potions?"

She nodded. "Yes, very much."

"Do you like Severus?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "At least, I think so. More than I used to, anyway."

He tugged at the end of his beard for a moment. Eventually he asked, "What is going on between you and Severus?"

She raised her eyebrows in genuine surprise. "What do you mean?"

He placed his bony elbows on the table. "I've been watching the pair of you interact since you became engaged to Theo, and it's obvious that there are issues between you."

Hermione's cheeks grew warm. "He was my teacher; I was a Gryffindor; he didn't like me. I asked too many questions in class and probably drove him insane. That's about it."

Lance examined her face. "You saved his life, didn't you?"

She gasped. "How did you know?"

He smiled. "It's well known that he was gravely injured on the night of the final battle and spent many months recovering in St. Mungo's. I've been friendly with Minerva McGonagall for some time. She mentioned once that it was you who raised the alarm and led the Healers to his whereabouts. I imagine that such a debt would greatly complicate a student-teacher relationship."

She nodded. "Maybe that's the only reason he's offering me the job: he feels like he owes it to me."

"Perhaps. But in very many ways I suspect the two of you to be oddly compatible. I imagine it's a matter of Severus controlling his tongue and you doing the same. Having said that, the man is a perfectionist; he will not be easy to work for."

Hermione shrugged. "I quite like a challenge."

Lance added another sugar lump to his tea. "He's an incredibly complex man, Hermione, and if you work for him, do bear that in mind. His experiences have made him

what he is."

She nodded silently, thinking of Lily Potter and the unhappy childhood she knew Severus Snape had endured.

Lance gave her a broad smile, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "Take the job, Hermione. It would be an adventure, and Merlin knows you could do with an adventure after putting up with Theo for so long."

"But what if I ruin this truce I have with Severus? I'm already in an awkward position here, and I don't want to make it any worse."

Lance picked up his cane and pointed it at her. "Take the job, girl. It might be the best thing you ever do."

She closed her eyes. Taking that job might also be the worst thing she ever did. But Severus Snape had been kind to her since she'd married Theo; she'd finally seen that there was more to him than the dungeon-dwelling, fear-inspiring Potions master. If things did not work out, she could leave after her three-month trial period and rethink her life. But maybe Lance was right: it could be the best thing she ever did.

She opened her eyes. "Okay. I'll take the job."

Lance beamed. "Excellent! Off you go," he said, motioning to the door.

"What? Now?"

"Yes! Why wait? Go and put the poor man out of his misery: he's up to his eyes in Potions contracts."

"Okay," she said uncertainly, running a hand through her hair. "I'll just go and tie my hair up."

Lance clicked his tongue impatiently. "Just leave it as is, girl. Go on!"

"Okay, I'll just do it," she agreed, suddenly resolute. She was about to go when he stopped her.

"Hermione?" he asked quietly.

"Yes?"

Lance gazed at her over his glasses. "He watches you, you know."

"I'm sorry?" she asked, confused.

"Severus," he said. "He does it with great discretion, but he watches you constantly."

She didn't know what to say. Why would Severus Snape watch her? Why was Lance telling her this?

"Go on, then," Lance said. "Don't leave the poor man waiting all day."

Severus had been pacing the floor of his study for almost an hour. He was already regretting having offered Hermione the job as his assistant she wasn't nearly grateful enough. When he had rashly proposed she take the position, he had expected her to accept immediately. He was put-out that she hadn't accepted the job with declarations of profuse gratitude.

It was seven o'clock when he heard her tentative knock at the front door. Taking a deep breath and ensuring he was wearing his very sternest Potions master expression, he descended the stairs and opened the door. She looked wild: her pupils were dilated and her hair was fanned out around her like a halo.

"Hermione," he said, glancing at his watch. "I hope you've finally condescended to grace me with an answer?"

"I accept," she gushed breathily. "I'd love to take the job ... Thank you."

He was both pleased and disappointed. "In that case, we have a contract to discuss. If you'd care to follow me to my study?"

He led the way to the first floor of the house, and gestured for her to take the velvet-covered chair before his broad desk.

"Ooooh," she said, turning to look at his bookshelves. "You have this library in addition to your Potions books in the laboratory?"

"Fascinating as I find my subject, I'm inclined to pursue more diverse reading material in the evenings. I assure you there will be opportunities for you to explore my library in the future, but if you wouldn't mind, I would rather like to finalise your contract."

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry."

He opened a small drinks cabinet with a flick of his wand. "Might I interest you in a drink?"

"Yes, please," she said, fiddling nervously with her watch. "Some mead would be lovely, if you have it."

He gave her a mock glare. "You desire alcohol when you begin work at eight tomorrow morning? A clear head will be necessary."

She looked mortified. "Oh, I'm sorry ... Just some tea, perhaps ... or pumpkin juice."

He smirked and handed her a glass of mead. "I jest, Hermione." He seated himself behind his desk, a large tumbler of Firewhisky in his hand.

He extracted some documents from a drawer. "I have a copy of a standard three-month contract. Much of it is, of course, negotiable, and if you will consent to give me a moment, I'll look it over and tailor it more precisely to your good self."

She nodded, and he began to scan the contents of the contract, tapping the parchment with his wand every now and again. He was aware of her gaze upon him as he amended the text, and he wondered what she was thinking. He could tell she was nervous, and he reminded himself to curtail his sarcasm. After a few minutes, he was satisfied with his work and pushed the contract towards her.

"You are referred to throughout the document as the Assistant Potioneer, and I am referred to as the Principal Potioneer," he explained.

She picked it up and began to examine the first page. While she read, he took the opportunity to study her face: she already looked better than she had the previous morning. The shadows beneath her eyes were not so evident, and there was colour in her cheeks. But it was in her eyes that he noticed the greatest change: gone was the dull, depressed look that had been so apparent. Her eyes shone once more, and she looked more alive, more vibrant than he had seen her for quite some time. He picked up his glass and raised it to his lips, his gaze never leaving her face over the rim of the tumbler.

She flicked to the second page, and he watched in amusement as she smiled.

"The Principal Potioneer reserves the sole right to choose the music played in the laboratory?" she asked.

He nodded. "I enjoy listening to music while I brew."

"What sort of music?"

"Orchestral music. I hate opera."

She gave a gasp. "Have you heard *Don Giovanni*?"

"I've no wish to hear *Don Giovanni*. I've just said that I hate opera."

"How can you possibly say you hate opera if you haven't heard the best opera ever written?"

He glared at her across the table. "Kindly read the next item on the contract."

She lowered her gaze to the paper once more. After a moment, she giggled. "The Assistant Potioneer is restricted to three questions per day with the exception of all questions related directly to the brewing of potions."

He smirked. "And the next ..."

"The Principal Potioneer is in no way obliged to answer these questions, with the exception of all questions related directly to the brewing of potions," she read. She looked at him and grinned.

"You've just illustrated the need for such clauses most admirably, Hermione," he drawled.

Still smiling, she turned to the final page and reached for the quill on his desk, signing her name at the bottom with a flourish. She placed the contract and the quill back on the desk and reached for her drink.

"I take it the contract is now legally and magically binding?" she asked.

He pulled the document across the table and picked up the quill. "It will be as soon as I sign it."

He scribbled his name below hers. The signatures glowed bright blue for a moment, reminding him painfully of the day she had signed her marriage contract in his presence.

"Do you promise to control your temper?" she asked.

"Do you promise to control your insatiable curiosity?" he countered.

She chuckled. "I'll certainly try," she said. Her expression became more serious. "I'm very grateful for this, Severus. I'll do my very best."

He inclined his head. "I would expect no less of you. You found all the clauses agreeable?"

She nodded. "Yes, it's fine. I just wanted to ask I don't want to seem irreverent ... Would you prefer if I addressed you as 'Professor' or 'Sir' when we are at work?"

He regarded her for a second and then shook his head. "My given name will suffice. I know we've been on friendlier terms these past few months, Hermione, but you may recall that I'm not the easiest man to work with. I have more contracts for potions than I can deal with at present; it will not be an easy job, and I will expect a great deal of hard work."

"I enjoy hard work," she replied with a glance at her watch. "I'd like to revise some of my Potions notes tonight. If it's okay, I'll take my leave."

He rose with a brief nod. "I'll show you out."

When they reached the front door, she turned to him and offered her hand. "Thank you for giving me a chance, Severus. I hope I'll prove you were right to do so."

He took her hand and shook it firmly. "I hope you will."

"And I just wanted to say," she began, her voice shaking, "the night of the final battle ..."

He narrowed his eyes, wary of what she would say next.

She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I did not act as I did out of a sense of pity, but out of a sense of deepest gratitude and admiration."

She turned and fled across Kensington Square.

Severus watched her walk away and wondered what, exactly, he had gotten himself into.

A/N: Dear Readers. A belated Happy St. Patrick's Day to you all! Lá Féile Padraig shona duibh go léir. It's a national holiday here in Ireland today, so I thought I'd celebrate by uploading a new chapter of Denial.

Thank you, every one of you, for your continued readership and for your kind reviews. Every review means so much. Many thanks. A few of you have asked, so I wanted to let you know that this story has 33 chapters in total.

Finally, another reason for celebration. Many of you know that I've been writing original fiction for the past four years. I was lucky enough to find a literary agent to represent me, but not yet a publisher. In January, with my agent's blessing, I entered a Young Adult/crossover Thriller I'd written in the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Awards. Much to my surprise, it has progressed to the Quarter Finals.

That means an excerpt (the first two chapters) is now available for free download and review on Amazon.com. You don't need a Kindle or anything, but if you have an Amazon.com account, you can 'buy' it at no charge and you can review it. If you have the time and inclination, I would be very grateful if you wanted to read and review. My RL name is Caireann Shannon, and the name of the book is The Brink If you just type my name into the search box on Amazon.com, it should come up. If you can spare the time, you have my gratitude, loyal readers!

LB x

Accidental Stars

Chapter 15 of 34

Hermione begins work with Severus

As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it, until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill. I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles. An elderly waiter with trembling hands was hurriedly spreading a pink and white checked cloth over the rusty green iron table, saying: 'If the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden, if the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden ...' I decided that if the shaking of her breasts could be stopped, some fragments of the afternoon might be collected, and I concentrated my attention with careful subtlety to this end.

- T. S. Eliot, *Hysteria*

Severus was unusually tense. He had risen before it was bright and had repositioned his cauldrons exactly fourteen times. Then, having reorganised his Potions books according to subject, he had gone in search of breakfast. Moe had appeared shortly before seven o'clock and had chuckled as she'd served his toast.

"You is not the only one up early this morning, Master Severus," she had said.

He had taken this to mean that Hermione was also preparing for their first day together, and, not caring to be outdone, he had returned to the laboratory immediately, determined that not a single thing should be anything less than perfect.

He had discovered, to his horror, that not all of his ingredients were in exact alphabetical order. He had spent the last three-quarters of an hour rearranging jars, tins and phials, and he was finally satisfied. He stood back and regarded his newly categorised shelves with a smirk of approval. There was not so much as a single bezoar out of place. If there was anyone who was likely to notice, it was surely Hermione Granger.

Hermione was unusually tense. She had risen well before dawn and had restyled her hair exactly three times. Then, certain that not a single errant curl had escaped her notice, she had gone in search of breakfast. Moe had given her tamed hair a complimentary nod.

"You is right to be impressing Master Severus," she had said. "He is liking everything to be just so."

Feeling queasy, Hermione had returned to her room to file her nails. She remembered that he had hated long fingernails almost as much as bitten fingernails in his classroom. Knowing that her hands would be under his direct scrutiny, she was determined that her nails would be nothing less than perfectly manicured.

She'd had an hour left to her before she was due at the laboratory, and, after applying a subtle layer of makeup, she had begun to leaf through all the information she possessed on the topic of Telenium cauldrons. It was now approaching eight o'clock, and she knew there was little more she could do in the way of preparation. She regarded her neatly plaited hair in the bedroom mirror with a small smile of approval. There was not so much as a single hair out of place. If there was anyone who was likely to notice, it was surely Severus Snape.

"Good morning," Severus murmured as he opened the door.

"Good morning," Hermione replied, giving him an uncertain smile.

"May I have your wand for a moment?"

"Certainly," she replied, extracting it from her practical, black robes and handing it to him.

He held the tip of her wand to the heavy bolt on the front door and whispered an incantation. The bolt shone bright green for a second before he gave a satisfied nod and returned her wand to her waiting hand.

"The door will recognise your wand from this point onwards," he said. "All you need do when you wish to enter is press the tip to the lock, and you will be granted access."

"I see," she said, feeling rather pleased. "Thank you."

He turned and strode to the stairs. She shut the door behind her and quickly followed in the wake of his billowing robes.

"Will I be granted the same access to the laboratory?" she asked as they descended the stairs.

"Not yet," he replied.

"Not yet? Am I not to be trusted?"

He turned to her. "You have to earn my trust, Hermione. After all, you've stolen from my stores before."

She gasped. In all the years she had known him, he had never once mentioned her second-year thieving at Hogwarts. "You knew? You knew and you didn't report me?"

He smirked. "I considered it, make no mistake, but I decided instead to deduce what you were up to."

"Did you find out?"

"Yes. I watched in some astonishment as you successfully brewed Polyjuice Potion. Quite a feat for a second-year, I thought, and rather undeserving of punishment."

She couldn't decide whether to be embarrassed that her covert operation had been discovered, or pleased that he had been impressed with her skill.

He opened the heavy wooden door to the laboratory with a wave of his wand. "It would seem you've already exceeded your quota of questions for today as per item twenty-three of our contract."

She glanced at her watch. "I don't think so. It's not quite eight o'clock: our working day hasn't begun, and we've not yet entered the laboratory."

"I make it to be only a few seconds before eight, so I suggest you choose your questions carefully between now and five o'clock."

"In that case, I'll make the most of the last few seconds left to me: If I don't ask my three questions each day, do they carry over to the next? For instance, if I save up all my questions, can I ask you fifteen questions on Friday?"

He leaned against the frame of the open door and crossed his arms. "Why weren't you wandering the corridors of Hogwarts alone and friendless, Hermione? How on earth did your companions put up with this for seven years? My estimation of Potter and Weasley has just risen. They must have had enormous patience."

She grinned and walked past him into the laboratory, a shiver of excitement running up her spine at the sight of the workbenches. Directing a longing glance at Nicolas Flame's Telenium cauldron, she wondered how long it would be before he permitted her to brew in what was surely his most prized possession.

Severus closed the heavy door and crossed the room. "For the foreseeable future, this will be your workbench," he said, indicating the bench where the three pewter cauldrons sat. "Although I have a number of tasks for you to complete this afternoon, I'd like you to spend the morning familiarising yourself with the laboratory. From what I can recall of you at Hogwarts, you are gifted with a sharp memory, and if you know the whereabouts of the various ingredients and textbooks, I might be spared needless questions. I would like to be interrupted as little as possible. Is that clear?"

She nodded her understanding.

"The parchments on your desk are Potions contracts. I've divided my contracts into two halves. The ones on your desk all deal with common potions that I'm certain you'll have no problem brewing." He crossed to a shelf and selected a jar of preserved Reishi. "I have a number of potions which require my immediate attention, so I'd like you to begin by looking through your contracts and familiarising yourself with our clients and their needs."

Feeling a slight thrill at the words 'our clients', she watched as he opened the jar and extracted one of the mushrooms from within. He began to pummel it to a paste with a pestle and mortar, and she gave a soft sigh, marvelling at the ease and efficiency with which he worked.

She read through the first contract, then moved to the second. When Severus had finished with the Reishi, he disappeared into the storeroom where he kept the more volatile ingredients. A few seconds later, the strains of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony filled the room, and Hermione smiled in recognition.

He emerged from the storeroom with a jar of yellow powder.

"Might I ask how you're playing the symphony?" she asked, puzzled. The quality of the sound was far too good to be coming from a wizarding radio station, and she couldn't see any speakers.

He gave a flick of his wand: six small, silver speakers appeared, mounted at the juncture of the wall and ceiling at various intervals around the room. "Not everything can be improved upon by magic," he said, "among them Herbert Von Karajan, the Berlin Philharmonic and Muggle sound systems." He resumed work on his potion.

She became quickly absorbed in reading through the various contracts. Quite a few of them were for St. Mungo's; a couple more were for one of the apothecaries in Diagon Alley. Most of the remedies they ordered were straightforward: Pepperup Potion, Skele-Gro, Bruise-healing Paste and Invigoration Draughts. She was glad to see he'd included a few more demanding potions in her list: a complex medication used in the treatment of Dragon Pox, and an elixir used in Hippogriff-taming of which she'd never even heard. It pleased her to find he had enough confidence in her abilities to trust her with the preparation of something other than Cough Potions.

She spent almost three hours poring over the contracts and making notes in a journal she'd brought with her. The stack of parchments on Severus's bench was even greater than her own, and she had no idea how he'd coped with it all on his own before now.

As the morning wore on, she darted occasional glances at his cauldron. He was using the simplest of the three: the wrought-iron cauldron lined with platinum, and although she could tell the potion he was working on was an antidote, it wasn't one she'd ever seen brewed before.

While she watched him work, she became increasingly mesmerised by his hands. She could hardly believe that she'd been his student for such a long time and had failed to notice his long, slender fingers. He held a metal stirring-rod in his right hand and used his left to prepare and add additional ingredients. The lecturers in Potions at the Sorbonne had been, for the most part, incredibly gifted at their subject, but never before had she watched someone brew with such consummate grace and ease. He had a habit of allowing his left hand to hover above the cauldron. He would move his fingers in the air as if caressing the rising steam.

Severus was aware that Hermione had been watching him for quite some time. He was impressed that she'd managed to curb her inquisitive tongue and had not yet asked him what he was working on. He had worried that he might find her presence in some way bothersome or distracting, but so far she had behaved, and all was well.

Apart from the Beethoven problem, that was. Within moments of his playing the Beethoven symphony, she had begun to hum along. Once the second movement had finished, he could stand it no more. With a flick of his wand he had changed to a Beethoven Piano Sonata. It seemed she knew this one, too: the humming had begun again. He had considered asking her to refrain, but, certain that it would cause her embarrassment, he bit his tongue.

Another flick of his wand had moved the disc along to a string quartet. The humming had continued. She evidently knew her Beethoven. Uttering a curse beneath his breath, he had returned to the storeroom and had replaced the Beethoven with some Sibelius. That had finally shut her up. He would have to avoid Beethoven from now on.

He finally looked up from his cauldron and caught her staring at his hands. "I take it you've finished examining the contracts, Hermione?" he said, pleased at the colour that rose in her cheeks.

"Yes, I ... I have," she replied, embarrassed at having been caught.

"Have you any questions? You've remained unusually quiet."

She shrugged. "It all seems straightforward. Is there a particular order in which you'd like me to complete the different batches?"

He shook his head. "I'd like you to manage the contracts in addition to brewing the potions. You've examined all of them now. What would you prioritise for the coming week?"

She looked through the notes she'd made, biting her lower lip in concentration. "The Pepperup Potion for St. Mungo's will need brewing today, and although the Veritas serum for the Norwegian Wizengamot is not needed for some time, it will be necessary to prepare it now as it requires a full month to mature." She turned to the next

page of her journal. "The other priorities this week are the Invigoration Draughts and the Skele-Gro for the Department of Sports."

He gave a stiff nod. "That will suffice. Have you any idea what I've been brewing this morning?"

Hermione frowned and peered across the room at his cauldron. "It's not something I've seen brewed before, but it's an antidote of some kind."

"I'm sure you can be more precise than that," he said, a gentle reprimand in his tone. "Consider the ingredients ..."

She closed her eyes for a moment and tried to recall everything she'd seen him add to the mixture. "It's an antivenin," she said, hoping desperately she was right.

"Correct," he said. "This particular antivenin also has a second purpose. If I tell you this phial contains the venom of a green mamba, might you hazard a guess?"

She smiled. "It can act as an antidote to many wizard-made poisons that attack the central nervous system."

"Good," he said, returning his attention to the cauldron.

Hermione knew a rush of satisfaction. A 'good' from Severus Snape was equal to a 'phenomenal' from practically anybody else.

He glanced at her from beneath his hair. "Of all the antidotes I brew, antivenins are particularly close to my heart. I'm sure you understand why."

She looked up at him, surprised he'd made reference to the night in the Shrieking Shack. She could not think of a suitable response. "Might I familiarise myself with the whereabouts of the ingredients?"

"You may," he agreed. "I'd urge you to exercise caution in the storeroom. It holds many unstable substances: Erumpent fluid among them."

She nodded, and he watched as she crossed to the shelves and began to take notes on row after row of his ingredients. He studied the manner in which she rubbed the tip of her quill against her chin while she worked, seemingly oblivious to the fact that she was doing it. When she was deep in concentration, she also had a habit of biting her bottom lip. After a time, she turned to him with a broad smile.

"There's little need to memorise anything," she said happily. "Everything is in perfect alphabetical order!"

He knew a distinct throb of self-satisfaction and was glad that he'd taken such pains to ensure his shelves were properly arranged. He watched as she made her way to the storeroom, her plaited hair swinging behind her. No-one had been permitted entry to his storeroom before, and he was not comfortable with her presence there. Many of the items were dangerously volatile, and he hoped that her training at the Sorbonne had instilled in her a suitable degree of caution. He was relieved when she emerged unscathed.

"You've the most extensive collection of rare ingredients I've ever come across," she said as she returned to her bench. "I'm so excited about working here."

"You're easily pleased," he responded, amused by her enthusiasm. Having siphoned the last of his antidote into a crystal phial, he placed it alongside a number of others in a small wooden box. He sealed it with a tap of his wand and carried it to her workbench.

"This box requires immediate delivery to a client in Cape Town. It's obviously unwise to trust an owl over such a long distance with such a heavy package," he explained, "so I generally send such deliveries by Floo. Might I ask you to do so, using the fireplace in the kitchen?"

She nodded. "Of course."

He extracted a piece of parchment from his robes and handed it to her. "This is the name and address of the client. Once the order has been dispatched, you may take your lunch; I'm certain you must be hungry by now."

She hadn't once thought of her stomach during the morning, but now that he mentioned it, she realised she was famished. She picked up the wooden box and headed for the door. Severus pulled it open for her, and they found Moe waiting outside. She looked as though she'd been standing there for quite some time.

"Mistress Cordelia and her friends is still in the living room," she explained. "I has made you both lunch in the kitchen."

Before either one of them could respond, she disappeared with a click of her fingers. Hermione directed an apologetic glance at Severus; she'd presumed she would return to her own house for lunch. She was sure he wanted a break from her by now.

He inclined his head. "I have one or two chores which require my attention. I will join you presently." He returned to the laboratory feeling mildly annoyed; Moe would ordinarily have asked his permission before inviting somebody else to dine with him. Perhaps, he thought, she'd become so accustomed to Hermione that she simply viewed her as one of the family and thus above the usual formalities.

Hermione made her way to the kitchen, where Moe was busy levitating cutlery onto the table. When she had successfully delivered the parcel by Floo, she took a seat and helped herself to a bowl of soup and a sandwich. Severus arrived a few minutes later and took the chair opposite.

Without the distractions of cauldrons and contracts, an uncomfortable silence fell between them. Uneasy with the lack of conversation, Hermione squirmed in her seat. She could stand it for no more than a few minutes.

"I read some of your journal articles while I was at the Sorbonne," she ventured. "You published quite prolifically in *The Potioneer* and *Brewer's Quarterly* for a time."

Rather than respond, he leaned back from the table, his arm draped over the back of his chair, and regarded her with a strange expression.

"Tell me, Hermione. What were your favourite subjects at Hogwarts?"

Surprised by the sudden change of topic, she said, "Charms and Transfiguration. Closely followed by Ancient Runes and Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"And your least favourite?"

"Divination, without a doubt. Muggle Studies was boring, and Care of Magical Creatures was stressful beyond belief...I spent my days worrying that Hagrid was going to do something to get himself fired."

"So Potions came somewhere between the two?"

She nodded, her cheeks growing warm. "I suppose so."

"And yet you chose to pursue that subject to Master's level. Might I ask why? I was generally successful, during my time at Hogwarts, in turning every student outside of Slytherin House completely off Potions."

She put down her spoon. "*You* were the reason I wanted to study Potions."

"I was the reason?" he asked, eyebrows raised.

"I've been asked the same question many times since I went to the Sorbonne, and I've never answered it with the complete truth. My usual explanation is that I was never

as good at Potions as some of my other subjects, and as a result it was a challenge. In a way, that's true. But in reality, it's all your fault."

"Would you care to elaborate?"

She took a deep breath and studied her fingernails. This was not a conversation she had intended to have on her first day at work. "Once Harry discovered the notes of the Half-Blood Prince, I was filled with envy."

He said nothing. After a moment, she raised her gaze shyly to his. "You knew Harry had your copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*?"

He gave a brief nod. "Yes, I was aware of the fact."

"Harry followed all the tips you'd written in the margins of the book. Professor Slughorn assumed Harry had some sort of innate talent. I must admit, I didn't enjoy being outdone in class, especially when Harry's work was not truly his own."

"I still fail to see how this resulted in your choosing to study for a degree in Potions," he said, becoming irritated.

"You were a N.E.W.T student when you wrote those notes, the same age as I was possibly even younger. I know I managed an Outstanding grade in my Potions O.W.L and N.E.W.T exams, but I never had that kind of flair. Those notes were beyond brilliant! When I had to choose my subjects for the Sorbonne, I decided that what I didn't possess by nature, I would acquire by hard work and determination. So that's it, really: I was jealous of the Half-Blood Prince and I resolved to make up for my shortcomings." She lowered her gaze and hoped he would drop the subject.

"I see," he responded quietly. "Misguided as your reasons may have been, if your Parisian professors are to be believed, you've certainly attained a commendable level of ability."

"I hope my brewing skills will prove them correct." She fiddled with her tea cup, suddenly annoyed that she'd been so honest. She felt silly now. "Might I ask you a question in return?"

"It would seem only fair," he acquiesced.

"When we studied Potions at N.E.W.T level, Professor Slughorn often praised the instinctive talents of ... of former students," she said, avoiding the name of Lily Evans. "He never mentioned you, either before or after the war, and I've always wondered why. Weren't you on good terms with him?"

"Horace Slughorn and I were neither on good nor bad terms while I was his student. I just did not interest him as did certain other less talented pupils. I had no connections; I had nothing to recommend me. I was silent, outwardly unremarkable and clearly from an impoverished family. I would not have fitted into his little club."

"I still don't understand it," she continued. "You were incredibly talented, and not all of his favourites were well connected."

Severus shrugged. "Connections were what he desired above all else. The occasional exceptions to this were usually female, vivacious and talented."

"Like Ginny Weasley," she said.

"Many still were Muggle-borns, completely devoid of connections in the wizarding world. Like you," he added, "and like Lily." He rose from the table.

She couldn't believe he'd mentioned Lily's name.

"Come," he said. "We have much to do."

They returned to the laboratory, Hermione still surprised that he had spoken of Lily Evans. She couldn't decide whether it was a good thing or not. Perhaps it meant he'd overcome his feelings for her. Or, perhaps, it meant that Lily was still on his mind night and day.

By the end of the afternoon, she also couldn't decide whether or not she'd made the right decision in accepting the job. She'd spent the hours after lunch brewing Pepperup Potion; hardly a challenge for a highly qualified Potioneer, but enjoyable, nonetheless. She'd been conscious of Severus casting furtive glances at her cauldron as she worked. His lack of complaint assured her he was satisfied; she'd no doubt he would have corrected her had he been displeased with her technique.

Overall, she supposed, they'd gotten on rather well for two people with such an unconventional past. He had bitten his tongue; she had done the same. But there was still an air of unease. There were issues hovering between them, and Hermione was sure that the only way for them to become comfortable around one another was to deal with those issues. She would find a way to draw the intractable Severus Snape into conversation with her, despite the ridiculous clauses in his contract. Lance had told her that Severus watched her. Maybe it was time she watched him in return.

It wasn't too long before she had an opportunity to do just that. On Thursday evening, Cordelia invited her to dinner along with more than a dozen other guests, among them Draco and Susan. Narcissa Malfoy was there too, but Hermione was relieved to find Lucius was visiting friends in Italy.

She arrived arm in arm with Lance, who had insisted they be fashionably late. Severus admitted them, and Lance hobbled ahead of them to the dining room, mumbling under his breath about the ridiculousness of Cordelia's dinner parties.

Hermione turned to Severus. "I'm sorry we're late. Lance insisted we be the last to arrive."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Yes, he's exceptionally fond of making an entrance."

Hermione laughed. "So I've noticed. He's quite the drama-queen." They reached the door, and she took a deep breath, placing her hand on her churning stomach.

Severus frowned. "Nervous?"

She nodded. "Yes, a little. I haven't been around the Mills since Theo left. I just feel a little awkward."

"Hold your head high, Hermione," he said, his tone kind. "You've done nothing to be ashamed of. I dissuaded Cordelia from placing you between her Aunt Millie and Narcissa Malfoy. You'll be seated next to Susan and opposite Draco."

She felt a rush of relief and gratitude. "Thank you," she said, touched he'd considered her comfort.

They entered the room to find the other guests already seated at the long dining table. Hermione mumbled an apology and took her seat next to Susan Malfoy, who flashed her an encouraging smile.

"Thank you for coming, dear," Cordelia said genially. She turned and addressed the table at large. "You'll notice we're missing a few guests this evening. Both Lucius and Theodore are abroad."

Hermione instinctively looked at Severus, who was frowning at his wife.

"And on that note," Draco announced loudly, "might I just say, Granger, that you're looking most excellent since you got rid of..."

"Draco!" his mother hissed. "That will do!"

Lance chuckled at the other end of the table. "The boy's right! She's much better off without that idiot."

"Lancelot!" Cordelia said, darting an anxious glance at her confused aunts. "That's quite enough, thank you."

Hermione suppressed a giggle. She could have sworn that Severus had given her the briefest of smiles.

Draco and Lance behaved themselves for the rest of the meal, and Hermione enjoyed talking to Susan, who filled her in on what had been happening at the Department of Mysteries.

Hermione was well placed to observe Severus as the evening progressed: he was seated at one end of the table next to his wife, and it was easy to watch his from beneath the safety of her curls.

What she saw unnerved her. Despite Lance's remarks that Cordelia and Severus were not all that they seemed, Hermione had always assumed they were just like any married couple. But now she realised that she'd been so wrapped up in her own misery that she'd never noticed their interaction at all. Or, rather, their lack of interaction.

While Severus elegantly performed the role of co-host, ensuring everybody's glass was kept full, Cordelia fussed over her guests and drew them into conversation. But over the two-hour meal, Hermione noticed that they barely exchanged one word, and when they did converse, it was in relation to the dinner. On the few occasions that their eyes met, she registered no affection, and on the one instance that they made physical contact, she rather formed the impression that it was nothing more than an elaborate act on Cordelia's part. On rising from the table to fetch another bottle of wine, Cordelia placed her hand on her husband's shoulder, and Hermione watched in fascination as Severus immediately stiffened.

The most interesting episode occurred just as they were finishing dessert. A tapping at the dining room window announced the arrival of a large brown owl, and Cordelia rose from the table. Before she crossed to the window, Hermione heard Severus remark, "That's the sixth visit from that owl this week. Your popularity seems boundless, my dear." Cordelia responded with a frosty glare, and then, having read the note, she returned to her seat with a vague, distracted smile.

Hermione continued to scrutinise their behaviour for a minute or two, until Severus turned towards her, and she knew he was aware she'd been watching him. Rather than turn away in embarrassment, she bravely held his gaze and gave him a hesitant smile. She felt a profound rush of pleasure when he returned her smile, a puzzled expression on his pale face.

The evening passed quickly, and she soon bade farewell to Susan and Draco. Lance left early, bored by his elderly relatives, and Hermione eventually found herself alone with Severus.

"Come," he said, pointing to the seat opposite him. "Have another glass of wine."

Hermione feigned surprise. "Another glass of wine? When I'm due at work tomorrow morning?"

He smirked at her. "And how are you enjoying work, Hermione?"

"I'm enjoying it immensely; I've missed Potions since I left Paris. How are you enjoying having your laboratory under siege?"

"It hasn't been nearly as painful as I'd expected," he said, pouring her a glass of wine.

She gave a wry laugh. "Well, I'm glad I'm not as painful as you'd foreseen." She picked up the bottle of wine and, feeling cheeky, topped up his glass. She liked the way wine seemed make him more unguarded than he would normally dare to be. The only other time she'd seen him like this was on the night of her wedding.

"It would appear," he said, plucking the bottle from her grasp and placing it out of her reach, "that we're both still on our very best behaviour."

"Hmmm," she said, sipping at her wine. "You haven't made a single derogatory remark all week."

"You haven't given me cause to make a single derogatory remark all week."

Her eyes widened. "Thank you very much," she gushed, beaming.

He arched an eyebrow. "You take that as a compliment?"

"From you, that's as much a compliment as I could ever hope to receive."

He tutted. "You make me out to be a very black character indeed, Hermione Granger."

She laughed. "You know very well that you are every inch the quintessential black character, Severus Snape."

"Thank you very much," he said, imitating her.

"You take that as a compliment?" she asked, grinning.

He smirked and then fell silent for a moment. "Welcome back."

She frowned. "What?"

"I don't pretend for one moment that I knew you in any detail," he said, dropping his voice to a whisper, conscious that Cordelia and Narcissa had retired to the next room for coffee, "but you've become less and less like the Hermione Granger I'd imagined you to be over the last few months. It's nice to see you back."

She sighed. "Thank you ... I think. I haven't been myself since I got married, really."

"Theo had a much more negative effect on you than I'd expected."

She nodded. "You're right. And you were right about Theo: we were incompatible in all the ways you'd known we would be. When did you learn to be such a good judge of character?"

"Believe me: it has not always been so." He rubbed his forearm where he had once sported the Dark Mark and regarded her thoughtfully. "But it is gratifying, now, to see you returned to your ... former glory," he finished with a smirk.

She laughed. "Former glory? What was it you called me in third year? An insufferable know-it-all?"

"And what was it you did to me when you were in third year?" he countered. "Knocked me unconscious in the Shrieking Shack?"

She laughed again. "Touché, Professor Snape. Besides, I thought we were letting bygones be bygones; burying the hatchet and all that?"

"You're the one who started the mud-slinging. But yes, we have called a truce, if I remember correctly. We'd need rather a large hole in the ground for all the hatchets we've used over the years."

He picked up his wine glass and raised it to his lips. Hermione watched him, admiring the recently-discovered long, slender fingers with which he lifted his glass.

"But you were right about many, many things," she confessed. "I should have listened to you."

"It's not always a difficult thing when you reach my age, Hermione, to view other people and their actions objectively. It's another thing entirely to apply that same wisdom to one's own life.

She frowned, wondering whether he was referring to her or to his own clearly troubled relationship. "Do you think, Severus, that you'll be able to put up with me at work?" she asked, wondering if they would ever converse as comfortably in the laboratory as they did at dinner parties.

"Perhaps," he drawled, his black eyes glittering with sudden amusement, "if you can control your humming habit."

"My humming habit?"

"It seems limited to Beethoven, but I've no idea how far your knowledge of music extends. So far, you seem unaffected by Sibelius, Shostakovich and Brahms."

Hermione groaned and lowered her head to the table. "I hummed along to Beethoven?"

"Indeed, you did," he said, entertained by her reaction. "Are there other composers I should avoid?"

She giggled and looked up again. "Tchaikovsky and Mozart, probably." She smiled. "I'm really sorry, Severus. I'd no idea I was doing it."

"Apology accepted," he said, returning her smile. "Now, it's after midnight, and I intend to present you with something a little more challenging tomorrow. I suggest you return to your abode."

"Okay," she said, rising from the table and stifling a yawn. "Goodnight, Severus. You're very funny."

He stiffened. "Funny?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"Yes," she insisted. "Funny."

She took her leave, sorry to say goodnight, despite the fact that she would see him the following morning.

Without knowing quite why, she smiled all the way home, suddenly excited about the weeks and months ahead that would be spent in Severus's laboratory. Maybe Lance was right: taking that job might just prove to be the best thing she ever did. It was certainly the first good decision she'd made since she'd said yes to Theodore Nott.

Tell Me

Chapter 16 of 34

Hermione and Severus receive an invitation.

A/N: Apologies for being slightly late with this chapter, and apologies, too, for not having answered your very kind reviews for the last two chapters. I promise I will get to them all Real life has just been a little cruel this week. Please do keep them coming. They make the long hours I spend editing worthwhile.

LB x

Let us twain walk aside from the rest;

Now we are together privately, do you discard ceremony,

Come! vouchsafe to me what has yet been vouchsafed to none...

Tell me the whole story,

Tell me what you would not tell your brother, wife, husband or physician.

- Walt Whitman, *To You*

The month of March passed quickly, and the apple blossom trees in Kensington Square bloomed, announcing the approach of summer.

It was a sunny Saturday afternoon, and although she had come to the park with the intention of reading a well-battered copy of her favourite Jane Austen, Hermione found her mind wandering again and again to the conundrum that was Severus Snape.

All in all, she thought, the first few weeks of her employment with Severus had been a revelation. The most disturbing thing of all was that she liked him. She actually liked being around him. *Him*. Severus Snape. Who would have thought it possible?

Yes, he could be waspish. Cold sometimes, too, but she had already learned to read his moods and understand his temperament. She had vowed to watch him, and watch him she had. Closely. And the result was that she'd learned much about her former professor. His foul humours, which were mercifully rare, had resulted in more than one heated argument. But with a little observation, she had come to realise that there might be an excuse for his behaviour on those occasions.

Over a week previously, she'd arrived at the laboratory a few minutes before eight. A tap on the door had gone unanswered, and a quick spell had confirmed there was nobody inside. She'd frowned: she hadn't once arrived at work before Severus. He was always there ahead of her, already brewing.

After ten minutes of waiting patiently by the door, she'd succumbed to impatience and had tip-toed up the stairs. He was not to be found in the living room or the dining room, and she had been about to climb to the second floor when a creak on the floorboards above had told her he'd finally left his bedroom.

"Good morning," she'd said, concerned, wondering if he was ill.

"Is it, indeed?" he'd snapped, darting her an icy glare.

Stung by his response and annoyed by the lack of apology for his lateness, she'd followed him silently down the stairs.

He had barked instructions at her for over an hour, finding fault with her chopping technique where she knew there was none. Still, she had not once risen to his inflammatory remarks, and as the morning had worn on, she'd detected the scent of Firewhisky from his breath and had noticed the deep, dark shadows beneath his eyes. He'd obviously not slept well, and shortly before lunch she had finally understood.

He had left his bench to retrieve something from the storeroom, and as he'd crossed the floor, she had watched from beneath her eyelashes as he'd raised his hand to his neck and winced. Comprehension had hit her like a Bludger to the stomach: he still suffered from the wounds to his neck. Familiar as she was with his obstinacy, she guessed that he was reluctant to take a Pain Potion.

Since her first week at work, she had often joined him for lunch in his kitchen, but when the weather was fine she sometimes grabbed a sandwich and went for a walk, determined not to crowd him. But on the morning she'd finally discovered the reason for his dark moods, he had dismissed her to lunch, insisting he needed to stay in the laboratory.

She'd crossed the square to her own house, where she'd taken a tasteless Pain Potion from the cabinet in her bathroom. Then she'd headed straight for Cordelia's kitchen, where Moe had prepared a lunch tray with a steaming mug of tea, to which Hermione added the Pain Potion. She'd carried it to the laboratory and had set it in before of him. He'd raised livid eyes to her face.

She had put up a hand. "Don't hex me, Severus. You look tired, and I thought you could do with something to eat. I'll be back at two."

She'd fled from the lab, stopping briefly at the door, half expecting him to hurl his potion-laced tea after her. She'd turned and watched as he'd raised the mug to his nose and inhaled. She had been certain that he would know about the potion, but after a moment's pause, he had sipped at the contents, and she'd breathed easily once more.

When she had returned from lunch, the tray had disappeared, and she'd gone straight to her bench, half afraid to look at him. The afternoon had passed without so much as a word from either of them, but a brief glance had told her that he didn't look as grey in the face as he had done that morning.

She had been tidying her bench that evening when he'd finally approached her.

"I'm grateful for the Pain Potion," he'd murmured. It hadn't been an apology, exactly, but she had read remorse in his eyes.

"You're welcome," she'd replied, refusing to smile.

"How did you know it was needed?"

"Are you serious?" She'd looked at him, her eyes wide with incredulity, her hand on her hip. "Severus, do you remember the Hungarian Horntail at the Triwizard Tournament?"

He had nodded with a deep frown.

"I would rather have faced that dragon than face you this morning," she'd said, pouting.

He had returned silently to his own workbench where he'd begun to leaf through a stack of potions orders. Hermione had retrieved her cloak from a hook on the wall and had headed for the door.

"I apologise, Hermione," he'd said quietly.

She'd stopped just short of the door and had turned to him, surprised. "Apology accepted."

Crossing the room to his bench, she had sat on his stool while he'd filed away his contracts. "Does it still hurt, Severus? After all this time?" she'd asked, her voice gentle.

He had given a brief nod. "On some occasions more than others."

"Isn't there anything that can be done?"

"No. There's too much damage to the nerves."

"I'm sorry I didn't realise before," she'd said. "I never considered there might still be pain despite the fact there are no scars."

He'd met her gaze then, and she'd known instantly that there *were* scars, but that he kept them hidden. She'd felt an enormous rush of sympathy for him and had left the room before he could see the tears in her eyes.

And now, here she sat in the park, hours of leisure time before her, and all she could think about was Severus Snape. Most people looked forward to their weekends, but she dreaded hers. She just didn't know what to do with herself. Distraction was provided by Padma and the babies, and by Harry, Ginny and little James, but whenever she was with them, her mind was still on Severus.

She wondered how he spent his weekends. She knew that Cordelia spent a lot of time abroad or with friends, and although Severus seemed on friendly terms with the Malfoys and some of the Hogwarts staff, she suspected he had little to do on Saturdays and Sundays. Maybe he looked forward to Monday mornings just as much as she did.

But she couldn't go on like this. It had often occurred to her, over the years, that he may have been in indescribable pain while he lay on the floor of the Shrieking Shack on the night of the final battle. And perhaps it was even possible that had she acted sooner, he might have been saved the permanent nerve damage that caused him pain still. The thought was almost more than she could bear. Her guilt was beginning to feel like a stone around her neck, and she knew she could not continue much longer without confronting the issue. It would have to be dealt with sooner rather than later. Whether he liked it or not.

Severus anticipated Monday mornings with a certain amount of pleasure. He always had. He preferred honest toil to idle pursuits, so weekends did not suit him. And his taste for Monday mornings had increased twofold since the arrival of Hermione Granger in his laboratory. But he assured himself it was his work that evoked such fondness for the start of the working week, not the company.

More than a week had passed since he had begrudgingly admitted that his neck still troubled him, and he greatly regretted that some moment of weakness, some grimace, had unwittingly revealed one of his most closely guarded secrets. She knew about his neck, and he had no desire to be the recipient of pity. He had noticed the look of concern on Hermione's face since the day she'd given him the Pain Potion; her gaze had rested on his neck on more than one occasion.

She arrived a few minutes before eight, as she always did, and he admitted her to the laboratory with a flick of his wand.

"Good morning," she said, giving the hesitant smile he'd come to know.

"Good morning. I trust your weekend was agreeable?"

"Yes," she said, extracting her journal from beneath her robes. "And yours?"

"It was adequate."

She gave an unbecoming snort. "Adequate?"

"Yes, it was adequate. Is there something amiss?"

She shook her head, grinning. "I've just never heard anyone describe a weekend as adequate. Dinner, perhaps, or an essay, but never a weekend."

He watched as she continued to her workbench, where it soon became apparent that her mind was not on her work.

"Hermione," he said testily, "you do realise you're chopping those berries instead of crushing them? Have you discovered some technique of which I've remained completely ignorant?"

She looked down at her bench and gasped. "I ... I'm so sorry," she stammered. "I don't know what I was thinking!"

He looked on as she Vanished the now-useless berries and crossed to the shelves to retrieve some more. He could tell she was distracted, and he wondered if, perhaps, something had happened over the course of her weekend.

Once she'd crushed the berries to a paste, she made her way to the storeroom, and he listened as she rooted through the jars, concerned about her presence there while in such a state of distraction. She emerged moments later, and he watched surreptitiously from beneath his lank hair as she uncorked a small phial.

His eyes narrowing, he closed the space between them and grabbed her by the wrist before she could tip the contents into her simmering cauldron.

"Merlin's beard, girl! Have you lost your mind?" he hissed.

She gaped at him as he extracted the phial from her grasp.

"I assume you meant to add tincture of belladonna?"

"That's what I was *about* to add," she said, confused.

"This," he spat, holding up the clear fluid, "is the bile of a Basilisk. Probably the most dangerous, expensive and irreplaceable item in my entire laboratory. And you wonder why I do not permit you to use the Telenium cauldron?"

"It's ... Basilisk bile?"

To his horror, she put her head in her hands. Fearing a tearful outburst, he Conjured a handkerchief, but was relieved when this proved unnecessary: she lowered her hands, looking more embarrassed than upset.

With surprising composure, she turned and extinguished the flame beneath her cauldron, and with a whispered *Evanesco*, she Vanished the contents and turned to him.

"Severus. I need to talk to you. I can't go on like this. I'm ... I'm too distracted."

"So I've noticed," he barked, eyeing her. She wanted to talk? He was certain the topic of conversation would not be to his liking.

She took a deep breath and said, "I want to talk about ... about that night. In the Shrieking Shack."

"Really? Well, I don't," he snarled, returning to his workbench in a flurry of black. He picked up a small silver knife and pulled a bundle of Valerian roots across the bench. To his annoyance, she crossed to his side and reached out to still his hand before he could commence shredding the roots. He swivelled to face her with a furious grunt.

"Please, Severus," she begged. "I love my job; I'd dearly like to stay on when the three-month contract is up, but I can't continue to work for you without sorting this out."

"Without sorting what out, exactly?" he snapped. "We were both there; we both know what happened. What is there to sort out?"

She swallowed nervously. "I was haunted for a long time by the image of Nagi..."

"Do not mention that cursed creature's name in my presence!" he hissed, baring his teeth.

"I'm sorry," she replied, sighing. "I'm sorry. But the point is, Severus, I was there. I was there, and I didn't check to see if you were dead or alive. I left you for hours upon hours, and I've wondered, for almost seven years now, whether you were conscious for ... for all that time. And if you were ... if you were in pain."

He flinched. He could recall every single word she'd said to him while he lay there on the filthy floor of the shack; he knew she'd been filled with remorse for not having checked for a pulse before she and Potter had left with his memories.

"I would love you to tell me that you lost consciousness when your hand thumped to the floor, Severus. I would like nothing more than to hear you remember nothing from that night until you awoke in St. Mungo's. Can you tell me that?"

He remained silent.

"You can't tell me that?" she asked. "Does that mean you *were* conscious? Were you in great pain, Severus?"

"Questions," he muttered. "Always questions." He turned away from her.

"Severus, please! I have to know!"

He sighed deeply. "Have you never heard the expression 'ignorance is bliss', Hermione?"

She chewed at her bottom lip. "That means you *were* conscious, doesn't it?"

He regarded her for a moment and finally gave a curt nod. "The venom acted only on my motor nerves. My sensory nerves were unaffected."

She clapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh, my goodness!" she mumbled. "You were conscious *and* you could feel pain!"

"I lost consciousness for a short time before you arrived. Judging by the position of the rising sun as it shone through the slats of the shack, I estimate I was unconscious for approximately twenty minutes ... Due to loss of blood, no doubt."

Hermione looked horrified. "We left you alone for something like eight hours, and you were in pain all that time? Was it ... Was the pain unbearable?" she asked, her voice shaking.

He remained silent for a minute, considering his answer. "Is it true that you suffered by the wand of Bellatrix Lestrange?"

She nodded. "Yes. For a short time."

"I assume she used her very favourite curse?" he said, his lip curled in distaste.

She nodded again. "The Cruciatus Curse."

"I also assume that you will never, as long as you live, forget that pain?"

She lowered her gaze. "No. I'll never forget it."

"The burning sensation of the venom rivalled the pain of the Cruciatus Curse."

Hermione looked appalled. "You were in that much pain *foreight hours*?" she whispered. "How did you stand it, Severus? Neville's parents lost their minds after only an hour!"

"I'm a well-practised Occlumens; it was possible to block a certain amount of the pain from my mind. Furthermore, victims of the Cruciatus Curse experience pain in every nerve in the body. My pain was limited to my neck, and as a result, it was easier to bear."

"Did you wish for death?" she asked, her face stricken.

"For a time, towards the end," he replied honestly.

Her lower lip trembled. "Would you have preferred I hadn't returned?"

He sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I won't insult your intelligence by telling you an untruth, Hermione. Yes, at that time, I would have preferred to die."

"But you don't regret it now?"

He looked at her, at the sincerity and concern in her warm brown eyes, and even as he considered his answer, he wondered when the pale face and bushy hair that had once irked him so had become important to him. "I've found that there are many things worth living for."

Her shoulders sagged. "I'm glad to hear that," she said, a catch in her voice.

He turned from her in embarrassment, suddenly eager to return to his work.

But she was not yet finished. "Severus, if I'd returned sooner, would..."

"No, Hermione," he interrupted, guessing her question. "The pain with which I sometimes suffer now was caused by the initial wound and not by the length of time the venom was in my system."

She gave a sigh of relief and crossed to the storeroom to replace the Basilisk bile. He shook his head, hoping she would drop the subject now, but when she emerged, she crossed straight to his bench, her expression grave. "Can you ever forgive me, Severus, for taking so long to return that night?"

"There's nothing to forgive," he insisted, refusing to meet her gaze.

"There's much to forgive. I will always be sorry that we took so long to come back to you."

He sighed, put down his knife once again and looked her in the face. "You said exactly those words just before Poppy Pomfrey arrived, if my memory serves me correctly, and there's no need to repeat them. For what it is worth, you have both my forgiveness and my gratitude."

She gave him a timid smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, might I suggest you return to your work and endeavour not to kill us both this time, silly girl?" He shook his head, but his tone was more playful than stern.

She nodded, and he watched as she returned to her bench, her long ponytail swinging behind her. He resolved to keep a subtle eye on her during the afternoon, but she appeared to have returned to her usual, competent self, and the expression of anxiety had left her face. The girl had obviously been fretting about the night she had saved his life. He was particularly glad to note she'd stopped glancing at his neck. If there was one thing he could not abide, it was pity.

The rest of that week passed without further mention of the Shrieking Shack. When she wasn't being unbearably nosey, Severus enjoyed watching Hermione work: she was not possessed of the innate flair of many skilled Potioneers, but she brewed with practised ease, and her knowledge of her subject compensated for her lack of instinct. There were only another five weeks to go until their three-month contract came to an end, and he was inclining towards offering her a permanent contract. Unless, of course, she resumed her infernal humming.

They had almost concluded their work for the week when Moe tapped on the laboratory door. Severus called for her to enter, and she shuffled into the room, two identical scrolls in her bony hands.

"You is receiving owls, Master Severus and Miss Hermione," she announced.

Hermione took them from her with muttered thanks and passed one to Severus.

He immediately recognised the Hogwarts seal and tore open the letter. Having quickly scanned the contents, he tossed the parchment onto his workbench with a dismissive grunt and returned his attention to his work. Hermione's squeal of delight made him scowl.

"It's an invitation to Pomona Sprout's retirement party!"

"Indeed," he muttered. "Thrilling."

She rolled her eyes. "Severus, you're such a killjoy."

"What joy could possibly be derived from Pomona Sprout's retirement party?"

"Professor Sprout is a lovely woman. You don't mean to tell me you'd consider refusing the invitation?"

"Of course I'd consider refusing the invitation." He muttered something under his breath, and she could clearly make out Minerva McGonagall's name.

"Did you just insult my Head of House?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Minerva McGonagall is no longer Head of Gryffindor."

She glared at him for a moment and then returned her scrutiny to her invitation.

Severus poured the last of his potion into a phial. He would probably have to attend the damnable party; Pomona Sprout had never been anything other than perfectly courteous to him. Hermione gave a deep sigh, and he looked across to her workbench.

"It seems I won't be going after all," she said with a disappointed pout. She put down the invitation and picked up her stirring rod once more.

"Might I ask why?"

She coloured and kept her gaze on her cauldron. "The invitation was for Hermione Granger Nott and spouse."

"And that's a problem why, exactly?" he asked.

"Well, I'm not going alone," she said. "Imagine the gossip!"

"Don't be ridiculous. You would be the subject of more gossip if you were conspicuous by your absence than you would if you were to attend without your spouse."

"I'd just feel ... silly," she said, her colour deepening.

"You're being childish, Hermione. I'm sure everyone at Hogwarts is well aware that you and Theo have separated. I presume you've told your friends?"

"Of course I've told my friends!"

"Then I'm sure the staff of Hogwarts are well aware of your situation. Minerva McGonagall has become as omniscient as ever Albus Dumbledore once was."

"If Professor McGonagall knows, why did she extend the invitation to my husband?" she asked, distressed.

He shook his head in exasperation. "Because you're still a married woman, Hermione. Wizarding etiquette demands that they extend the invitation to your husband. It would have been impolite for them not to do so; it would be impolite for you to refuse the invitation."

She pursed her lips. "Then why is it okay for *you* to refuse the invitation?"

"I said that I would *consider* refusing the invitation. In reality, I will have to attend. Poppy Pomfrey is one of our most important clients, and Pomona is her friend. We provide most of the potions for the infirmary. She'd be most displeased if we did not attend."

She tapped her fingernails on the bench, momentarily lost in thought. "Will Cordelia go, too?" she asked eventually.

Severus picked up the invitation and looked for the date. He shook his head. "It's next Saturday: she's visiting the Schneiderlids that weekend."

Hermione looked suddenly hopeful. "So you'll be going on your own, too?"

"So it would seem," he said, tossing the invitation on the bench again.

"Well," she said nervously, "couldn't we go together?"

He arched both eyebrows. "I beg your pardon?"

"I don't mean go together, as such, I just ... I," she stammered. She took a deep breath. "I won't annoy you or anything...it's just that I'd really hate to arrive all on my own. If we could just, well, get there together, it wouldn't be so bad."

Severus opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, gathering her belongings, her cheeks flaming. "It was silly to ask. I just thought if we could go together, it wouldn't be so lonely. I wouldn't annoy you all night or anything...I'll just be a bit nervous about arriving on my own. But it's fine, I didn't mean to embarrass you or anything, and I..."

"Hermione?" he asked, amused.

"Yes?" she said, peering at him from beneath her curls.

"You're babbling."

"Sorry," she said, biting her lower lip.

"It would be a pleasure to escort you to Hogwarts," he said formally.

"Thank you so much," she said breathily. "I know it's silly, I'd just hate to make an entrance all by myself. I promise I won't bother you, or talk too much, or hum or anything. Once we get there, I'll just leave you alone. Honestly. And I'll..."

"You're babbling again," he said, giving her a frown.

"Okay, I'll just go," she said, flashing him a smile. "Thank you, Severus. Thank you very much."

He watched as she picked up her journal and practically bounced out the door, bushy curls bobbing behind her. He put his hands on his hips and glared at the scroll of parchment still sitting on his workbench.

He hated these returns to Hogwarts, and now, it seemed, he was to attend with Hermione Granger. He wondered what his wife would make of it. Quite frankly, he didn't really care what she thought. He was rather more worried about how Minerva McGonagall would interpret it, interfering old witch that she was.

Severus watched as Cordelia tapped her wand to her trunk, sending it ahead of her to Amsterdam. She turned to him with a brittle smile.

"Give my regrets to Pomona, Severus. I would have liked to be there, if I hadn't already arranged to visit Katarina."

Severus returned his attention to the *Daily Prophet*. "I'm sure you'll be greatly missed."

Cordelia frowned and retook her seat at the dining table. "Are you annoyed, Severus?"

He glanced at her over the top of his paper. "No, I'm not annoyed. I'm accustomed to your weekend jaunts."

She pouted and crossed her arms. "Would you prefer I stayed at home and played the dutiful wife?"

He folded his paper with a sigh. "No, Cordelia. Let us leave it at that; I've said I'm not annoyed."

She regarded him as he poured his tea. "I'm sure I would be surplus to requirements, anyway," she said, adopting a more genial tone. "I believe you've offered to accompany Hermione to Hogwarts."

"Indeed I have," he confessed. "She was reluctant to attend alone, given that your son has deserted her."

Cordelia smirked. "I never realised you had such an admirable sense of duty to your former pupils, Severus. First you offer her a job, now you're escorting her to parties. Whatever will it be next? A place in your bed, perhaps?"

He laid his cup delicately on its saucer and leaned across the table. "If you wish to cross wands, Cordelia, I suggest you do it with somebody else. You are no match for me, and I have far more mud to sling than you."

He rose with as much dignity as he could muster and flung his napkin onto the table. He could feel her gaze upon him as he stalked from the room.

Hermione paced the floor of her sitting room, waiting anxiously for the knock on the front door. She'd spent much of her afternoon having her hair styled at Padma's house. Padma had spent over an hour charming her hair into sleek, shiny waves while Hermione had bounced the twins on her knees. Once her hair had been curled to perfection, she had decided to have her makeup done in a Muggle beauty parlour and had finally returned home to dress.

She stared at her reflection in the mirror above the mantelpiece, and it occurred to her that she had put more effort into her appearance this evening than she had on the day of her wedding. Before she could dwell on the fact, the mirror spoke.

"Yes, very nice, dear. Very Slytherin," it drawled.

Hermione's gaze flew to the collar of her dark green dress robes. "Oh no! You think it looks very Slytherin?" She didn't want anyone to think that she had dressed to suit her escort for the evening. "Should I change into the blue robes?"

The mirror gave a disgruntled sniff. "I think you'll find Slytherin colours are infinitely preferable in this family, my dear."

She didn't have a chance to consider a change of clothes: a loud knock on the door and a glance at her watch told her it was time to leave.

She took a steadying breath before reaching to open the latch. The sight of Severus on the doorstep made her smile. He was, of course, dressed entirely in black.

He frowned and said, "I seem to be a constant source of hilarity, Hermione. Might I ask what you find so amusing?"

She gave him a grin. "It's just that you always wear black robes, and I'd wondered what you would wear tonight."

He glanced at his black attire. "Would you prefer I'd borrowed one of Lance's purple outfits?"

She sniggered. "Definitely not." She shut the door behind her. "I presume we Apparate straight to the Hogwarts gates?"

He gave a curt nod. "Shall we?"

They both turned on the spot and reappeared with a loud pop at the school. It was almost dark, but the huge, wrought-iron gates lay open, and the path to the castle was bordered by a long line of floating candles. Light blazed from the many windows of Hogwarts in the distance, and the silhouette of the castle was visible against the darkening sky.

Hermione felt that familiar rush of happiness at the sight of the place that had felt like home for so many years, and a small "Oh!" of pleasure escaped her lips. Severus glanced sideways at her as they began their stroll to the school.

"I take it you enjoy returning to Hogwarts?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes, very much so. It's bittersweet, I suppose, but enjoyable, nonetheless."

"Were you happy here?"

"In many ways, yes," she said. "There was always the constant worry that Harry was going to get himself killed, and I was very lonely for the last few months of my final year here, but other than that, yes. I was very happy."

He looked at her through the dim light. "Why were you unhappy during your last months here?"

"The Marriage Act," she said. "Ron had assumed I'd marry him, but I refused. We barely spoke during seventh year...it put a strain on my relationship with Harry and Ginny, too. I was never close to the other girls in my year, so it was a bit of a friendless end to my time here. I think I would have been even lonelier if it hadn't been for Neville."

"I see," he said.

"What about you?" she said, suddenly shy. It was difficult to believe she was walking the grounds of Hogwarts with her former professor, conversing with relative ease.

"I don't like coming back here," he said curtly.

"Might I ask why?"

"There are many reasons. But primarily, one does not like to return to the scene of the crime, so to speak."

She presumed that by 'the scene of the crime' he spoke of the Shrieking Shack, and she watched him, expecting him to glance or gesture in that direction. But as she observed him, his gaze moved briefly to the Astronomy Tower, and she understood the crime of which he spoke: the night he had taken Dumbledore's life.

She stopped. "Severus, it was hardly a crime. We all know you acted under Dumbledore's orders."

He scowled. "I would much rather we did not discuss it." He strode away from her.

"But, Severus..."

"But *nothing*," he spat in an angry whisper, stopping and whirling to face her. "Damn it, girl! Do you think I require a therapist?"

"No, I was just curious. You don't have to..."

"First you insist we talk about that damned snake, and now this?"

She walked past him, feeling hurt. "Fine. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

He caught up with her in two lengthy strides. "I did not mean to react in anger. There are just certain things I would rather not talk about."

"It's okay." They walked in silence for a minute or two. "Are you still in contact with many of the staff?" Hermione asked in effort to regain civility.

"Minerva hounds me to take up the position of Potions master again on a regular basis, and I occasionally meet Filius for a drink in The Leaky Cauldron. Horace asks for advice from time to time."

"Really?" she asked, interested. "He's finally recognised your genius?"

He peered at her. "Are you teasing me, Hermione?"

She laughed. "Not really. Would you consider returning to teach?"

"I would rather hex both my arms off."

She smiled in response and glanced at the steps of the castle, increasingly nervous about entering without her spouse. When she looked up, Argus Filch was hobbling towards them, Mrs Norris in his arms.

"Evenin' Headmaster," he said to Severus before directing a glare at Hermione.

"Good evening, Argus. I think you'll find that I'm no longer the Headmaster," he said, amused.

Filch grunted. "You've just gone and left us with that Gryffindor woman," he said, still glowering at Hermione.

Hermione could tell Severus was trying not to smile. He turned to her.

"I trust you remember the former Head Girl?" he said to Filch. "Another Gryffindor woman."

Filch mumbled something under his breath and shuffled past them in the direction of the school gates.

"Charming as ever," Hermione said with a grimace.

"HERMIONE!"

She turned in surprise as her name was bellowed from the top of the steps, and she beamed as the unmistakable bulk of Hagrid hurtled towards her.

"Hagrid!" She ran to close the space between them and giggled as he lifted her up and spun her around.

"Hagrid!" she cried again when she'd caught her breath. "It's so good to see you!"

"Hermione Granger! It's great ter see yeh." He lowered her to the ground and turned to Severus.

"An' Professor Snape!" he cried. To Hermione's great delight, he pulled Severus into a hug.

When Hagrid finally released him after much back-patting, Severus looked as though he'd been Stunned, and Hermione doubled over with laughter. Hagrid left them to go and tend to an injured Hippogriff, and Severus busied himself with straightening his robes. Hermione was still giggling.

"You find this entertaining?" he asked, plucking feathers from his cloak.

"Highly entertaining. Your expression was priceless."

She looked up at the door of the castle, and the smile slid from her face. Severus, now feather-free, followed her gaze.

"Chin up, Hermione," he whispered. "I guarantee they will forget about your missing husband within minutes if you behave with confidence and dignity. I daresay the absence of my spouse will draw more comment than yours."

She looked at him and wondered what he meant by this remark. He offered her his arm. Touched by the gesture, she linked her arm through his and beamed at him.

"Thank you, Severus. Not just for tonight, but for everything you've done over the past two months."

He nodded, and they proceeded to the Great Hall, both of them wondering what the evening would bring.

Chaste Life

Chapter 17 of 34

Hermione considers her feelings.

A/N: Happy Easter to those of you who are Christian, Happy Spring to the rest. :) I'm slowly catching up on answering my reviews, so please keep them coming! I'm very much looking forward to hearing what you think of this chapter.

LB x

The little Love-god lying once asleep

Laid by his side his heart-inflaming brand,

Whilst many nymphs, that vowed chaste life to keep,
Came tripping by; but in her maiden hand
The fairest votary took up that fire,
Which many legions of true hearts had warmed,
And so the general of hot desire
Was, sleeping, by a virgin hand disarmed.
This brand she quenched in a cold well by,
Which from love's fire took heat perpetual,
Growing a bath and healthful remedy
For men diseased; but I, my mistress' thrall,
Came there for cure, and this by that I prove
Love's fire heats water; water cools not love.

Hermione wasn't sure what she'd expected to happen when she walked through the doors of the Great Hall on Severus's arm: a collective gasp, perhaps, or the silent, disapproving stare of everyone at the party. But their entrance was something of an anti-climax: the Hall was packed with well-wishers, and only one or two of the gathered throng turned to inspect the newcomers.

Within seconds, she had spotted many of her friends: Neville and Hannah were chatting to Pomona Sprout; Ernie Macmillan was talking animatedly with Horace Slughorn; and Harry, who hadn't even mentioned that he'd been invited, was looking uncomfortable under the adoring gaze of the current Head Girl. Hermione felt a little silly for having coerced Severus into attending the party with her, considering so many of her friends were here.

"Not quite the scandalous entrance you'd feared, Hermione," Severus whispered with a smirk.

She gave him a tentative smile. "Not quite," she agreed, "although Minerva looks a little shocked."

He glanced at the Headmistress, who was hurrying towards them from the opposite end of the Hall. "I suspect that's because we've arrived together, not because your spouse is absent."

"Do you think so?" she asked, embarrassed.

"Of course. You might have been my brightest student, but you certainly weren't my favourite."

She beamed. "Was I really your brightest student?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, you were. I'm sure you're perfectly well aware of that fact."

"So, who was your favourite?"

"I didn't have a favourite," he said.

"Apart from the Slytherins."

He ignored this last and nodded at Minerva McGonagall. "Good evening, Minerva."

"Good evening, Severus," she replied, laying a welcoming hand on his free arm. She turned to Hermione.

"Hermione, it's good to see you," she whispered.

Severus finally relinquished Hermione's arm, and she shook the older woman's hand.

Minerva looked from one to the other. "I had not expected you to attend together," she said, her curiosity plain to see.

Hermione felt Severus stiffen beside her. "I bullied Severus into escorting me," she explained. "I was nervous about attending alone."

Her remark had the desired effect: Minerva's expression changed from one of curiosity to one of sympathy. She gave Hermione's hand a reassuring pat. "I was sorry to hear about your separation, dear. I was surprised to hear you'd left the Department of Mysteries, however."

Hermione shrugged. "I wasn't happy there, and Severus kindly offered me a position in his laboratory."

Minerva turned to peer at Severus over her glasses. "I see. Well, you obviously haven't murdered one another quite yet. Is Cordelia unable to join us tonight, Severus?"

"She's visiting relations in the Netherlands," he said.

"She seems to be suffering from wanderlust almost as much as her son. I don't think either of them will win spouse of the year," Minerva said with a scowl. "Now, help yourselves to some refreshments. Perhaps I will see you both a little later." She left them and headed for the doors.

Hermione turned to Severus, her eyes wide. "I can't believe she just said that!"

"Minerva has never been fond of Cordelia; I believe they had a clash of personalities while Cordelia was Head Girl."

"Cordelia was Head Girl? Were you still at school then, or had you left?"

Severus gave a curt laugh. "I was only in my third year. Cordelia is almost four years my senior. You presumed I was the elder?"

She immediately coloured. "No, not at all. I just ... I hadn't given it any thought, that's all. I didn't mean to suggest you look older than she does or anything ..."

He smirked. "That's quite all right, Hermione." He gestured to the refreshment tables. "Would you care for a drink?"

She sighed. "Yes, I think I need one."

They made for the laden refreshments table at the centre of the hall, and she gave Neville a brief wave; he gave her a solemn nod in return. Severus followed the direction of her gaze. "It must be quite a big occasion for Mr Longbottom," he said, handing her a glass of champagne.

"Yes," Hermione agreed, watching Neville and Hannah from across the room. "He officially becomes Professor of Herbology tonight. One would expect him to look a little happier."

"Indeed," Severus concurred, looking in the same direction. "One would expect them both to look happier." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "Why did he offer for you at Belgrave House?"

She was surprised he'd asked. "I don't think he knew what else to do: he didn't want to get married, and we'd always been friends. I think he saw it as an easy way out. He wasn't at all upset when I refused." She returned her gaze to Severus. "He's had a difficult life, Neville. He's had feelings for somebody else for quite some time, but she's abroad, and he feels he has to stay in Britain to take care of his parents."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Luna Lovegood?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"A lucky guess. I was aware they'd become friends during my final years here."

"You won't say anything, will you? I'd hate for Hannah's feelings to be hurt."

"Am I not always the very soul of discretion?" he asked.

"I suppose you are," she agreed. She was glad to see him drain his glass of red wine: he was always more talkative when he'd been drinking.

Severus suddenly turned to her with a deep frown. "Quickly," he said, taking her by the elbow. "We need to escape."

But over his shoulder came the huge, bespectacled eyes of Sybill Trelawney. "Severus Snape!" she cried, grasping him by the arm. "I knew you would return tonight!"

He detached her hand and looked at her with distaste. "Well foreseen, Sybill. Hardly a feat worthy of praise: practically all members of staff past and present are here this evening."

"Yes, but while gazing into the future this very morning I saw a dark and dangerous figure. I knew it must be you!"

Severus gave a dramatic roll of his eyes, and Hermione giggled into her champagne. "And what does the future have in store for me, Sybill? Let me guess ... I am in grave danger?"

Trelawney looked from left to right and lowered her voice to a stage whisper. "Danger of a sort, dear boy. The spirits have said you will find a wife within the year!"

Hermione couldn't help herself: she guffawed, drawing a glare from the Divination professor.

Severus gave a snort. "Sybill, I've been married for the last six years, and my wife remains alive and well."

Trelawney recoiled from him, looking confused. "*You are married?*" she asked in disbelief.

Hermione was almost crying with laughter.

Severus shook his head. "Hard as that may be to believe, yes, I am married. You recall the Marriage Act, Sybill? The very reason you are currently wed to Martin Mimbleton?"

She looked lost for a moment. "Yes, I recall it now. Was that only six years ago?" She turned her huge, magnified eyes to Hermione. "Is this your wife?"

Hermione, who had been in the process of swallowing a mouthful of champagne, inhaled it and started to cough.

"Merlin give me patience," Severus muttered. "No, this is not my wife. This is your former student and Head Girl, Hermione Granger."

Trelawney peered more intently at Hermione. "It's you!" she spat, extending a bejewelled finger. "That book-obsessed Gryffindor!"

Hermione started to giggle again.

Severus looked around and spotted Neville's grandmother. "Sybill, Augusta Longbottom remarked to me last week how very much she was looking forward to having her palm read this evening."

The Divination professor immediately made a beeline for the old woman, mumbling to herself as she went.

Hermione grinned. "Severus Snape, that was so mean. Poor Mrs Longbottom!"

"It was an urgent matter of self-preservation," he said, refilling her champagne glass. "Now, I must have a quick word with Horace." He looked across the Hall at Harry, who was still squirming beneath the worshipful attentions of the Head Girl. "I believe Mr Potter is in dire need of assistance, Hermione."

She laughed. "Yes, I do believe he is; I'd better go and rescue him. I'll see you later."

She walked away from him, aware that his gaze followed her across the vast room.

"Hello, Harry," she said, flashing the Head Girl an apologetic glance. "Could I have a word, please? In private?"

"Hermione! Yes, of course." He gave a brief wave to the now-pouting Head Girl and dragged Hermione to a quieter spot in the crowded room.

"She was driving me mad," he hissed. "She kept fluttering her eyelashes at me in this really pathetic way!"

Hermione chuckled. "That's what happens when you make it onto *Witch Weekly's* 'Ten Most Kissable Wizards' list."

"Ten most kissable wizards?" Harry fell silent for a moment. "Where did I come on the list?"

"Third," she replied.

He gave her a silly grin. "Not bad. Not bad at all. Who came first and second?"

"That Irish Quidditch player came first, Conor Ryan, and Kingsley Shacklebolt came second."

Harry looked pleased.

Hermione frowned. "Where's Ginny? And why didn't you tell me you were invited?"

"I get invited to everything," Harry said, looking bored. "The price of fame and all that. I would have told you if I'd known you were invited, too. ~~Why~~ were you invited?"

Hermione shrugged. "I see Ernie is here, and he was Head Boy, so it must be because I was Head Girl. What about Ginny?"

"She's at home with James," Harry said, looking at the floor. "Couldn't get a babysitter."

Hermione peered at him, suspicious. "All those Weasleys, and you couldn't get a sitter?"

"I knew you'd ferret it out of me if I tried to lie," Harry said with a sigh. "She's pregnant," he whispered, "and she's not feeling very well."

Hermione beamed. "That's wonderful news! I'll come and visit next weekend; I can bring her some of Severus' nausea potion...it really works, and it's completely safe for pregnant witches."

"She'd like that. Ron and Rose are expecting a baby, too."

Hermione tried not to let her smile falter. "My goodness, Molly's going to have a lot of knitting to do!"

"She certainly is," he agreed. He gazed across the room to Severus and Horace Slughorn. "Did I see you come in with Snape?"

"Yes. I talked him into escorting me: I thought I'd feel a bit conspicuous coming in without Theo, but now I feel silly for being so bloody needy."

Harry shrugged. "He didn't look like he minded, particularly. What were the two of you giggling about?"

She smiled. "Oh, just something Trelawney said. She's bats, that woman. And maybe I was giggling, but I'm sure Severus was just smirking. I can't quite imagine him giggling."

"No. I can't imagine it, either. How are you getting along in work?"

"Really, really well. I love my job. If someone had told me two years ago that I'd be working for Severus Snape and actually enjoying it, I would have thought they'd been Confounded."

Harry looked at her curiously. "You like him, don't you? You've actually forgiven him for all the horrible things he said to you in school."

She cocked her head to the side. "In fairness, he had a fair amount to forgive too, Harry. Haven't you forgiven him for the things he said and did?"

Harry watched Severus and finally nodded. "Yes, I suppose I have. Right, I better congratulate Neville and Professor Sprout and get back home. Ginny was looking green when I left. I'll see you next weekend."

He left her with a small wave and went to speak to Neville and Hannah. Hermione automatically sought out Severus: he was still deep in conversation with Horace Slughorn, but caught her eye and gave her an almost imperceptible nod. She wished she could talk to him. Her gaze moved around the Hall until she found Ernie Macmillan, alone by the refreshment tables. He would have to do until she could talk to Severus again.

As the evening wore on, Hermione found her gaze drawn time and again to Severus. He looked quite dashing this evening, she thought. His well-cut robes and dark hair gave him an air of distinction. He would never be what most women considered good looking, but he was striking. He radiated intelligence...she could almost feel it from across the room...and she wondered why she had never valued his cleverness while she'd been a student.

She became increasingly aware that he observed her as she mingled with the other guests, and she remembered what Lance's had said: "He watches you, you know." With the exception of dinner parties hosted by Cordelia, she hadn't seen Severus outside of work, so this was the first opportunity she'd had to test the sincerity of Lance's words. And now she knew it was true. The knowledge both terrified her and thrilled her at the same time.

Severus approached the corner where she currently stood alone.

"Hello," she said, meeting his gaze. "I see you've managed to avoid both Sybill and Minerva."

He gave her a smirk. "You appeared to have done the same."

"Well, everybody tries to avoid Trelawney, but I've no reason to avoid Minerva."

He grunted. "You would if every conversation you had with her ended with her whinging for you to take up a teaching position." He didn't mention his other reason for avoiding Minerva McGonagall this evening: her desire to discuss his sudden interest in Hermione Granger.

"Have you also been avoiding the attentions of Rolanda Hooch?" she asked with a smile.

He raised his eyebrows. "Have you been spying on me all evening?"

"For most of it, yes. It's been entertaining watching you trying to escape the amorous advances of the Hogwarts witches."

He eyed her warily, and then looked at her glass. "Just how much champagne have you quaffed tonight?"

"Only three glasses," she replied, trying to look innocent.

"It only takes three glasses of champagne to produce such brazen behaviour. And in front of your employer, no less?"

She leaned forward, closing the gap between them, a smile on her lips. "But we are not at work, Severus. You are not my employer tonight, and I'm not your student or your employee."

He watched as she turned and walked away from him and admired the way her green dress robes clung to her curves. He tore his gaze reluctantly from her retreating form, only to find Minerva watching him with suspicious eyes from across the Hall. Cursing under his breath, he went in search of someone to talk to: anyone but Minerva bloody McGonagall.

Severus glanced at his watch and was pleased to see it was after eleven o'clock. Surely three hours was more than long enough to have paid one's respect to a retiring ex-colleague? He scanned the Hall for Hermione and spotted her chatting to Neville Longbottom. He began to walk in her direction when he found his path blocked by Minerva McGonagall. She had two glasses of red wine, and she pressed one into his empty hand.

"Have a drink, Severus," she instructed. "You've managed to avoid me all evening."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Why would I avoid you, Minerva?"

She glared at him above her glasses. "Well, there's no need. I've decided to give up trying to persuade you to return to Hogwarts."

"You have my eternal gratitude."

"I could hardly encourage you to give up your Potions business when it would mean rendering the former Head Girl unemployed, now could I, Severus?"

He clenched his teeth and gave her a warning glance.

"Why did you offer her the job?" she asked.

"She was in need of employment; I was in need of an assistant. She's more than qualified for the position."

They both looked across the Hall, where Hermione was still deep in conversation with Neville.

"You've become quite the Good Samaritan, Severus," Minerva remarked.

"Minerva," he said through gritted teeth. "You know I am in her debt."

She turned to him, a strange expression on her face. "And is that the only reason you have a sudden desire for her company? Forgive me if I offend you, Severus, but I've known you for quite some time now, and I find it hard to believe that you would act purely from a sense of duty."

"I've acted from a sense of duty before, Minerva, as well you know," he said, the vein in his temple pulsating with anger.

"Perhaps. But that sense of duty was connected to your feelings for a woman. I don't mean to insult you, Severus. I would just hate to see her hurt ..."

To Severus's great relief, they were interrupted by Filius Flitwick. "Forgive me for intruding, Minerva, Severus," he squeaked, "but Horace and I are heading down to the Three Broomsticks for a quick pint before closing. Would you care to join us?"

Desperate for any excuse to escape the Headmistress, Severus said, "I'd be delighted, Filius." He gave Minerva a triumphant glance.

"I must stay to see to our guests," Minerva said with a frown. She turned to leave them. "Tread softly, Severus."

Ignoring her parting remark, Severus turned to look down at the tiny Charms professor. "If you would give a moment, Filius. I accompanied Hermione Granger here tonight, and I must ensure she'll have an escort to the gates."

Filius nodded and went in search of Horace Slughorn while Severus crossed the Hall to Hermione.

His heart still thumping in anger from his conversation with Minerva, he greeted Neville and turned to Hermione. "Filius and Horace have requested my company at the Three Broomsticks, Hermione. I was wondering if Mr Longbottom would agree to escort you to the gates when you wish to return home?" He was pleased to see the brief expression of disappointment on her face.

"Of course," she said, turning to Neville. "That's if Neville doesn't mind?"

"Not at all," Neville said. "I could do with some fresh air."

Severus nodded his thanks. "Good evening, Hermione. I will see you on Monday morning."

She gave him a beaming smile. "Goodnight, Severus. And thank you, again."

"My pleasure," he said before turning and joining Filius and Horace at the doors of the Hall. He rather thought it would have been much more of a pleasure to have enjoyed her company on the return journey, but he thought this was, perhaps, for the best. A moonlight stroll with Hermione Granger would not have gone unnoticed by Minerva.

Although Hermione resumed her conversation with Neville, her gaze did not once leave Severus's retreating figure. When he reached the door, he turned and looked at her one last time before he disappeared from the Hall.

Only a few more minutes had passed when she noticed Neville trying to stifle a yawn, and she suggested it was time to leave. He fetched their cloaks, and they made their way out into the cool night air. Hermione felt she could finally be honest with him, away from the prying eyes and ears in the Great Hall.

"I know you enjoy your work here, Neville, but are you happy?"

"I'm happy in my work, and I'm happy here at Hogwarts. Do you mean are Hannah and I happy? Together?"

She nodded. "Yes, I suppose that's what I meant."

"We are not *unhappy*," he said.

"But neither are you happy?"

"Hannah doesn't like her job," he explained. "You can hardly blame her: Madam Pince is a joyless old hag. I think when she imagined returning to Hogwarts, she thought it would be just like our student days: she didn't count on having to work in a job she doesn't like and having to live with a husband she doesn't love."

"Oh, Neville," Hermione murmured, "I'm so sorry."

He shrugged. "We took a chance, and it didn't work out. We really did try; we both did. I like her; I respect her, but I just don't love her, and the feeling is mutual. She doesn't want to stay here, and her contract is up in August, so I reckon we'll call it quits then."

"Where will she go?"

Neville smiled. "She's applied to become landlady of the Leaky Cauldron."

Hermione laughed. "Well, that's about as different as you can get from Hogwarts Librarian."

"Good luck to her, I say," Neville said magnanimously. "She deserves to be happy."

She looked at him through the darkness. "You deserve to be happy, too."

He shrugged again. "I like my job, and I'm happy to be at Hogwarts." He turned to her. "What about you, Hermione? Were you very upset when Theo left?"

"I was upset at first. Not because he'd left, particularly. Like you and Hannah, it just hadn't worked out. But I just felt like I was in limbo; I'm still his wife, after all. Severus was the one who snapped me out of being miserable. Not only that, but he offered me the job, and I've really enjoyed it so far. I'm much happier now than I was when Theo was around."

Neville fell quiet, and she could see him frowning through the glow of the floating candles. She could just make out the murky outline of the school gates ahead.

He cleared his throat before he spoke again. "What's the situation with you and Snape?"

"What do you mean?" she asked. "I work for him, and he's been very kind to me. That's about it."

"Oh, come on, Hermione! You talked about him for nearly an hour, and you never took your eyes off him all night!"

She stared at him, stunned. "I work for him, Neville! I see more of him all week than anyone else. You talked about Herbology for ages; I didn't assume there's something going on with you and Professor Sprout."

Neville gave a brief laugh. "Yes, well I didn't spend the evening watching her every move. I'm not blind, Hermione. I watched the two of you when you arrived, and I saw the expression on your face when he approached us. Your eyes lit up!"

They'd finally reached the gates, and she turned to face him. "What exactly are you trying to say, Neville?"

He held his hands up. "I didn't mean to make you angry. I just think it's fairly obvious that you have feelings for him."

She felt thunderstruck. And embarrassed that she'd been caught watching him. "I do have feelings for him, Neville. I feel grateful for the job, I feel admiration for his abilities, and I quite enjoy his company. Nothing more than that."

"Whatever you say, Hermione. I'd just hate to see you get hurt, that's all." He leaned against the pillar of the gates.

"He's changed so much, Neville. Or maybe we just couldn't see the real him when we were kids. Do you still dislike him?"

"I don't really know him; he was polite to me while we were at Belgrave House, I suppose. But he ~~was~~ my Boggart when we were at school," he added with a grin.

Hermione giggled, remembering Neville's Boggart Snape dressed in his grandmother's clothes. "He's not your Boggart anymore?"

"I don't think so...I haven't seen a Boggart for quite some time."

She remembered how her Boggart had assumed the form of Professor McGonagall, telling her she had failed her exams. She smiled at the memory of how very innocent she had been back then. "What do you think our Boggarts would be now?"

Neville looked thoughtful for a moment. "Mine would be me: old, alone and unloved," he whispered.

Hermione looked at the outline of his round face and felt sad. She was afraid that her Boggart would be the same as Neville's. She stepped forward and gave him a hug. "Goodnight, Neville. Thank you for walking me out. And you're wrong, you know. About Severus. I admire him. Nothing more than that."

"If you insist," he said. He gave her a silent nod and stood back to allow her to Apparate home.

When she reached Kensington Square, she went straight to bed, but lay awake for quite some time, her mind full of her conversation with Neville. But her thoughts eventually drifted, as they often seemed to these days, to Severus Snape.

Hermione was restless all day Sunday, and a trip to her parents' house for Sunday lunch did nothing to improve her mood. Relations with her mother were still frosty, and she left early, pleading to be excused because of a headache. It was not an untruth: whether the throbbing in her head was due to the champagne or from thinking all night about her conversation with Neville, she didn't know.

She spent over an hour walking around Hyde Park, but the weather turned damp, and feeling chilled, she returned home. She could hear Lance pottering around upstairs, his ebony cane tapping against the floorboards of his study. She climbed the stairs: Lance would cheer her up.

He seemed pleased to see her and bade her enter his study.

"Just the girl I was hoping to see," he said, settling himself stiffly behind his desk.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, indeed. I've just returned from having lunch with Minerva McGonagall, who's completely scandalised at your having accepted a job with Severus," he said, peering at her through his spectacles.

"Scandalised?" she asked.

Lance chuckled. "Well, maybe scandalised isn't the right word, although it must be said that Minerva is easily scandalised. Concerned, perhaps, is a more fitting term."

"Why is she concerned?"

"She mentioned that you came to speak to her before you married Theodore. She said you'd applied for the job as Severus's assistant that summer, but that he refused to consider you as a candidate," Lance explained. "I think she's just curious as to what has made you both change your minds. I wouldn't worry about it."

"I see," Hermione said, bothered. Why was everybody suddenly so interested in her relationship with Severus?

"How are you and Severus getting along in work these days?" he asked.

Hermione smiled. "Better than I would ever have thought possible. We've had our arguments, of course, but nothing important."

Lance looked pleased. "Does he talk to you?"

Hermione nodded. "Some days more than others. There are times when he wants silence, and I think I've learned to read his moods."

Lance shook his head. "No, I mean does he talk to you about himself at all, or about you, for that matter. Does he discuss anything other than Potions?"

"Well, yes, I suppose he does," she replied, reluctant to betray Severus's trust. "We've ... well ... resolved a few issues."

"I'm glad to hear it," Lance replied. "Has he ever spoken to you about Cordelia?"

"No, of course not! We don't talk about our personal lives."

"Yet," he said. "Ah, Hermione. I think Severus Snape is rather good for you. And you for him."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "If only Minerva shared your opinion."

Lance tutted. "Never mind what she thinks. I think you and Severus are good for each other, and that's what really matters."

Hermione spent the rest of the evening curled up in her favourite armchair. The book she'd meant to read remained unopened in her hand while she thought again about her conversation with Neville. He was wrong. Surely he was wrong?

She would not allow the feelings of admiration and respect she felt for Severus to be misinterpreted as something else. Admiration was one thing; attraction was another. Conveniently forgetting how much she'd enjoyed watching him in the Great Hall, she concluded that there was no way she was attracted to Severus Snape. Neville was wrong: she did not have romantic feelings for him. Not at all.

She arrived at the laboratory on Monday morning to find Severus had already begun work. The laboratory was full of steam, and he was bent over the Telenium cauldron.

"Good morning, Severus," she said cheerfully, setting her journal on her workbench. "You've started early! How was ...?" Her chatter died in her throat as soon as she laid eyes on him.

Never before had she seen him without his cloak, but it lay discarded on his stool, and he had opened the buttons on his black frock coat to reveal a white linen shirt beneath. He had rolled up his sleeves as far as his elbows and had tied his shoulder-length hair back from his face with a black band. His brow was beaded with perspiration.

Her mouth felt suddenly dry, and her palms started to sweat. She knew she should stop staring, but she could not tear her gaze away from him. He raised his eyes to hers, and she could tell he had been up all night: he looked exhausted.

"Good morning," he said, his voice hoarse. "I trust you returned safely from Hogwarts on Saturday night?"

"Yes, thank you," she replied, finally returning her scrutiny to her Potions journal. "How was your evening in Hogsmeade?"

"It was fine," he said. "Might I request your assistance? This potion required brewing during the full moon, and as a result I've been up all night."

She glanced at the cauldron. She didn't recognise the colourless fluid that was still issuing clouds of steam. "What is it?"

"Exostraserum," he said, his gaze on the potion.

Hermione gasped. "That's a variation of Veritaserum! I've heard of it, but I've never seen it brewed."

"That's because it requires a Telenium cauldron. Do you know how it differs from Veritaserum?"

She nodded. "It does not cause the drinker to admit the truth to others, just to themselves. It provides clarity of thought and an insight into one's own beliefs and feelings."

"Well done," he replied. He raised his left hand and beckoned her with his index finger.

Judging by the way her hands were shaking, she rather thought she could do with a little insight into her own feelings. Mere admiration generally didn't cause one's hands to tremor or one's legs to turn to jelly. She crossed to his bench, hoping that he couldn't hear the hammering of her heart.

"The process of the brewing is complete, but it requires a further two hours of stirring. I'm greatly in need of some sleep. Might I venture to ask you to stir until ten o'clock?"

She nodded. "Yes, of course."

"If you need to take a break, you may cast a Stasis Charm for up to three minutes, but no longer than that. It must be stirred in an anti-clockwise direction, but I suggest you add one clockwise stir for every twenty anti-clockwise stirs. It's not essential, but it aids in the interaction of some of the more important ingredients," He stepped back and motioned to the stirring rod in his right hand. "If you would?"

She stepped forward, feeling the colour rise in her cheeks. With a great effort to quell her trembling hand, she took the stirring rod from him without breaking the rhythm of the anti-clockwise stirs. He relinquished the rod and stood beside her for a moment, watching as she stirred the potion.

"Now add one clockwise stir," he said and watched with a frown as she did as she was told. "You'll find it works better if you angle your wrist to the left."

"What do you mean?" she asked, suddenly defensive. "I spent four years at the Sorbonne, and not one of professors found fault with my technique."

"Yes, well I'm sure your Parisian professors had not the ability to brew this potion. A lifetime of experience has demonstrated that the change of direction works better if you do it like this," he explained. He held his wrist up and tilted it to the left as if holding the stirring rod. He gave a grunt of impatience at her blank stare. "Good lord, girl. It would be quicker if I just showed you."

He stood behind her, and she could not help her sharp intake of breath as he brought his right arm around and enclosed her fingers in his. He stirred the potion with her, and she shut her eyes, overwhelmed by the sensation of his chest pressed against her back. When he spoke, she could feel the rumble of his voice through her robes.

"When you add the clockwise stir," he said, his mouth next to her ear, "tilt your hand like this."

He tightened his grip on her fingers and angled her wrist to the left. She could feel his breath against her cheek, and when he removed his long, slender fingers from her hand and stepped away from her, she felt bereft, and for one crazy moment she wanted nothing more than to turn and press herself against him. Instead, she drew a deep, shuddering breath.

"I'll return after lunch. When the stirring is complete, you may extinguish the flame and leave the potion to lie still. It will require a month to mature." He turned and picked up his cloak from the stool. She met his gaze once more, and he raised an eyebrow. "Is something the matter, Hermione?"

"No, I'm fine. I'll see you later," she muttered.

She waited until she had heard him climb the stairs, and then she cast a Stasis Charm on the potion. She held her hands out before her and watched them shake in disbelief.

Neville was right: she did have feelings for Severus Snape. Strong feelings. And no good could possibly come of it.

A/N: No good could possibly come of it? Dearest Hermione, we beg to differ! ;) To those of you who were looking forward to a dance at the party, I apologise. But you will get that dance soon. I promise. LB x

All Day Long I Look

Chapter 18 of 34

Hermione travels to Edinburgh.

*I am worn out with dreams;
A weather-worn, marble triton
Among the streams;
And all day long I look
Upon this lady's beauty
As though I had found in a book
A pictured beauty,
Pleased to have filled the eyes
Or the discerning ears,
Delighted to be but wise,
For men improve with the years;
And yet, and yet,
Is this my dream, or the truth?
O would that we had met
When I had my burning youth!
But I grow old among dreams,
A weather-worn, marble triton
Among the streams.*

- W. B. Yeats, *Men Improve with the Years*

Severus woke from a troubled sleep and peered at his watch. It was almost one o'clock in the afternoon. He had only meant to sleep for an hour or two; he had not before permitted Hermione to use the Telenium cauldron, and his sleep-deprived decision to allow her to complete the brewing of the Exostraserum now seemed foolish in the extreme.

Cursing himself for his stupidity, he threw back the covers and headed for the shower. If the girl had rendered the Potion useless, he would not be pleased.

As the scalding water eased the throbbing in his neck, his thoughts turned to Minerva McGonagall. She had always been over-protective of her Gryffindor charges...even more so where Hermione Granger was concerned...but her audacity in hinting that he had feelings for the former Head Girl was unacceptable. That was not to say he did *not* feel something for Hermione Granger...it just annoyed him to be on the receiving end of Minerva's legendary meddling.

He stepped from the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist. He would have to proceed with caution: Cordelia's remark about Hermione had unsettled him; Minerva's suspicions had set alarm bells ringing; and Lance's constant inquiries about how they were getting along had also given him reason to worry. He derived much pleasure from watching Hermione, but it seemed his surveillance had not gone undetected. He had almost been guilty of the most heinous crime of all: the wearing of one's heart on one's sleeve.

Having dressed, he made his way to his study and summoned Moe, requesting breakfast and black coffee. He was in need of some caffeine, and there was thinking to be done.

Sitting back in his leather chair, he allowed his gaze to wander to the window. The petals of the apple and cherry blossom trees blew past his window like snow, and despite the warmth of the house, he gave an involuntary shiver. He closed his eyes and tried to focus.

Hermione Granger. He expected the image in his mind to be of the buck-toothed know-it-all of her adolescence, but the picture that came first was of a beautiful young woman in a backless, ivory gown. Damn it. Emptying his head once more, he tried to picture her as the bane of his Potions classroom, but saw her instead as the capable assistant who awaited him in the basement, her brow furrowed and her lower lip caught gently between her teeth.

He shook his head and opened his eyes with a sigh. He was a fool. He had allowed her to become too much to him. It was one thing to feel concern for her; he did, after all, owe her a life-debt. But it was another thing entirely to have allowed her to become, if he was at all honest, an object of desire. He had watched her, at first, to gauge how she and Theo had been getting along. Once Theo had left, he had watched her to ensure she was not miserable. But what reason had he for his continued scrutiny? He watched her now because he *wanted* to. He watched her because she drew the eye, and rather pleasantly at that. Beauty and intelligence was a heady blend.

But he had been caught watching her. What kind of Slytherin was he? It was unforgivable that he had been spotted ogling a girl almost twenty years his junior. He had absolutely no intention of denying himself either the pleasure of her company or the diversion of her prettiness, but he would have to practice discretion.

Her reaction to his proximity that morning had not gone unnoticed. He had observed the trembling of her hands as she had taken the stirring rod from him and the closure of her eyes when he had stood behind her. He had brushed it off as embarrassment at the time, but he knew it was more. Each time he had sought out her face in the Great Hall on Saturday night, she had already been watching him. It was gratifying to know that his appreciation of her appeared to be mutual. But it was a dangerous

situation, and one that could not continue without great vigilance.

The clock above the mantelpiece in his study announced two o'clock, and he rose from his desk. It was time he checked on the state of his Exostraserum. He had brewed it at the request of an exclusive apothecary in Rome, but he rather thought he would keep a small phial among his personal stores. He was in a delicate position, and the occasion might arise when clarity of thought might elicit a way forward. Trouble was surely on the horizon.

When he reached the laboratory, Hermione had already returned from her lunch and was busily brewing Pepperup Potion. She mumbled a greeting and kept her gaze downcast, making him smirk. He found it satisfying that his feelings, if they could be called such, were shared.

"I see my Telenium cauldron has, at the very least, remained intact," he said.

"I daresay you'll find it has," she responded.

He crossed to his workbench and examined the contents of his cauldron. The liquid was perfectly clear, and a brief incantation told him that the ingredients had been well blended.

She watched from beneath her lashes as he whispered a protective charm over the potion. "Is it to your satisfaction?"

He nodded. "It would seem to be. It must lie undisturbed in this cauldron for a month before it becomes active."

She fell silent and continued with her work. Severus watched from his bench as she lit the flame beneath her cauldron, chewing her bottom lip in concentration or nervousness...he wasn't sure which.

"I'm grateful for your help with the Exostraserum, Hermione," he said quietly.

She looked up and gave him a bashful smile. "That's quite all right; I'm here to help. And thank you for trusting me with the Telenium cauldron."

"You're welcome. You've gained my trust through your diligence. Unless you see fit to use the Basilisk bile again, I may allow you to brew in the cauldron once the Exostraserum has matured."

Ignoring his dig about the Basilisk bile, she beamed. "I can hardly wait! Would you permit me to use the Xiao Tiang Mei cauldron in the meantime?"

"I may, if you can keep your mind on your work," he replied.

"I'll do my best." It might be easier said than done, she thought, considering her very recent discovery. "What do you intend working on now?"

He uttered a sigh. "Paperwork for the remainder of today."

He picked up a stack of orders and began to leaf through them. One was from a new client, and he was reluctant to burden himself with such an unexciting contract. He had little need, financially or intellectually, to bother with orders for such mundane potions as Skele-Gro and Invigoration Draughts. He was about to scribble a note refusing the contract, when he thought of Hermione. He had yet to give her any responsibility for liaising with their clients.

He crossed to her bench and laid the sheet of parchment on her desk.

She looked up. "What's this?"

"It's a request from a new client."

"You wish me to add it to my contracts?" she asked.

"Not exactly," he said. "It's not yet a contract; it's a *request* for a contract."

She put down her knife and picked up the parchment, reading through the potions the client had requested. "None of the potions are a problem. What do you want me to do with it?"

"I research my clients before I agree to act as supplier. I wouldn't wish to become contracted to someone who may make unreasonable demands or request unsavoury potions. I have not the time to deal with this particular client. I would, therefore, like you to act in my stead."

Her eyes widened. "You want me to research them? How do I do that?"

"You go and visit them unannounced in their place of work, question them about their business, and if you're satisfied with what you find, invite them to dinner and negotiate the contract."

"Invite them to dinner?" She could not picture Severus Snape wining and dining his clients.

"An unfortunate part of running a business, Hermione. I know you've been hired as a Potions Assistant, but I think it would be worthwhile for you to gain some experience in the realms of public relations."

She shrugged. "If you think so. When would you like me to go and meet them?" She glanced again at the parchment. The client was a woman from Edinburgh.

"As soon as possible. If, of course, it fits your brewing plans for this week. Friday, perhaps?"

She nodded. "Friday it is."

Early on Friday morning, Hermione Apparated to Edinburgh. She emerged into an already busy street, smiling as she took in the familiar site of Edinburgh Castle in the distance. Heading straight for the gateway to the city's wizarding district, she pushed open the door of a small, dusty bookshop.

The *Inky Quill* had served, just like the *Leaky Cauldron* in London, as the entrance to the magical shopping quarter for well over three hundred years. And by the look of the grimy, yellow windows, nobody had bothered to dust the shop since it had first opened. It was the wizard equivalent of a second-hand book shop, and Hermione had spent many enjoyable afternoons in the *Inky Quill* during her last year at Hogwarts, seeking out magical texts that were no longer in print.

The old, stooped proprietor looked up from his copy of the *Daily Prophet* as she closed the door behind her and smiled in recognition. "Well, if it isn't young Miss Granger!"

Hermione grinned. "Hello, Hamish."

"It's been a few years since you last darkened my doorstep, young lady," he muttered, giving her a wink. "What can I do for you?"

"Much as I would love to spend the morning rooting through your books, I'm here on business today," she explained. "I have to find a new apothecary. It's in Gael's Lane,

but I've never really been beyond Vertic Alley, so I've no idea where it is."

"Aye," he said knowingly. "Looking for Morag McTaggish, are you?"

She nodded. "Yes, that's the one."

"Go straight down Vertic Alley and take the third street on your left...you can't miss it. There's a big tartan robe shop on the corner, and Morag's little place is the fifth or sixth shop along."

"Thank you, Hamish," she said, giving him a grateful smile.

"Any time, missy. What sort of business are you in these days?"

"I'm a Potions assistant for a private brewer in London."

"Let me guess: Prunella Wellsworth or Severus Snape?"

She raised her eyebrows. Hamish seemed to know everyone in the wizarding world. "Well guessed! I work for Severus Snape."

He chuckled. "Brave girl." His smile turned to a frown. "Isn't he married to Cordelia Mill?"

"That's right," she said. He could probably write a more successful gossip column than Rita Skeeter. "Do you know her?"

"Aye," he said with a sniff. "She's a frequent visitor to Edinburgh."

"I'd forgotten. She owns a cottage near here, doesn't she?"

"Indeed she does," Hamish whispered conspiratorially. "About ten miles north of the city. But I don't think it's the countryside that draws her here, if you get my meaning."

Uncomfortable about discussing her mother-in-law, she suddenly wanted to be rid of Hamish's inquisitive company. "Well, I should really be on my way. Thank you for your directions, Hamish."

He bid her farewell, and she made her way to a broad bookshelf right at the back of the cluttered shop. Examining the fourth shelf from the top, she sought out the worn, green cover of *Wizard Clans of the Scottish Highlands*. When she found it, she tapped her wand against the spine three times, and the bookshelf faded to reveal the sun-dappled cobblestones of Vertic Alley.

Stepping into the bustling street, she inhaled the smell of baking bread and freshly brewed coffee. Ignoring the sudden rumbling of her stomach, she made her way straight down the main shopping street, searching for Gael's Lane on her left. There would be plenty of time for some shopping and a spot of lunch later, but for now, she had business to attend to.

She finally reached the tartan robe shop and turned down the narrow lane to the left. About half way along the tiny street, she spotted a hanging sign depicting the cauldron and crossed wands of an apothecary. The building reminded her of the Burrow: it was three stories high, and judging by the way the upper floors were tilting dangerously forward, it was held up by magic.

A little bell above the door of the shop tinkled as she pushed it open, and a young woman with a long, blond plait looked up from the box of glass bottles she was unpacking on the floor.

Hermione gave an exclamation of recognition. "Annie Gilbert! I haven't seen you for ages!"

Annie rose from the floor with a squeal of delight. "Hermione! How nice to see you again!"

Hermione hugged the shorter girl. Annie was a Muggle-born who'd started at Hogwarts when Hermione, Harry and Ron had returned to the school to complete their seventh year. She'd been Sorted into Gryffindor, and recognising that the shy little girl was desperately homesick, Hermione had taken her under her wing.

"Shouldn't you still be at Hogwarts? Aren't you taking your NEWTS this year?"

Annie nodded. "Yes, I am, but I'm hoping to take a degree in Potions, and as I've no classes on Friday mornings, Professor McGonagall has allowed me to take a job with Morag. I work here on Saturdays, too. It's good experience, and I need to save some money for college."

"I took a degree in Potions, too. I'm working as a Potioneer in London."

Annie grinned. "Yes, we hear all about you on a regular basis. Old Sluggy is always telling everyone how you were awarded a Master's level degree because you're so clever."

Hermione tried to hide her delight. "Is he?"

Annie nodded. "Never stops talking about you and Harry Potter."

Hermione could well believe it. "Is Morag McTaggish here?" she asked, looking about with great interest. "I'm here on business and I need to talk to her."

"She's upstairs...second door on the right. You can go on up, if you like. I'm sure she won't mind."

Hermione climbed the stairs and tapped politely at the second door on the right. A voice bade her enter, and she hesitantly opened the door.

She stepped into the little office to find a startlingly familiar woman behind a cluttered desk. Morag's grey hair was pulled into an elegant bun, and, but for the lack of reading glasses, she looked exactly like a younger McGonagall.

Morag smiled. "You must be Hermione Granger," she said in a thick, Scottish brogue. "I've seen your picture." She rose from her chair and offered her hand.

Hermione shook it. "Yes, I'm Hermione," she said shyly. "I hope you don't mind, but I'm Severus Snape's assistant, and he has sent me in his stead. He's a little snowed under at the moment."

"Aye, Minerva told me you were working for him, and I'd wondered which of you would come to investigate me."

Hermione blushed, and Morag laughed.

"Have a seat, Hermione," she said kindly, indicating the chair before the desk. "Minerva has told me a lot about Severus. I fully expected an inspection before a contract was discussed. Minerva and I are cousins."

"I thought you must be related: you're incredibly alike." Surely Severus had known that Morag was related to Minerva? She was a little annoyed that he hadn't seen fit to mention it.

"Severus didn't mention it? It's probably something he expected you to uncover today. Is this the first time he's asked you to negotiate a contract?" Morag asked.

"Yes," she admitted. "I've had sole responsibility for a number of already existing contracts, but I haven't yet negotiated one."

Morag smiled knowingly. "I rather suspect Severus is testing you. Minerva speaks very highly of you, Hermione Granger, so feel free to explore every nook and cranny of my wee establishment, and I'll do everything I can to make sure you return to Severus Snape with a well-investigated and lucrative contract."

Morag was as good as her word. Hermione spent the entire morning looking through the stocks of potions in the tiny shop and leafing through the existing paperwork. As Morag had only recently set up her business, there were mercifully few contracts to be read through, and Hermione was finished by lunchtime. Nothing about the apothecary gave her cause for concern, and having arranged to meet Morag for an early dinner in a restaurant Severus had recommended, she left Gael's Lane in search of lunch.

She shopped for the afternoon, and her dinner with Morag in an up-market wizard eatery passed easily and quickly while they read through the minutiae of the Potions contract.

The waiter cleared away their dessert dishes, and Hermione picked up her quill. She took a minute to check through the list of potions required, and, drawing a line beneath her price-list, she circled the finalised figure and pushed it across the table to Morag.

"That's the total for each batch of potions, based on our regular prices for an order of this size." She expected Morag to haggle over the final figure.

Morag examined the sheet of parchment with a frown and took a quill from her handbag. She scribbled some notes beside the list of potions while Hermione looked on in anxious silence. Finally, she pushed the parchment back across the table.

"I have a suggestion," Morag murmured, sipping at her wine.

"Go ahead," Hermione said, expecting the older woman to propose a lower figure.

"I'm prepared to offer you an additional ten per cent for the inclusion of a clause that would be to my advantage," Morag said.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. An additional ten per cent was a lot of Galleons.

"If you agree to prioritise me above your other clients, I'd be willing to pay a higher amount," Morag explained. "I'm not short of gold, but I need something that will give me the edge over my competitors. There's a nationwide shortage of Pepperup Potion every winter, and a lack of Sunscreen Salve every summer. I'd like to be ahead of the game, and if you could guarantee that my orders are always completed within seven days, I'll pay you ten per cent on top of the total of each order."

Hermione thought of the other contracts sitting on her desk. Thus far, she had completed all of her orders well ahead of schedule. She sat back and smiled at Morag. "Are you doing this because you know I'm on trial with Severus?"

Morag chuckled. "Let's just say the arrangement would benefit us both, Hermione. You're not the only one who has done your research: I've approached other brewers, and none of them were willing to agree to a deadline of less than fourteen days."

Hermione picked up the contract and, having added the final clause, signed her name at the bottom. She passed it to Morag and offered her hand. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you," she said with a grin.

They shook hands, and Morag made a duplicate of the contract with a tap of her wand. Hermione asked for the bill and excused herself in order to visit the bathroom before Apparating back to London.

Still smiling over the successful completion of her very first contract, she left the bathroom and was about to return to her table when she glanced up at the handsome couple who had just entered the restaurant.

Cordelia Mill, dressed in beautifully tailored robes of midnight blue, arrived on the arm of a grey-bearded man whom Hermione had never before seen. She took a step backwards, screened from view by a rack of cloaks. Through the dim candlelight of the restaurant, she watched with a sinking feeling in her stomach as Cordelia and her mystery man looked at one another with an unmistakable air of intimacy.

Feelingly deceitful, Hermione had just decided to walk forward and make her presence known when she stopped: Cordelia and the bearded man, still waiting to be shown to their table, turned to one another and kissed.

Her heart pounding, Hermione stayed where she was. There was no question that the man on whose arm Cordelia had arrived was more than an acquaintance. They were lovers. Of that Hermione was certain. She breathed a sigh of relief when the proprietor finally led the couple to their table at the far end of the restaurant, out of sight of Morag and Hermione's table.

Hurrying back to her new client, Hermione paid the bill, bid Morag goodnight and returned to Kensington Square. Her excitement at having secured such a lucrative contract had evaporated. Instead of looking forward to reporting to Severus on Monday morning, she was filled with utter dread.

The weekend was torture. Should she say something to Severus about what she'd seen in Edinburgh, or should she keep her mouth shut?

It was really none of her business. Cordelia and Severus's relationship was nothing to do with her. She had suspected for quite some time that all was not well between them, but she had certainly not believed her mother-in-law capable of such blatant adultery.

She had considered, for a time, confronting Cordelia on her return to London. On Friday night she had decided she would insist that Cordelia come clean to Severus about her Scottish lover. But she knew that Severus would never forgive her if she said something to Cordelia before telling him.

Severus was her friend and her employer. Her greatest loyalty was to Severus and not to Cordelia. And she couldn't go on without saying *something*. He would know there was something wrong. She decided she would have to come clean first thing on Monday morning.

Would he be angry? Would he be upset? Would it make things difficult between them?

She didn't sleep a wink on Sunday night.

When Hermione arrived at work on Monday, she found Severus emerging from the storeroom, two jars of powder in his hands.

"Good morning," he said, crossing to his workbench. "How was Edinburgh?"

She didn't answer, and he eventually looked up from his cauldron with a frown. "Well? Is something the matter?"

She placed the contract before him. "My trip was ... good and bad."

He eyed her for a moment and picked up the contract. He skimmed the first page and turned to the second. "I presume Morag tried to bargain with you?"

"Yes, she did," Hermione said. "Turn to the last page."

He flicked to the final page and arched one eyebrow in surprise. "An additional ten per cent?"

"On the condition that Morag's orders receive priority treatment and are dispatched within seven days," she explained.

He examined the final clause of the contract and handed it back to her. "It would appear you have a hitherto unsuspected talent for business, Hermione."

She tossed the contract onto her workbench and returned her gaze to his. "I'm sure our arrangement was more due to Morag's innate kindness and connection to Minerva McGonagall than it was due to my haggling skills."

His frown deepened. "You're annoyed because I didn't tell you she was Minerva's cousin?"

"No," she said with a sigh, rubbing her brow, "not really. It's rather more serious than that."

He waited for a minute before he lost his patience. "Shall I seek the insight of Sybill Trelawney or would you prefer I perform Legilimency?"

She took a deep breath. "Severus, there's no easy way of saying this, so I'll be as direct as I can. I hope this isn't going to make things awkward between us."

"For pity's sake get on with it, girl," he growled.

"I had dinner with Morag at that restaurant you recommended, and while I was there, I saw ... I saw ..."

"Yes?"

"I saw Cordelia with ... with another man," she finished in a rush.

His face remained impassive. "And that's it, is it?"

"What do you mean, 'that's it'? I mean *another man*, Severus, and they were more than friends by the looks of it!" she said, shocked by his lack of reaction.

To her astonishment, he chuckled. "Let me guess," he said with a smirk. "Tall man with short grey hair and a neat beard?"

Her jaw dropped. "You know him?"

"His name is Everard Munroe, and he is her lover," he explained, apparently not bothered.

Hermione gaped for a moment, completely wrong-footed. "Her lover? How can you be so calm about this? I haven't slept since Friday night!"

"Hermione, you are naivety itself," he said and summoned her stool with a flick of his wand. "Have a seat."

She perched on the edge of her stool, utterly confused.

"Cordelia and I married out of necessity. We have a reasonably amicable marriage; why should that mean Cordelia be denied her romantic freedom?"

"Why should that mean she be denied her romantic freedom?" Hermione echoed. "Because she's your wife, Severus!"

Severus sat on his own stool and folded his arms. "I will expect you to keep what I say to yourself. This is Cordelia's information. Do I have your word?"

She nodded. "Of course."

He scrutinised her face for a moment. "Cordelia, as you are probably well aware, was the only daughter in her family. She has four brothers, all of whom she out-performed while at Hogwarts. Her mother died while she was in her second year, and her father had little time for a girl: the boys were infinitely more important, so far as he was concerned. Her appointment as Head Girl passed him by completely unnoticed. Desperate for recognition and male approval, she fell for the first man to pay her any attention: a man who happened to be acting on the Dark Lord's orders.

"Gilbert Nott had been a Death Eater for three years when he was ordered to marry Cordelia. The Mills had long resisted any involvement with the Death Eaters, and the Dark Lord believed it would cause them great embarrassment if the only female of their line was to become wed to a known Death Eater. He was, of course, correct. Cordelia eloped with Gilbert Nott, and the family were dreadfully ashamed. She was young and foolish, but despite the fact that theirs was a loveless marriage, Gilbert was always fond of her and treated her with kindness."

Hermione was fascinated. Theo had told her nothing of his mother and father's relationship. "Was he kind to Theo?"

Severus shrugged. "I've no reason to believe he mistreated him. Cordelia inherited a cottage on the outskirts of Edinburgh from one of her aunts, and she spent an increasing amount of time there when the Dark Lord returned, in order to be near to Theodore while he was at Hogwarts and to ensure that he was not coerced into becoming a Death Eater. I'm not making excuses for Theodore or Cordelia, Hermione. I am all too well aware that Theo has inherited his mother's innate self-obsession, but she did her very best to ensure that he did not follow in his father's footsteps, and in that regard, she succeeded."

Hermione nodded reluctantly.

"Everard Munroe was, for quite some time, a Professor of Transfiguration in Helsinki. Fearing for the safety of his elderly parents, he quit his position and returned to Edinburgh in the wake of the Dark Lord's return to power. I'm not quite sure when he and Cordelia met, but I know they began seeing one another before Gilbert Nott died in the final battle."

"So she cheated on her first husband as well?" Hermione asked, indignant. "You and Cordelia might have married because of the Marriage Act, Severus, but she married Gilbert Nott of her own free will, and she had no right to cheat on him!"

"Hermione," he said, exasperated, "she married him when she was eighteen years old. Was she really to pay for that mistake for the rest of her life?"

"If she decided it was a mistake, why didn't she divorce him?"

Severus gave a sigh. "In wizarding society, Hermione, both parties must agree to a divorce, no matter what the circumstances. She asked him for one on many occasions. Gilbert would not agree; it would not have pleased the Dark Lord."

"It's still adultery, and I just don't like it," she insisted, pursing her lips.

"Forgive me for saying so, but sometimes you view things from a Muggle perspective. This is not a Muggle soap opera; it is real life, and pure-bloods have been arranging marriages for centuries. Such behaviour is now legally obligatory, and where there are arranged marriages, there will always be adultery. Adultery is not frowned upon so much as it is in Muggle society."

Hermione rather begged to differ, but she crossed her arms and said nothing.

"Everard Munroe is a pure-blood," he continued. "When Gilbert died, Cordelia entered a requisite period of mourning. It would have been unthinkable for her to marry within a year of Gilbert's death, but she and Everard planned to do exactly that when the year had elapsed. Unfortunately for both of them, the Marriage Act came into effect before they had a chance to wed. I cannot be sure, but I've reason to believe they were thinking, reluctantly, of fleeing the country. Everard was loath to leave his parents, however, and Theodore had not yet sat his NEWTs. The opportunity to abide by the Marriage Act presented itself, and Cordelia found a way around her problem."

"You were her solution?" Hermione asked.

He laced his fingers. "I suppose you could say that."

"You knew she loved another man, but you married her anyway?"

He gave a derisive snort. "I did not marry for love, Hermione. It was to my advantage to marry Cordelia Mill."

"Did you know about Everard before you got married?" she asked.

"I decided to do a little research before offering for Cordelia. I found out about her affair with Everard Munroe. I was a spy: it was not difficult to unearth the truth."

Hermione shook her head. "Why did you marry her, if you knew?"

"Why did I marry her? For the very reasons you married Theodore: to abide by the law and stay in Britain. And there were other advantages: she is wealthy and has many connections. She enabled me to set up what has become an incredibly lucrative Potions business. I am a Slytherin, Hermione. I would not have married Cordelia unless I believed that such a marriage would be to my personal advantage."

"Is she open about it? Do many people know?"

Severus shook his head. "We've never discussed it; I've no idea whether or not she knows I'm aware of the situation. I know she practices no discretion when in Edinburgh, as you've discovered, but they never meet in London, and for the most part, she is tactful. Lancelot knows. Of that I'm certain."

"Is Everard married?"

"No. He was fifty-three when the marriage act was introduced. He was exempt."

Hermione looked at him so intently he was forced to look away. "I just can't believe this, Severus. I'm in complete shock. I can't believe you're so accepting of this situation."

"I made a choice; I went into this with my eyes wide open. Cordelia has my respect; she does not have my affection. I've enabled her to carry on with her life in this country. She, in turn, has given me the financial and political support to launch a successful business. Where's the negative, exactly?"

"In your personal life, Severus," she said, knowing she was stepping over one of his invisible boundaries. "Would she be so understanding if you found someone you wanted to be with?"

He glared at her. "You're getting rather personal here, Hermione. Do you think I've adhered to some sort of vow of celibacy these past six years? Not all of us were so idiotic as to take vows of fidelity."

She stifled a gasp. It had never occurred to her that he, too, might have taken a lover. She blushed. "I'm sorry," she mumbled, slipping off her stool and returning to her bench. "I didn't mean to pry. Honestly. I was just so taken aback when I saw them. You've been very good to me, Severus, and I just hated to think that something was going on behind your back; I hated the idea that you were being treated unfairly."

"I haven't been treated unfairly. Cordelia is to be pitied, Hermione. She is not to be despised."

Hermione looked up. "How, exactly, is she to be pitied, Severus?"

"She made a huge mistake when she was a young woman, and when she eventually found someone with whom she could be happy, that happiness was snatched away from her by the Ministry of Magic," he explained. "She cannot be with the man she loves and is forced to live a lie. Do not detest her on my account. I'm by no means unhappy with the situation."

Hermione looked down once more, determined to set her mind to her work. Despite Severus's words, she couldn't help but feel for him. He had spent many years living a lie for Albus Dumbledore, and now he was doing the same for his wife. Lance's words about playing pretend suddenly made complete sense. Maybe Cordelia Mill deserved some happiness after the mistakes she had made in her youth, but surely the same could have been said of Severus Snape?

When Hermione left work later that day, she returned home and climbed the stairs to Lance's study. She knocked on the door and found him scribbling furiously on a length of parchment. He put down his quill as she closed the door behind her.

"Are you busy?" she said. "Will I come back later?"

He grunted. "Just drafting a letter to those Bertie Bott's people." He motioned for her to sit down.

She frowned. "The people who make Every-Flavour Beans?"

"The very ones!" he said, rapping on the desk with a scowl. "I've been buying those blooming beans for over eighty years, and guess what they've gone and done?"

Hermione couldn't tell whether he was genuinely annoyed or just pulling her leg. "I've no idea. What have they done?"

"They've decided, in their *wisdom*," he said derisively, "to discontinue the radish flavour beans!"

Hermione grinned. "Is that a bad thing?"

"Of course it's a bad thing!" he said, aghast. "I can't be doing without radish flavour beans!"

She giggled.

"Laugh if you will!" he said. "Maybe you're not fond of radishes, but regardless of one's taste in vegetables, you must admit it's false advertising. I'm just pointing out to them that they're going to have to change the name of their product from Every-Flavour Beans to *Almost* Every-Flavour Beans."

"Oh, Lance," she said, still giggling. "You certainly know how to cheer a girl up."

He grunted again and pushed the letter away. "And why do you need cheering up? Is Severus misbehaving?"

Her smile vanished. "No, Severus is not the one misbehaving." She looked Lance directly in the eye. "I was in Edinburgh on Friday, and I happened to come across Cordelia and Everard Munroe."

"Ah, yes," he said knowingly. "He has rather a nice beard, does Everard."

Hermione rolled her eyes, knowing Lance was being deliberately obtuse. "His beard is hardly the issue. I was so shocked, Lance. I had to confront Severus about it, and I just feel so bad about the whole thing. How am I meant to go around pretending everything's normal?"

"Everything *is* normal, dear girl," he said gently. "The only difference is that you happen to know about it. Severus doesn't love Cordelia; Cordelia doesn't love Severus. You should be delighted."

She felt like a child caught with her hand in the biscuit-tin. "What do you mean by that?"

It was Lance's turn to roll his eyes. "I wasn't born yesterday, girl! Cordelia and Severus have what amounts to an open marriage; you've been abandoned by your husband. Severus deserves a bit of happiness; you deserve a bit of happiness. Do I need to spell it out for you?"

"Lance, are you insane?" she cried, rising from her seat.

He chuckled. "That would seem to be the general consensus." He gave her a penetrating stare over his glasses. "Are you telling me you feel nothing for Severus Snape?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but she didn't know how to deny it. Not to Lance.

Lance chuckled again. "You see?"

She walked to the door, suddenly eager to flee. "He's my employer, Lance, and he's Cordelia's husband, regardless of what's going on between them. Furthermore, I'm still married to your great nephew, and much as I despise him, he's not yet caused my ring to burn," she said, raising her hand and pointing to her wedding band.

Lance sat back in his chair. "That ring will burn; mark my words. And are you telling me you intend to remain celibate for the rest of your life? What if Theo never comes back?"

"It's only been three months. He'll want a divorce at some stage; I'm sure of it."

"We'll see," Lance said with a crooked grin. He dismissed her with a little wave of his hand and picked up his quill once more.

She left the room and shut the door behind her, her heart thumping. Her mind was whirling with all this newly discovered information. But somewhere behind the shock, the disgust, the embarrassment at what Lance had said and fear at what she might be getting herself into, there skulked some as-yet nameless new emotion. Hope? Interest? She wasn't entirely certain. But for the first time she realised that in an emotional sense, Severus Snape was very much a single man.

Infinitely Suffering

Chapter 19 of 34

Hermione has some trouble with her wedding ring.

I am moved by fancies that are curled

Around these images, and cling:

The notion of some infinitely gentle

Infinitely suffering thing.

- T. S. Eliot, *Preludes IV*

Hermione spent the rest of the week avoiding Cordelia Mill. Despite everything Severus had said, despite every excuse he had made for Cordelia's behaviour, she couldn't help but feel indignant on his behalf.

There was something else, too: Now that she knew their marriage was nothing more than an arrangement, her attitude to Severus had changed. She found him attractive, and now she was less horrified by her own feelings. True, to become romantically involved with him would cause everything to tip wildly out of balance. Lance was wrong: there was no way she could act on those feelings. But now, somehow, they seemed more acceptable.

More and more often she found herself drifting off to sleep remembering the feel of those slender fingers upon her own and the rumble of his voice when he'd stood behind her. His obsidian eyes had begun to haunt her dreams. But they were just that: dreams. Was she really hurting anyone by allowing him to become an object of fantasy?

And there was something else on her mind. He'd told her he hadn't taken a vow of celibacy. Did that mean he'd had a lover? More than one? And did he have *omew*? The thought made her skin crawl. At first, she thought it was because she couldn't stand the idea of adultery, no matter what the circumstances. But by the end of the week, she realised the feeling of irritation was nothing to do with prudishness or disapproval. It was something much worse than that. It was jealousy.

At first Severus wondered if he had, perhaps, made a mistake in disclosing so much information to Hermione. The facts were not really his to divulge, given how he had come by them. But what else could he have done? His wife and her lover had flounced around Scotland with little effort at discretion. What were they to expect?

He'd spoken the truth when he'd said he had never discussed the circumstances with his wife. It was like an unspoken agreement between them, and he liked it that way. His marriage had given him the freedom to continue to live in Britain. He had been involved with two women during the first few years of his married life, and so far as he was concerned, he was free to see any woman he chose.

But these days, there was only one woman on his mind, and she'd been on his mind for longer than he cared to admit. Almost two years had passed since Hermione had married his stepson, and the image of that backless gown seemed to be permanently imprinted on his retinas. How often had he watched her brew and wondered what it would be like to run his fingers down the length of her bare spine? How gratifying would it be to hear her gasp if he dared to bury his nose in her fragrant hair and press his lips to the smooth nape of her neck?

He crossed his study and poured himself a brandy. The situation was too complex. She was his assistant; his stepson's wife; his former pupil. He looked across the square and cursed aloud. He had been too long without a woman. Surely there were desirable witches to be found in London? There were women of far greater beauty than Hermione Granger. But they *weren't* Hermione Granger. Their beauty might outshine hers, but they had not that intoxicating blend of intelligence, naivety and warmth that was there in her hazel eyes.

In a sudden fit of self-loathing, he drained the brandy from his tumbler and flung it into the empty fireplace, wincing at the sound of the shattering glass. Why did he feel for Hermione Granger? *What* did he feel for Hermione Granger? Somehow, lust seemed infinitely more acceptable than something deeper.

A tap on the door made him turn from the window. Cordelia entered his study, and her gaze moved to the shards of glass in the fireplace.

"I heard breaking glass," she said with a frown.

"I dropped a tumbler," he said. "No reason for concern."

"You dropped a tumbler? In the fireplace?"

He folded his arms. "Yes, I did."

"Isn't it rather early for a drink?" She crossed the room and took the seat in front of his desk.

He glanced at his watch. It was eleven o'clock in the morning. "Perhaps. Is there something you wanted, Cordelia?"

"I've decided to throw a surprise party for Lance," she announced. "He turns one-hundred and five tomorrow."

He raised an eyebrow. "You're staying in London for the weekend?"

"Yes. I hope I'm not interfering with your plans?"

He sat down and shook his head. "When are you planning to have the party?"

"Tonight. It's rather short notice, but I happen to know Lance has no plans for this evening, and I was hoping Hermione might escort him here after the other guests have arrived."

"Provided she has no plans of her own, of course," he said.

Cordelia looked surprised. "Well, yes. Of course. She doesn't seem to have much of a social life, poor thing."

He knew a moment of annoyance on Hermione's behalf and could not help his reply. "She spent last Friday in Edinburgh on business, but to my knowledge, she has no such plans this weekend."

Cordelia hid her alarm well. "Wonderful," she said breathily. "I've invited most of the family, and I'm about to send an owl to the Malfoys. I thought I'd invite Newt Scamander and his wife, too; I know Lance is quite chummy with them at the moment. I would invite Minerva, but I'm sure she's busy with the school."

Severus was relieved: he had no wish to spend an entire evening under the scrutiny of Minerva McGonagall. "I'm sure you're right."

She gave him a brittle smile. "Providing everybody is available at such short notice, there should be enough of us for a jolly evening. I'll ask Moe to prepare the table in the ballroom; it's more spacious. Would you write a note to Hermione and ask her to bring Lance along shortly after eight?"

"Why don't you pop across the square and ask her yourself?" he asked with a small smile. He knew she wouldn't want to be alone with Hermione after his remark about Edinburgh.

She rose from her chair and glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. "I've not the time, Severus. I have far too much to organise."

"You've not the time, or you've not the inclination?" he asked, deliberately goading her.

She turned, one elegant hand on the handle of the door. "I've not the time," she repeated with a frown. "Besides, I'm sure you won't mind, seeing as the two of you are such good *friends*."

She closed the door with a bang, drowning out his amused chuckle. His wife was easy to bait.

He summoned his cloak, deciding he would pass the request to Hermione in person. He was keen to ensure she would play her part and behave normally in Cordelia's presence. Merlin only knew Gryffindors were not known for their subtlety.

Hermione sighed when she heard the knock on the front door. She'd persuaded Padma to leave the twins with her for the morning and go out for brunch and some shopping with Dean, and although Shivani was fast asleep in her little travel cot, she'd only just managed to get Preeya off to sleep on her shoulder. The baby jerked at the sudden noise, but continued to sleep, and Hermione climbed the stairs from the basement, humming gently, wondering where Moe had disappeared to.

She opened the front door with one hand, hoping she wouldn't find her mother-in-law on the other side, and smiled when she found Severus there instead. She pressed a finger to her lips.

"I've only just got her off to sleep," she whispered.

Severus looked as though he'd been Stunned. "Her?" he asked, staring at the yellow-clad baby.

Hermione grinned. "Yes. Her. Preeya. My goddaughter."

Severus stood rooted to the spot. "Your goddaughter?"

She rolled her eyes. "Are you going to come in, or will I have to babysit on the doorstep?"

"Whose is it?" he asked, stepping over the threshold and closing the door gently behind him.

Hermione sniggered. "*It* belongs to Padma and Dean and is part of a matching set."

"A matching set?" he asked, still looking startled.

"They have twin girls, as you know very well," Hermione hissed.

"I just didn't expect to find them here," he said, finally recovering. He tore his gaze from the sleeping infant. It had been some time since he had seen Hermione dressed so casually, in jeans and a t-shirt.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" she asked, already heading for the stairs to the basement. "Shivani's in her cot in the kitchen, so I don't want to leave her alone for more than a minute or two."

He followed her down the stairs, eyeing the black-haired baby over her shoulder. "I've come to ask a favour."

"Have you?" she asked, crossing to the stove and lighting the flame beneath the kettle with her wand.

"Cordelia's decided to throw a surprise birthday party for Lance this evening," he said.

Hermione gasped. "I'd no idea it was his birthday!"

"He turns one-hundred and five tomorrow."

Hermione was suddenly anxious. "I presume Cordelia wants me to be there?"

He nodded. "She wants you to escort him to our house after the other guests have arrived."

"Do I have to go?" she asked, one-handedly measuring two large scoops of breakfast tea into an earthenware pot.

"You know you do. Lance would be glad of it: he hates his brothers, and they've all been invited."

Hermione uttered a deep sigh. "I suppose I don't have much of a choice."

Severus crossed the room and took the kettle from her. "I'll make the tea. Can't you put her in the crib?"

"I could, but I don't want to. She's so cuddly," Hermione said, smiling fondly at her goddaughter.

He watched in astonishment as she nuzzled the sleeping baby with her nose and inhaled.

"She just smells so lovely," Hermione said, "and if you listen really carefully you can hear her sort of sighing in her sleep."

She returned her gaze to Severus and laughed at the look of utter horror on his face. She crossed to the crib and laid Preeya next to her slumbering sister. "Surely even you have to admit they're lovely babies?" She turned and accepted a mug of tea from him.

"What do you mean 'even you'?" He peered over the edge of the crib, keeping a cautious distance. "They're not as ugly as some specimens I've come across," he said, taking a seat at the pine table.

Hermione gave a quiet laugh. "I'll pass your compliment on to Padma and Dean." She sat opposite him. "I'll feel awkward tonight, seeing Cordelia again."

"I expected that," he said, sipping his tea. "That's why I wanted to speak to you. It's imperative you behave normally around her this evening."

"I'm not good at hiding my emotions, but I'll do my best."

He watched her for a minute, admiring the way a few strands of hair had worked themselves loose from her ponytail. "Bear in mind, Hermione, that the situation has not changed. It continues as it has done for many, many years. The only thing that has changed is your awareness of the circumstances."

She met his gaze and nodded. "You're right. Lance said something similar. Besides, I think I'm over the shock of it by now. You're the one married to her. Surely if you can be so magnanimous, I can at least ignore it."

"I assure you, my magnanimity is motivated by pure selfishness. Why would I want to rock the boat?"

She shrugged. "I can't pretend I understand it, Severus. I don't think I could stand to live like that."

"I had a choice. The time may come when you have no choice but to live similarly." His gaze was drawn to her wedding ring. "There's a veritable epidemic of extra-marital affairs in the wizarding community."

She shrugged a second time. "Maybe there is, and maybe I'm naive, but I just don't like it, and I can't condone it." No sooner were the words out of her mouth than she felt guilty. Hadn't she, a married woman no matter what the situation, had amorous thoughts about the very man sitting before her?

He drained the last of his tea. "Can I count on you not to confront my wife?"

"Of course you can, Severus," she insisted. "Have I ever betrayed your confidence before?"

He could read nothing but sincerity in her brown eyes, and it suddenly occurred to him that the girl sitting before him probably knew more about his personal life than any other person on the entire planet. How very strange. "No. You've never betrayed my confidence. I know you are trustworthy." He rose from the table. "I'll see you this evening."

She watched him make for the door. "How will I know when all the other guests have arrived?"

"I'll send my Patronus."

She nodded and glanced at the sleeping babies. "Would you like a go before you leave?" she asked, gesturing to the crib.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You know," she said, smiling, "would you like to hold one of the babies?"

"Are you out of your mind?" he spat.

She giggled. "I'll take that as a no, then."

Lance hobbled into the kitchen while Hermione was feeding Shivani. Preeya had already been fed and was happily gurgling at the three teaspoons Hermione had Levitated above the cot.

"Babies!" he exclaimed, smiling. He tickled Preeya under the chin and was rewarded with a gummy smile. "Padma's twins?"

"Yes," Hermione replied. "That one is Preeya, and this is Shivani."

He stiffly took a seat and watched Hermione feed the ravenous baby. "You seem remarkably comfortable with them."

"I've been around them quite a bit," she explained, "and they're very good. James Potter is more of a handful all by himself, really."

"Was that Severus I heard earlier?" he asked.

"Yes, Cordelia has invited you and me to dinner tonight."

Lance gasped. "Godammit! She's planning one of her bloody surprise parties, isn't she?"

Hermione gaped at him, groping feebly for some way to deny it.

Lance shook his head. "Must I go through this every five years? Just because she's at a loose end for the weekend doesn't mean the rest of us have to suffer!"

"Well, maybe it's not a party, maybe it's just dinner with her and Severus," she said, knowing that her flaming cheeks would give her away.

Lance pushed his spectacles up to the bridge of his nose and peered at her. "I wasn't born yesterday, girl. She'll have the entire bloody family there. You haven't even met my youngest brother, Galahad. Complete toe-rag. Can't stand the sight of him."

Hermione laughed. "Are all your brothers named after Knights of the Round Table?"

"Yes. My mother was a complete and utter idiot. Bedivere, Tristan and Gawain are the other three. Gawain is the only one I can bear, as it so happens."

"Weren't Gawain and Lancelot supposed to be sworn enemies?"

Lance chuckled. "Yes, indeed. Stupid woman didn't do her research very well, did she? Look at me...I'm supposed to be a towering mass of male virility, and what did she get? A five foot tall pansy! Served her right, if you ask me."

Shivani smiled, amused at Hermione's laughter.

"But isn't one of your sisters called Mary? I was expecting a Guinevere or a Morgana at the very least."

Lance grinned. "They're called Mary and Jane."

Hermione snorted. "I'm sure tonight will be entertaining with you lot there."

"Right," Lance grumbled, getting up suddenly. "I'm off to Madam Malkin's. I haven't any robes nearly dreadful enough for tonight. If Cordelia insists on throwing me these awful parties, the least I can do is embarrass her with the vulgarity of my clothing!"

Padma collected the twins after three, and Hermione spent most of the remainder of the afternoon tackling her hair. It wasn't nearly as pretty as when Padma charmed it for her, but it wasn't quite as bushy as usual, and copious amounts of Sleakeazy's had worked wonders. When she was happy with her appearance, she went in search of Lance, who was already waiting in the hallway, his ebony cane tucked under his arm. She could not prevent her jaw dropping at the sight of his outfit.

"What do you think?" he asked, hobbling around in a circle to give her the full view.

The robes he had chosen were of the most garish pink Hermione had ever seen, and were embroidered with gold and silver stars. He wore a matching, jaunty little cap at an angle on his head. Hermione couldn't imagine a more objectionable outfit.

"Absolutely perfect. Cordelia will have a fit." The thought did give her a certain amount of pleasure.

"Just as I'd hoped!" Lance said. "She'll probably have some of her Ministry of Magic cronies there tonight...I can't wait to see her face."

"Has Severus sent his Patronus yet?" she asked, glancing at the front door. "He said he'd let us know when the guests had arrived."

Lance shook his head. "Not yet. Might we wait in your sitting room?"

"Yes, of course!" She opened the door of the sitting room, but before Lance could shuffle across the carpet, there was a faint whooshing sound, and the biggest Patronus Hermione had ever seen came through the front door. She looked in surprise at the huge, silver figure that landed on the floor, its great, leathery wings outstretched.

She'd been expecting the silver doe Patronus that Harry had described in such detail. But as the silvery figure in her hallway turned its blank eyes towards her and gave a slight nod, there was no mistaking the magical beast: a Thestral.

She stared at it, waiting for it to speak and wondering if it would have Severus's voice or if, perhaps, it belonged to somebody else. But it didn't open its mouth, and after a few more seconds it disappeared.

Lance sighed. "Well, I suppose we should go."

They made their way slowly around the green, and when they finally reached Severus and Cordelia's front door, Hermione took a steadying breath. She would have to be careful around Cordelia. Around Severus, too. She had no wish to draw attention to herself as she had done at Hogwarts.

Moe answered their knock with a deep frown. "Master Lancelot," she hissed, one hand on her hip. "Just what is you wearing?"

Lance chuckled. "What's wrong with it, Moe?"

"You is looking like a Pygmy Puff!"

Lance looked down at his gaudy robes. "I think they're quite dashing!"

Still shaking her head, the little elf lead them to the ballroom, and when she pushed open the door, a loud chorus of "Surprise!" rang out.

Lance feigned immediate shock and confusion. "What? Is it someone's birthday?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and then quickly pasted a smile on her face as Cordelia strode towards them, her arms outstretched.

"Oh, Uncle Lance," Cordelia simpered, kissing the old man on both cheeks. "Happy Birthday!"

She turned to Hermione and kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you for bringing him, dear girl," she whispered. "Couldn't you have persuaded him to change out of that hideous outfit?"

Hermione tried to look innocent. "I thought it looked rather nice."

"Do you really think so?" Cordelia shook her head. "If you cross to the bar, dear, Severus will fix you a drink."

Hermione was glad of an excuse to leave Cordelia's side and worked her way across the room, staying away from the more tedious old Mills as she went. There were more than forty people present, and she didn't recognise some of them, although she could clearly make out Lucius Malfoy's drawl coming from somewhere to her right.

Severus smirked when she reached the bar. "He knew about the party," he said, nodding in Lance's direction.

Hermione smiled. "Yes, he did. Sharp as a tack, that man, despite appearances. He wasn't happy about it."

"I assume he wore that horrid ensemble just to annoy Cordelia?" Severus asked.

"Right again," she said, accepting a glass of red wine from him.

"You did well with Cordelia."

Hermione shrugged. "I'll behave myself, don't worry."

"I know you will, and I know you did not relish the idea of coming tonight. I hope it's some consolation that I've seated you with Draco and Susan."

She immediately brightened. "They're here?" she asked, looking around and spotting them in a corner of the room. "Thank you, Severus. If I'd been next to Aunt Jemima again I probably would have turned my wand on myself."

"You're welcome," he replied. "I must mingle with the guests. I will see you later."

Draco was as amusing as ever, but still, Hermione found the surprise party difficult to endure. Before they'd sat down to dinner, Susan had announced she was pregnant. Happy as she was for Draco and Susan, Hermione couldn't help but feel a little sorry for herself. Harry, Ron and Draco would all have a generation of children heading off to Hogwarts together some day while she would, in all probability, look on enviously. She recalled what Neville had said about his Boggart, that it would take the form of him...old, alone and unloved. She knew that in this safe, post-war world, loneliness had become her greatest fear, too.

Her discomfort was made worse by some of the elderly Mills asking after Theo's whereabouts, to which Cordelia replied, "Darling Theodore is still abroad!"

Hermione thought she would quite like to hunt down darling Theodore and wring his darling neck. No sooner had she thought it, then, as if on cue, her goblin-wrought ring began to tingle. She put down her fork and placed her hand in her lap beneath the table. Gripped by panic, she twisted the ring around and around on her finger, willing it not to burn. Not now, in a room full of people. She had always expected this day to come, but she had no idea how bad the pain would be, and she would rather not suffer the humiliation of a room full of people bearing witness to her husband's first act of infidelity.

Agitated, she excused herself and rushed to the bathroom, where she turned on the tap and placed her ring finger beneath the cold water. She left it there for a few minutes, and by the time she turned off the gushing water, the tingling had stopped.

Hermione returned to the ballroom, wondering if she had, perhaps, imagined the sensation. Taking her seat at the table once again, she glanced towards the opposite end of the room where Severus was seated beside his wife. He didn't look up, and she was glad he hadn't noticed her state of alarm.

The rest of the meal passed by without incident, and Hermione noticed that Severus had hardly once glanced in her direction. She wondered if somebody had said something to him about their camaraderie. If Lance had been so candid about his suspicions with her, it stood to reason that he'd made similar comments to Severus. Either way, she missed his attention, and she longed for the night to end.

By the time the dessert dishes had been cleared away, she was drained. In no mood for idle chat, she was finding Draco's theatrical behaviour bothersome, Lance's affected senility irritating, and Cordelia's play-acting downright infuriating. She had a clear view of her mother-in-law from where she was seated, and the manner in which Cordelia constantly placed her manicured hand possessively on Severus's forearm was unbearable to watch. It was almost nauseating.

Once the coffee had been served, Cordelia ushered a group of her friends and relatives to the sitting room, and Lance finally dropped his act of aged befuddlement. Many of the guests left, and Hermione lingered with Draco and Susan. After a time, Severus approached their end of the table. He shook Susan's hand and turned to Draco.

"Lucius tells me congratulations are in order," he drawled, taking Draco's hand.

Draco smiled. "For a man who insists he dislikes babies he's spreading the word pretty quickly."

Severus turned and met Hermione's gaze. "And how is my assistant this evening?"

She gave him a forced smile. "Fine, thank you."

He sat opposite her and placed his empty glass on the table. "Might I ask you to pass that bottle of wine?" he asked, indicating a bottle a little way along the table.

She stood and reached down the table. Picking up the half-full bottle, she leaned across the table to fill his glass when, without any warning at all, her left hand was suddenly engulfed in the most intense sensation of heat she'd ever experienced in her life. She couldn't help but cry out, and, dropping the bottle of wine on the pristine tablecloth, she instinctively cradled her left hand against her chest.

As the wine flowed from the bottle and stained the white cloth red, Severus and Draco sprang from their chairs. Severus's gaze moved from Hermione's hand to her face, and as he met her eyes, he knew by the alarm he read there that her wedding ring had finally started to burn.

Hermione could tell by the Severus's stare that he knew exactly why she'd dropped the bottle, and as tears sprang to her eyes, she silently pleaded with him to get her out of this room full of people, many of whom had turned to see what all the commotion was about.

Lance extracted his wand from his brash robes. "Oh, dear me!" he exclaimed, cleaning up the spillage with a flick of his wand. "Those bottles are dreadfully slippery."

He directed an intense stare at Severus over his little spectacles. "Severus, it's after eleven o'clock, and I do believe you and Hermione promised to whip me up a very special potion for my birthday. Time is running out, so I suggest you get cracking, dear boy!"

Severus shot him a look of deepest gratitude. "I'd almost forgotten," he replied, feigning a glance at his watch. He moved around the table and took Hermione by the elbow. "Excuse us, ladies and gentlemen, this should not take long."

Without waiting for a reply, he steered Hermione to the door and down the stairs to the basement.

"It's your ring?" he whispered as they reached the laboratory.

"Yes," she said, her voice shaking. "I know you warned me, but I'd no idea it would be this painful. Thank you for getting me out of there."

"You've Lancelot to thank for that," he muttered, opening the door. He stood aside to let her enter and glanced at her face as the torches on the walls lit the room. Her

cheeks were drained of colour, and he could tell she was trying not to cry.

"Sit," he said, gesturing to her stool and making for the storeroom. "I know something that will help ease the pain."

Ignoring his order to sit, Hermione paced up and down, her teeth clenched. The heat from the goblin-wrought ring was making her entire hand burn. As she paced, she held her left hand out and splayed her fingers. It didn't look any different, and she scratched viciously at her ring finger with the nails of her right hand.

Severus emerged from the storeroom with a jar of yellow liquid. "Scratching at the ring will only make it worse," he said as he Conjured a glass bowl.

"Fucking stupid, cheating bastard," Hermione hissed. She picked up an empty phial from her bench and hurled it against the stone wall, trying not to imagine Theodore Nott copulating with some attractive woman.

Severus glanced at the shattered glass and turned to face her, one eyebrow raised.

Hermione shook her head. "I'm sorry, Severus. I know I'm childish; I'm just so fucking angry."

He'd only once before heard her swear, and he looked at her in concern as he opened the jar and poured half the contents into the bowl. "There's no need to apologise. I'm infinitely more fond of justifiable anger than I am of tears of self-pity."

She uttered a rueful laugh. "Well, brace yourself, Severus Snape. The tears may yet come." She looked at the bowl. "Solution of strained and pickled Murtlap tentacles?"

He looked surprised. "You've used it before?"

She nodded, and her face contorted with pain as the burning of the ring increased. "I made some for Harry after Dolores Umbridge made him slice his own hand open in fifth year." She glanced at the bowl again. "I thought Murtlap essence was only good for cuts; doesn't it intensify the pain of burns?"

"Usually, but you have not been burned; you're suffering from the magically-induced effects of a broken vow," he explained.

She lowered her throbbing hand to the bowl. "Are you sure about this?"

"Of course I'm sure," he snapped. "I've used Murtlap essence many times for someone suffering from precisely these effects. Don't you trust me?"

She submerged her hand in the liquid. "I'm sorry, Severus. Of course I trust you." She uttered a sigh of relief. "That's much better."

He gave a small grunt of annoyance and turned from her. Picking up the jar of the remaining Murtlap essence, he turned to go back to the storeroom.

"Please don't go, Severus," she pleaded. "I shouldn't have doubted you. I just ... I really don't want to be alone right now."

He stopped and turned to face her again. Placing the jar on the bench, he fetched his stool and sat beside her. She seemed close to tears once more.

"Talk to me," she said. "The pain is much better now, but I'd rather not think about my *husband* and his current occupation."

He laced his fingers. "What do you wish to discuss?"

She remained silent for a moment. "Who was the woman you knew who took the vow of fidelity? The one you mentioned on my wedding day?"

He scowled. "That is absolutely none of your..."

"It was your mother, wasn't it, Severus?"

He glared at her for a moment, and she was afraid that she'd gone too far, that he would storm from the room. But he gave a deep sigh.

"Yes, it was my mother. An eminently foolish woman."

"Does that mean I'm an eminently foolish woman?"

"Yes," he said. "You were eminently foolish when you agreed to take such a vow, Hermione. And like you, my mother was certainly not unintelligent. The main difference between you was that she genuinely loved my father. Why, I'll never understand, but the burning of her ring did not just result in physical pain, but in emotional anguish of the most severe kind."

"It doesn't sound like the happiest of marriages."

He gave a wry laugh. "It could hardly have been any worse. I've no idea how they got together, but I'm convinced she gave him a Love Potion. She was not graced with beauty, and my father was handsome in his youth. Unfortunately, I was blessed with my mother's looks," he said with a crooked smile.

Hermione couldn't help but draw a parallel between Eileen Prince and what she knew of Merope Gaunt. There was a striking similarity between Tom Riddle's and Severus's parentage. "I saw a picture of your mother once: Eileen Prince."

Severus looked taken aback. "How did you know?"

"I started doing a bit of research into the identity of the Half-Blood Prince when Harry found your Potions book," she explained. "And then, when you ... left at the end of our sixth year, I looked through some old copies of the *Daily Prophet* and found your birth announcement. I presumed from what I read that your father was a Muggle."

"Yes, he was. The very worst sort of Muggle," he said through gritted teeth. "I don't mean to disparage Muggles, Hermione, but my father was a particularly poor specimen. He hated magic; he drank too much; he was tight with what little money he had and generous with his fists."

"Were you an only child, Severus?"

"Yes. I was born shortly after they married, and my mother suffered many miscarriages in the years following my arrival. Hardly surprising, given that she was periodically used as a punch bag."

Hermione fell silent once more, astounded that he'd been so open with her. What a terrible childhood he must have had. Her gaze fell to her still-burning hand beneath the liquid. "Did her ring burn often?"

"Yes," he said, his gaze drawn to her goblin-wrought ring. "He regularly disappeared for the weekend with his entire week's wages, and it was usually on these occasions that the ring would burn."

"Did you feel sorry for her?"

He tapped his fingernails on the surface of the bench, and for a moment she thought he would not answer. "I sympathised at first. I discovered the benefits of the Murtlap essence in my second year at Hogwarts, and that gave her some relief, but as I grew older I lost patience with her. She could so easily have left him. She was a witch; it was her duty to protect her only child. But in my later years I came to believe she'd chosen him over me, and I became embittered towards her. I stopped providing her with

the Murtlap essence, and then ..."

"And then what?" Hermione asked, fascinated.

He looked away from her. "I came home after my graduation to find the stupid woman had taken a carving knife from the kitchen, and in her distress, she had severed her own ring finger."

Hermione gasped. "Oh, no!"

"She almost bled to death," he said dispassionately. "She died a few months later."

"That's just awful," she whispered. "And your father?"

"He drank himself into an early grave before I returned to Hogwarts to teach. I certainly did not grieve for him."

She sat staring at him in stunned silence. It was another minute or two before she remembered her own discomfort. She looked down at her hand again. "Did you tell me all of this because you wanted to, or to distract me?" she asked with a small smile.

"A little bit of both, perhaps," he said. "You manage to ferret things out of me with remarkable ease, Hermione Granger, so perhaps I've given up trying to fight you. Besides, I'm impressed with how you've coped this evening: both with Cordelia and with your ring."

Her eyes filled with tears again. "I know it's not the same for me as it was for your mother, Severus, but it's still hurtful. I know I didn't love Theo, but I still don't like the thought of him with another woman."

They remained quiet for a few moments, their gazes on the ring. Anxious not to dwell on Theo, Hermione thought about Cordelia.

"I watched Cordelia during dinner," she said. "She's very possessive of you; I don't know how you can stand her pawing at you like that." She looked up at him and knew she'd said the wrong thing. By the expression on his face she could tell he'd taken it as a criticism.

"Well, one would think," he snapped, "that if tonight has taught you anything at all, it is that one cannot always control the actions of one's spouse."

She bowed her head and, feeling overwhelmed, could not stop the tear that slid down her cheek. "I shouldn't have said that. I didn't mean any offence, Severus."

"And I did not mean to upset you," he said softly. "Come, dry your tears. You have behaved admirably well."

To her surprise, he reached forward with his thumb and brushed the tear from her cheek. His hand lingered there for a moment, and she closed her eyes, leaning in to his touch.

He dropped his hand as the door of the laboratory was flung open, and an irate Cordelia marched into the room.

"Just what is going on!" she demanded. "What are you thinking, Severus? Disappearing off like this. People will talk!"

He narrowed his eyes. "Our exit was necessary, Cordelia, thanks to your son!" he spat, pointing to Hermione's hand.

"What on earth are you ..." she stopped, comprehension dawning on her face. "Ah. I see."

"Lance's quick thinking enabled us to leave the room with the excuse of brewing him a potion. And quite frankly, Cordelia, I don't really give a damn if people talk."

Cordelia put her hand on her hip. "Well, does this really require both of your continued presence?"

"Yes. Hermione is in quite a lot of pain and has no wish to be left alone, given the circumstances."

Avoiding her daughter-in-law's gaze, Cordelia turned and walked back to the door. "I will expect you both back upstairs as soon as possible, and I'd appreciate if you tried to appear as if you were enjoying yourselves."

Hermione said, "Well, at least Theo's enjoying himself."

Cordelia paused on her way through the door, but did not turn around.

Severus gave a deep chuckle once she'd left, and Hermione looked up at him, relishing the sound.

"That was quite a comeback," he remarked.

She grinned. "I couldn't resist."

Slowly, she raised her hand from the solution. "It's stopped!" she exclaimed. "The pain has vanished."

Severus extracted his wand and Conjured a small towel, which he tossed to her. "I'm glad to hear it."

She picked up the fluffy white towel and dried her hand, wriggling her fingers as if to ensure the burning really had stopped. She looked at her watch and smirked. "Only ten minutes," she said smugly. "Stamina never was Theo's strong point."

Severus Vanished the glass bowl and its contents and graced her with an amused smile. "I think the Sorting Hat placed you well, Hermione." He walked to one of the shelves and picked out a small, blue phial.

"Something for Lance?" she asked.

He nodded. "A potion that temporarily dyes one's hair to match one's outfit."

Hermione sniggered and walked to the door. "Pink hair! Cordelia will be thrilled."

He joined her at the door, and she looked up at him with a smile of gratitude. "Thank you, Severus. You've come to my rescue more times than I can count these past few months." She held up her left hand and gazed at her ring. "The decision to accept this ring was probably the most ludicrous I've made in my entire life."

"What is this?" Severus asked, grasping her hand and peering intently at the base of her thumb.

She tried to pull from his grasp. "It's nothing," she insisted.

With the index finger of his free hand he reached out and traced the long, silver scar on her skin. "Where did you get this scar?"

She wriggled, trying to free her hand from his vice-like grip. "Nowhere."

"Stop trying to pull away," he said, his gaze still fixed on her hand and an expression of horror on his face. "I did this, didn't I?"

She didn't know what to say.

"That night at St. Mungo's," he continued, "when you tried to return my memories. I made the glass beaker explode."

She looked at him, wanting to deny it, but knowing he would see through a lie.

"I had absolutely no idea I'd hurt you. I'm dreadfully sorry," he said.

She gave him a nervous smile. "It's fine. Honestly. It was easily healed."

"I could remove the scar for you ..."

"No! I've grown accustomed to it. It reminds me ... It reminds me that I don't always know what's best for other people."

He stared at her for a moment then returned his scrutiny to her hand. He seemed lost in thought, and she couldn't read the expression in his eyes. He repeatedly traced the thin scar with his finger, and she found the sensation more than agreeable. She was glad that he seemed too absorbed in his thoughts to notice her shiver of pleasure.

"Severus," she said, embarrassed. "Might I have my hand back?"

He suddenly realised what he was doing and dropped her hand as though he'd been bitten. "Forgive me, Hermione. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

Suddenly emboldened by the behaviour of both their spouses, she leaned forward and whispered, "You didn't make me feel uncomfortable, Severus. Quite the opposite, in fact. I was just afraid that if you continued for much longer, I'd never want you to stop."

She held his gaze for a moment, then turned and headed for the stairs, stunned by her own audacity.

He watched her go, drinking in the sight of her dark silhouette and bouncing curls as she climbed the stairs, pleasantly surprised at her coquetry. He smirked to himself. The immediate future was beginning to look rather interesting.

I Knew a Phoenix

Chapter 20 of 34

Severus must decide whether or not to renew Hermione's contract.

A/N: Happy Monday, everyone. :) I just wanted to thank you for your continued readership and reviews. Every one of them is a joy, and I'm slowly catching up on answering them all.

A few people have asked, so I wanted to confirm that Denial is 33 chapters in length. I will continue to upload two chapters every week.

LB

There'll be that crowd, that barbarous crowd, through all the centuries,

And who can say but some young belle may walk and talk men wild

Who is my beauty's equal, though that my heart denies,

But not the exact likeness, the simplicity of a child,

And that proud look as though she had gazed into the burning sun,

And all the shapely body no tittle gone astray.

I mourn for that most lonely thing; and yet God's will be done:

I knew a phoenix in my youth, so let them have their day.

- W. B. Yeats, *His Phoenix*

Hermione woke on Sunday and wondered, for a moment, why she felt so ill-at-ease. It took a few seconds before the fog of sleep cleared and she remembered the events of the previous evening. She buried her face in her pillow with a groan. Her anger at Theo had calmed overnight, but she was mortified at the memory of what she'd said to Severus. She had not spoken to him again following their conversation in the laboratory except to say goodnight, and she could only imagine what he must have thought of her shameless behaviour.

She could hardly believe it. She might as well have just gone ahead and told him that she fancied him. What must he think of her? She wondered what might have happened if she had stood her ground instead of walking away. Would he have told her that she needed to behave more like an employee? Had she angered him? Embarrassed him? Or, perhaps, flattered him?

With a sudden burst of energy, she threw back her duvet and headed for the shower, realising as she went that she was the very worst kind of hypocrite. She had spent the week before condemning Cordelia Mill and her extra-marital affair, only to turn around and flirt with her former professor.

Tossing her pyjamas to one side, she stepped beneath the spray and scrubbed as though she could somehow wash away the humiliation. Her wedding ring caught her eye, and she held it before her, wondering if that moment of daring had been precipitated by her annoyance at Theo. Theodore bloody Nott. The thought of him made her frown. Had he just had a one-night stand or did he have a girlfriend? She decided a shopping trip to Diagon Alley was in order: she might need more Murtlap tentacles in the weeks to come.

She lowered her gaze to the thin, silvery scar just below her thumb. Never once had she thought to hide it from Severus, and in a way, she was glad she hadn't. She had

long admired those long, slender fingers of his, and the memory of his touch upon her skin was something to be filed away and treasured. But work on Monday was going to be dreadfully awkward, and for the second week in a row, she wasn't sure that she wanted the weekend to draw to a close.

But draw to a close it did, and as she walked across Kensington Square to work on Monday morning, Hermione tried to think of something to say; some topic of conversation that would divert attention away from what she had said.

A magpie landed right in her path, stabbing frantically at something between the cracks of the paving stones. As she approached, it spread its wings and rose with an irritated cry into the air. The sight of the bird's outstretched wings reminded her of the Thestral Patronus and made her smile: She had found the perfect subject for conversation. In her anxiety on Saturday night, she had not thought to ask him about the Patronus that had come to usher her to the party.

When she pushed open the door to the laboratory, Severus was already at his workbench, the flame beneath his cauldron lit. He looked up and met her gaze with an arched eyebrow, and she wondered again what might have happened on Saturday night if she had stood her ground.

"Good morning," he said, still watching her.

"Good morning, Severus," she replied, knowing her cheerful tone sounded forced.

Laying her journal on the bench, she crossed to the shelves and picked out her ingredients for the morning, her curiosity about the Patronus genuinely piqued.

"Severus?" she began. "You know the Patronus that was sent to summon Lance and me on Saturday night?"

"Yes," he said, and she could tell by the hesitancy in his voice that he'd hoped the question would not be raised.

"Was it yours?"

He didn't answer, and she laid her ingredients out on the desk before turning to face him, determined not to let him evade the question. "Was it yours, Severus? The Patronus?"

"Of course it was mine," he snapped. "I told you I would send my Patronus when the guests had arrived."

"When did it change?" she asked.

He put down his pestle and mortar with a bang and turned to face her, gripping the edge of his workbench. He shot her a look of unmistakable warning. "What do you mean?"

She swallowed nervously. "Your Patronus used to be a doe, and now it's a Thestral. I just wondered when it had changed. Although it's not unheard of, it's still unusual for a Patronus to change, and I've never heard of anyone having a Thestral as their Patronus."

He resumed his work with a grunt. "I'm unsure when it changed. I had little need to cast a Patronus for some time, and when eventually I did, two years after the Dark Lord's defeat, it had assumed the form of a Thestral."

She could tell by his flat tone of voice that he didn't want to be questioned further, but she couldn't resist. "I remember reading somewhere that only the powerfully magical have the ability to conjure a Patronus that takes the form of a magical beast."

He uttered a short, derisive laugh. "Are you hoping to goad me into a full confession by your flattery, Hermione?"

She felt her cheeks grow warm. "I'm just curious, and I was not trying to goad you."

"Always bloody questions," he said with a shake of his head. "Have you ever known anyone's Patronus to change form?"

"Yes. Tonks's Patronus originally took the form of a rabbit, but it changed to a ... a wolf."

"And why did it change to a wolf?"

"Well," Hermione said awkwardly, "because she loved Remus, I suppose."

"Touching, isn't it?" he spat.

She watched him for a moment, wondering what he was trying to insinuate. If Tonks's Patronus had changed because she had fallen in love, did that mean his had changed because he had, at some point, stopped loving Lily Evans?

"I would choose your next question very carefully," he said, darting her a glare. "There are certain lines of inquiry along which I refuse to be drawn."

She frowned at him. "Do you find me unbearable, Severus?"

"Yes," he mumbled, though she could see he was trying not to smirk. "But I knew exactly what I was letting myself in for, having suffered your presence for so many years in the classroom. I have only myself to blame."

"Why a Thestral, Severus?"

"Don't you think it rather suits me?" he asked. "After all, I do believe you described me as 'the quintessential black character'."

"Yes, but why not a raven, or a panther, or maybe a python?"

"A python?" he said, looking up at her with wide eyes. "I might have been Head of Slytherin, but don't you think after the events of the final battle I might have lost my fondness for snakes?"

She groaned at her own stupidity. "I'm sorry, that was a stupid and insensitive thing to say. But still, Severus. Why a Thestral? Why an animal that is associated with death?"

He put his stirring rod aside with another sigh. "Perhaps I did it subconsciously, just to spite Albus Dumbledore," he suggested. "His Patronus was, after all, a Phoenix: the animal most associated with life and regeneration. He would have been most displeased at my having a Patronus so closely connected to death."

"Are you suggesting we have the ability to choose our own Patronus?"

"Not consciously, but subconsciously, perhaps," he said, folding his arms.

"I still don't understand the Thestral," she continued.

"Why are Thestrals believed to be unlucky?"

"Because you have to have seen death in order to see a Thestral."

"Precisely. Bearing that in mind, why might a Thestral become an intrinsic part of someone's personality?"

She frowned for a moment. "Because they almost died?" She the familiar throb of guilt that always came when she remembered how she had left him for dead in the Shrieking Shack.

"That is my theory," he said with a nod. "If you will forgive the rather poetic drama of it all, I believe that if one must have seen death in order to see a Thestral, if one has touched death, maybe one's Patronus becomes a Thestral."

She looked at him for a minute, confused. "When you say, 'touched death', does that mean you had what Muggles term a near-death experience?"

A frown creased his brow, and she could tell she had touched another nerve.

"I suppose you could term it a near-death experience," he said.

She gasped. "Did everything go all misty? Did you speak to someone? Did you have a choice to go on or to come back?"

He looked surprised. "Misty? Why do you ask such questions?"

"Because Harry had a near-death experience the night of the final battle, when Voldemort struck him with the Killing Curse. Everything went misty, and when he awoke he was in a train station, and he spoke with Dumbledore. He had a choice: to go on or to come back."

"I see," he said, looking away, a strange expression on his face.

"Was it like that for you? Did you speak to someone?" Hermione asked, her questions frantic in her sudden interest.

"That, I'm afraid, is not up for discussion."

"But if your Thestral theory is correct," she said, her mind racing, "why hasn't Harry's Patronus become a Thestral?"

"Perhaps his near-death experience has not had a profound effect on his life," he suggested, "as, perhaps, mine has."

She shook her head. "I'm not so sure. He changed after that night, and I think almost dying had a lot to do with it."

"Perhaps it was because there was no reason for his original Patronus to change."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Does that mean your feelings had changed sufficiently to change your Patronus from a doe?"

"My feelings?" he hissed, clearly angry. "Have you absolutely no idea when to draw the line, girl? Would you like me to just extract my heart and soul and lay them bare for your dissection?"

She looked down, knowing she'd gone too far. "I was just..."

"*Curious*," he said sarcastically. "Such a goddamn Gryffindor."

"Severus," she said, determined not to let him bully her. "Why do you have to fly off the handle like this? You can be so bloody infantile sometimes. Can't you tell that I am not trying to *dissect* you out of curiosity? I'm just trying to understand you, because I would have thought by now it's fairly obvious that I actually give a damn!"

"Did you just stand here in *my* laboratory and call me infantile?" he asked in a tone of disbelief.

"Yes, I did," she said. "You don't scare me, Severus Snape; I'm no longer a first-year." She folded her arms and glared at him.

He returned her glare and mimicked her posture. "You think the fact that you *give a damn* gives you licence to interrogate and insult me?"

"No, I don't. I didn't mean to insult you. You just drive me mad with your waspishness."

"Well, you drive me mad with your prying," he growled.

They continued to glare at one another until he finally uttered an irritated grunt. "Might we return to our mutual tasks?"

She nodded and returned opened her Potions journal, determined not to get upset.

"Silly girl," he muttered under his breath.

She glanced up at him, but saw that a small smile pulled at the corner of his mouth. "Silly man," she whispered.

"Your timing is appalling," he drawled. "Your contract is up at the end of the week and must be reviewed."

He left his workbench and crossed to the storeroom. She watched as he disappeared from view and wondered if he was really considering terminating her employment or if he was toying with her. He emerged a moment later, and the sound of a Mozart Symphony filled the room.

"That's the first time you've ever played Mozart," she said

"Indeed," he said. "You can't seem to control your curiosity, so let us see if you can curb that maddening humming instead."

She shook her head. He was such an infuriating bastard. Even if it killed her, she was determined not to hum.

They fell silent for a time, absorbed in their tasks. An hour passed before she spoke again.

"If you should feel the need to fire me," Hermione said quietly, "just know that I've had three of the happiest months of my life."

He looked up. She grinned at him and added, "Despite the fact that you're the most difficult man I've ever had the misfortune to meet."

He smirked. "Well, Hermione Granger, if you should feel the need to resign, just know that I've had three of the most entertaining months of my life, despite the fact that I've never met a more aggravating witch in all my years." His expression grew serious. "But should we both decide to continue, I'd like you to be aware that the topic of Lily Evans will never, ever be up for discussion."

She nodded her understanding and returned her gaze to her bubbling cauldron. "I'm glad your Patronus is a Thestral, Severus. It suits you," she said.

He did not reply, but she could tell he was pleased.

Five days later, Severus sat behind the desk in his study. Anyone watching would have assumed his gaze was fixed upon the trio of little girls playing with their father in the square below, but he stared with unseeing eyes, his attention on the matter of his Potions assistant.

A freshly drafted contract sat before him. A permanent contract. But he hadn't yet decided whether or not he would offer Hermione such a legally binding position in his business.

In all honesty, there was no reason why he should not keep her on. With the exception of the morning she had almost added the Basilisk bile to her potion, she had demonstrated her abilities as a highly competent Potions mistress. What was more, she had a clear instinct for business.

She had impressed him of late. He recalled the night of Lance's birthday party: She had handled both her physical pain and her spouse's infidelity with great strength, and the memory of her remark to Cordelia was enough to make him smirk. Her ring had burned on two subsequent occasions while she was in the laboratory. She had Summoned the Murtlap essence from the storeroom and had continued her work with her right hand, her left hand submerged in the yellow liquid until the pain had passed.

"Is there anything I can do, Hermione?" he had asked on the second occasion, gesturing to her ring hand. "Do you wish to talk about it?"

"No, thank you," she had replied calmly. "I'm growing quite accustomed to it, and the Murtlap essence helps."

"Have you tried to contact Theo?"

"I sent him an owl on Sunday morning after the party. I put a Tracing Charm on the letter, so I know he destroyed it without reading it. I've no intention of contacting him again."

They had fallen silent for a few minutes until Hermione had extracted her hand from the bowl and had glanced at her watch.

"Impressive," she'd said with a smirk. "Twelve minutes, this time. Either he's improved, or he's using an endurance potion."

Her attitude to what was potentially an embarrassing and distressing situation had surprised him. He admired her strength, and while he had gazed at her small, white hand on Saturday night, and had traced the thin, silvery scar with his thumb, it had occurred to him that he no longer minded that she *knew*. The memory of Lily Potter no longer hurt him, and although he had no wish to talk about that long, painful part of his life, the fact that Hermione knew about it did not now anger him.

The words she had said when he'd finally released her hand from his grasp that night..."I was just afraid that if you continued for much longer, I'd never want you to stop..." had left him breathless with their daring. Had she not turned and walked away from him, had she remained standing before him with that flirtatious smile upon her lips and that hungry expression in her eyes, what would he have done? His imagination had provided many colourful answers, and his fantasies of what might have been revolved around entangling his hands in her fragrant hair and pinning her to the stone walls of his laboratory with his eager body.

He was aware of the stirrings of desire below his navel and wondered why he couldn't find the motivation to seek out a meaningless affair with some nameless, discreet witch. There was no doubt that a liaison with Hermione Granger would mean untold complications in his life. Although he did not care to admit it, she had become more to him than a colleague, more even than a trivial object of lust. A romantic involvement with Hermione would come with a great deal of emotional strings attached, and Severus Snape did not care for emotional attachment.

It was almost three o'clock, and Hermione was due to arrive at any moment to discuss the renewal of her contract. Suddenly desirous to be away from the familiarity of their surroundings, he rose from his leather chair and tossed his cloak onto the window seat as he passed. Dressed in his customary black coat and trousers, he descended the stairs and left the house. Closing the door behind him, he leaned casually against the moulded frame of the door and awaited Hermione's arrival.

Hermione had dressed with great care that morning. It was a typically muggy summer's day in London, and she'd chosen her favourite pair of jeans and a white, lacy summer blouse. Slipping her feet into a pair of sandals and her wand into her back pocket, she left the house and crossed Kensington Square. She spotted Severus waiting by his front door and smiled; everyone in London was dressed for the agreeable weather with the exception of Severus Snape. She swallowed nervously as she crossed the road. She very much hoped that he was about to offer her a permanent contract, but he was not always predictable, and she wondered if she had overstepped too many of his boundaries in the past three months.

She smiled hesitantly as she climbed the steps. "Going somewhere?" she asked. "I thought I had an appointment to see you at three."

"Indeed you do," he responded. He glanced up and down the road and offered her his arm. "Come with me."

"Where?" she asked, bewildered.

"Somewhere more neutral."

"Why?"

He gave her a penetrating stare. "I think it's about time we had a more open discussion, and I do not wish to have it here."

Hermione's heart began to pound. An honest discussion? "But where are we going?"

"Don't you trust me?" He proffered his elbow once more.

"Of course I do," she said, linking her arm through his and trying not to let his proximity affect her.

He turned on the spot, and she closed her eyes as they Disapparated, hating the nauseating feeling of compression. Before she even opened her eyes, she could smell the salty tang of sea air, and she shivered at the sudden drop in temperature. He released her arm, and she opened her eyes. They were standing on a grassy hilltop, a few feet from a jagged cliff that fell to a churning, grey sea. The sky was overcast and the temperature was much cooler than in London.

"Where are we?" she asked, frowning at the unfamiliar landscape.

"Guess," he said.

She looked about. "Scotland?"

"West of Ireland," he said. "The Dingle Peninsula, to be precise."

She gazed around her once more. "I've never been to Ireland." She turned her scrutiny to Severus. "Why are we here?"

"I desired a walk," he said with a shrug. He noticed her shiver and conjured a thick, grey cloak. "You are cold," he said, handing her the cloak and averting his gaze from her cold-hardened nipples as they strained against the sheer fabric of her blouse.

She accepted the cloak from him and flung it around her shoulders, following in his wake as he turned and strolled along the cliff top. Now that her bare arms were warm, she quite liked the feel of the damp grass against her sandal-clad feet.

He glanced sideways at her. "Do you truly wish to continue in my employ, Hermione?"

"You know I do," she said.

"Why?"

She considered her answer for a moment. "Because I enjoy the work; I'm thrilled that you've begun to allow me negotiate my own contracts; the salary is more than adequate ... and, to be honest, I ..."

He watched her from beneath his black hair, enjoying the flush of her cheeks. "Yes?"

"I enjoy your company. I'd miss you if I didn't get to work with you." She stared resolutely at the grass, not risking a glance at him. He remained silent, and she began to panic. "I know I probably drive you completely nuts, Severus, and if you feel you don't want me around, I promise I'll understand. I know I have a tendency to babble, but I'll try to improve ... I thought I *had* improved, really, but I can try harder not to, you know ... babble all the time ..."

"Hermione," he said.

"Yes?" she said, finally finding the courage to look up at him.

He put a finger to his lips. "You're babbling *now*."

"Yes, I know. You make me nervous sometimes."

He stopped in his tracks, and she almost ran into him.

"Why do I make you nervous?"

She held his gaze, hardly daring to breathe. He folded his arms and remained still, awaiting her response.

"You just do," she said, stepping around him and staring at the grass once more as she walked.

He caught up with her, and they walked on in silence.

"Do you think we've gotten along well these past few months?" he asked eventually.

"Yes," she said. "Better than I would ever have thought possible. Don't you agree?"

He slowed his pace and stopped, his gaze on a diving cormorant. "Yes, I agree. I think we have, for the most part, behaved ourselves."

She stood next to him. "I think we've dealt with a number of issues in a perfectly adult fashion," she said with a smile.

He uttered a short laugh. "I suppose we have." He turned and frowned down at her. "But there are some issues we continue to avoid and that is, perhaps, as it should be."

She met his stare and wondered if he meant Lily Evans, the night he'd taken Dumbledore's life, or their increasingly obvious mutual attraction.

"Do you truly think it wise that we continue, Hermione?"

She swallowed rapidly. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't," she said.

He broke eye contact with her once more and looked out at the grey Atlantic. "If you're certain this is what you want, the position is yours for as long as you care to hold it." He took a small piece of parchment from his pocket and enlarged it with a tap of his wand. He handed it to her. "You may take it home with you to consider the finer points. It is rather a more complicated contract than the previous one."

She opened the first page of the contract and began to read.

"Please do not attempt to go through it now. It is seventeen pages long and requires detailed scrutiny before you sign," he explained.

"But the title page says 'associate', not 'assistant'," she said, confused.

"If you choose to accept, you will no longer be my assistant. This is a contract for a permanent associate. You will have sole charge of your own contracts, and you will keep sixty per cent of all the profits you secure over the next three years. After that time, should you still wish to continue in the company, you will become a full partner."

She gaped at him. "Sixty per cent of my contracts?"

He crossed his arms. "I thought that was rather generous. Even with your current portfolio of clients, it should ensure your salary is at least doubled."

She shook her head. "You misunderstand me, Severus. I'm not complaining; I'm overcome. That's more than generous, but I don't understand why you would do this. What have you to gain?"

"I thought more responsibility would be of benefit to you. As for my personal gain, I've little patience for brewing such potions as Skele-Gro. I would appreciate if you were willing to continue to undertake the more mundane jobs, and in return, I will give you control of some of the more interesting contracts."

"I ... I don't know what to say, Severus. This is so much more than I'd hoped for ..."

"It will require a lot more effort on your part. You've proven yourself capable of negotiating with our clients. Now that I know you to be trustworthy in the laboratory, I will be spending each Monday away from London, in order to liaise with our customers. I suggest you spend one day each week doing the same. Friday, perhaps. There are a number of desirable contracts currently in control of other Potioneers, and I would like to have secured a number of these by the end of the year."

Hermione was still stunned. "You really consider me worthy of such a position? Of being your associate?"

He gave a curt nod. "I would not have made such an offer if I did not think you were worthy."

She was so touched that she felt tears come to her eyes. "Thank you so, so much, Severus," she said hoarsely. "I know you dislike tears, but I'm afraid I'm close to crying."

Before he could reply, she launched herself at him and threw her arms around his neck. He stiffened for a moment, but as he allowed the floral scent of her perfume to wash over him, he relaxed and patted her on the back. She finally pulled away from him with a sigh.

"I don't know how I will ever thank you," she whispered.

"There is no need," he assured her, feeling awkward. He had not expected such a physical demonstration.

As she removed her arms from around his neck, she stood on her toes and pressed her lips to his cheek.

He had to stifle the groan that rose within him as she pressed her warm lips to his skin, and he closed his eyes. Her mouth only lingered for a second, and when he opened

his eyes once more, she stepped away from him and Disapparated with a resounding crack, leaving him to stand alone on the cliff top, gazing at the horizon and absentmindedly fingering the spot on his cheek where she had kissed him.

Six weeks later

The first six weeks of Hermione's employment as Potions associate passed in a blur of paperwork. Her brewing duties had not really grown, not yet, but now she had to complete her brewing within four days and spend the fifth day visiting her clients and petitioning new customers. She was left with barely any time to work through her contracts, dispatch invoices and write brewing timetables, and she often found herself bringing her paperwork home with her and working until midnight by candlelight.

She certainly wasn't complaining; she enjoyed having sole responsibility for her contracts, and the increase in working hours meant she had little time to focus on the void that the breakdown of her marriage had left in her life. Her Saturday mornings were filled with contracts and invoices, and the rest of her weekends were spent with her parents or her friends. In fact, the only drawback to her new position was that she saw less of Severus.

They both spent one day a week away from the laboratory, and as a result, she did not see him from the time she left on Thursday evenings until they both returned on Tuesday mornings. That was four entire days without him. She felt her heart sink every time she bid him farewell each Thursday, and the weekends had never seemed so long.

Things had changed between them. In the past six weeks, they had not argued or had a single heated exchange. Not once had he snapped at her, and she hadn't once asked him about his past. They were on their best behaviour, behaving like true professionals, and although the atmosphere in the laboratory was pleasant, she missed the occasional intimacy of their early days at work. Since the day she had kissed him on the cliff top, it was as if some unspoken agreement existed between them; as if their mutual attraction was permissible, but that it was not to be acknowledged or acted upon.

She lived for Tuesday mornings, and she knew she wasn't alone. Severus was always in the laboratory when she arrived, and where he had previously muttered a greeting in the mornings while he continued to brew, he now put aside his work and took a few minutes to converse with her. She couldn't quite define it, but something in his dark eyes, some small sparkle told her that he was as glad to see her as she was to see him. He had even, once or twice, bestowed her with a genuine smile rather than a smirk.

Much to her dismay, Cordelia hadn't hosted a single dinner party since Lance had turned one-hundred-and-five, leaving her with no opportunities to see Severus at the weekends. But this weekend was different: Each July, Cordelia hosted a ball in aid of St. Mungo's in her magically enlarged ballroom. The attendees usually included a delegation from the Ministry of Magic, senior Healers from the wizarding hospital, the Hogwarts staff and the cream of wizarding society.

Hermione had mixed feelings about the ball: she was excited at the prospect of seeing Severus outside of work, but she dreaded being asked about Theo, and she'd never really liked dancing. She had spent two weeks searching for an appropriate gown and had finally found a flattering set of sky-blue robes. Padma had insisted on coming over for the afternoon in order to style her hair and apply her makeup, and she was determined to look her best.

She smiled at Padma's reflection in the large, ornate mirror they'd propped up on the kitchen table.

Padma returned her smile with a sigh. "I've never come across anyone with hair as thick as yours, Hermione. It'll take me half the day to get through all this frizz."

Hermione gave her an apologetic glance. "What time do you have to be back to feed the babies?"

"They're not as hungry as they used to be, so I'm free for the next three hours. As long as I don't go leaking everywhere, I'll be fine."

Hermione chuckled. She'd been around breastfeeding mothers long enough by this stage to have lost her squeamishness. "Thank you for doing this, Padma. I'll be much more relaxed tonight if I don't have this mane of fluff to worry about."

A comfortable silence fell as Padma worked through Hermione's hair strand by strand, applying a glob of Sleekeazy's, and then using her wand to charm the hair into sleek waves.

"How are you getting on at work?" Padma asked.

"Not too bad, thanks. I've a lot more work to do now, but it's a much more interesting job, and a lot of my clients are nice people. I was dreading the whole wining and dining aspect to it, but it's okay."

Padma grinned. "Any nice eligible wizards?"

Hermione laughed. "Alas, no. Half of them are women, and most of the rest are nice old gents. I've only met one wizard our age, an Austrian guy, and he's happily married with two little boys."

Padma stopped for a moment and looked at her in the mirror. "Don't you get lonely, Hermione?"

She shrugged. "I haven't had time to get lonely, and I have Severus to keep me company at work."

"I can't believe you actually get along well with Snape. He was so mean to you at school. Don't you still resent him for it?"

"No, not at all," Hermione said honestly. "After all, I did steal from his stores, set his cloak on fire and knock him unconscious. And he hates constant questions, so I must have been the student from hell."

"What do the two of you talk about?"

Hermione puzzled over this for a moment. "Everything and nothing, really. Work, Potions journals, the Mill family, London ..."

"Does he ever talk about Dumbledore?" Padma asked curiously.

"No. He rarely mentions him at all. There are a few topics of conversation that are strictly off the agenda." She gave a sudden gasp. "Sorry," she muttered. "My ring's burning. Would you mind getting the Murtlap essence from my dressing table, and I'll get a bowl?"

Padma left to get the bottle of yellowish fluid, and Hermione took a glass bowl from a cupboard. Padma poured the strained solution into the bowl and watched as Hermione took her seat before the mirror and submerged her hand in the liquid with a sigh of relief.

"That's better," she said.

"How can you be so calm about it?" Padma asked, shaking her head. "If it was Dean, I'd want to hunt him down and hex his testicles off."

"It's funny, really. I expected it would upset me, and although it did at first, it doesn't bother me anymore. The pain is bearable with the Murtlap essence, and I couldn't care less what Theo is up to, to be honest. It's not like you and Dean; I never loved him."

"But how long is this going to continue, Hermione? He's been gone for almost half a year. What if he never comes back? You can't sit around waiting for a divorce forever."

You're only twenty-five; you're too young to be an old maid. You need a man."

Hermione looked at her in the mirror. "But I'm still married."

"And you might be still married for the rest of your life unless you go and hunt Theo down. Even then, he might not grant you a divorce. What are you meant to do? Be celibate for the rest of your life? Don't get me wrong, Hermione; I don't approve of adultery in normal circumstances, but these are not normal circumstances. Your husband has abandoned you and is clearly prepared to shag any witch within his reach. I'm not saying you should do it just because he is, I just think you should be free to have a relationship if the right man comes along."

"You really wouldn't think badly of me if I had an affair?"

Padma shook her head. "Not with the way things are. If you wanted to have a relationship, you'd get nothing but support from me. I want you to be happy."

"Thank you," Hermione muttered, moved. "I've thought about it a lot these past few weeks. I'm still not comfortable with the idea of meeting someone else. It's just ... it would still feel like cheating, somehow. Maybe I'll get over that in time."

"You may have no choice but to get over it in time," Padma said. "You can't live a loveless existence forever. You're just not made for it; you have too much affection to give."

Hermione frowned. "Practically every man in the country is married, though, thanks to the Marriage Act. Where am I meant to find someone?"

"I've thought about that. You'll have to find someone in similar circumstances or meet a nice Muggle." She grinned at Hermione in the mirror. "Dean has a very handsome cousin."

Hermione rolled her eyes. She had no interest in Dean's cousin, and the only man she wanted was certainly in similar, loveless-but-married circumstances.

Her ring stopped burning a few minutes later, and then they concentrated on her hair and make-up. They were almost finished when there was a loud knock on the front door. Moe was at Cordelia's house, helping with the preparations for the ball.

"Are you expecting someone?" Padma asked.

"No, nobody. Just ignore it."

There was a second, more forceful knock on the door.

"Where's your house elf?"

"She's helping Cordelia get ready for the ball," Hermione said.

"I'll get it," Padma said, putting down her wand. "Stay where you are and do not move. Your hair is almost perfect."

Hermione listened as Padma thundered up the stairs and opened the front door. She could make a masculine voice, and as the voices grew closer, she realised it was Severus and smiled.

"Hermione," he said, inclining his head as he followed Padma into the kitchen. "Forgive my intrusion, but according to my wife, it's of vital importance that I fetch three cases of wine from your cellar for tonight's festivities. She has, by all accounts, secured Lance's consent."

"Go ahead," Hermione said, grinning. "Padma and I are almost finished. Do you need any help?"

"No, thank you. Cordelia has enlisted the help of Moe and a few of the other family house-elves who are due to arrive soon. After that my life may thankfully be my own once more." He made his way to the small wine cellar in the corner of the kitchen.

Hermione sat back, and Padma worked on the final strands of her hair.

"How did you get on with the Felix Felicis on Friday?" she called to Severus.

"Perfectly well," he answered from the cellar. "I've already sent it to the client."

He emerged from the small room with three wooden cases of wine Levitated before him. "Might I use your fireplace to Floo these across the road? I cannot Levitate them across the square as there are some Muggles in the park."

Hermione nodded, and he sent the cases through the fireplace, dusting off his robes when he was finished.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" Hermione asked.

"No, thank you. I'm required across the square." He stopped when he reached the table. "How was your trip to St. Mungo's yesterday?"

"It went very well," she said, suddenly smug. "They accepted the contract for the Blood Replenishing potion."

"At the price we had agreed?"

"I lowered the price by ten per cent," she said.

He scowled. "You lowered it by a full ten per cent without prior consultation?"

She grinned at him in the mirror. "I lowered it on the condition that they drop their contracts with Prunella Wellsworth and give us sole responsibility for their potions outside of their own laboratories."

Severus looked thunderstruck. Prunella Wellsworth had been his biggest rival since he had started his business. "They agreed?"

Hermione nodded, incredibly pleased with herself. "They agreed. We are now the only Potioneers with whom they do business."

His expression of astonishment slowly changed to a satisfied smirk. "Let me guess, you dealt with Healer Thwaite?"

"Yes! Have you met him?"

"Many times," he said. "But it would appear he has something of a penchant for young, female Gryffindors."

Hermione uttered a mock gasp. "Are you suggesting my success had more to do with my gender than with my abilities?"

"I'm sure it was an irresistible combination of the two," he concurred, still smirking. "I'll ensure that a bottle of champagne is set aside tonight in order to toast your success. Now, I must leave. I bid you both good day."

Hermione smiled as he turned and left the room in a flurry of black, her eyes following the reflection of his retreating form in the mirror. She raised her gaze to Padma's face, and then her smile faltered. Padma had one hand on her hip and was frowning at her.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Padma shook her head and put a finger to her lips. When they'd heard the slam of the front door, she put down her wand and took the seat next to Hermione. Hermione turned to face her.

"Not him, Hermione. Not Snape," Padma whispered.

Hermione blushed. "What do you mean?"

"I know I've spent the past hour trying to talk you into finding a man, Hermione, but not him. Not Severus Snape."

She struggled for a response. "What? Padma, what are you talking about?" she said, trying to look innocent.

"Oh, Hermione, come *on*," Padma said impatiently. "I've known you long enough to be able to tell when you like someone. I wondered, over the past few months, if there was something to it...you barely talk about anyone other than Snape these days. But seeing your interaction with him proves it."

"Of course I talk about him...I see him more than anyone else!" Hermione insisted.

"Hermione ..." Padma said, glaring at her. "You positively glowed from the moment he entered the room until he left again."

Hermione gave up. Padma knew her too well. She covered her face with her hands. "I can't help it, Padma. I never meant for it to happen."

Padma shook her head. "I can't believe this, Hermione. How long has it been going on?"

Hermione shrugged. "About two or three months, I suppose. I know you must think I'm crazy, but I'm just ... attracted to him. I can hardly explain it."

"How on earth can you be attracted to Severus Snape?"

"How could I *not* be attracted to him? I like his black eyes, his sense of humour, his hands ... And he's so clever, Padma! He's the only man who has ever made me feel hopelessly out of my league. And his voice! I could listen to him talk for hours." She leaned forward, willing her friend to understand. "I don't know how it happened, Padma, but it did."

"Hermione," Padma said, perplexed, "he's married!"

"I know," Hermione said miserably. "Look, I can't tell you all the details without being disloyal to my mother-in-law, but he's no more married than I am, in reality. Don't get me wrong, Padma; I know it's ridiculous. I have no intention of ever, *ever* acting on my feelings. It is whatever it is. I can't help the way I feel, but I can certainly help the way I act."

Padma watched her for a moment. "This cannot happen, Hermione. It would complicate everything; it would be a disaster."

"I *know*," Hermione insisted. "Please credit me with a little intelligence. I've already told you: nothing will ever come of it. It's probably a silly passing crush and I'll just have to get over it. Besides, he probably still sees me as a bothersome little girl."

Padma frowned. "He doesn't," she said, dropping her voice to a whisper once more. "That's what worries me most of all. Judging by the little scene I just witnessed, I don't know who has it worse: you or him." She picked up her wand once more. "I'll finish your make-up and then I'll have to go."

Hermione's heart was thumping. She knew, deep down, that Severus felt something for her, too. Lance certainly seemed to think so. But if she was so determined that nothing should or could ever come of it, why had Padma's words sent a thrill of delight up her spine? Why was her pulse racing with sudden hope?

Padma finished up a few minutes later, and Hermione walked her to the fireplace and handed her the jar of Floo powder.

Padma gave her a hug. "Don't do it, Hermione," she begged, looking worried. "It would be jumping from the frying pan into the fire. I couldn't bear to see you get hurt again."

"I won't," she replied. "I have to work with him, and he's still Theo's stepfather, when all is said and done. Don't worry. It will pass. You'll keep it to yourself?"

"Of course," Padma said, still looking concerned. "Behave yourself at this ball tonight."

"I will."

She stepped back as her friend disappeared in a blaze of green flames, and after staring at the empty fireplace for a few moments, she turned and headed for her bedroom.

She had meant what she'd said to Padma: she had no intention of acting on her feelings. But she also had no intention of looking anything other than her very best for Severus Snape.

Music in Mouth

Chapter 21 of 34

Hermione attends Cordelia's ball.

A/N: Please forgive me, patient readers! I know this chapter is two days late. I've been unwell over the last few days, and we've had an exchange student staying with us, so I was busy scrubbing every inch of the house in preparation. Thank you again for your kind reviews, and I hope this chapter will have been worth the wait.

LB x

*When night stirred at sea
And the fire brought a crowd in,
They say that her beauty
Was music in mouth
And few in the candlelight
Thought her too proud,
For the house of the planter
Is known by the trees.
Men that had seen her
Drank deep and were silent,
The women were speaking
Wherever she went...
As a bell that is rung
Or a wonder told shyly
And O she was the Sunday
In every week.*

- **Austin Clarke, *The Planter's Daughter***

Hermione regarded her reflection in the bedroom mirror: Padma had done an amazing job of her hair and make-up. But even beneath the paint, she knew she looked better than she had for some time. Her complexion had a glow to it that had been sadly lacking while Theo had been around, and thanks to the hearty meals that were regularly served up to her by Moe, she had regained the weight she had lost following his departure.

There would be many dignitaries at the ball: rumour had it that Kingsley Shacklebolt himself was to attend. Her new clients, the senior staff of St. Mungo's, would be there along with most of the teachers from Hogwarts. Many influential wizards from the continent had been invited, and there were to be photographers and reporters, too. But it did not matter to her who would be there, really. She would look her best for Severus Snape, and if he approved, she couldn't care less what anyone else thought of her.

Leaving a few tendrils of hair to frame her face, she gathered her hair into a twist at the back of her head and clipped it into place. Then she opened her wardrobe and fingered the delicate, light-blue material of her dress robes. When she'd slipped into them, she stood in front of her mirror, her hands on her hips. She turned and looked over her shoulder with a frown. There was no doubt that the outfit was flattering: it reached her ankles and accentuated her curves without being too clingy. The overall effect was one of demure sophistication, and she supposed it was perfectly appropriate.

But it wasn't what she wanted. A single witch in her mid-twenties would surely wear an outfit that was a little more ... well ... sexy. With a sigh of dissatisfaction, she pushed the straps from her shoulders and allowed the blue robes to fall to the floor. Slipping into her dressing gown, she crossed to the wardrobe once again, determined to find something more provocative to wear.

Perhaps one of her gowns could be altered. She began to rifle through her clothes and paused for a moment to smile at the periwinkle-blue gown she had worn to the Yule Ball in her fourth year. It was altogether too childish a frock for her now, but she'd never had the heart to throw it away. That night had been the first time she had ever truly felt attractive, and that was precisely how she wanted to feel tonight. She wanted to feel desirable.

The next gown she came to was the lilac dress she had worn to Bill and Fleur's wedding, and the one after that was a yellow ensemble she had chosen for her graduation ceremony. There were several other suitable outfits: the green robes she had worn to Pomona Sprout's retirement party; the red dress her mother had bought her for her twenty-first birthday; the pink frock she had saved so hard to buy in her second year at university. She fingered the red dress: it was certainly sultrier than anything else she owned, but it wasn't quite right for a wizarding ball.

She was about to close the door and resign herself to the blue robes when her gaze fell upon her wedding dress. Even with the satin cape to hide the back of the dress, the scoop of the neckline and the cut of the material were more alluring than the sky-blue gown. Perhaps she could charm it to a more adventurous colour: a deep red or a midnight blue. She took the ivory gown from the rail and laid it on the bed.

Standing back, she tried to think of what she might do to alter it. The small train at the back would have to go, and she could always add a slit at each side to just above her knees. Recalling all she could about trimming spells, she took her wand in hand.

It only took a few minutes, and then she stood back and eyed her alterations. The dress already looked better, but it was still recognisably her wedding dress, and she had never been particularly good with colouring charms. She chewed at a fingernail. She could always Floo to Padma's house: Padma regularly changed the colour of her clothes. But she had imposed enough upon her friend for one day, and she had no wish to undergo further interrogation on the topic of Severus Snape.

After another moment of gazing at the gown, the answer came: Moe. House-elves were always good at tailoring spells, and Severus had told her the other family elves had been summoned to help prepare for the ball. Perhaps Moe could be spared for a few minutes.

"Moe?" she called.

Moe appeared with a crack before her. "You is calling, Miss Hermione?"

"Moe, I'm so sorry. I know you must be very busy, but I was wondering if you could spare two minutes to help with my dress?"

Moe nodded solemnly. "Mistress Cordelia is having lots of help now, and it is important you be looking nice, Miss Hermione."

Hermione beamed. "Oh, thank you, Moe. I decided to wear my wedding gown tonight, but I don't want it to look like my wedding gown. I've removed the train and altered the skirt, but I'm not much use at colouring charms."

Moe gave the gown an appraising glance. "Is you wearing the cape?"

"Yes." She laid the cape next to the dress. "What colour do you think, Moe? I was thinking of a deep red, or perhaps a very dark blue."

Moe turned to her. "But Master Severus is liking black!"

Hermione stared at her. "What do you mean, Master Severus is liking black?"

"He is always wearing black, so he is always liking black."

"But, Moe, why would you say that?" she asked, embarrassed. Were her feelings so obvious to everyone? "Why would it matter what Severus likes?"

"If you is wanting to please Master Severus, you is wearing black." She dismissed Hermione's question with a flutter of her bony hands and turned her attention to the dress. She closed her eyes for a moment and rubbed her hands together, then she placed her palms at the shoulders of the gown and slowly ran them down the entire length of the dress.

Hermione gasped: as Moe moved her hands along the material, it changed from ivory to darkest black. When she'd finished with the dress, she moved to the cape.

"Moe, that's beautiful," Hermione gushed. "I love it!"

"I is not finished yet," Moe said. She clicked her fingers and a small tin appeared in her left hand. She opened the lid and Hermione could see hundreds of tiny black beads within. Moe poured some into her right hand and then scattered them over the surface of the dress. She clicked her fingers once more, and the tiny beads arranged themselves all over the gown.

Hermione gave a delighted squeal. The dress was barely recognisable. "Moe, you are simply the best! It's just gorgeous."

She shrugged out of her dressing gown and slipped the newly altered gown over her head. Walking to the full-length mirror, she grinned at her reflection. It was perfect. She frowned. Perfect except for her hair, which now looked entirely too formal. She pulled the clip from the back of her head and allowed the sleek waves to tumble over her shoulders. Turning, she looked at the back of the dress. Her hair reached to just below her shoulder blades and did not detract from the allure of the backless gown. Not that anyone would see it. She picked up the cape and fastened it to her shoulders.

Moe stood beside her, examining her reflection in the mirror.

Hermione beamed at the little elf. "Master Severus is liking it?" she asked.

Moe nodded. "Master Severus is liking it," she confirmed.

Severus was growing impatient. The majority of the guests had arrived, but there was no sign of Hermione Granger. It was only half-past-eight, but she was usually punctual, and he had looked forward to the opportunity of seeing her outside of the laboratory for some time. She always dressed prettily for such occasions.

He saw Lance arrive in his hideous pink robes and watched as Cordelia made a bee-line for her aged uncle with a deep frown. A smirk lifted the corner of his mouth as Cordelia walked away a moment later, shaking her head, and Lance hobbled towards him.

"Cordelia asked you to change into something a little less eye-catching, I presume?" Severus asked.

"Insufferable, etiquette-obsessed woman! She should be thankful I didn't dye my hair tonight," Lance grumbled. He looked about the room. "The usual crowd, I see. A few new additions: all of them tedious old bores, no doubt."

"For the most part, yes," Severus agreed. His gaze was drawn again to the door, but the newcomers were Neville and Hannah Longbottom.

"Waiting for Hermione, are you?" Lance whispered, his eyes twinkling.

Severus shot him a glare. "Lancelot Mill, I hope you're not going to cause trouble tonight."

Lance chuckled good-naturedly. "I popped in to see her before I left. She should be here shortly; she's already dressed and made herself up. She's looking particularly easy on the eye this evening, let me tell you."

"Is she, indeed?" Severus said with a roll of his eyes.

Lance poked him in the arm. "You need not pretend with me, old boy. I know bloody well you fancy her."

"Lance!" Severus hissed, checking to see they hadn't been overheard.

Lance dropped his voice to a whisper. "It's about time the pair of you stopped dancing around the issue. A good shag: that's what you both need."

Severus sighed. "I'm leaving before you cause irreparable damage to my marriage."

Lance shook his head. "And some marriage it is." He looked around the room again, until his gaze settled on Cordelia. "You know she's invited Everard this year?"

Severus's eyes narrowed. "Yes, I am aware of that fact. As long as they behave appropriately, I've no objection."

"Maybe it's time to find a little bit of happiness for yourself, Severus," he said, shuffling away towards Newt Scamander. "I have every confidence that you and Hermione would be very, very good together."

Severus frowned at Lance's retreating figure. He had been looking forward to feasting his eyes on his Potions associate all evening, but Lance's words had set alarm bells ringing. Minerva McGonagall was here, so he would have to censor his behaviour. He crossed the room to Lucius Malfoy's side, where he had an advantageous view of the doors to the ballroom. He looked on as a small delegation from the Ministry arrived, followed by Healer Thwaite and the senior staff from St. Mungo's. Excusing himself to Lucius, he went to greet his new clients.

He'd been talking to Thwaite for only a minute or two when Hermione finally arrived, and although he continued to nod at the Healer's words, the man's meaningless pleasantries fell on deaf ears.

Hermione Granger very often looked pretty, and now and again, particularly when her smile touched her warm brown eyes, he thought her beautiful. But never before had she looked like she did tonight.

He tilted his head forward, allowing his long, black hair to obscure his eyes, and watched as she stepped uncertainly into the room, an expression of wonder on her face. Never before had she seen the magical ballroom enlarged to full capacity, and he eagerly drank in the sight of her as she gazed around.

He allowed his hungry eyes to travel down her body, noticing as he went that she had regained her womanly curves since Theo had left. Padma's attentions had left her with a glorious mane of gleaming curls. On her feet she wore a pair of delicate, high-heeled black sandals, and as he admired her shapely calf through the slit at the side of her dress, he realised with a start that she had altered her wedding dress. His stomach clenched at the sudden recognition: she was dressed in the very gown that he would never forget.

As Severus continued his covert scrutiny of her, she moved her gaze from the chandeliers and painted ceiling to the faces in the room. She gave Draco and Susan a wave, but before she moved to join them, she met his gaze. For a moment he fancied that a wave of understanding passed between them, some sort of silent acknowledgement of their mutual desire. He allowed the corner of his lips to curl upwards in a discreet smile, and his chest tightened as he was rewarded with a beaming grin.

She turned from him and made her way towards her friends, and he allowed his gaze to follow her as she went, her satin cape fluttering as she walked. Draco lifted his hand to his mouth and uttered a piercing wolf whistle as she approached. Hermione giggled and punched Draco on the arm, and Severus knew a moment of anger as all the heads in the vicinity turned to look at her.

He wanted to hex Draco where he stood for having drawn the admiring gaze of so many male eyes. In a fit of jealousy, he actually contemplated asking the boy to leave for such behaviour, but instead he drank deeply from his glass of champagne and continued to pretend to listen to Healer Thwaite. The other men could look all they liked: he alone in this room knew of the erotic sight that lay beneath Hermione Granger's black cape. That was some consolation.

Hermione felt the colour rise in her cheeks. "Draco, I could just murder you."

Draco and Susan laughed. "Ah, go on, Granger. You can't wear a sexy dress like that and then pretend to be embarrassed when people ogle you," Draco said with a grin.

"Yes, well, I didn't expect to make an entrance to the accompaniment of a wolf whistle," she responded, pretending to pout. "I don't know how you put up with him, Susan."

Susan smiled. "I'm used to him by now."

"You look really, really well," Hermione said, patting her on her now-visible bump. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better now that I've got my energy back. We found out the baby is a boy," she said, beaming.

"That's great news! Have you thought about names yet?" Hermione asked

Susan frowned. "What was it you came up with last night, Draco? I assume it was a joke."

"Scorpius," he said, entirely serious. "And it's not a joke."

Hermione guffawed. "Scorpius?"

"I told him he'd have to kill me first." Susan shook her head fondly at Draco. "We're thinking of calling him Abraxas, after Draco's grandfather."

"That's a damn sight better than Scorpius," Hermione said, smiling.

Draco looked around the room. "Your friend Hannah is looking particularly hot tonight," he said to Susan, who rolled her eyes.

"I'm going to go and ask her about the job at the Leaky Cauldron," Susan said. "She has to decide whether or not to take it by next week."

Hermione watched her go, feeling a pang of envy that she and Draco had unwittingly made such a good match. Draco was an outrageous flirt, but Susan was so secure in her relationship with him that it didn't bother her at all.

Draco took two glasses of champagne from the tray of a passing house-elf and handed one to Hermione. "Have you heard from Theo?"

She shook her head. "He's ignored every letter I've sent."

"I've tried a few times, too. I presume he got the letters, but he hasn't written back." Draco moved his gaze to Severus. "Severus shot me quite a glare when I whistled at you; he seems very protective of you."

"He's been very kind to me since Theo left, but I'd imagine the glare probably had more to do with the fact that you dared to whistle in his house than the fact that it was directed at me."

"I should really go and say hello to my parents," Draco said. "Save me a dance, Granger."

He left her side, and Hermione allowed her gaze to stray to Severus again. He was still in conversation with Healer Thwaite, but she was pleased to note that he had a full glass of champagne in his hand. She spotted Moe hovering near the dance floor with a tray of drinks and decided she would make every effort to ensure that Severus's glass was kept full.

Hermione watched in great irritation as Severus swept Cordelia around the dance floor. She knew he was under obligation to begin the night's dancing with his wife: she was, after all, the one hosting this charity ball. But the possessive way in which Cordelia was clinging to her husband and whispering in his ear was grating on Hermione's nerves. *She* wanted to be the one in the arms; *she* wanted to be the one who felt the tickle of his breath against her cheek as he spoke. Snatching a glass of champagne from the buffet table, she knocked it back quickly as Neville edged his way towards her.

He smiled and said, "You don't look particularly happy."

"Well spotted," she replied with a frown. "I'm not one bit happy."

Neville followed the direction of her gaze. "You don't like seeing him with her?" he asked in a whisper.

Hermione glared at him. "No, I don't." She shook her head and sighed. "It's pathetic, Neville, isn't it? I suppose you're going to give me a lecture now because he's a married man."

"No, I'm not. I think Professor Snape is no more a married man than you are a married woman."

Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"I live in Scotland, Hermione," Neville explained. "I've heard rumours about your mother-in-law. Or Hannah, at least, has heard rumours."

"I see," Hermione said, eyeing Cordelia from across the room.

"Besides," Neville continued. "I thought you insisted you and Snape were just friends and workmates?"

Hermione sighed again. "Well, I've since decided that you were right and that I'm a complete fool, and no matter what happens, I'm setting myself up for more heartbreak."

Neville looked at Severus and Cordelia. The dance floor was almost full already. "Would you like to dance?" he asked.

"Won't Hannah mind?"

Neville shook his head. "She's sitting with Susan; I don't want to disturb her."

Hermione took his hand and followed him onto the dance floor, where he swept her into his arms. She'd forgotten what a good dancer Neville was. "Do you think badly of me, Neville? For the whole Severus thing?"

He shrugged. "Maybe I would've done, years ago. But no, not now. If there's one thing I've learned over the last two years it's that deep down, none of us can help the way we feel. If there's something between you and Snape, maybe that's just the way it is."

She fell silent for a moment, soothed by his words.

"Has anything happened between the two of you?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No. It's so complicated, Neville. I don't know if anything *evesshould* happen. I'm still married, after all." She looked up into his familiar, friendly face. "What about you? How are things at Hogwarts?"

He grunted. "Same as ever. Hannah was offered the job at the Leaky Cauldron; she's got a week to decide whether or not she wants to take it."

"Would you be happier if she took it?"

"I don't like seeing her stuck in Hogwarts, missing her friends and feeling miserable," he said. "We're not going to divorce until one of us meets somebody else: we don't want to be forced into another disastrous marriage just because of this bloody law. In the meantime, I think she should take the job. She'd be happier in London."

"And what about you, Neville? Don't you think you'll ever find some way around the situation with your parents?"

"The problem is St. Mungo's, really. It's a hospital, not a proper care home. Mum has been ill so many times over the past few years, and I think that if I didn't call in to check on them at least once every week, they'd be completely neglected. The staff are totally overstretched at the hospital. I've looked into private care: there are a few really great wizarding-run nursing homes around the country, but my teacher's salary doesn't amount to much, and I certainly wouldn't have enough to put them up if I took off around the world to look for Luna."

Hermione spotted Kingsley Shacklebolt whirling around the dance floor with Hestia Jones and darted them an icy glare. The wizarding population might well be on the rise again thanks to the Marriage Act, but casualties of that noble cause were all around her.

Severus hovered by the buffet table, feigning interest in the meaningless prattle of Newt Scamander's wife, but all the while focusing his attention on Hermione, who was currently in the arms of one of their overseas guests. He happened to know that the young man in question was single and residing in one of the countries that had not adopted the Marriage Act. He watched as she laughed gaily, and jealousy gnawed at his insides. For a moment he considered using a Tripping Jinx on the fellow, but the approach of Minerva McGonagall made him push his jealousy to one side.

"Good evening, Severus," she said with a knowing smile.

"Good evening, Minerva," he said, inwardly cursing as Newt's wife left to join her husband on the floor, leaving him alone with the headmistress.

"Isn't Hermione looking lovely this evening?" she whispered.

"Yes, Minerva, she certainly is," he said, his jaw clenched.

"Lance tells me she has become your permanent associate," she said, peering at him above her glasses.

"She's proven herself adequate to the task," he snapped, scowling at her.

Minerva chuckled. "You're so defensive, Severus. I haven't come here to try to persuade you to return to Hogwarts or to dissuade you from becoming close to Hermione Granger."

Severus eyed her suspiciously, wondering if she had, perhaps, been talking to Lance. He would throttle the old man.

"If her admiring glances are anything to go by, Severus, she's as fond of you as you are of her." She turned and looked in the direction of his wife, her eyes narrowed. "And given the behaviour of your spouses, is that really such a bad thing? I think you and Hermione Granger might be very good together."

He watched in disbelief as she walked away from him, that knowing smile on her lips again. He looked around the room for Lance. It seemed a Tongue-Tying Curse might very well be in order.

By one o'clock in the morning, Hermione had had quite enough of Cordelia Mill's ball. Not once had she spoken to Severus, and what was more, he seemed determined to dance with every witch in the room apart from her. She plonked herself on a chair and watched through narrowed eyes as he led Rolanda Hooch onto the dance floor.

He was such a graceful man, and his dark colouring and demeanour drew the eye. She wondered why she'd never recognised any of this when she'd been an adolescent. Not once at Hogwarts had she ever seen past the billowing cloak, the hooked nose and that razor-sharp tongue.

But here she was, all dressed up and increasingly infatuated with the man who had become her employer and her friend, and not once had he seen fit to approach her. It seemed her dress had not had the desired effect after all, despite Moe's efforts.

Downing her fifth glass of champagne, she crossed her arms as Lance lowered himself stiffly into the seat next to her.

"Deary me. You're looking incredibly glum this evening, Hermione Granger."

"Do I, indeed?"

Lance raised an amused eyebrow. "Dislike seeing him with other women, do you?"

"I dislike the fact that he hasn't talked to me all evening, and I'm also rather annoyed that Cordelia has had the gall to invite her Scottish plaything here tonight," she spat, glaring in the direction of Everard Monroe.

Lance chuckled. "You're rather magnificent when you're angry. In fairness, Cordelia has behaved with perfect decorum this evening; not once have I seen her at Everard's side. And as for Severus, I'm sure he has his reasons for not approaching you. He always has his reasons, misguided though they may be."

Hermione sighed and rubbed one aching ankle. "I'm sorry, Lance. I didn't mean to take it out on you. And by the way," she added as she watched Minerva McGonagall glide past in the arms of Horace Slughorn, "what have you been saying to Minerva?"

"Whatever do you mean?" Lance replied, feigning innocence.

"She seems very interested in how I'm getting along with Severus, and I know you two are good friends."

Lance didn't answer the question, but after a moment he said, "I think Cordelia is distracted tonight, with so many high-profile guests to attend to. Perhaps you and Severus should spend a little time alone."

"A little time alone? Are you mad? He hasn't spoken a single word to me all evening, and yet you think he'd like to be alone with me?"

"Hermione, you're paranoid. He has been discreet tonight, even by his own standards, but he has rarely taken his eyes off you, nonetheless. He looked positively furious when you danced with that German chap." He looked at Severus and Rolanda Hooch. "This dance is about to end...watch him and you'll see what I mean."

Hermione watched as the waltz came to an end, and with a small bow, Severus relinquished Madam Hooch's hand and stepped away from her. Then his gaze moved around the room until it finally met her own. Realising he was being observed by her and Lance, he dropped his gaze and walked across the ballroom to join them.

Lance turned to her with a smile. "See what I mean? He's coming our way, so I think that is, perhaps, my cue to leave. Enjoy the remainder of your night, dear girl."

Even though she was annoyed at him, Hermione couldn't help but notice the flutter of nerves in her stomach as Severus reached her side and took the seat that Lance had just vacated.

"Good evening," he drawled.

"Good evening," she said brusquely, refusing to look at him.

He gave a short laugh. "Do I detect a touch of anger?"

She crossed her arms and turned to glare at him. "Yes, you do. The only wizard with whom I might have enjoyed a decent conversation has ignored me all evening."

He smirked. "Perhaps that wizard, despite the fact that he would have liked nothing better than to converse with you, had his reasons for failing to pay you the attention you so rightly deserve."

She held his amused gaze, wondering why he was in such genial form.

"Shall I fetch you a glass of champagne?" he asked.

"No, thank you," she said, her anger starting to evaporate. "I've had quite enough champagne."

"My glass seems to have magically refilled itself all evening. Did you tell Moe to keep it full?"

Hermione immediately coloured. "What on earth gave you that idea?"

He chuckled. "The fact that she said 'Miss Hermione said I is to be keeping your glass full, Master Severus.'"

Hermione shook her head and tried not to smile. "Next time, I'll make sure I forbid her to tell you of my little schemes."

He gave her a mock scowl. "Were you trying to get me drunk, Hermione?"

"Has it worked?"

"I can detect the faintest trace of intoxication."

"Only a trace? Perhaps you need more champagne."

"I didn't say the intoxication had anything to do with alcohol," he said silkily, his tone flirtatious.

She examined his face, thinking she'd imagined the suggestiveness of his remark. She was usually the one to do the flirting.

He lowered his voice and said, "You look quite exquisite tonight."

She couldn't help but gape.

He smirked. "Although that particular expression is not entirely becoming."

She frowned, feeling both pleased and unnerved by the compliment. "Are you sure you're not drunk?"

"Positive," he replied. His gaze fell to her gown. "You've altered your wedding dress."

She gasped. "I was hoping nobody would notice."

"I'm quite sure nobody else *has* noticed. It just so happens that I'm exceptionally fond of that gown."

She looked at him in surprise, and then remembered that with the exception of Theo and her mother, he was the only one to have seen the provocative cut of the back of her dress.

"I apologise for not speaking with you before now," he said, suddenly serious. "There are many pairs of curious eyes upon us, Hermione."

She presumed he was speaking of Minerva. Not knowing quite what to say, she cast her gaze over the dance floor. "I can't believe Cordelia had the temerity to invite Everard Munroe here tonight. I thought you said they never liaised in London?"

"They never have, to my knowledge. I haven't so much as seen them speak this evening, however. There is safety in numbers."

He sat back in his chair, and they watched the dancers whirling before them. Neville and Hannah caught her eye.

"I think," Hermione said quietly, "that for the first time since Theo left, I can almost feel the unhappiness in this room. So many victims of this stupid law: Hannah and Neville; Blaise and Katie; Cordelia and Everard."

"You and me?" he whispered.

Her heart thumped in her chest. Did he just mean that they were both trapped in loveless marriages, or had he intended to infer something more? "You and me," she said, unable to tear her gaze from the intense expression in his ink-black eyes.

He looked away from her, and his scrutiny fell upon the group from the Ministry of Magic. "Just look at them, Hermione, pretending that the increase in magical births has made it all worthwhile, that the casualties of this shambles of a law mean nothing. In denial of the fact, every single one of them, that by doing our duty we have caused great unhappiness."

She sighed, feeling suddenly sorry for herself. "Perhaps I should say goodnight, Severus. My feet ache, I'm exhausted, and it's much too warm in this room."

He rose and stood before her. "I beseech you to stay a little longer. And you know what they say, Hermione: If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. Or the ballroom, in this instance. Come with me," he said, extending his hand.

"Where?" she asked, allowing him to pull her gently from her chair.

"I promised you we would toast your success with St. Mungo's tonight, and so we shall," he said, directing her towards the door.

"Are you sure we can just leave?" she asked. "What about all those pairs of curious eyes of which you spoke?" Part of her longed to be alone with him, but another part wanted to run away and steer well clear of all temptation.

"I'm not entirely sure I care anymore," he said, stopping at the door. "Do you?"

She glanced around the ballroom and turned back to face him, aware that Lance's twinkling eyes were upon them. "No, I don't."

He gestured to the staircase. "Then after you, Hermione."

She stepped through the doors and made for the staircase, presuming he intended to descend to the laboratory.

"Not that way," he said, pointing upstairs instead. "This way."

"Your study?" she asked, following him.

He shook his head. "Somewhere entirely more pleasant."

She knew a moment of panic. Surely he didn't mean to take her to one of the bedrooms? "Are you sure this is appropriate?"

He smirked. "It is not *inappropriate*. Besides, I thought you didn't care?"

She shrugged and decided to throw caution to the wind. "I don't."

"Then let us proceed to the fourth floor."

She climbed the stairs, and when they finally reached the fourth floor, she stopped.

"This way," Severus whispered, placing his hand on the small of her back and directing her to a narrow door at the end of the short corridor. He tapped his wand to the handle and pulled it open. "Follow me."

She saw another narrow set of steps leading upwards, at the top of which was a wrought iron gate.

Severus lit his wand, and when they reached the gate he murmured an incantation and it swung open. He climbed the last step and stood aside, waiting for her to follow.

She could feel the fresh night air on her face, and she inhaled the familiar aroma of at least a dozen fragrant herbs as she stepped out into what was the most charming roof garden she'd ever seen.

Severus smiled at the expression on her face, and as he murmured another incantation, numerous candles blazed into life around the little garden, casting a warm glow on her features. "Is it to your liking?" he asked, closing the gate behind him.

"It's amazing," she gushed, circling the garden, trying to take everything in. "You grow some of our ingredients here?"

"Yes, most of the simplest herbs and plants are grown here. It's temperature controlled," he explained.

"Why haven't you ever told me about it before?"

He flashed her one of his rare, genuine smiles. "It's one of my most closely guarded secrets; with the exception of Lance, I don't believe I've ever brought anyone here before. Most of the Mills know about it, of course, but when I moved here it had fallen into complete disrepair. A few weeks of effort soon turned it into a productive herb garden."

She looked about her again, recognising a number of the plants in their terracotta pots. In the corner was a pair of wooden chairs and a small table. "It's just lovely," she said, turning on the spot. "Do you spend much time here?"

"I read up here occasionally in the summer, and Lance joins me from time to time for a nightcap."

She crossed to the thick stone wall that reached to her waist and gazed out over the roofs and the twinkling lights of London.

He joined her and Conjured a pair of champagne flutes with a flick of his wand; one further flick, and a bottle of Bollinger Reserve appeared. "I told you a bottle of good champagne would be set aside to toast your success." He popped the cork and poured them both a glass of champagne.

She smiled. "Are you sure this won't tip you over the edge, Severus? I thought you said you were already faintly intoxicated?"

"Yes, and I thought I had already said that my intoxication was not due to the effects of alcohol?" he drawled, handing her a glass of champagne and watching her face. Before she could react to his innuendo, he had raised his glass. "Here's to enchanting associates who appear to have the ability to charm even the hardest of hearts."

She smiled, wondering whether he meant himself or Healer Thwaite. "Here's to Potions masters who are willing to give a girl a chance," she responded.

They clinked their glasses together and raised them to their lips.

"So," she said, leaning against the small stone wall. "To whom do all these pairs of curious eyes belong?"

"Has nobody of your acquaintance expressed interest in how we have progressed from hostility to camaraderie over such a relatively short space of time?" he asked, eyebrows raised.

"I suppose they have. Lance is constantly badgering me about how we're getting on."

Severus grunted. "That makes two of us. Minerva's no better. It would seem that once you hit eighty you lose the ability to keep your nose out of other people's business."

Hermione laughed. "So I've noticed. But it's not just the older generation who've said something. Neville and Padma have also ... well ... asked questions."

"Neville Longbottom? Who would have thought?" He considered telling her about Cordelia's remarks, but decided to keep it to himself for now. "You drew the admiring gaze of quite a number of the male attendees this evening, and in more than the spirit of mere camaraderie." He allowed his eyes to flicker over her figure.

She swallowed rapidly. "And you would describe this as camaraderie, would you?" she asked, pointing from her chest to his.

He stared at her with such intensity that she was forced to drop her gaze. "How would you describe it, Hermione?"

She uttered a short laugh and looked out over the rooftops. "I think I would describe it as skating on very thin ice." She sipped at her champagne and continued her scrutiny of the skyline.

Neither of them spoke for a few moments, and the sound of the small orchestra Cordelia had hired could be heard above the clink of glasses and the chatter of the guests so many floors below. The musicians struck up another waltz, and Hermione gasped in recognition.

"It's Tchaikovsky: the waltz from The Sleeping Beauty." She closed her eyes for a second, enjoying the familiarity of the introduction.

He placed his glass on the wall. "Would you care to dance?" he asked, offering her his hand.

Hermione's eyes widened. "What? Here?"

"Why not? We are far from all those curious eyes, and I've longed to dance with you all night."

Feeling almost hypnotised by his dark eyes and the pull of the music from below them, she placed an unsteady hand in his.

He led her to the centre of the tiny garden, but before he took her into his arms, he raised his fingers to her shoulders, ignoring the questioning look on her face. Willing his hands to remain steady, he undid the clasps on her cape and tossed it onto one of the garden chairs, his gaze never leaving her face.

"A woman should never dance with her cloak on," he murmured.

He took her right hand in his left and placed his free hand on the bare skin of her back, a small smile lifting the corner of his mouth as she shuddered in response. He paused for a second, enjoying the feel of her smooth skin against his palm, pleased at having finally realised one of his long held fantasies.

She placed her hand on his shoulder, shivering at the twin sensations of his body pressed against hers and his warm hand on her bare skin. The black eyes she so often found unreadable seemed to be laid bare tonight, and she could clearly read desire in their depths.

"We are playing a very dangerous game, Severus Snape," she whispered as they started to dance.

"And what game is it we are playing, Hermione Granger?" he asked, that satisfied smile still playing about the corner of his lips.

"I'm not entirely sure," she said, her voice trembling.

"Then why is it so dangerous?" he whispered next to her ear, and she finally had everything she had longed for earlier that evening: she was in his arms and had the tickle of his breath against her cheek.

She did not answer him; she did not know what to say, and her heart was beating so rapidly that she was certain she would faint if she didn't calm herself. She breathed deeply, trying to memorise the feel of his body against hers. He was as graceful a mover as he was a Potions brewer.

"I rather expected you to hum along, seeing as it is a Tchaikovsky waltz," he said quietly.

She smiled and looked up at him. "I think I've forgotten how to hum," she replied breathily.

He gave her a satisfied smirk, and, overwhelmed by the hunger in his gaze, she laid her head against his shoulder.

Severus closed his eyes and leaned his chin against the top of her head, basking in her warmth and her subtle perfume. Without even thinking about it, he started to stroke the exposed skin of her back with his thumb and was rewarded when a small sigh escaped her lips.

Hermione would have liked nothing better than to remain in his arms for hours, but the short waltz ended with a flourish, and she almost cried with frustration.

They stilled when the music stopped, and as they pulled apart, his gaze fell to her lips. He was so close that she could still feel his breath on her skin, and she knew that if she just inched forward, their mouths would meet.

Hardly knowing what she wanted anymore, she could think of nothing but how his lips would feel upon hers, when he relinquished his hold on her with a muttered, "Thank you, Hermione."

She tried not to let the disappointment show on her face. "You're welcome," she whispered.

He moved back to the wall, and she followed him, picking up her glass with trembling fingers. There was an ache in her chest; an ache of loss. She wanted to feel those long, warm fingers on her skin again. She looked up at him, but he was examining his glass, apparently lost in thought.

"Tell me, Hermione," he said, turning to her. "What will you do if Theo never comes back?"

She gave him a sad smile. "I've no idea, and it's a question I've been asked many times over the past few weeks." She sipped her drink. "What will you do if Cordelia never leaves?"

"I do not know, but I've never yet let it get in my way."

They stood in silence for a minute, and Hermione realised the orchestra had not started to play again. Severus glanced at his watch.

"It's two in the morning," he said. "Many of the guests will be leaving. I must descend and say goodnight to a few of them. Would you like to accompany me, or would you prefer to remain here?"

"I'll stay here if you promise to come back," she said hopefully.

He nodded, already turning towards the wrought iron gate. "I'll return as soon as I can."

Hermione sighed as he disappeared from view and buried her head in her hands, her shoulders sagging in a sudden release of tension. What in Merlin's name was she doing? She had sworn she would not let this happen, but if the last hour had proved anything, it was that she was more besotted than ever by this complicated man.

What was she supposed to do? Was she supposed to just ignore these emotions and hope they would go away?

Her hands still shaking from the effect of his touch, she crossed to the chair where he had tossed her cape. Still marvelling that he'd had the daring to do such a thing, she wrapped the satin cape around her shoulders and sat on one of the wooden chairs, tucking her legs beneath her. She had meant what she'd said to him back in the ballroom: her feet ached and she was exhausted. She closed her eyes and awaited his return, wondering what would happen before this night was through.

It was almost an hour later when Severus had at last seen off most of the important guests. While Cordelia was busy with the remainder, he decided to return to the roof garden while his absence might go unnoticed. As he climbed the stairs he vowed to proceed with caution. He had behaved with atypical boldness this evening, and

although he did not regret their moonlit dance, he had no wish for events to spiral out of control.

He pushed open the gate and saw with a pang of dismay that Hermione was fast asleep on one of the garden chairs. Closing the gate quietly behind him, he crossed to her side and gazed down upon her slumbering figure.

She was curled up on the chair, her cape wrapped around her shoulders, her lips parted as she slept. Despite the sophistication of her gown and her makeup, she looked young in her slumber. He smiled: the sleeping beauty waltz seemed more than appropriate.

A wave of longing swept over him, and he knelt beside her, tenderly brushing an errant curl from her flushed cheek. The split skirt of her gown had ridden up her thigh, exposing the smooth, flawless skin of her leg. Desire coursing through his veins, he reached out to touch her, but stopped. If ever the opportunity arose for such an action, he wanted to read the permission and mutual desire in her hazel eyes. Perhaps that day would never come, but he would wait.

With a frustrated sigh he rose to his feet.

"Moe?" he whispered.

The little elf appeared before him with a crack. Hermione did not stir.

"You is calling, Master Severus?" she asked.

"I was wondering if you would be so kind as to Apparate Miss Hermione to her bed, Moe. It would be inappropriate for me to do so." He cast one last, longing glance at Hermione's sleeping face and stepped back.

The elf nodded and placed her hand on Hermione's arm. With a click of her fingers they both disappeared, leaving Severus alone on the roof garden.

He Vanished the bottle of champagne and the glasses with a flick of his wand and turned to descend to the ballroom once more.

With a deep sigh of regret, he wondered what might have transpired if she had not fallen asleep. Perhaps it was better this way. They were, as she had said, skating on very thin ice.

The Worst of All Bad Names

Chapter 22 of 34

Severus and Hermione make new resolutions. But will they stick to them?

She hears me strike the board and say

That she is under ban

Of all good men and women,

Being mentioned with a man

That has the worst of all bad names;

And thereupon replies

That his hair is beautiful,

Cold as the March wind his eyes.

- W. B. Yeats, *Father and Child*

Severus grimaced as he lifted his coffee cup to his lips: Years as a spy had taught him to read a person's body language the moment they entered the room, and if Cordelia's frosty glare and determined set of her chin were any indication, she was steeling herself for a confrontation.

"Good morning, Severus," she said coldly, taking the seat opposite him and reaching for the teapot.

"Good morning," he replied, picking up his copy of the *Daily Prophet* and scanning the pictures from the ball on the fourth page. "There's a charming picture of you and Narcissa Malfoy in this morning's paper."

She lifted her gaze to the paper for a moment before returning her attention to her breakfast. "And how did you enjoy the ball, Severus?"

He looked at her over the top of the *Prophet*. "I'm not generally fond of such events, but I thought it went quite well. Were you happy with it?"

She did not answer him, but delicately placed her teacup in its saucer and laced her fingers. "You disappeared off with Hermione for almost an hour, Severus. Let me guess: the poor girl was having problems with her wedding ring again?"

He put down the paper and leaned forward with a scowl. "To my knowledge, she had no problems with her ring last night, Cordelia, as your son was evidently behaving himself."

"Then where did the two of you go for so long? Are you going to tell me she went home and that it was mere coincidence you happened to go missing at the same time?"

"No, I won't deny that we spent almost an hour together. I don't see that it's any of your business, and I fail to understand why I should have to justify my actions, but on Friday she secured a lucrative contract with St. Mungo's. I had promised we would toast her success last night, and so we did."

"Given the copious amount of champagne in the ballroom, I cannot understand why you had to take your celebrations elsewhere." Her brow was furrowed in anger.

"Some of the Ministry people spent time smoking in the drawing room; a number of guests took their champagne out to the patio to escape the warmth of the ballroom; Hermione and I left for some fresh air. Why is that a problem?"

Cordelia tapped her manicured nails on the table. "Don't play innocent with me, Severus. You know very well why it was unacceptable: she's a young woman, and while it may be socially acceptable for the two of you to spend hours closeted away in your laboratory, it is certainly not acceptable for you to gallivant off together in the middle of a ball in front of hundreds of guests."

"Cordelia, there were, as you rightly pointed out, hundreds of guests here, and I'm certain our absence went unnoticed by all but you." He could tell by her momentary silence that he was right: no-one had noticed.

She glowered at him. "At the end of the day, no matter what the current situation between Hermione and Theo, she is my daughter-in-law, and your increasingly frequent little escapes in front of company are inappropriate."

He balled his hands into fists. "Well, while we're on the subject of inappropriate behaviour, there was one name in particular I was surprised to see on the guest list last night. You might behave as you like in Edinburgh, Cordelia, but I've never before known you to flaunt your private life in my face." He enjoyed her expression of shock.

After only a few seconds she recovered and said, "And what, exactly, is that supposed to mean?"

He gave her a withering look. "Do not feign stupidity; you know full well what role I played during the war. Don't you think I would have applied my talent for investigation to my fiancée before I signed on the dotted line?"

"You had the gall to meddle in my private life before we were married?"

"I've never meddled in your private life, my dear," he said with forced calm. "I made it my business to find out what I was letting myself in for, and I accepted your private life before we were wed. I've never once interfered, but I was surprised to find, for the first time since we became husband and wife, that you crossed the line and invited one particular guest into our home last night."

She looked at him aghast, and then dropped her gaze. "That's hardly the point; I believe we were discussing Hermione."

"But I believe the point I've just made is entirely relevant: I have not, to date, interfered in your personal affairs, Cordelia, but if you give me reason, I can make your life exceedingly difficult."

She narrowed her eyes. "How dare you threaten me, Severus Snape?"

He shrugged and gave her a defiant smirk. "If you make things difficult for me, I will return the compliment. I've allowed you your private life, Cordelia; I beseech you to extend the same courtesy to me."

She rose from the table and tossed her napkin onto her breakfast plate, her toast uneaten. "I'll be spending the week in France," she announced, flouncing from the room without waiting for a reply.

He watched her go, and his smirk disappeared. He had spent almost two decades playing spy. He was tired of deceit, and play-acting, and espionage. He had quite enjoyed the relative peace that had been his since the fall of Lord Voldemort, devoid as it had been of complications. But it seemed that his wife would not stand idly by and allow him to indulge his growing appetite for Hermione Granger. Perhaps the time had come to relegate the girl to nothing more than an employee. The situation was entirely too complex; it could not be allowed to continue.

Hermione awoke after ten o'clock on Sunday morning, utterly confused. Her black gown was hung neatly over the stool in front of her dressing table, and she was dressed in her pyjamas.

She knew a moment of panic: surely Severus hadn't brought her home and undressed her? But as she took in the sight of her neatly arranged clothes from the night before, she knew it must have been Moe. She lay back on her pillow and pulled the duvet over her head, hardly daring to believe that she'd been so utterly brainless as to fall asleep on the chair in Severus's roof garden.

She sighed. What must he think of her? Was he annoyed with her or was he, perhaps, just as disappointed as she was?

She recalled the things he had said to her: He had told her she looked exquisite; that he had been fond of her wedding gown; and that his intoxication had nothing to do with alcohol. She closed her eyes and remembered his daring in having removed her cloak, and a moan escaped her lips at the memory of his touch upon her bare skin; the warmth of his body as they had danced; the caress of his breath on her face.

Her altered gown had done the trick, in the end. After last night, there could be no more denial of the fact that they desired one another. When they met in the lab again on Tuesday morning, she fully expected him to be gruff, formal and unfriendly. But she would know that beneath his carefully constructed defence, he wanted her as much as she wanted him.

She strode to the door and plucked her dressing gown from the hook. She desperately needed some tea after all that champagne, and she could hear Moe bustling around in the kitchen, humming as she worked.

"Good morning, Moe," she said, taking a seat at the table.

"Morning, Miss Hermione," Moe replied. She Levitated a plate of crumpets to the table. "You is getting an owl," she said, gesturing to a folded piece of parchment.

Hermione picked up the note, immediately recognising Padma's handwriting. She quickly scanned the contents: Dean was taking the babies to his mother's house for lunch, and Padma wanted to know if Hermione would join her for a chat. Although she was uneasy about what her friend might say to her, Hermione was glad of the opportunity for a discussion. She needed a female companion to confide in. She looked up as Moe brought a pot of tea to the table.

"Master Severus was liking your dress?" the elf asked.

Hermione grinned. "Yes, Moe. I think we can safely say that Severus liked my dress."

Padma beamed as she opened the front door. "Come on in. The house is actually clean, for once."

Hermione closed the door behind her and looked around. Padma's house hadn't been this quiet and calm since the twins had been born.

"I wasn't much in the mood for cooking a big Sunday lunch," Padma said, leading the way to the kitchen, "so it's just sandwiches and cakes, I'm afraid."

"That'll do me," Hermione said. "I'm starving." She sat down while Padma put on the kettle.

"How was the ball? Tell me everything."

"Well, first off, I decided not to wear the blue gown."

"What?" Padma shrieked. "It cost you a fortune! I thought it was lovely."

"It's nice, I suppose. But when I tried it on I just thought I looked ... I don't know ... too mature, I guess. I looked like a mini version of Cordelia. I wanted to look a bit ... sexier."

Padma frowned. "For Snape?"

Hermione blushed furiously. "Yes, I suppose so."

Padma shook her head. "I'm still in shock about this. But go on...what did you wear instead?"

"With a bit of help from Moe, I altered my wedding dress and dyed it black. It looked great...Moe added lots of black beads."

"I presume you wore the cape?" Padma asked, an eyebrow raised.

Hermione laughed. "Of course I did! I'm not *that* daring, you know."

Padma smiled. "Go on, then. You went to the ball looking all seductive ..."

"Well, the first few hours were fairly tedious. You know I'm not really a fan of dancing, but I'd a nice chat with Neville, and Susan was there, bump and all. They're expecting a boy, apparently."

"I'd say Lucius Malfoy's delighted it's a boy." Padma took her seat at the table and placed the pot of tea before them. "So, let's cut to the interesting parts *Were* there any interesting parts?"

Hermione took a nervous breath. "I suppose there were, but if you keep reacting in shock and horror to anything I say about Severus, there's no point in telling you."

Padma was wide-eyed. "Did something happen?"

"I suppose so. But don't get your knickers in a twist: it wasn't all that much. I haven't snogged him or anything."

"Look, I'll behave myself, I promise," Padma reassured her. "I know I wasn't terribly supportive yesterday, but it was just such a shock. Tell me what happened."

"Well, I was really, really annoyed, because he didn't come near me all evening. Never even said hello. And he danced with practically every witch in the room apart from me. To cut a long story short, it was after one in the morning when I finally got to talk to him. He's really different at dinner parties and balls: I don't know whether it's the wine or just that he lets his guard down, but he behaves much differently. We get on great at work, most of the time, and we have quite interesting conversations, but he's much more friendly at these sort of events. Flirtatious, even."

"Anyway, we talked for a bit. He told me I looked nice, which was a surprise, and said there were lots of curious eyes upon us. Eventually I told him I was going to go home, but he asked me not to, and took me up to this gorgeous roof garden that I didn't even know was there. It was really lovely. He grows lots of Potions ingredients up there, and it was all lit by candles."

"I see," Padma said, frowning again.

"He opened a bottle of champagne to toast my success at St. Mungo's, and we had a bit of a talk about all the people who seem to be interested in the fact that we've become friends. And then," she looked up at Padma, nervous about saying much more, "he asked me to dance."

"He asked you to dance? On the roof garden?"

Hermione nodded slowly, moving her gaze to her teacup. "It was a Tchaikovsky waltz; you know how I love Tchaikovsky's ballets. So, yes, he asked me to dance." She decided not to mention that he had taken off her cloak and had stroked her back with his warm hand. But even the thought of it made her cheeks grow warm.

"That's quite ... romantic," Padma said, a crooked smile on her face.

"I suppose it was," Hermione said, covering her face with her hands. "Merlin, Padma. I wanted him to kiss me so badly. I know it's wrong, but he's practically all I can think about. It's so long since I felt like this about someone; in fact, I'm not sure I've *ever* felt like this about someone." She lowered her hands and before she could stop it, a tear trickled down her cheek. "What am I going to do?"

"Oh, Hermione!" Padma said. She came around the table and drew Hermione into a hug. "Look, like you said yesterday, you can't help the way you feel. I'm not going to pretend I understand it...it's Snape, for God's sake...but I can see that you really like him." She Conjured a handkerchief and handed it to Hermione, who blew her nose loudly.

"It's not just that I find him attractive," Hermione explained, her voice choked. "I admire him, you know? His intellect; his bravery. I even like his sense of humour and his goddamn ridiculous black clothes. He has an incredible voice and this mesmerising way of letting his hand caress the steam from his cauldron."

Padma gave a short laugh. "Girl, you have it bad."

"I know," Hermione wailed, raising her hands to her face once more. "And it's such a stupid, dead-end, hopeless situation."

"Look," Padma said, relinquishing her hold on Hermione and pouring her another cup of tea. "I know I spent the afternoon yesterday trying to convince you that you should get yourself a man. And my reluctance about Snape has nothing to do with the fact that he's ... well ... Snape. It's the situation you're in. You live with the Mills; he's married to one of the Mills; he's Theo's stepfather, and more importantly, you have to work with him. If you became involved with him, how difficult would your everyday life become? All I want is for you to be happy, and if I thought for one minute that an affair with Severus Snape would make you happy, I'd give you nothing but encouragement. But as it is, you've already been badly hurt this past year, and I couldn't bear to see you hurt again. What future would there be for the two of you? I know you said his marriage is a sham, but he's still married, at the end of the day. And unlike Theo, his wife is still around. What possible good could come of it?"

Hermione dried her tears. "Everything you say makes sense. I can't deny that. Even if I tracked down Theo, there's no guarantee he'd grant me a divorce. And even if he did, I'm certain Cordelia wouldn't oblige Severus with one; that would only leave her in a situation where she would have to marry again within six months."

"I don't mean to be cruel, but the way forward seems pretty clear to me," Padma said gently. "You have to get over him. I know you love your job, and that you want to keep it, so it will be a difficult thing to do when you have to see him so often. But you need to do it, Hermione."

Hermione uttered a deep sigh. "I know. You're right. It'll be hard, but it has to be done."

She knew Padma spoke the truth. Perhaps the time had come to relegate Severus Snape to nothing more than an employer. The situation was entirely too complex; it could not be allowed to continue.

Hermione was glad she had the laboratory to herself on Monday: it gave her time to think about the discussion she'd had with Padma and an opportunity to ensure that she was determined to distance herself from Severus. She'd meant what she said: It couldn't go on. She would forget about their moonlit dance on the roof garden.

When she arrived at work on Tuesday morning, Severus was, as usual, there before her.

"Good morning," she said nervously, trying not to enjoy the sight of him.

"Morning," he replied without looking up.

She smiled to herself; she had fully expected him to have put up his emotional barriers since the ball. "I apologise for falling asleep on Saturday night, Severus. I hope I wasn't too much trouble." Without waiting for his reply, she busied herself with the ingredients for her first potion of the day.

"Apology accepted," he said gruffly, still not meeting her gaze.

It was generally their custom to talk for a time on Tuesday mornings, and usually, Hermione would have drawn him into conversation. But today, she concentrated on what she was doing, pleased that she was already putting her plan into action. She took her hair clip from the pocket of her robes and scraped her curls into a ponytail at the back of her neck, securing it with the silver clip. Then, taking the jars she needed from the shelves, she crossed to her workbench, relieved that Severus's gaze had not followed her across the room. It seemed she was not the only one with a new resolution.

After lighting the flame beneath the largest of the wrought iron cauldrons, she started to chop and slice some roots, and a heavy silence fell between them. Severus appeared absorbed in his work, and a quick glance told her he was working on a Sleeping Draught. She was curious to know for which client he was brewing it, but she held her tongue, determined not to be the one to break the silence.

Her own potion was a tricky one to brew: a balm used in the treatment of Dragon Pox. She smiled in satisfaction as she added the dried Doxy wings, and the liquid became the precise shade of yellow she had hoped for. It was the first time she'd brewed this potion since her third year in college, and, feeling smug that it had turned out so well, she reduced the flame and picked up her stirring rod. It required a full hour of slow stirring in an anti-clockwise direction, so she set her little timer with a flick of her wand and began.

She had only been stirring for ten minutes when her silver hair clip gave way and fell to the floor with a metallic clink.

Cursing under her breath as her bushy curls fell forward, obscuring her view of the cauldron, she bent down and tried to reach the clip with her left hand. If she stopped blending the potion, even for a second or two, it would be rendered completely useless. She had no intention of throwing away her morning's work and wasting rare and expensive ingredients. Standing up again, she cast a glance at Severus.

"Severus, could I ask a favour?" she asked, blushing.

"What?" he snapped.

"My hair clip has come undone, and I was wondering if you could pick it up for me and tie my hair back?" she said, feeling like his student for the first time in months.

He looked at her, incredulous. "And why, pray tell, can't you do it yourself?"

"Because I'm at a delicate stage in brewing this balm, and it'll be ruined if I stop stirring," she explained.

"Cast a Stasis Charm on it," he barked.

"Severus, you know I can't: it's that Dragon Pox Potion for St. Mungo's. A Stasis Charm won't work."

"For pity's sake, girl," he said through clenched teeth, casting a Stasis Charm on his own potion and tossing his stirring rod angrily onto his bench. "Do you take me for a hairdresser?"

He crossed to her workbench in three angry strides, his furious gaze searching the ground for the hair clip. He spotted it and picked it up with an irate grunt. "Either secure your ridiculous mane properly from now on, or cut it off," he spat, reaching forward to scoop her hair from her face.

"Sorry," she murmured, mortified. He hadn't called her hair ridiculous for ages.

With the clip in his right hand, Severus gathered her hair from either side of her face, noticing as he did so the expression of hurt on her features. He felt sorry immediately; angry though he was, he had not meant to injure her feelings. An apology sprang to his lips, but then he bit it back: he was determined that they should behave as nothing more than workmates, and she deserved to be taken to task for her carelessness.

With a sigh of irritation, he pulled her hair back, exposing her neck, and as he did so, the floral scent of her perfume washed over him. He closed his eyes and inhaled, remembering how she had felt in his arms on the roof garden.

He could feel her stiffen at his proximity, and he opened his eyes again, gazing at the smooth, white skin of her bare neck. How often had he wondered what it would feel like to run his hand along the delicate surface of her shoulder? How many times had he imagined what her reaction might be if he dared to touch her?

In the days, weeks and months that were to come, he would often look back on this moment and wonder what, exactly, had made him do it. What sudden flash of madness had caused him to throw caution, sense and all his resolutions to the wind? Not caring anymore what the rest of the world thought and not caring what complications would be wrought upon his life, he allowed the delicate silver clip to fall to the ground and reached forward, wondering if her neck would feel as warm and soft as her back.

He pressed the tip of his index finger to her skin and gently trailed it all the way down to her robed shoulder. A satisfied smile lifted the corner of his mouth as her stirring rod clattered, abandoned, to the surface of the wooden bench, splattering a trail of vibrant yellow across the polished surface as it fell. He watched, enraptured, as her eyelids fluttered closed and a soft gasp escaped her lips. He had long imagined how she would vocalise a response to his touch, and he was not disappointed.

Suddenly overwhelmed by a desire to taste her, he allowed his right hand to linger at her shoulder and twisted her hair at the back of her head in his left. Eagerly anticipating her reaction, he leaned forward and touched his lips to the vein at the side of her throat.

Her heart pounding wildly, Hermione forgot all about her important potion as he pressed his warm, soft lips to her neck. She let her head fall back, exposing her throat to him, hardly recognising her own voice as a guttural groan rose from deep within her chest. She could feel him smile against her skin at the sound, and she gripped the edge of her workbench, her knuckles whitening in an effort to steady her suddenly useless legs.

Pressing herself back against his body as she had so long wanted to do, she turned her head towards him, all her good intentions forgotten, determined at last to discover exactly what his lips would feel like against her own.

Severus pulled away from her neck as, slowly, she turned to face him. In that short second that would remain in his memory forever, their gazes locked, and he was, for once, grateful that her Gryffindor nature meant she wore her heart on her sleeve. The permission and mutual desire he had yearned to see while she had slept on the roof garden was there in her expression, her eyes wide with yearning.

That suspended moment came crashing down around him as their mouths met, and his sense of everything external vanished. He was lost in the smell of her, the feel of her. And he didn't care if he never found his way back to sanity again.

It was not often that Hermione found it easy to read the emotions in his black eyes, but in that short moment before their lips met she could see the undeniable hunger that

had overwhelmed them both. And as they met in a tangle of hands and lips, she thrilled with the knowledge that he wanted her, just as much as she wanted him. As his mouth crashed upon hers, her first thought was that his lips, his hands, his tongue, were so warm. For such an austere man, she had not expected such heat, such fervency.

They kissed frantically, both of them tangling their hands in one another's hair, their breathing quickly becoming shallow and ragged. Severus pressed himself against her, and she could feel his hardening erection against her hip. She had never before been a vocal lover, but as he moved his eager mouth along her jaw, she moaned aloud.

One hand still entangled in her hair, he trailed his other hand down her body, brushing his thumb against one already taut nipple, enjoying the sound when she moaned again. He wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her more surely against him, knowing, but not caring, that she could feel his hardness, wanting her to know that he was only moments away from having her, no matter what the cost.

Hermione reached behind her, scrabbling for her wand. Her fingers closed upon it, and, groaning again at the feel of his lips on her throat, she brought it between them. After pushing his cloak from his shoulders, she ran the tip of her wand along the long row of buttons on his coat, and they popped open as her wand passed. As he found her lips again, the sensation of his searching tongue making her want to whimper his name into his open mouth, she shoved his frock coat from his shoulders, and he allowed it to fall from his arms, joining his cloak in a black heap on the stone floor.

She dropped her wand and pressed the palms of her hands against his chest, feeling the warmth of his skin beneath his linen shirt. She shivered as his hands moved up her body again, moving over the sides of her breasts as they rose to the base of her throat, where he undid the clasp of her work robes and tossed them across the room.

Severus buried his hands in her glorious hair once more, amazed that he had, only minutes before, described it as ridiculous. How could he have thought such a thing when he could just picture it spread across his pillow or dangling over the edge of his bed as she threw back her head in ecstasy? He gave a groan as she lowered her fingers to the waist of his black trousers and fumbled at his belt. Having undone the buckle, she bit gently at his lip and moved her mouth to his ear. He choked back another groan at the feel of her panted breaths against his stubbled cheek.

"Severus," Hermione whispered into his ear, "don't make me beg." Her pulse raced, and something swelled in her chest, some desperate, overwhelming emotion that she knew must be desire, stronger than she had ever felt it in her life before. She threaded her fingers through his fine hair and pressed the palm of her other hand against his still-clothed erection, marvelling at her own daring.

He kissed her again and in a voice hoarse with need he said, "There is no need for you to beg."

Moving his hands to her waist, he lifted her and pushed her on top of the potions bench, so that she was sitting on the very edge of the yellow-spattered wood, her hips level with his own. One of her sandals clattered to the floor, and, with their foreheads pressed together, he moved his eager hands to her knees and pushed her light, summer skirt up her thighs, enjoying the feel of those smooth legs that he had ached to touch on Saturday night.

Hermione gasped as he snaked his hands around her hips, and, looping his fingers around the sides of her knickers, he pulled them down her legs. She was already damp with craving, and she didn't care if he knew it as he dropped her knickers to the floor, where they joined his discarded coat.

Kissing her again as she wound her arms around his neck, he moved his hand along the softness of her inner thigh and smirked as she wantonly spread her legs for him, her modesty forgotten in her fervour. He could feel the damp heat of her against his fingertips, and she let out a strangled cry as he circled her clitoris with the pad of his thumb.

"Severus," she moaned into his mouth, "please."

It was all the invitation he needed. He moved his hand to the tented front of his trousers and freed himself from the confines of his clothing. She reached down to touch him, but before she could press her fingers to his length, he pulled her to the edge of the workbench and buried himself within her.

They groaned in unison, still for a moment as they absorbed the first sensation of their coupling. Then, as she wrapped her legs around his waist and lowered her panting mouth to his lips, he began to move, biting back a moan each time he plunged into her.

Anxious to feel her fingers upon flesh, Hermione slipped her hands beneath his shirt and moved her hands up his back, running her nails lightly along his skin. She had enjoyed sex before, yes, but never like this, never with this kind of desperate, frantic need. Already, so soon, that warning tingle was building in her belly with every thrust. She had wanted this for so long, had imagined this with such regularity, that she knew she wouldn't last. Allowing her head to fall back, she was rewarded by his hot mouth on her neck once again.

Severus watched her through half-lidded eyes, admiring the way her hair skimmed the top of the bench, the way her curls swung wildly every time he drove into her. He opened the buttons on her blouse, trailing kisses down her chest as he went, inhaling her scent as he buried his nose between her breasts. Pulling down one of the cups of her satin bra, he gazed at the delicious swell of her breast, the dusky areola. Then he traced a line across her skin with his tongue and took her hardened nipple into his mouth.

Hermione cried out as he circled her nipple with his tongue. Arching her back, she pressed herself further into his mouth, knowing she was only moments away from orgasm. She sighed as he released her breast and returned his attention to her mouth, his breathing almost as ragged and erratic as her own.

He lowered his hands to her hips and pulled her as close against him as he could. He moved faster still, aroused by the sight of her as she leaned back on her elbows, her exposed breast jutting through her blouse and her long hair dangling into the contents of her cauldron, scattering more yellow droplets across her workbench. He was close to climax, and he moved his hand beneath her bunched up skirt once more, circling her swollen nub in rhythm with each thrust.

He watched her face, magnificent in passion, her eyes closed, her cheeks flushed and her lips parted provocatively. He clenched his teeth, silently urging her on until she cried out once more, and he knew he had succeeded. She arched her back and her head fell back further, her muscles clenching around him.

Biting her bottom lip in an effort not to scream aloud, Hermione allowed the most intense orgasm of her life to consume her, aware, but hardly caring, that Severus's gaze was upon her as she came. Then, still breathless, her heart still racing, she sat forward and wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs tighter around his waist.

Severus gave an inarticulate moan as she brought her soft lips to his, and, still feeling the last contractions of her orgasm, he spilled himself inside her as a hiss of pleasure escaped through his gritted teeth.

He gave a deep sigh of satisfaction as she leaned her head on his shoulder, his breathing slowly returning to normal, the reality of what he had just done beginning to seep into his lust-addled brain. They stayed that way for a long moment, the only sounds their calming breaths and the bubbling of Hermione's now-useless potion.

"I've wanted to do that for some time," she whispered eventually, lifting her head from his shoulder.

He pulled from her and quickly rearranged his trousers, pulling up his zip and buckling his belt. He watched her expression from beneath his hair, wary of how she would react and unsure of how they should proceed. She looked beautiful, her hair wild, her cheeks still flushed and her breast exposed. About to comment that he, too, had wanted to do this for longer than he cared to admit, he quickly shut his mouth as she raised her hands to her face and uttered a small sob.

"But, Severus," she whimpered, lowering her hands, revealing scarlet cheeks and tear-filled eyes. "We shouldn't have. It was wrong."

He knew first a throb of terrible disappointment, and then a cold, creeping feeling of rejection. Hurt, he took a step away from her.

"Well," he snapped, tucking his shirt into his trousers, his jaw clenched, "you didn't seem to think it so wrong when you were moaning and asking me not to make you beg."

Hermione raised her unsteady hands to her face again, a horrible wave of guilt and shame replacing the fire and passion she had felt only minutes before. Suddenly aware

of her dishevelled state, she fixed her bra and buttoned her blouse with quivering fingers, unable to stop a tear of self-loathing from slipping down her cheek.

"I'm still married, at the end of the day," she said, too afraid to meet his gaze.

"Your spouse doesn't seem to have such a problem with his conscience," he said, his tone angry.

"I know," she said, wiping her cheek. "But it's still wrong. No matter what she's up to, Severus, Cordelia has never done me wrong, and I've betrayed her."

He gave a grunt of disbelief. "What a splendid time for some misplaced Gryffindor dramatics." He picked his coat up and shrugged into it.

Overcome by shame now, Hermione hardly heard what he said. She slipped from the bench and looked at the ground where her knickers, her wand and her sandal lay discarded, evidence of her adultery. Slipping on her knickers in as dignified a way as possible, she slid her foot into her sandal and picked up her wand.

Severus stood before her, his hands on his hips. "Hermione ..." he said, his tone more gentle.

"I'm sorry, Severus," she said, crying freely now. "I have to go."

Without retrieving her cloak, she fled from the laboratory, her yellow-stained hair swinging behind her.

As the front door slammed shut above him, Severus dropped his gaze to the floor, where the silver hair clip lay next to his cloak. Picking it up, he was gripped by sudden self-disgust and hurled the delicate clasp against the wall.

A sweep of his arm sent phials and glass jars hurtling to the ground, and the yellow-filled cauldron followed, hitting the floor with a sickening clunk, its contents quickly trickling between the flagstones.

He had behaved like a complete and utter idiot. He had not meant for this to happen. Yes, he had desired her since the day he had first seen that accursed backless gown, but he had never meant for it to happen. Not like this. She required, deserved, much more than a quick fuck on a workbench.

He closed his eyes and raised a hand to his brow. He was a fool.

Hermione ran across Kensington Square, tears streaming down her cheeks, not caring who saw her or what they thought of her tousled appearance. When she reached the house, she threw open the door and fled straight to her bedroom, determined to avoid Moe's penetrating stare.

She collapsed onto her bed, sobbing, overcome by the enormity of what she had just done. After all the promises she had made to herself and to Padma, she had done that which she had sworn she would not. She had always known it would be too complicated. How was she ever meant to return to work, pretending everything was normal?

It had all been so manageable, so magical in a way, when it had hovered between them, silently acknowledged but never spoken aloud. It had been almost acceptable. But now, it was finally out in the open: They desired one another, and they had acted on that desire. How could things ever be normal between them again? She had ruined everything.

Her career was now in tatters. Severus had been difficult enough, at times, before this morning, and now he would be impossible. She started to shake, her heart pounding again.

She sat up on the bed and hugged her knees to her chest, but still the shaking continued, her teeth chattering. An adulteress. That's what she was.

She made her way unsteadily to the bathroom, searching through the contents of the cabinet above the sink until she found a Calming Draught. Knocking it back, she returned to her bed, overwhelmed by fatigue and remorse, and as she cried herself to sleep, she caught sight of her wedding band. She had completely forgotten about it, until now.

As she succumbed to sleep, she thought that the one redeeming aspect of the morning's events was that somewhere, wherever he happened to be in the world, Theodore Nott's ring had burned. She hoped it hurt like hell.

When she woke it was afternoon, and there was a tray of sandwiches and a steaming pot of tea on her bedside cabinet. With a rush of affection for Moe, she sat up and pushed her hair out of her face. It was sticky with the yellow residue of the Dragon Pox potion. Her stomach rumbling, she picked up one of the sandwiches and leaned against the headboard, more composed than she had been earlier. Now that the panic had subsided, she could think straight.

She shook her head. What on earth had made him do it? He'd been positively grumpy this morning. She was annoyed that he had been so bold as to touch her neck, to press his lips to her throat, precipitating them both into such a morass. But then she remembered the hair clip. Maybe he thought she had done it on purpose; maybe he was sitting across the square, pointing the finger of blame at her, just as she was doing to him.

Trying to ignore the guilt, she closed her eyes. The feel of his lips on her neck had been divine, and the heat of his kiss ... The colour in her cheeks grew as she remembered the things she had whispered, the inarticulate groans that had come, unbidden, from her own mouth. Never before had she behaved so gratuitously; no-one had inspired such a passionate reaction from her. No-one had ever made her feel that way. And what if she was never, ever, to feel like that again?

She poured herself a cup of tea, taking comfort from the warm mug in her hands. She'd always been the perfect lady, but that morning, something had woken in her. Some passionate nature that she hadn't even known she possessed.

But it was wrong, fundamentally wrong, and that could not be denied. She had meant what she'd said to Severus: Cordelia had never done her wrong, had never treated her badly. No matter what Cordelia's faults, no matter how she treated her husband, she did not deserve such a stab in the back from her daughter-in-law.

Now that she was calm, she felt no remorse for cheating on Theo. Perhaps, if her ring had not burned with such regularity over the preceding two months, she would have felt bad. But as it was, she felt nothing. That still didn't make it right. She was married; Severus was married. There might be extenuating circumstances, but it was still adultery.

And there was something else niggling at her. Passion-filled though their encounter had been, it was not at all what she had imagined. For weeks now she had fantasised about all kinds of scenarios where he might kiss her, and that kiss had always been tender, lingering, moving. Yes, it had always led to more in her dreams, but it had never been the frantic, frenzied affair that had actually transpired.

She had imagined a moment that was altogether more romantic. She had never even seen him naked. She had so badly wanted to run her hands over his bare chest; she had longed to feel his naked skin against her own. But it had not at all gone according to script, and now it was ruined.

Tears welling in her eyes once more, she placed the mug on the tray and rose from the bed. There were two hours left until Severus left the laboratory for the day. She would shower, dress, and then she would do what was right: She would face him and tender her immediate resignation.

She tapped nervously at the door when she reached the basement, her hands shaking. When there was no response, she pushed it open.

Severus stood at his workbench, his back to the door, gentle spirals of steam rising from the Telenium cauldron. She closed the door behind her, drinking in the sight of his tall, black-clad figure, wondering if this really was the last time she would ever see him like this.

She allowed her gaze to move around the room, taking in the shelves full of ingredients, the torch-lit walls and the workbench where she had spent so many enjoyable hours. She saw, with a start, that he had done much more than clean up the mess. At one end of her bench sat her work robes, neatly folded with her silver hair clip sitting on top, and at the other end sat eight corked phials of vibrant yellow potion: He had brewed the Dragon Pox Potion in her absence.

Feeling oddly touched, she swallowed hard, bracing herself for what she knew she must do and gathering her courage to that end.

"Welcome back," he hissed in a menacing tone, making her jump. He didn't turn from his work. "Let me guess," he said, obviously seething. "In a fit of ill-founded conscience, and displaying a distinct lack of that renowned Gryffindor courage, you have come to quit your job."

She slowly crossed the room to his side, knowing he was not going to make this easy. She stood beside him, waiting for him to turn and face her.

He cast a Stasis Charm on his potion, and as he turned to confront her, rage blazing in his black eyes, she suddenly understood: Like her, he had never meant to let it happen this way; he had been swept away by a moment of craziness, and now he was filled with regret. What was worse was the damage she had done by running away. She knew he must have taken it as rejection. She had hurt him.

As he waited for her to speak, she searched his face hungrily, filled with doubt about quitting her job now. It was wrong to want the man standing before her, but everything about him had become dear to her. She probably knew more about the real Severus Snape than anyone else alive, and she wanted him. Their spouses were involved with other people: surely that meant the only ones who truly stood to get hurt were themselves?

Hermione looked into his defiant eyes and accepted the fact that she no longer wanted a life without him in it, no matter what the cost. She simply could not be without him.

"Yes, Severus," she said. "I came here to offer my resignation."

"How predictable," he drawled, returning his attention to his work.

She reached out and laid her hand on his arm before he could lift the Stasis Charm. He met her gaze, his eyes still blazing.

"I know it's wrong, Severus, but I can't help the way I feel. I never, ever meant for this to happen. But I ... I also know I can't just walk away from this."

He grunted and turned away again. "I'm sure you'll find employment elsewhere, Miss Granger."

She tugged at his arm. "Damn it, Severus! I'm not talking about the bloody job." She waited for him to look at her once more. "I mean *you*, Severus Snape. I can't walk away from *you*."

"And what if I don't want you? What if I intended to hand you your dismissal as surely as you intended to tender your resignation?" he snarled.

She knew, without knowing how or why she was so certain, that he didn't mean it, that he wanted her every bit as much as she wanted him. Closing the distance between them, she stood on her toes and, wrapping one hand around his neck, she pressed her lips to his.

His arms remained by his sides, and he did not return her kiss. Her mind began to scream that she was too late, that her reaction that morning had caused too much damage and he would never forgive her.

But suddenly she felt him relax against her, and as his tongue parted her lips, he wrapped her in his arms and drew her to him.

This was the kiss she had visited so often in her dreams. *This* embrace was everything and more than she had imagined it would be. It was slow, searching, and filled with so much more than anything they had shared earlier that day. A thousand different emotions stirred in her chest, and when he pulled away, she felt bereft.

"Are you certain this is what you want?" he asked, his breathing ragged, his eyes still uncertain.

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life," she insisted hoarsely.

"Then know this, Hermione: I cannot proceed if I am to be constantly confronted with tears, doubts and guilt."

She knew very well she would be plagued by guilt, but she would deal with it herself. It would be her burden, and hers alone to bear. "You won't be. I've made my choice."

"We will have to be very careful," he whispered.

She nodded, aching to touch him again. "Yes, I know. But this is what I want. I want you."

She watched in delight as the uncertainty left his eyes and was replaced by desire. "We can work on the details later," he said with the smallest of smiles. "First, however, let us do this thing properly."

He took her hand in his and gently pulled her to the door of the laboratory. She knew, as she followed him through the door and up the steps, that the fight was over. She would follow this man anywhere, no matter what the consequences.

A/N: Well, well, well. And so it begins ... I have a few things to say, so let's number them. I'm in a numbering kind of mood. :)

1. On the archives that provide warnings, you will see that I have added an adultery warning. When I first posted this chapter back in 2008, I also included a warning at the start of the chapter. I have removed it here. Why? Well, it kind of gave the game away, and very many readers didn't like it. If you were shocked or offended by what happened in this chapter, forgive me for not adding a stronger warning. I thought long and hard about it. But in normal, published books, there are no such warnings. Goblet of Fire did not come with a character death warning. So please forgive me if you think I made the wrong choice here. Believe me, having many friends whose lives have been affected by it, I am no fan of adultery. Either is Hermione, as you can tell. But there are extenuating circumstances in this story, as Severus has pointed out, and we will watch to see how our favourite pair deal with everything before them.

2. In 2008 I wrote a one-shot from Theo's POV called 'The Ring of Fire', which detailed Theo's reaction to his burning ring. Somehow, I have lost it. I can't find it on hard drives, memory sticks, online ... If anyone happens to have a copy, please PM me! If I recover it, I will post it.

3. Thank you all so very much for your well wishes. I'm feeling much better now. xxx

4. My hands were literally shaking when I uploaded this chapter for the first time so many years ago. I am almost just as nervous now. I would love to hear what you think, so I await with bated breath. Please be kind I am a delicate soul! *wibbles*

5. It has been a bad writing week. My YA thriller did not make it to the semi-finals of the Amazon novel competition (although my friend's novel did, which is

terribly exciting more about that next chapter), and my literary agent still hasn't had any luck with finding a publisher for my YA fantasy. I try to keep going, but my confidence suffers with each rejection. Your kind and enthusiastic reviews have truly been keeping me going these past few weeks, so from the bottom of my fragile writer's heart, I thank you all so very much. *hugs*

LB x

May I Feel

Chapter 23 of 34

Hermione and Severus reach an agreement.

may I feel said he

(i'll squeal said she

just once said he

it's fun said she

(may i touch said he

how much said she

a lot said he)

why not said she

(let's go said he

not too far said she

what's too far said he

where you are said she)

may i stay said he

(which way said she

like this said he

if you kiss said she

may i move said he

is it love said she)

if you're willing said he

(but you're killing said she

but it's life said he

but your wife said he

now said he)

ow said she

(tiptop said he

don't stop said she

oh no said he)

go slow said she

(cccome?said he

ummm said she)

you're divine!said he

(you are Mine said she)

- E. E. Cummings, *may i feel said he*

Hermione allowed Severus to lead her up the stairs from the basement, her mind filled with nothing but the intoxicating nearness of the man she had wanted for so very long. His hand was warm as it encased her own, and as they passed the door of his study, she closed her eyes for a moment, overwhelmed by the knowledge that she was, perhaps, mere minutes away from running her hands down his bare chest as she had done so many times in her imagination.

He led her to the second level, the floor that was home to the bedrooms, and Hermione stopped.

"Severus, what about Cordelia?" she whispered. She had almost forgotten.

"She's abroad," he said, turning to face her.

"I thought she only travels at the weekends?"

"She's decided to spend the week in France," he said, looking vaguely amused. "You think I would be so indiscreet as to bring you to my bed while my wife has coffee with her friends downstairs?"

She smiled nervously, hardly daring to believe he was leading her to *his* bed. "I suppose not."

He pushed open the door, standing aside and allowing her to precede him into the room. Watching as she surveyed her new surroundings, he gently closed the door and leaned his back against it. He scrutinised her face as her gaze moved over the grand four-poster bed and the white gauze curtains that were elegantly tied at each corner. She looked over the dressing table, and he realised what she was looking for: some trace of a feminine presence.

"This bedroom is mine and mine alone, Hermione: Cordelia has separate sleeping and dressing quarters," he explained.

She turned to face him. "She doesn't share your bed?"

"You find that surprising? You think I would share my bed with another man's lover?"

"But I thought that marriages had to be consummated in order to be fully legal since the implementation of the Marriage Act?"

"Yes, they do," he said, becoming impatient. "The marriage was consummated. I don't think it was a particularly pleasurable experience for either of us, and we did not repeat the exercise. We agreed that we had entered a marriage of convenience and that we would be more comfortable with separate rooms."

"But ... didn't you ..."

He rolled his eyes. "Hermione, would you like the intimate details? I assure you, Cordelia does not share my bed."

Hermione sighed and closed her eyes for a moment, annoyed she'd given in to her insatiable need to question everything. Then she closed the space between them and laid her hands on his clothed chest.

"I'm sorry, Severus. You know I have great difficulty keeping my mouth shut."

He grunted. "Perhaps I should draw up a contract to curb your maddening tongue when we are outside the laboratory."

She smiled. "Perhaps you should," she whispered, her gaze falling to the long line of buttons on his coat.

The moment she smiled at him, he could feel his irritation disappear, and he watched as her hands travelled to the neck of his coat. "If you are uncomfortable in this house, we need not stay," he said as she opened the first few buttons at his throat.

She glanced up at him, her fingers still working on his buttons. "I would very much like to stay," she said. "I can't think of a single place I'd rather be, including libraries, bookshops and laboratories, and that is really saying something, because everyone knows..."

"Hermione," he whispered, placing his thumb on her lips, "you're babbling again."

"I always talk when I'm nervous," she replied, reaching the buttons at his waist.

"Well, let us endeavour to shut you up," he drawled, delicately lifting her chin and lowering his mouth to hers.

She moaned into his mouth, her hands still occupied with his innumerable buttons. He kissed her gently, enjoying the warmth of her lips and revelling in the increasing rate of her heartbeat. He could feel it against his chest.

She pulled away from him when she'd opened the last of his buttons and pushed the coat from his shoulders. It puddled in a heap at his feet, discarded for the second time that day, and she moved her attention to his white, linen shirt. "You've more buttons than Madam Malkin's shop," she said.

He allowed her to continue and raised his hand to her face, cupping her cheek and gently stroking her skin, enjoying the sight of her determined brow as she pulled the tail of his shirt from his trousers. He had been the one to take the initiative that morning, and for now, he was happy for her to lead.

Surprised that he had not yet stopped her, she pushed open his shirt and pulled it down his arms. His hand left her face, and he quickly opened the last two buttons on his cuffs, allowing the shirt to join his coat on the carpet.

She pressed the palms of her hands against the ashen white of his chest. His skin was so devoid of the effects of the sun as to be almost luminous in its pallor, broken only by a smattering of black hair between his pectoral muscles and a line of hair below his navel that disappeared beyond the band of his trousers. Running her hands up his chest and across his shoulders, she hungrily drank in the details of his bare torso. He was not particularly muscled, but neither was he untoned. His shoulders were strong and wide, and he was incredibly lean.

Severus permitted her to explore his bare chest with her hands and eyes, watching with great fascination as she traced imaginary lines over the surface of his skin with her fingertips. Suddenly desirous to feel her skin against his own, he grasped the hem of her cotton t-shirt and pulled it up to the level of her breasts, where she obediently raised her arms and allowed him to pull it over her head and toss it aside.

He gripped her by the elbows and pulled her flush against him, her lace-clad breasts pressed to his naked skin. Raising one hand to the back of her neck, he kissed her again, backing her towards the bed, but stopping before they reached the edge.

He stepped away from her, and she moaned her objection. "Patience," he said. "We've rushed this once already, and it's not a mistake I intend to repeat." His gaze raked over her half-naked form, the swell of her breasts clothed in a black, lace bra, the curve of her smooth hips leading into the waist of her jeans. He reached out and traced the line of her collarbone with a single finger and walked around until he was standing directly behind her, where he allowed his finger to follow the curve of her shoulder blade and come to rest at the small of her back, remembering once more the sight of her in that backless gown. Then he gripped her hips with both his hands and pulled her against him.

Hermione leaned into him and allowed her head to fall back onto his shoulder, her hands reaching around to grasp his thighs and pull him tighter still against her body.

With his right hand, he pushed her curls to one side and lowered his lips to her neck, smiling at her sudden intake of breath and the way she began to knead the material of his trousers with her fists.

"You are very beautiful," he whispered into her ear.

She turned her head to look at him, her heart leaping at his words. "Despite my ridiculous mane?"

He kissed her shoulder and brought his hands up to her hair, running his fingers through her curls, still damp from her shower. "The adjectives that apply to your hair depend very much on the setting," he said, his breath against her ear making her shiver. "When you are in the laboratory, your hair is ridiculous; when you are in the bedroom, it is magnificent."

"Severus," she whispered with a sigh, allowing her head to fall back on his shoulder once more.

He dropped his hands to her back again, where he undid the clasp of her bra and slid the straps down her arms. For a moment she brought her arms up to cover her breasts in a fit of shyness, but he returned his lips to her neck, and, running his fingers along her bare arms, he gently grasped her wrists and lowered them to her sides.

She closed her eyes as he brought his hands to her waist and moved them slowly up over her ribs until they cupped her exposed breasts, his thumbs finding their way to her nipples and circling them. He stopped nuzzling her neck, and she opened her eyes to find he was staring straight ahead over her shoulder. She followed his gaze and discovered that they were reflected in the full-length mirror across the room.

Bringing one hand up behind her to tangle in his black hair, she watched their reflected selves as he caressed her breasts, his long, slender fingers moving in the same sensual way they always did in the steam that rose from his cauldron, eliciting the most divine of sensations in the lower regions of her stomach. She would have expected to feel embarrassed, exposed, standing as she was reflected in a mirror and naked to the waist. But it was the most erotic thing she had ever seen in her entire life, and, boldened by longing, she locked gazes with him in the mirror.

He stepped away from her and sat on the edge of the bed, beckoning to her with his finger.

"Come," he said hoarsely.

She crossed the few short steps to stand before him, kicking off her sandals as she went, feeling both aroused and self-conscious as his black eyes meandered over her body. He grasped her hips with his hands and leaned forward to kiss her stomach. She closed her eyes and threaded her fingers through his hair while he trailed his mouth across her belly, his teeth grazing against her skin when he reached her hipbone. He undressed her slowly, carefully, as if unwrapping a fragile gift.

"Lie down," he said when her jeans and her knickers lay on the floor.

She did as he said and watched while he removed the rest of his clothing. Hermione could have stared at him all day. The whiteness of his skin was in marked contrast to the ebony of his hair and his eyes, and he was even more striking without his clothes than he was when dressed in his dramatic, stark black. She let her hand run down his chest once more, and when she reached the dark trail of hair below his navel, there were no longer any trousers to interrupt her path.

He made love to her slowly, so much more slowly than he had earlier that day, and when they had both cried out their release, she cradled his head to her shoulder. Beads of perspiration dotted his brow, and his breathing slowly returned to normal as she stroked his hair absent-mindedly, her heartbeat resuming its steady rhythm.

Severus lowered himself to the bed next to her. He pulled the blanket lying folded at the end of the bed up to their waists, still enjoying the sight of her breasts, rising and falling as she recovered her breath. He propped himself up on one elbow, watching her face closely, wary of her response after that morning's fiasco. Her eyes were closed, but as she opened them, she met his gaze and gave him a shy smile.

"So that's what you call 'doing it properly'?" she asked.

"Indeed," he said, relieved there did not seem to be any tears of guilt or anguish forthcoming. "Is it to your liking?"

She laughed. "Yes. I think I'm quite a fan of doing it properly."

She inched closer to him and leaned her head against his chest. He began to stroke her arm and laid his head on the pillow.

"Severus?" she whispered, looking at him.

"Hmmm?"

"Do you regret it?"

He looked at her steadily, considering his answer. "No," he said simply. "Do you?"

She shook her head and gave him another shy smile. "No. How could I regret it?"

She turned away from him and curled her back against his chest, nestling her head beneath his chin. To her surprise, he wrapped an arm around her and pulled her tighter still against him. She had almost expected him to dismiss her from his bed, or to be uncomfortable, at least. But his desire to prolong their physical contact was unexpected and enormously welcome.

One of his hands lay between her breasts, and she laced her fingers through his, pleased when he did not pull away.

"When did this start, Severus?"

He glanced at the clock. "Approximately fifty minutes ago," he drawled.

She laughed and squeezed his hand. "You know what I mean."

He pressed his lips to her shoulder. "I am unsure, but I know that your backless gown made quite an impression on me."

"Really?" she asked, turning to look at him. "When you saw it on my wedding day?"

"Believe me, I still saw you as an irritating ex-student at that time, but it disturbed me to discover that you had become an attractive young woman."

She was quiet for a moment, absorbing this piece of information. "I think it began for me when I started working for you...maybe even before that, I'm not sure. But I didn't realise it until the morning you asked me to brew the Exostraserum."

Severus remained silent, thinking about what she had just said, his gaze resting on the pale, bare skin of her shoulder, marvelling that she was here, in his bed. He had not told her a lie: he had never had Cordelia, or any other woman for that matter, in this bed. Normally one to guard his privacy, he took a moment to consider why he felt no impulse to evict her from his room.

When he had taken lovers in the past, he had always been gripped by an urgent need to flee their presence once the physical act was complete. But her presence was soothing, her warm body comforting. He wondered if it was a result of the many months they had spent working together.

She sighed. "Are we adulterers, Severus?" she asked, her tone contemplative rather than upset.

"Technically, I suppose we are," he said, disentangling his hand from her own and resuming his stroking of her arm. "But it is, perhaps, less of a crime than it might normally be: you are separated from your husband, and I have neither a physical nor an emotional relationship with my wife. These are, I believe, extenuating circumstances."

He turned and lay on his back. Hermione rolled over to face him.

"Where do we go from here?" she asked. "What do we do?"

He glanced at her. "We've a lot to discuss. Would you prefer to dress and have this conversation somewhere else?"

She snaked her hand around his waist and smiled. "I'm perfectly comfortable where I am, thank you very much."

"I suggest, being in such a mutually delicate situation," he began, "that we must agree to complete secrecy."

"We must tell nobody?" she asked.

He nodded. "Don't you agree? From what I've seen and heard over the years, the more people there are aware of an affair, the more likely it is that it will eventually be exposed."

Hermione wondered how she was going to hide such a monumental development in her life from her friends. "What about the people who've already expressed an interest in our relationship, Severus? How do we hide it from them?"

"We'll need to be vigilant," he said. "Lance will be a problem: that man is more omniscient than anyone I've ever met."

She gave a brief laugh. "He was the one who finally talked me into accepting the job. He certainly spotted this before I ever did."

"I suspect he would congratulate rather than remonstrate if he knew. Given that all three of us live in such close proximity, it may be almost impossible to keep it from him, but I'm certain he'll be discreet. Some of his comments have been positively entertaining."

"What has he said?" she asked, smiling.

"Oh, something along the lines of 'A good shag...that's what the pair of you need'."

Hermione snorted. "I'm not sure I'll be able to lie if he asks me."

"We needn't worry about Lance. But that is where it must end; Cordelia could make life very difficult for us if she knew."

"Wouldn't that be hypocritical of her?" Hermione said with a frown. "She's been having an affair all her married life!"

"Yes, it would be hypocritical, but the fact that it's *you* might exacerbate the problem."

"The fact that it's *me*?" Hermione asked, wide-eyed. "Why?"

"You're her daughter-in-law; her son's wife; a member of the family. It would be a terrific scandal if it was discovered. Besides which," he added, "you're a full generation younger than she, and despite the fact that we have nothing but a marriage of convenience, she has a tendency to jealousy."

"You really think she would be angrier because it's me, in particular?"

"I know she would," he said, frowning. "We've already argued over the fact that I disappeared with you on Saturday night, and she's made more than one barbed comment about the amount of time we spend together."

"That's worrying." Hermione examined one of her curls for a moment, lost in thought. "I'll do everything I can to be discreet, Severus. But Padma already knows something's going on; she knows about Saturday night."

He looked at her, scowling. "Knows what about Saturday night?"

"About the roof garden. I'm sorry," she said. "I ... I just needed someone to talk to. She told me I'd be absolutely insane to get involved with you, so I came to work this morning determined nothing would ever happen." She grinned. "So much for good intentions."

A smile pulled at the corner of his mouth: he was amused she'd come to work that morning with such similar resolutions to his own. "If you can agree to do your utmost to continue in secrecy, that will suffice," he said.

"I agree, of course," she said. "I still don't see how this is going to work out. What about the business? And the fact that Cordelia is here during the week?"

"The business cannot be allowed to suffer. I think we must promise that our professional and private lives be kept separate. It may prove difficult at times, but it is essential. Just ensure your hair is secured tightly from now on," he said with a mock frown.

Hermione grinned. "I will. So, what you're saying is that we can only see one another outside of work ... at the weekends?"

"Precisely," he said. "Do you have another suggestion?"

She shook her head. "I suppose not." Her stomach suddenly rumbled loudly. "I need food."

"I'm going to use the shower," he said, throwing back the cover. "You may do the same if you wish, and then I'm sure Moe will provide us with a meal."

"Can I eat with you?" she asked, suddenly shy.

"I don't see why not; we've eaten together before when there have been potions contracts to discuss. Besides, Cordelia's absence this week makes things easier."

"We can relax the rules this week?" she asked, admiring his naked form as he rose from the bed.

"I suppose we may, but I suggest we start as we mean to go on in the laboratory."

Without further comment, he strode naked across the room, and Hermione watched him disappear into the ensuite bathroom, marvelling at the way he was as graceful undressed as he was clothed. For a moment, she considered following him into the shower, but she didn't feel comfortable enough. Not yet.

As the sound of running water came from the bathroom, she lay back on the pillow, admiring the white gauze curtains that hung from the posters of the bed, hardly daring to believe that she was here, in Severus Snape's bedroom. She closed her eyes and inhaled: the bed smelled of him.

With a contented sigh, she rose from the bed and extracted her wand from the pocket of her crumpled jeans. Her gaze followed the trail of discarded clothes all the way to

the door of the bedroom, reminding her of the guilt she'd felt that morning in the laboratory.

Pointing her wand at her abdomen, she whispered a contraceptive spell and took a black dressing gown from the hook on the back of the door. When Severus emerged from the bathroom, a white towel around his waist, he smiled.

"A little big, perhaps," he said.

He watched as she closed the bathroom door behind her, almost disappointed that he had not invited her into the shower with him. There would be time, maybe, for such pleasures in the days and weeks to come.

He could only hope that she would accept things the way they were. For how long would she remain content to be nothing more than his mistress? For how long would either of them be willing to live with lies and deceit? There was little point in dwelling on what was to come: they would have to take one day at a time and deal with events as they unfolded.

When they'd dressed, they walked to the door of the bedroom. His hand on the doorknob, Severus looked down at her, searching for something to say, something that would somehow seal the agreement they had made.

As if she had read his mind, she said, "Don't worry, Severus. I know I have a big mouth, but I'll keep my end of the bargain. If I feel, for some reason, that I must tell someone, I'll ask your permission first."

He nodded, satisfied.

Hermione waited for him to open the door, sensing the awkwardness that had been there since they'd left his bed. She supposed it was a normal part of any budding relationship, and she wondered how long it would take for the discomfort to ease. She badly wanted him to kiss her again before they left the room, but his hand twisted the knob of the door, and he stood aside.

She couldn't leave the bedroom without something...some physical display of intimacy, so she stepped forward and leaned her forehead against his chest, her hands on his waist. After a small hesitation, he gathered her in his arms and pressed his lips to the top of her head. They stayed like that for many moments, and she smiled. Somehow, it was more encouraging than any kiss.

In the days that followed, Severus was amazed at how easily they adopted their contrasting roles. By day they were workmates; by evening they were lovers.

After a few hours of unusual politeness on Wednesday morning, they resumed their normal relationship in the laboratory. They conversed easily, argued occasionally, and spent most of their day absorbed in their mutual tasks. But once five o'clock came, and they had secured the laboratory for the night, they could barely keep their hands off one another, and the evenings had been spent in his bedroom. They emerged only when their need for food could no longer be ignored, and Moe seemed positively thrilled by the fact that they had eaten together every evening. After dinner, Hermione had left each night to return to her own house, and he began to wonder how he would fill his evenings once his wife returned from France.

On Saturday afternoon, having spent almost four hours sifting through paperwork in his study, he descended to the laboratory. He could smell Hermione's perfume before he had even opened the door. She was dressed in her work robes, her hair pulled tightly back from her face with a band. He smirked, wondering what she had done with her inefficient silver hair clip.

"Hello," she said cheerily.

"Good afternoon," he said, crossing the room and putting his hands on her shoulders.

She looked surprised. "What happened to the 'no physical contact in the laboratory' rule?"

"Ah," he said with a smirk. "Our working hours are Monday to Friday from eight o'clock to five in the evening. The rules don't apply to weekends."

Hermione chuckled. "In that case, let me finish this batch of SkeleGro and get cleared up."

He released her and crossed the room, where he added his completed paperwork to the stack sitting on his workbench. He sat and watched as she bottled the potion, Vanished the remnants from her cauldron and extracted a sheet of parchment and a quill from the drawer beneath her bench. He could tell she was writing a letter, and, curious, he moved to stand behind her once more.

Hermione groaned as Severus wrapped his arm around her waist and began to nuzzle at her neck.

"To whom are you writing?" he whispered in her ear.

"You don't want to know," she said, signing her name at the bottom of the parchment and summoning a small bottle from the storeroom.

Severus frowned as she caught the bottle and began to wrap it in brown paper. "Is that Murtlap essence?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "Or you could call it penance, perhaps."

He realised with a start that she was writing to Theo. "You think he deserves it?"

"No, I don't think he deserves anything. But it will make me feel better," she explained.

"I thought the subject of guilt was off the agenda?"

"It is. I'm merely answering your questions," she said. She turned and smiled. "Let me send this, and then I'm all yours."

He watched as she disappeared from the laboratory, her ponytail bouncing behind her. She hadn't once mentioned her husband since Tuesday morning, and he wondered what she thought of the fact that somewhere in the world, Theodore Nott's wedding ring had begun to burn with great regularity.

Preoccupied as he had been with his own thoughts, he hadn't spared much thought for his stepson. Knowing Theo as he did, he knew that the boy would not put up with the constant pain of a burning ring for very long. Even with the aid of the Murtlap essence, he knew he was unlikely to remain patient with the inconvenience of having to submerge his hand every time his wife was unfaithful.

He was certain Theodore Nott would return, but he pushed the thought from his mind. Things were complicated enough as they were, and the return of Hermione's husband would make matters much, much worse. But he was determined to enjoy what remained of this week before his wife's return from France.

He would worry about Theo another day.

A/N: Dearest Readers. First of all, I wanted to thank every single one of you who left me a review or sent me a message earlier this week. I'm not sure if you know exactly what it has meant to me, so let me assure you that your encouragement, enthusiasm and kindness has turned a bad week into a wonderful week.

Thank you so much.

Someone who left an unsigned review on FF.net wanted to know my age I couldn't reply to an unsigned review, so here is a very brief bio! I am 38 years old, and I live near Dublin, Ireland, with my wonderful husband, two sons aged 16 and 12 and two bunnies called Hazel and Penelope. Until 2007 I was a musicologist and university lecturer. After 15 years of degrees, masters degrees, a PhD and many boring conferences, I decided I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in the stifling and back-stabbing world of academia. I now work part-time as my husband's receptionist, and spend most of my week writing original fiction. I was extremely lucky to land a London-based literary agent two years ago, but as yet, alas, she hasn't found me a publisher. The search goes on!

And finally, some good news: The Ring of Fire has been found! Yes the wonderful lyn_f of TPP has managed to procure a copy for me, as has my Czech translator, evi10. Thank you so much, lyn and evi! I will brush it up this weekend and add it to the story. Be warned it is very short, mainly from Theo's POV, and was meant to be funny. I'm not sure it fits in with Denial, really, but I'll add it nonetheless, rather than upload it as a separate story.

Have a marvellous weekend, one and all.

LB x

The Ring of Fire

Chapter 24 of 34

Hermione gets a little revenge.

A/N: Here you go, my loyal readers. As I've said before, this is very short, and was supposed to be a humourless look-in on Theo and his cousin. It was never really meant to be part of Denial, which is told exclusively from Hermione and Severus's POVs, but due to popular demand, I will add it to the main story this time around. Apologies for the multiple swear words. It's Theo's fault. Thanks to lyn_f and evi10 for providing me with copies. Enjoy!

LB x

Love is a burning thing

and it makes a fiery ring

bound by wild desire

I fell in to a ring of fire.

I fell in to a burning ring of fire

I went down, down, down

and the flames went higher.

And it burns, burns, burns

the ring of fire

the ring of fire.

Johnny Cash – *The Ring of Fire*

Hans Michelob Schneiderlidl looked up with a frown as his cousin, Theodore Nott, sprang from his chair, hissing a string of expletives through gritted teeth.

"Something the matter, Theo?" Hans asked in a disinterested tone of voice.

Theodore flicked his smouldering joint onto the floor and stamped it out. "I told you there was something wrong with that fucking hash," he spat.

Hans glanced at the carpet, and his frown deepened into a scowl, very different from his usual expression of bored indifference. "That's my mother's best carpet, Theo, and that was a perfectly good spliff."

Theo started to rub at his left hand with his right, a mixed expression of horror and disbelief on his gaunt face. "It's not the hash. It's my ring," he whispered. He looked up at his cousin and raised his voice. "It's my fucking wedding ring. It's burning the fucking hand off me!"

Hans sat up, suddenly intrigued. "Your ring? You mean ... Hermione is ... is ..."

"Yes, that's exactly what I fucking mean," Theo snapped, looking frantically around the room for something that might dull the pain. He rounded on Hans, who began to chuckle. "You find this fucking amusing, do you?"

Hans shook his head. "Hermione, eh? I wouldn't have thought she had it in her. Do you reckon she's doing it with an actual human being or just with a good book, perhaps?"

Theo ignored him. "Merlin's fucking beard! I can't take this. Do something, Hans. Get me a bowl of water!"

With three lazy flicks of his wand, Hans Conjured a small table and a glass bowl full of water. "Sit down," he said. "You're ruining the mood."

"Ruining the fucking mood?" Theo asked in disbelief, submerging his hand in the water.

"Better?" Hans asked.

Theo shook his head. "No. Worse, if anything. I can't fucking believe this!"

Hans raised a blond eyebrow. "You didn't expect her to get a little revenge? How many times have you made *her* ring burn over the last few months?"

"I just didn't think she was the type," Theo said, annoyed. "Are you actually sticking up for her?"

Hans shrugged. "It was bound to happen sooner or later, I suppose."

"*Fuck*, this hurts," Theo said, pouting.

"Be a man about it," Hans grumbled, returning his attention to his newspaper.

"Be a man about it? I'd like to see how you'd cope with this amount of pain. Seriously. It's fucking agony!" Theo started to pace the room, rubbing his left hand agitatedly on the leg of his jeans. For the first time since he had left his wife, he knew a moment of guilt. He had known her ring would activate when he'd been unfaithful, but he'd had no idea it would be so painful.

He wondered who she could possibly be with, and whether she'd done it because she'd wanted to, or just to get her own back.

He strode angrily from one end of the extravagantly furnished room to the other, swearing under his breath and shooting covert glances at Hans, irritated by his cousin's lack of concern. After a few more minutes of tortuous misery, the burning stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

"It's stopped," he muttered in surprise, raising his hand to his face and examining his ring. "The burning. It's gone!"

"Thank fuck for that," Hans whispered.

"Five times," Theo snarled, banging his fist on the table. "Five fucking times in less than a week!"

Hans laughed and gave an unconcerned flick of his blond fringe. "I've never heard you swear so much, Theo. It rather suits you. Funny, really. You're using the F-word, while your wife is actually doing it."

"Yes, thanks for reminding me. I know exactly what she's doing, thanks."

"No problem," Hans muttered as he lit a cigarette.

"I went out for a drink with that Swedish girl last night, and the ring burned so badly I had to leave the fucking bar. And it lasted for over an hour!"

Hans smirked. "So, now your wife's sex life is interfering with your own?"

"Hermione fucking Granger." Theo shook his head and stared into the distance. "Who the fuck is she seeing?" he whispered, his eyes narrowed.

Hermione groaned as Severus wrapped his arm around her waist and began to nuzzle at her neck.

"To whom are you writing?" he whispered in her ear.

"You don't want to know," she said, signing her name at the bottom of the parchment and summoning a small bottle from the storeroom.

Severus frowned as she caught the bottle and began to wrap it in brown paper. "Is that Murtlap essence?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "Or you could call it penance, perhaps."

He realised with a start that she was writing to Theo. "You think he deserves it?"

"No, I don't think he deserves anything. But it will make me feel better," she explained.

"That's Hermione's owl," Theo said as Hans accepted the package from the large barn owl at the window.

Hans tossed the paper-wrapped package to his cousin. "Maybe you should actually read this one," he suggested.

Theo fingered the parcel suspiciously. He shook it and could hear the unmistakable sound of liquid within. He tore the note from the wrapping and tossed the package back across the room to Hans. "You open it."

Theo read his name on the slip of parchment, recognising his wife's handwriting. It didn't seem to be a Howler: it would have started yelling well before now. He crossed to the fireplace, and was on the verge of tossing the letter among the flames when curiosity overcame him. Ignoring his apprehension, he opened the note.

Dear Theodore,

Please find enclosed one small bottle of strained and pickled solution of Murtlap tentacles. You'll find it eases the pain greatly. You will need it over the coming weeks, so I suggest you learn how to brew it. If you desire a permanent solution to our problem, you know where to find me.

Hermione.

It was almost as if she knew that he had finished reading her note. The second he'd read her signature at the bottom, his ring flared with intense heat. He dropped the piece of parchment to the ground and swore.

"Quick. A bowl," he said to Hans, his jaw clenched in pain.

Hans Conjured a bowl and poured the yellow liquid from the unwrapped bottle. Theo lowered his hand into the solution and gave a sigh of relief.

"It works?" Hans asked.

Theo nodded. "The burning hasn't gone completely, but it's eased."

Hans bent to retrieve Hermione's note from the carpet and quickly scanning the contents.

"It's definitely better than it was before," Theo said. "But what the hell am I supposed to do? Go around with my fucking hand in a bowl every time my estranged wife fancies a shag?"

Hans frowned and glanced down at the letter again. "Hermione suggests that there's a permanent solution to your problem."

"And what's that?" Theo hissed. "Chop my fucking ring finger off?"

Hans rolled his eyes. "You can be incredibly thick for someone supposedly so clever, Theo."

"What's the fucking solution, then?"

Hans smirked. "Get your ass back to London and get yourself a divorce, cousin mine."

My Dark Declivities

Chapter 25 of 34

Severus has a nightmare.

He. Dear, I must be gone

While night shuts the eyes

Of the household spies;

That song announces dawn.

She. No, night's bird and love's

Bid all true lovers rest,

While his loud song reproves

The murderous stealth of day.

He. Daylight already flies

From mountain crest to crest.

She. That light is from the moon.

He. That bird ...

She. Let him sing on,

I offer to love's play

My dark declivities.

- **W. B. Yeats, *Parting***

Hermione woke some time before six on Monday morning. She knew there was little point in trying to get back to sleep when there was so much to think about. Knowing that Cordelia was to return from France the previous evening, she'd cancelled her plans to have Sunday lunch with her parents and had spent the afternoon with Severus instead, determined to cherish her last hours with him before his wife's return. She had left him before five o'clock and had spent the evening catching up on some paperwork, anxiety and guilt gnawing away at her all the while.

But she'd meant what she'd said to Severus: she did not, for one second, regret that they had come together.

During her years at university, she'd had two boyfriends, one of whom she'd been with for over a year. At the time, she had fancied herself in love, and the physical side of their relationship had been perfectly satisfactory. But this was something else entirely. This was passion, and she felt helpless against the almost magnetic pull of such all-consuming pleasure.

Hermione didn't feel much guilt so far as Theo was concerned. He deserved what he got: he'd left her without a divorce; he'd been the first to break their wedding vows. She'd felt no remorse when she had punched Draco in the face in her third year; she'd felt no remorse when Marietta Edgecombe had spent months trying to remove the word 'sneak' from her face; and she'd certainly felt no pang of sorrow when the centaurs had carried Dolores Umbridge into the depths of the Forbidden Forest. And it was no different with Theo. She had sent her husband a bottle of Murtlap essence, and, as far as she was concerned, that was more than he deserved.

She pulled the duvet cover tightly around her and closed her eyes, trying to identify what, then, was making her feel this way. Cordelia was part of the problem. Hermione believed Severus should feel no guilt on his wife's account: Cordelia had, after all, been involved with another man since before they'd wed. But the fact remained that her mother-in-law had never done her wrong. She'd even been supportive since Theo had left, and, as a result, Hermione felt disloyal.

It also bothered her that her affair with Severus was to be kept secret. It had to be that way, she knew, but it would be difficult to keep such an enormous part of her life hidden from her friends. She dreaded to think what Harry might have to say if he ever discovered the truth. His hatred of Severus had waned since the final battle, but she knew they'd never really like one another, nonetheless. And what would her parents think of her seeing a man almost their own age?

She didn't care that Severus was almost twenty years her senior. In many ways she'd always felt so much older than her friends, and his maturity suited her. Being a younger woman was not the problem, but being someone's mistress was altogether different. That was one of the things that annoyed her: she was, when all was said and done, his mistress. An adulterer. The thought of that word made her sigh again. But she would bear her guilt without complaint just as she had promised she would.

Alongside the guilt there was anxiety about the future. It was less than a week since they'd begun their affair, and she felt foolish to be contemplating the months and years ahead. She couldn't help but wonder, though, where all this would lead. They were in such an impossible situation, but would that situation last forever? Would Theo ever want a divorce? When she had passed fifty and the marriage act no longer applied to her, would Cordelia demand a divorce from Severus?

And even if she did, even if they were both free of their spouses, would Severus Snape want anything to do with his former student? The word 'love' had not once been mentioned. She would not have expected that at such a tender stage in a relationship with any man, but she couldn't help but wonder what he felt for her.

Her own feelings were complicated. Did she love him? She wasn't sure. He had certainly earned her respect, her admiration and her affection. And now that they were lovers, she wanted him every moment of every day. Wasn't that love? Or was it just desire? She knew she *could* love him, at the very least.

But what about Severus? She knew he wanted her just as much as she wanted him, but perhaps it was simply lust. When they were at work, he seemed to enjoy her company when she wasn't irritating him with questions or humming along to the music. And in the bedroom he was a passionate, considerate and incredibly talented lover. But the two were so separate, as if they had two completely different relationships: The one where they were friends and colleagues, and the one where they were lovers.

But if, someday, they were both free of their marriages, would he even want her? Would he flee from the idea of commitment? With a deep sigh, she threw back her bedcovers and headed for the shower. She was in no position to make plans for the future; for now, she would have to take each day as it came.

When she'd dressed and showered, she made her way to the kitchen where she found Lance hobbling about on his cane. The table had been set for breakfast, but there was no sign of Moe.

"Good morning, Lance," she said warily. "What has you up at this hour?"

He turned and gave her a smile. "Oh, this and that: I decided to give Moe the morning off," he said, hunting for the tea.

Hermione narrowed her eyes suspiciously. In her experience, the last thing any house-elf wanted was a morning off. "Would you like me to make the tea?" she asked.

"No, no!" he insisted, spooning some tea leaves into a pot. "It's all in hand. Sit down, girl. The toast is on the table."

Hermione did as she was told and watched as he Levitated the steaming pot of tea onto the table. Lance limped across the kitchen, his cane clattering against the tiled floor. He lowered himself stiffly onto the chair opposite her.

"So," he said, pouring himself a cup of weak tea. "Moe tells me you and Severus have been getting along swimmingly this past week."

"Have you been setting that poor elf to spy on us?" she asked, buttering some toast.

Lance chuckled. "Oh, so it's 'us' now, is it?"

She blushed tellingly. "It's been 'us' for months, Lance. You know he's my friend as well as my employer."

He chuckled again. "Yes, well, I had a drink with him up on that roof garden last night, and he told me you've gotten together."

Hermione gasped. She couldn't believe Severus had confided in the old man so quickly. "*He told you?*"

"Well, he as good as told me, such was his prickly defensiveness, and now you've confirmed my suspicions."

She gaped at him, shocked he had goaded her into an admission. "You sly thing, you," she said, not knowing whether she was amused or annoyed. "Bet you were in Slytherin."

"Hufflepuff, actually. The Sorting Hat was aiming for Slytherin, but I opted for Hufflepuff just to spite my mother."

"Yes, well, the Hat was right," Hermione said, shaking her head and helping herself to tea.

"So, tell me," Lance said, lowering his voice. "Is he good in the sack? I always reckoned he would be."

She choked on her toast. "Lance! You are unbelievable. I'm not telling you a single thing."

"Look," he said, becoming suddenly serious. "Girls always need someone to talk to, and I just wanted you to know that you can talk to me should the need arise. I imagine many of your friends might not approve, and you know full well I've been hoping to see you and Severus get together for months."

"Why, Lance? Why would you hope such a thing when we're both married to members of your own family?"

"Because Cordelia never deserved a man like Severus, and Theo certainly never deserved a clever girl like you. Besides," he continued, pointing a wizened finger at her. "The two of you are well suited; I can't believe nobody ever spotted it before."

"You really think we're well suited?" she asked, smiling. The idea pleased her.

He gave a nod. "I've never seen Severus look younger. You make him happy: he just hasn't realised it yet." He sipped thoughtfully at his tea and said, "Cordelia returned from France last night."

"Yes, I know."

"Cordelia's bark has always been worse than her bite, and although it would be dreadfully hypocritical of her, it's possible she could cause trouble for the pair of you if she found out. For Severus, in particular."

"You're very fond of Severus, aren't you, Lance?"

"I've gotten to know him over the past six years: he has gained my deepest respect and admiration. The man is a war hero, one who refuses to acknowledge his heroism. What's more, he's denied himself companionship and the love of a good woman. Why wouldn't I want to see him happy?"

Hermione was fascinated: there were so few people to whom she could talk about Severus. "Did you know Albus Dumbledore, Lance? Does Severus ever speak to you about him?"

Lance shook his head. "I met Dumbledore many times, over the years, but we were never more than acquaintances. Severus rarely mentions him. Nor has he ever talked about Lily Evans."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "You know about Lily Evans?"

"Minerva told me what transpired during the final battle. I don't know all the details, but I know Severus loved her, once."

She sighed. "You really believe I can make him happy, Lance?"

"I know you can," he said with a smile. "And I fully intend to sit back and watch you do it."

Hermione crossed Kensington Square at exactly eight o'clock. She would miss Severus today: It was Monday, his day to spend time away from the laboratory meeting clients. Feeling despondent, she touched her wand to the front door and pushed it open, only to find her mother-in-law on the other side.

Cordelia was wrapped in a beautifully embroidered dressing gown, and her hair and makeup were already impeccably finished.

"Hermione!" she cried, giving her daughter-in-law one of her best hostess smiles.

"Hello," Hermione said, trying her hardest to return the smile.

Cordelia crossed the hallway and drew her into a hug, kissing her lightly on both cheeks. "You've just missed Severus! He's left for Amsterdam."

"Yes. I ... I'm just on my way down to the laboratory."

"Well," Cordelia said conspiratorially. "Why don't you take full advantage of his absence and come upstairs for coffee with me and my friends at eleven o'clock?"

"That's very kind of you, but I have so much work to get through ..."

Cordelia rolled her eyes. "He's such a slave driver! Well, if you change your mind, you'd be more than welcome."

Hermione muttered her thanks and fled to the staircase, her hands shaking. When she reached the basement, she fumbled for her wand and finally pressed it to the lock on the wrought iron door. She entered quickly and slammed the door behind her, pressing her back to its cold surface and sliding all the way to the floor. Her potions journal clattered to the ground, and she put her face in her hands.

She'd spent a blissful week cocooned in a small, private universe with Severus. But now she'd returned to earth with a bang. This was the reality of the situation: having to play-act in front of the woman whose husband had become her lover. All the extenuating circumstances in the world did not make things any easier when you had to lie to someone's face.

Glad that Severus was not there to witness her behaviour, she sobbed her heart out, knowing she could not walk away from him, but for the first time fully aware of the burden she would have to bear.

Hermione managed to avoid Cordelia for most of the month that followed, and she soon settled into a routine with Severus. During the week, they behaved as they always had done: employer and employee.

There were times when she badly wanted to touch him as he passed her by, just lay her hand on his forearm or press a brief kiss to his cheek. But they'd agreed that they would separate their personal and professional lives, and Hermione wanted to keep her word. Their weekends more than made up the lack of physical contact, and she found that the Saturdays she had once dreaded were now the very thing she lived for.

It hadn't been too difficult to keep things from her friends. She'd avoided any kind of intimate discussion with Padma, ensuring she was kept busy with the babies when they were together. She knew Padma was watching her, waiting for the right time to ask, but so far no interrogation had been forthcoming. Harry and Ginny were much easier: although they were curious about her friendship with Severus, they had never known anything of her feelings.

One day at the end of August, Neville requested they meet for lunch in Diagon Alley, and she agreed. She met him on a Thursday afternoon, and she returned to the laboratory after her lunch feeling decidedly glum.

"Is something the matter?" Severus asked, frowning as she returned to her bench.

She gave a troubled sigh. "I met Neville for lunch."

"Ah, yes. That would explain it. Mr Longbottom tends to have that effect on people," he muttered, smirking.

"Severus, don't be mean about Neville!" she snapped, thumping her journal onto her bench. "You just can't resist having a go at him, can you?"

The smirk slid from his face, and he quirked an eyebrow, unused to such a sensitive reaction from her.

"Oh, Severus, I'm sorry," she said, rubbing her brow. "I know you were only joking. It's just that he's really, really depressed, and it's upset me."

He returned silently to his work with a scowl.

Her eyes filled with tears. "Do you accept my apology?"

He raised his gaze from his cauldron and looked at her, wondering what had transpired between them to warrant such bad humour. "Of course I accept your apology," he said quietly. "Would you care to explain what has distressed you?"

She sat on her stool and uttered another deep sigh. "Well, he and Hannah have officially separated. She's taken a job in the Leaky Cauldron, and he, obviously, has stayed on at Hogwarts."

"That's hardly a surprise. It's been plain to everyone that they've been unhappy since they wed."

"Yes, but I thought he might be happier since they split up. It's only made him more depressed, though. She might have been miserable at the school, but it's even lonelier for him now, and he has more time to brood about where his life is going."

Severus gave a shrug. "He's hardly the only casualty of the Marriage Law. He must create his own happiness."

"But he *can't*," Hermione insisted. "He's trapped here, and the woman he loves is abroad. It's so unfair. He's had such a terrible life."

He watched as she chewed her bottom lip in concern for her friend.

"I mean, just imagine! He was raised by a grandmother who did nothing until he reached the age of fifteen but belittle him. He was no better off than an orphan, yet he could never truly grieve for his parents because they're still alive. They're worse than dead! He'll never really know them, and yet he has to watch them live out their lives in these empty shells that pass for bodies, and he will have to be responsible for their care until the day they die."

Severus was rather captivated by the expression of worry on her face. "But he has, as you rightly point out, lived with this all his life. I thought him quite transformed from his insipid self in his final years at Hogwarts. He'd grown from a bumbling fool into a courageous, self-assured young man. What has changed?"

"In part it was the Marriage Law: Most of us had the option of leaving the country if we didn't wish to abide by the law, but Neville couldn't. His grandmother is old and frail now, and so responsibility for his parents rests with him. His mother has been unwell over the past few years, and he doesn't think they receive adequate care in St. Mungo's. He visits them every weekend and pops in unannounced from time to time during the week, just to keep the staff on their toes." She shook her head sadly.

"Why doesn't he move them to a private home?" Severus asked with a frown. "There are many wizard-run care homes around the country."

"He's looked into that, but they're all unaffordable. He can't sell the family home to pay for their care while his grandmother lives, and his salary would never cover it. Besides, if he was to leave the country to look for Luna, he wouldn't receive a salary at all."

"I see," Severus said, stirring the contents of his cauldron. "Your concern for him is touching."

She jerked her head up to look at him, but she could discern no sarcasm. "I've always liked Neville," she explained. "When he offered for me at Belgrave House we talked about this, and at the time I thought he was just sulking. But we've been over his options time and time again, and I just don't see a way around it. I'd like nothing better than to see him find Luna Lovegood, but he loves his mum and dad, and he'll never leave them if he thinks they won't be looked after."

They remained silent for a few moments, and Hermione slipped off her stool to resume her brewing.

"Severus?" she said, smiling at last. "Did you know you were Neville's Boggart when we were in third year?"

He grunted and glared at her. "The whole school knew I was his Boggart."

Hermione chuckled. "Well, you *were* particularly hard on him."

"I was hard on both of you; I presume I wasn't *your* Boggart?" He paused for a second, peering into his cauldron. "That was one of the things that annoyed me most about you: You always seemed to find it necessary to hiss instructions into Neville Longbottom's ear rather than give the boy a chance to do it himself."

"Severus, he couldn't do it himself because he went to pieces every time you were in the room!"

He waved his hand dismissively. "I don't know how I put up with the pair of you for so long. You were positively the worst student I ever had the misfortune to teach."

Her jaw fell open. "The *worst* student? You said I was your *best* student at Pomona Sprout's retirement party. When did I ever brew a potion that was anything less than perfect? When did I ever submit an essay that was less than satisfactory?"

He smirked. "Your work was perfectly adequate. It was the constant questions that were the problem, not to mention the fact that you drove the entire class crazy with your know-it-all hand waving."

To her great amusement, he waved his hand in the air in an impressive imitation of her former self. Trying not to laugh, she picked up a bound bunch of roots and hurled them at him.

He caught them deftly in his left hand and tossed them back on her bench, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"You're so cruel," she said, smiling.

He returned his attention to his work once more but, after a few minutes, said, "It's rather crueller that I've ended up so heavily in the debt of my two least favourite students."

Hermione frowned. "Severus, you know you're no longer in my debt: you've more than repaid anything I did with your kindness this past year. And why would you say you're in Neville's debt?"

He gazed at her, surprised it hadn't occurred to her before. "Don't you know why I feel indebted to him?"

She returned his stare, and then gasped. "He killed the snake!"

He gave a curt nod and lowered his gaze.

Hermione continued to watch him, finally understanding why he had been so kind to Neville at Belgrave House. "You're not his Boggart anymore," she said, unsure why it suddenly seemed important.

His smirk returned. "I'm glad to hear it."

"He told me his Boggart would be himself now: old, alone and unloved." She sighed. "Sad, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said, uncomfortable. He was afraid his Boggart might assume a similar form. "Sad, indeed."

On the Saturday that followed, Hermione met her mother for lunch and some shopping, and when she had unpacked her groceries, she crossed Kensington Square. Standing on the steps, she cast a spell to check that Cordelia had left for Scotland, and then she entered and climbed the stairs to the study. After a brief knock, she pushed open the door.

"Hi," she said, smiling. Severus sat behind his desk, a huge pile of parchment before him.

"Good afternoon," he replied, putting his quill down and leaning back in his chair. "How did you fare in Belfast yesterday?"

"Fine...nothing to report. I've just found out that Lance has gone to visit friends in Venice for a few days, and he's taken Moe along with him. So I thought ..." She felt suddenly shy. "Would you like to have dinner at my house?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You're going to cook?"

"Yes," she said, pouting. "I mightn't be as good as Moe, but I'm a perfectly competent cook, you know."

"Well, we'll soon see," he drawled. "Yes, I'd be delighted to have dinner at your house. Lance's wine cellar is far superior to Cordelia's. If your food is inedible, we can drown our sorrows."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "In that case, I'll see you in one hour."

Hermione closed the door behind her and made for the stairs, delighted he'd agreed, despite his teasing. Thus far, they'd spent weekends in his house, and given that they'd normally retired to his bedroom before dinner, she'd never had an excuse to stay the night, and no invitation had been forthcoming. He might consider it too intimate, she thought, to sleep next to her, or perhaps there was some other reason she had not yet considered.

She would cook them both a hearty meal, and, hoping that a full stomach and a bottle of wine might do the trick, she hoped to entice him to remain the night in her bed. She longed to know what it would be like to wake up next to him, to sleep in his arms, and she was determined to find out.

When Severus arrived an hour later, Hermione had set the table, lit some candles, and was almost finished preparing dinner. Knowing he had a fondness for red meat and red wine, she'd cooked fillet steak. She heard him on the stairs and flashed him a smile as he entered the room.

"That smells promising," he said, peering over her shoulder.

"You doubt my culinary skills?"

"Not any more. Would you like me to choose a bottle of wine?"

"Yes, please."

Hermione watched him cross to Lance's wine cellar, and by the time he'd emerged with a bottle of whatever vintage he'd judged appropriate, she had served their meal.

When they'd finished dessert it was almost dark outside, and Severus opened a second bottle of wine. As always, she found him much more talkative when he'd been drinking, and she enjoyed listening as he regaled her with tales of the staff while he had been a student at Hogwarts.

Shortly before ten o'clock, she rose from her chair and boldly straddled his lap, sighing as he ran his hands up her sides. "I've become incredibly fond of Saturdays," she muttered into his ear.

"As have I," he replied, pulling her to him for a kiss.

She led him to her room, and after they'd made love, she snuggled against his chest while he slowly stroked her arm as had become his custom.

She smiled to herself, pleased that the meal and the wine had had the desired effect as they lay entwined in a drowsy silence, lulled by the sound of rain against the tiny basement window.

Severus watched her face in the soft glow of the candlelight, admiring, as he so often had these past few weeks, the way in which her hair fanned out across her pillow. Her eyes were closed, but he knew she was not yet asleep. He allowed his gaze to travel down her delicate throat to her lightly freckled chest and the swell of her breast, pressed against his side.

He had always found it easy to divide his life into different roles. When he'd been at school he had played four different parts: diligent student; sworn enemy of Potter and Black; friend of Lily Evans; neglected son. Before the final defeat of the Dark Lord, he had played Hogwarts teacher by day and Death Eater by night, and even now his every waking hour was compartmentalised: husband of Cordelia Mill; successful businessman; lover to the woman who currently had one arm and one leg wrapped around him.

The final two, in particular, were slowly becoming less distinct. Increasingly often, he found himself longing to reach out and touch Hermione as he passed her bench on his way to the storeroom, or wanting to press his lips to her forehead before she left the laboratory in the evenings. But during the week, it was necessary to behave as both husband and conscientious professional, and he refused to give in to such moments of weakness.

He watched Hermione's face in the dim light of the room, wondering why he felt it infinitely more acceptable to shag her at the weekends than it did to indulge himself in these little longed-for intimacies. In a rare moment of honesty, he realised that he would really like nothing better than to remain here in the warmth of her bed, her naked body curled against his through the night. What would it be like to wake next to her?

Berating himself for such sentimentality, he shook his head and disentangled himself from her limbs. It was after midnight: time to return to his own home. But before he could retrieve his clothes, her fingers closed over his forearm.

"Severus," she whispered. "Stay."

Slowly, he turned to face her. "It would be unwise, Hermione."

She propped herself up on one elbow. "Why? Why would it be unwise?"

"It would make it easier for us to be discovered," he said, turning from her.

"Severus, that's nonsense. Cordelia's away, and she never returns before Sunday night. Lance won't be back for days, and he knows about us anyway."

He knew she spoke the truth: There was no such reason for him to vacate her bed. How could he explain to her that he feared giving in to such cravings? That he worried they would make him vulnerable; that he was appalled at the thought that he might wake screaming from one of his nightmares?

She knelt behind him and wrapped her arms around his chest, gently kissing his shoulder, making him close his eyes.

"Please, Severus. We have so little time together. Stay with me."

The sensation of her naked body against his back was more than he could resist. Knowing this meant he would have to forego sleep that night, he turned in her arms. After pressing a brief kiss to her temple, he lowered them both to the bed, not knowing quite how he felt when she uttered a deep sigh of satisfaction. After reaching for his wand and extinguishing the candles, he tucked her head beneath his chin and wrapped her in his arms.

"Thank you," she whispered, snaking her arm around his waist.

"Goodnight, Hermione," he murmured.

He stared into the darkness as her breathing became deep and regular, thankful that the tickle of her curls against his nose would help keep him awake. He could not allow himself to fall asleep.

It always began the same way. Almost every night since he had woken in St. Mungo's, whenever he fell asleep, Albus Dumbledore would visit him in his dreams.

He was sitting behind the headmaster's desk in Hogwarts, quill in hand, when Albus entered quietly through the heavy wooden door.

"Albus?" he said, perturbed. "I thought ... I thought you were dead?"

The former headmaster uttered the chuckle that had infuriated him for seventeen years. "Indeed I am, Severus. You killed me, if memory serves correctly." Albus took the seat in front of the desk and laced his fingers.

"I only took your life because you ordered me to do it," he replied with a frown.

"So it gave you absolutely no pleasure to do it, Severus?" Albus asked, gazing at him above his glasses with those penetrating blue eyes. "Did you not, when the time came, derive some enjoyment from the act?"

"No!" Severus insisted, pushing his chair away from the desk and rising from his seat. "It didn't give me pleasure. I felt ... Anger. I was angry at you, at the Dark Lord, at myself for the position into which I had been forced. I felt hatred, perhaps, for all three of us. But no. Not pleasure."

"I told you once that only you would know whether it would harm your soul to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation, Severus. And only you know the truth of it. Are you sure there was not some moment of pleasure mixed in there with your anger and your self-revulsion?"

He stared at the old man. "No. There was no pleasure ... I am ... I ..."

But even as he stopped, considering the truth, he cried out in pain as he felt it: his soul, being torn in two. "No!" he cried, clutching the desk and sinking to his knees.

Dumbledore looked at him, his blue eyes twinkling without sympathy. He chuckled maddeningly while Severus struggled for breath. "I thought as much."

While he fell to the floor, one hand clutching the desk, the other clawing at the burning pain in his chest, the scene changed.

Suddenly, the agony was gone, and he was kneeling on the grass at the foot of the Astronomy tower, Dumbledore's broken and lifeless body spread before him. They were alone, save for Fawkes the Phoenix, who circled the air above them with plaintive cries.

He looked upon the lifeless body of the man who had been his headmaster, his colleague, his confessor, and sometimes, his friend. Yes, Dumbledore had used him. Yes, he had manipulated him. But he had trusted him without once wavering in that trust, and surely that was worth something?

The agony that had recently gripped him was replaced by a dull ache, and he knew it was a pang of loss; sorrow that such a great, if fundamentally flawed man, had been killed by *his* wand.

Allowing grief to wash over him, he wrapped the body of Albus Dumbledore in his own cloak and lifted him from the ground. In his dream the burden was light, and, not knowing why, he made his way through the Hogsmead gates and towards the Shrieking Shack.

He was sure of his destination, determined to reach the tumble-down old house despite the feeling of foreboding niggling at the back of his mind, telling him that he should not go there, that something lay in wait for him.

When they reached the shack, he kicked the door open and stumbled forward, laying the swathed body on the dusty floor and kneeling beside Dumbledore's lifeless form once more.

He reached inside his coat for his wand, but his fingers closed around something cold and metallic instead, and he found the old man's broken glasses in his hand. Wondering how they'd ended up in his coat, he reached down to pull the cloak back from Albus's face, intending to place the glasses on his crooked nose.

But even before his fingers found purchase on the thick material, he knew that something was terribly wrong. The body enveloped in the cloak had somehow changed shape, and even as he pulled the cloak from where the face should have been, whatever lay within started to twist and writhe.

He froze in shock as the cloak fell from his hands, revealing the smooth head of Voldemort's snake. As Nagini turned her burning eyes towards him, the scream began in his chest, leaving his lips as the creature lunged for his neck, her dripping fangs bared.

Struggling for breath, Severus clutched at his neck, almost crying out again in relief to find that there was no enormous snake attached to his throat.

As his panic subsided, he groped for his wand in the darkness, disorientated and soaked in sweat. Before he could light the room, he heard someone calling his name, fear in their voice.

"Severus?" Hermione whispered urgently. "Are you okay?" She reached out and wrapped her arms around him.

In complete mortification, he realised he was in her bedroom and that he had succumbed to fatigue. He took her arms roughly from around his chest and leapt from the bed.

"You had a nightmare," she said, obviously shaken. "You were calling out in your sleep!"

He lit the tip of his wand and found his trousers lying in a tangled heap on the floor. He pulled them on, refusing to meet her gaze through the cold, blue light. He shrugged his shirt over his shoulders, fastening the buttons with a flick of his wand.

"Where are you going?" she said, kneeling up in the bed, clutching the sheets to her bare chest.

"I should not have stayed," he said, Summoning his shoes from across the room and sitting on the edge of the bed to pull them on.

She reached forward and placed her hand on his back. "Tell me what's wrong?" she pleaded.

"No," he spat, pulling away from her again. He snatched his coat from the carpet and rose from the bed.

"Severus!" she said, scrambling for her wand and Summoning her dressing gown. "Talk to me."

He strode to the door. "Good grief, girl. I've told you before that you're not my therapist."

"Oh, so I'm good enough for a quick fuck, but you won't tell me what's wrong?"

"Your words, not mine," he snarled, pulling open the bedroom door.

"Wait!" she cried, scrambling to her feet.

"No," he said, flicking his wand at her. "I do not need your pity."

Hermione was flung back against the bed as he disappeared, slamming the door behind him. He had hexed her. He had actually hexed her. Wiping a startled tear from her cheek, she heard him close the front door with a bang and took a deep breath to steady herself. If he thought he could use her when he felt like it and refuse to talk to her, he had another thing coming. She crossed to the wardrobe and pulled jeans and a jumper from a hanger. She was damned if she was going to let him leave like that.

Severus stood on the steps of Hermione's house, his chest heaving. He looked up at the dark, night sky, trying to control his breathing. It was raining heavily, and he was already soaked. He crossed Kensington Square on foot, letting the rain run down his face as if it could wash away his humiliation.

Only a few minutes later, Hermione followed him across the square to Cordelia's house. Pressing the tip of her wand to the lock, she let herself in and closed the door, listening for him. He was unlikely to have gone to the roof garden in such inclement weather, so she headed for his study, pausing outside to take a deep breath.

She opened the door to find he had lit a fire in the grate and was seated in his leather armchair with a large glass of Firewhisky. He was staring at the flames, his hair wet, and she took his lack of rebuke as a good sign. Without saying a word, she crossed the room and knelt at his side, waiting for him to turn to look at her, and when he did, his eyes blazed with anger. She bravely held her ground.

Severus had turned to her with the intention of telling her to leave him alone, to return to her house and never mention it again. But as he looked into her warm brown eyes, he felt his anger dissipate. She was not looking at him with the expression of pity he had expected, but with the same look of compassion he had seen upon her features when she'd talked of Neville Longbottom.

They looked at each other for a long moment.

"Come," he said finally, patting his leg and putting his Firewhisky on his desk.

Determined to hold her tongue, Hermione slipped onto his lap, laying her head against his chest. She'd known for some time that he did not sleep well, and now she knew it wasn't just because of the wounds to his neck. She had no wish to compel him to tell her of his nightmares, so she entwined her fingers through his, listening to the slow, steady beat of his heart through his shirt as she waited for him to speak.

"I've been haunted by the same nightmare almost every night since I first regained consciousness in St. Mungo's," he whispered after many silent minutes.

"Doesn't Dreamless Sleep potion help?" she asked.

"Yes, but it's not without side effects, and I've no wish to become dependent on it. I've taken it occasionally, when I've deemed it necessary. I should have taken it tonight."

She desperately wanted to know of what he dreamt, but she held her silence and waited.

After another minute, he said, "Albus Dumbledore seems to find the need to visit me in my dreams. And always our conversation revolves around the same topic: my soul."

"Your soul?" she asked, sitting up so she could look at him.

He nodded. "On the night he requested I take his life, I asked him why he didn't allow Draco to do it as the Dark Lord had commanded. He answered that he did not want the boy's soul to become damaged. When I suggested my soul meant nothing to him, he said that only I would know whether or not my soul would be harmed by helping an old man to avoid pain and humiliation."

"Like euthanasia," she said.

"Perhaps. But in my nightmares he taunts me: he suggests that I derived pleasure from the act of killing him, and in my dream I can feel my soul rip apart." He closed his eyes and rubbed his brow.

Hermione watched him, knowing she should choose her words with extreme care. "Dumbledore played an irresponsible game with many people's lives, Severus. I know he had the good of wizarding kind at heart, but that didn't give him the right to put you, and Harry for that matter, in such incredible danger. To ask such an act of you wasn't fair. It *could* have maimed your soul forever."

He shot her a glance. "How do you know it didn't?"

She gazed into his black eyes, the flames reflected in their depths. "I don't know. Only you can know that."

He looked away from her and into the fire. "I'm sure you're well aware that in order to successfully cast an Unforgivable curse, you need to mean it."

"But surely needing to mean it and drawing pleasure from the act are two different things?"

He gave a deep sigh. "I had rather a complex relationship with Albus Dumbledore. He trusted me; he respected my abilities. But I don't think he particularly liked me. I am a hard man to like. Mind you, he liked me enough to bequeath me Nicolas Flamel's Telenium cauldron."

Hermione gave him a small smile. "Did you like him?"

He shook his head. "Not particularly. I could see what a talented manipulator he was, and I did not like the fact that his manipulation extended to me. But I certainly respected him: He was truly the most powerful wizard I've ever met, and I was, I suppose, touched that he placed so much faith in me. He often sought my opinion on matters of importance; I was flattered.

"He had angered me greatly that last year, especially so when he told me that Potter must die. I was furious with him. It was easier than I had envisaged, in the end, to cast the curse that ended his life. I put all my anger into it: Anger at Albus; anger at the Dark Lord; anger at myself. I felt like a trapped animal that night. I *was* trapped. Had I not completed Draco's assignment in his stead I would have died, and I had tasks yet to fulfil." He paused again, lost in the dancing flames.

"And how did it make you feel when you actually did it?" she asked in a whisper.

"Despicable," he said. "Resentful, bitter, ashamed, enraged. Once I'd delivered Draco to his mother and had sought an audience with the Dark Lord, I Apparated to Spinner's End and spent the remainder of the night retching over a toilet bowl. I was glad it was all over at last, but I've searched my soul over the intervening years, examined my memories, and I cannot find any trace of pleasure in the killing of Albus Dumbledore."

"Then your soul is unharmed?"

Severus gave her an ironic smile. "I wouldn't go as far as to say it is unharmed. My soul has certainly been tainted the things I've done, and by some of the things I failed to do. There are things I've done for which I feel no remorse, so I'm sure I've sustained damage, but as far as I can tell, my soul has not been torn in two."

She lay against his chest once more. "Your soul remains whole, Severus. I know it."

He didn't reply, but pressed his lips to the crown of her head.

"The strangest thing is," he said eventually, "the nightmares always begin and end the same way. Sometimes the details or the settings are different, but it always begins and ends the same way: At first, Albus asks me about my soul, but as the dream progresses, I find myself on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, his lifeless body before me, wrapped in a cloak."

He swallowed rapidly, and she knew it was the next part of the nightmare that had made him cry out in his sleep.

"When I lift the cloak from his face it's no longer Albus: he becomes the damned snake. It lunges for my neck, and I wake screaming, as you have recently discovered."

She didn't know what to say, so she simply squeezed his hand.

"I don't expect I will ever stop being haunted by the memory of that cursed serpent," he said. "We were all harmed, in one way or another, during the war, and some of the emotional scars will never, perhaps, truly leave us. But I wish I knew why Albus always becomes the snake."

"He becomes the snake because Nagini is not the only one who hurt you. You've been damaged by them both, Severus."

He gave her a deeply questioning look. "Perhaps." He took her face in his hands and kissed her.

When he pulled away, she lay against his chest once more, her mind reeling with the things he had just said. She thought back to his state of panic when he had woken from the nightmare, and she wondered if he even remembered having hexed her. A few minutes passed, and he glanced at his watch.

"It's after four in the morning," he whispered in her ear.

She took that as her cue to leave and reluctantly rose from his lap. "I should go." He looked up at her, a strange expression on his face. "Goodnight, Severus," she said, close to tears and not really knowing why.

She turned to walk away, but he stood up and gripped her by the arm. "Stay," he said, mirroring her own actions from earlier that evening.

Surprised, she met his gaze, and instantly understood that this was his apology. She smiled as he pulled her into his arms.

"Gladly," she replied.

When she woke the next morning, Severus was still asleep. She propped herself up on one elbow, watching him. He lay on his back, his head turned towards the window, the duvet pulled down to his waist.

Hermione allowed her gaze to travel along his body, taking in the scattering of dark hair on his chest, the sinewy muscles on his arms and the veins on his hands. She looked at his long, slender fingers and his neat nails, and as she moved her gaze back to his still-slumbering face, devoid of its customary scowl, she thought, *I love him*

She pressed her fingers to her mouth, as if the admission would somehow escape if she did not hold it in. It was the first time since they'd embarked on their affair that she knew without question that she had begun to fall in love with this difficult, stubborn, unpleasant man. Rather than make her happy, the realisation made her sad, for what was the point of loving him when they were trapped by the Marriage Law?

He stirred and turned towards her, his eyes still closed, and she silently vowed that she would not tell him. Despite the fact that he had, only just the night before, bared his soul to her, she still had absolutely no idea how he really felt about her. She knew he sometimes enjoyed her company at work, and she knew he desired her, but beyond that she was lost.

No. She would not tell him she loved him. If there was ever to be such an admission, she would have to be certain that her feelings were reciprocated, and for now, she simply didn't know.

But as he opened his eyes and greeted her with a drowsy half-smile, she thought that maybe there was hope. And when he took her by the hand and led her to the shower, she knew that they had made more progress in the past twenty-four hours than they had for weeks.

Yes, they were trapped by their marriages, but there was still hope. There was *always* hope.

Your Wounded Stare

Chapter 26 of 34

Severus gives Hermione a birthday gift.

A/N: My dearest readers. I have fallen behind in answering your reviews again. Please feel free to blame my sons. My sixteen-year-old has his Junior Cert (state examinations like GCSEs or OWLs) in five weeks, and so he has been excused from housework while he is studying. Alas, I have had to take up the slack. But he is quite the Hermione Granger, so I'm sure we'll be rewarded with bucket loads of As in return. In fact, he has started giving grinds (extra lessons) to his classmates at the cost of 2 per student per class, which I'm sure is against school rules, so he's more like something of a Weasley twin/Hermione mix. It's all my genes, of course. ;)

A few of you have left reviews suggesting I make the story go one way or another. Please remember that this story was completed four and a half years ago and I promised that the story would not change. In editing it, I am merely changing the language with which it is told (the original was, to my mind, rather heavy and over-written in parts), and not the story itself. And in answer to another frequent question: Denial was originally 33 chapters long. Now, with the addition of The Ring of Fire, it will be 34. So, after this chapter, we will only have another eight to go.

One or two of you have also bemoaned the lack of lemons. You get one in this chapter (hurray!), but this story was never really about the sex scenes. It was never the kind of tale that was going to have a detailed sex scene every single chapter after Severus and Hermione got together. If that's what you're looking for, I'm afraid this story is not for you. If you want nothing more than fluff, again, it is not for you. Denial is a story that looks at some tough issues for people in tough circumstances, and examines how they might feel and cope. But if you've made it this far in the story, I beseech you to stick with it and trust me. Our couple have a rocky road ahead of them, but I will be kind. And again, remember, I am not changing the original story, so I will not be adding lemons as I go, although there is a scene in one of the later chapters that I will lengthen and elaborate.

And finally, thank you, again, from the bottom of my heart. When I've had a hard day and the last thing I want to do is wade through another chapter of the original manuscript, I read over your reviews and it makes every second of it all worthwhile.

LB x

Walking with you and another lady

In wooded parkland, the whispering grass

Ran its fingers through our guessing silence

And the trees opened into a shady

Unexpected clearing where we sat down.

I think the candour of the light dismayed us.

We talked about desire and being jealous,

Our conversation a loose single gown

Or a white picnic tablecloth spread out

Like a book of manners in the wilderness.

"Show me," I said to our companion, "what

I have much coveted, your breast's mauve star."

And she consented. O neither these verses

Nor my prudence, love, can heal your wounded stare.

- Seamus Heaney, *A Dream of Jealousy*

It was the second week of September, and it already felt like autumn. The long summer evenings would soon be no more, and as Severus gazed across Kensington Square, he wondered what the colder months would bring.

It was Monday evening. He hadn't seen Hermione all day, and as he looked through the yellowing leaves of the trees towards her house, he imagined what she might be doing. Maybe she was having dinner in the company of Lance and Moe. It was possible that she had gone to visit friends: Harry and Ginny, perhaps, or Padma and Dean. He was envious of all these imaginary dinner companions.

He was annoyed with himself. Cordelia had left for Edinburgh the previous Friday, and so he and Hermione had enjoyed two nights together instead of one. It was ridiculous that he was missing the girl, having spent the entire weekend with her. He had slept beside her on both nights, and on neither occasion had he been revisited by his recurring nightmare.

There were two possible explanations for this: either the knowledge that there was someone beside him had been enough to keep the nightmare at bay, or he found comfort in the presence of her warm, naked body pressed against his own. He felt that, somehow, the former explanation was infinitely more acceptable.

Six weeks had passed since they'd embarked on their passionate affair, and with each day he was finding it increasingly more difficult to keep his professional and private lives separate. On more than one occasion, Hermione had arrived at the laboratory, her ponytailed hair swinging behind her, and he had been almost overwhelmed by her exquisiteness. How he had longed to cross the room and take her radiant face in his hands and kiss her until they were both dizzy with breathlessness.

With increasing frequency he watched her work at her bench, recalling the morning they had first made love on the yellow-spattered surface with such desperation. How badly he wanted to take her on that bench again, but they had agreed that it was unacceptable, and there were potions to be brewed.

He tore himself from the window of his study and crossed the room to his mahogany drinks cabinet. As he took a crystal decanter of brandy from its shelf, a small glass phial at the very back of the cabinet caught his eye. He had almost forgotten it was there: One dose of Exostraserum. As he took it out and fingered the delicate bottle, he remembered Hermione's definition of the effects of the potion: "It provides clarity of thought and insight into one's own beliefs and feelings."

The past few weeks had confused him. He had entered this liaison with Hermione fully cognisant of the difficulties it would bring, but he had not bargained on one of those difficulties being the turmoil that was his own feelings. He wanted to relegate her to nothing more than a mistress, but she deserved more, and he knew it. But neither of them was in a position to pursue anything other than their adulterous affair, so contemplation of an impossible future was pointless.

He gazed at the colourless liquid in the tiny glass bottle and slowly removed the little cork with which it was stoppered, knowing it could help him examine his emotions. He raised it to his lips, but before he could drink it, he lowered it again and replaced the stopper.

Now was not the time: he was certain that Theodore Nott would return. He was, in fact, stunned that his stepson had put up with the inconvenience of his burning ring for such a long time. But Theo's return could cause events to spiral out of control, and the time might yet come when the Exostraserum would be vital.

Uttering a sigh of relief, he pushed it to the back of the cabinet shelf once more. The idea of exploring his deepest emotions was not one with which he was comfortable. There were many skeletons in his particular closet, and he had no wish to confront them face-to-face.

On a Thursday morning some ten days later, he watched Hermione make her way to her workbench. He knew it was her birthday today, and he wondered why she hadn't mentioned it. He was well prepared. For some reason, he had always remembered Hermione Granger's birthday, even when she had been his student. On her first day at Hogwarts he had been presented with a list of all the incoming first-years in order of their age. She had been the eldest in her year, the first newcomer to turn twelve, and as a result her name and date-of-birth had been top of the list.

She didn't look particularly happy today, and he wondered if she'd been upset to discover that there was no gift from him among the presents she'd received that morning. He had thought long and hard about what to buy for her, but he had no intention of presenting her with her gift before their working day was through.

He remembered watching her in the Great Hall on the morning she had turned twelve, aware that none of her classmates had wished her well. She had not been popular among the first-years, and he had rather thought it served her right for being such a know-it-all. She'd only received two small gifts by owl, and it had occurred to him that she had, in all probability, been every bit as ostracised by her Muggle classmates as she was by her magical ones.

"Hermione?" he asked, thinking that she looked exceptionally pretty this morning. "Did you find it difficult as a child, being a Muggle-born?"

She looked up, surprised. "What do you mean? At Hogwarts?"

He shook his head. "Not at Hogwarts. What was it like to be a witch brought up as a Muggle? What was it like before you received your letter from Hogwarts?"

"Very difficult," she said with a shrug. "Frustrating ... I felt like something was wrong with me. My parents were concerned: they even went so far as to bring me to a child psychologist when I was nine. It's nothing any other Muggle-born hasn't gone through. You know...making things explode when you get angry; making things Levitate when you're happy...that sort of thing. It's easily explained when you are a pure-blood or a half-blood, but pretty frightening when you have no idea that the magical world exists. I think my parents were relieved when I got my letter and we had our visit from Pomona Sprout to explain everything."

"How did you get along with your peers?" he asked, genuinely interested.

Hermione frowned. "Not terribly well, although I'm not sure if it had anything to do with my being a witch. It was possibly just my 'know-it-all hand waving' as you've described it." She grinned at him. "I never felt like I fit in when I was in a Muggle school. I had hardly any friends, and I believed it would all be different when I went to Hogwarts ... I thought I'd be accepted. I was sure the fact that I was clever and so far ahead of my Muggle classmates was because I was a witch, but after a few days at Hogwarts, I realised things weren't very different there."

He couldn't help but draw a parallel between Hermione and the only other Muggle-born with whom he had ever had any sort of relationship. Yes, Lily had spoken of the fear in her parents' eyes when she had performed magic as a young child, but she had never had such difficulty with children her own age. The difference was that in her youth, Hermione had lacked the charm and self-confidence of a young Lily Evans. She'd only gained that confidence later on in life.

"You seemed to get along infinitely better with your male classmates than you did with the other girls," he said.

"I got along with Neville from day one, but the other guys only accepted me because of Harry and Ron. The girls in my year, Parvati and Lavender in particular, just weren't my type at all. I always got along well with Ginny, but again, that was more to do with my friendship with Harry and Ron than anything else. She was always sporty, confident, and fantastic on the Quidditch pitch; I don't think we would've been friends if she wasn't Ron's sister. Padma was my first true female friend, I guess."

He watched her for a moment. "I can't believe you ever thought you were suited to Ronald Weasley: a less well-matched pair I've never come across in my life."

She gave him an embarrassed smile. "Yes, you're probably right. But I think, in a way, it was his family I loved rather than him. With Harry and I being only children, it was easy to become smitten with the Weasleys. Their family life was chaotic, loud, disorganised, but warm and welcoming, and so much fun. I loved the summers I spent at the Burrow. It worked out fine for Harry: he's well suited to Ginny. They're both sporty, clever...well, Harry can be when he puts his mind to it."

Severus snorted in disbelief.

"I only have two cousins," she continued, "so the Weasleys' home life was something of a revelation to me. I suppose it's the reason I can't imagine having anything less than two or three children." She realised what she'd said and lowered her gaze, her cheeks colouring. She hadn't meant to let slip something so personal.

He regarded her for a moment longer, wondering how she could possibly feel, surrounded by friends who either had children or were expecting babies.

"Didn't you ever wish to have a child with Cordelia, Severus?" she asked without raising her gaze.

He arched an eyebrow. "Certainly not. It's not legally obligatory, so why would I wish such a thing?"

She looked up at him. "You've never wanted children?"

He shook his head. "I've never had such a desire. When one comes from a desperately unhappy home and has endured a miserable childhood, one has no wish to visit such wretchedness on an innocent child."

Hermione felt suddenly sad for him. "I don't think you would ever repeat the mistakes of your parents, Severus."

"It seems to me that despite the very best of intentions," he replied quietly, frowning, "human beings have a strange habit of becoming their parents."

An uncomfortable silence fell between them, but as they gradually became engrossed in their mutual tasks, the atmosphere soon dissipated. Moe called them to lunch at one o'clock, and they dined companionably in the kitchen, reading to one another from a selection of recent journals.

At five o'clock, Severus watched as Hermione began to tidy away her ingredients, scribbling in her journal as she sent jars and phials soaring back to their shelves with her wand.

"Have you plans for this evening?" he asked, feigning innocence.

She smiled. "I'm dining out with my parents tonight."

"Do you need to leave immediately?"

She shot him a curious glance. "Not quite yet ... I'm not meeting them until six. Why?"

He withdrew his wand from the folds of his robes and sealed the door with a flick. "I have good news and bad news."

"What bad news?" she asked breathily, wondering if, perhaps, Cordelia had discovered their affair.

"The bad news is that Cordelia informed me this morning that she's decided to spend the weekend at home. It seems you share Narcissa Malfoy's birthday, and she has decided to throw a dinner party for you both."

She groaned, shaking her head. "How did she know?"

"She remembered from last year," he said.

She shook her head again. "And the good news?"

"Well," he said, suddenly uncertain. "It's not so much good news as something I think...I hope...you will enjoy." He opened the press beneath his bench and extracted a large, silver-wrapped present.

He crossed the room, amused at her astonished expression, and placed the gift before her. He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. "Happy birthday, Hermione."

She gaped at him.

"You thought I'd forgotten?" he asked, smirking.

"I just didn't think you had any reason to remember," she said. "I don't like to make a fuss of my birthday." She looked at the gift and grinned. "Can I open it?"

"Of course."

"Ooh, it's heavy," she said, lifting it an inch or two off the bench. She undid the black ribbon and parted the silver paper. When she'd opened the wooden lid of the box she peered inside.

Severus watched her closely, hoping he had chosen appropriately. He knew women were generally fond of jewellery and the like, but he'd never seen Hermione wear much besides her wedding band, and he thought that his gift was, considering the circumstances, every bit as suitable a gift for employer to give an employee as it was for one lover to give another. He couldn't help but give her an uncertain half-smile as she raised her astounded gaze to his.

"Severus!" she cried. "You didn't?"

"Apparently, I did," he said.

She gaped at him before removing the lid and carefully extracting a large, solid gold cauldron. Placing it carefully on her bench with a clunk, she raised her hands to her face in disbelief. It was a Xiao Tiang Mei cauldron, the same size as the one that sat upon Severus's bench. She knew that mere Galleons were not enough to purchase a cauldron like this: one needed serious contacts and a well-respected name in the field of Potions.

She turned to him, her eyes brimming with tears. "Severus, I'm just speechless."

"That makes a pleasant change," he said, taking in her tear-filled eyes. "Are you upset? I wondered if I should, perhaps, have gotten you something more personal. I worried that you would not be content with something that is, essentially, only useful when you are at work. But I want to assure you that this is yours and yours alone. It does not belong to the business in any way. If, someday, you wish to leave, it would be yours to take with you, and..."

She grinned at him and placed a finger to his lips. "Severus," she whispered. "You're babbling."

He smirked. "We seem to have reversed roles."

She looked back at the gleaming cauldron and ran her finger tenderly around the rim, as if it was a new and cherished pet. She could make out the symbols that were the customary mark of a Xiao Tiang Mei cauldron, but there was a set of symbols on the opposite side that she had never seen before. Tracing them with her finger, she turned curious eyes to his face.

"Severus, what are these markings? I've never come across them before."

"It's your name," he said simply.

"My name?" she asked, suddenly breathless. "You had them customise a cauldron especially for me?"

He nodded, nervously fingering his bottom lip with the tip of his index finger.

"But ... but ..." she stammered, "It's difficult enough to purchase one of these cauldrons. How in the world did you talk them into putting my name on it?"

He smiled. "I have my ways; I can be very persuasive."

She dreaded to think how much it must have cost him. "You must have ordered it weeks ago!"

Severus nodded. "Two months ago."

Hermione looked at him, confused. "You ordered it before ... before we even got together?"

"Yes," he said. "I rather thought you deserved it."

Before she could blink it back, a tear slid down her cheek. "I'm so, so touched," she said, her voice choked. She leaned her head against his chest and snaked her arms around his waist, glad that he had warded the door.

He lifted her chin and brushed the tear away with the tips of his fingers. "You genuinely like it?"

She gave him a smile and nodded. "I love it, Severus. I'm stunned."

He pulled her closer to him and lowered his head to kiss her, then whispered, "I intended giving you the cauldron no matter what happened between us, but your second present definitely depended on us becoming lovers."

Kissing her again, more passionately this time, he undid the clasp of her work robes and allowed them to fall to the ground. She pulled away from him.

"Severus," she said, glancing at the sealed door. "I thought this was against the rules?"

"I'm sure we can make an exception for your birthday," he whispered, his breath against her ear. He took his wand from his robes once again and flicked it twice.

Hermione could feel a Warming Charm take effect around her, but even so, she shivered as he placed his wand on her workbench and began to undo the buttons of her shirt. She toed off her shoes and moved her hands to the neck of his coat, but he grasped her wrists and lowered them to her sides.

Her buttons undone, he lowered her shirt down her arms and let it fall to the ground before opening her belt and unzipping her jeans.

He undid the clasp in her hair, letting it tumble loose about her shoulders, and grasped her by the waist, lifting her onto the edge of the bench, the way he had done the morning they'd first made love. He hooked his thumbs over the band of her jeans and she obligingly lifted her hips for him, allowing him to pull them down her legs. She licked her lips in anticipation as he pulled off her socks and tossed them on top of her discarded jeans, and as he raised his lips to hers for another kiss, she reached once more for the buttons of his coat, only to have him remove her hands again.

"Severus, if you think I'm going to sit here near-naked while you get to stand there in your black-clad glory, you're very much mistaken."

He smirked at her. "Shy?" He allowed his gaze to rake over her torso, taking in the sight of her erect nipples beneath the satin of her bra. "You have no need to be."

"I *am* shy ... I can't help it," she whispered, wrapping her arms protectively around her waist.

He quickly undid the buttons of his frock coat and his shirt and shrugged them down his shoulders until he stood bare-chested before her. "Better?"

"Better," she agreed, moving her fingers to his belt. Before he could stop her, she reached into his trousers with one hand and stroked her fingers up the length of his erection.

"Hermione," he growled, grasping her wrists once more and extracting her hand from his trousers. "Enough! It is *your* birthday." He put her hands firmly behind her back. "Are you going to do as you're told or will I have to use a Binding Charm?"

"You haven't told me to do anything," she complained, giving him a mock glare.

"In that case let me make it clear: keep your hands to yourself!"

He stood between her legs and undid the clasp of her bra, gazing at her peaked nipples as he eased the straps down her arms. He didn't believe he would ever grow tired of looking upon her full, pert breasts. Taking one of her nipples into his mouth, he smiled at her sudden intake of breath and the way she tangled her hands in his hair, pulling him more surely against her chest. He released her breast and whispered, "Lie back."

She did as she was told with a deep sigh of satisfaction, and he watched as she lay across the bench, her loosened hair spread magnificently around her. He circled her nipples once with his thumbs before sliding his hands down her stomach to remove her black satin panties, then trailed his hands up the inside of her thighs, parting them as he went.

Hermione arched her back as his hands made their way up the sensitive skin of her thighs. She felt vulnerable, exposed like this, but at the same time excited, and as he lowered his lips to the soft skin of her inner thigh, his hot mouth following the path his hands had taken, she soon forgot her inhibitions and moaned aloud.

He reached the juncture of her thigh, his nose buried in her pubic hair, and he smirked at her sharp intake of breath as his thumb stroked her already swollen clitoris. She cried out as he replaced his thumb with his warm tongue and arched her back further, gripping the sides of the bench, her knuckles whitening. She was wet with arousal, and as he slipped first one finger and then two inside her she gave a loud groan, making him glad he'd put a Soundproofing Charm on the room.

She no longer cared that she was naked, exposed upon her workbench as warm waves of pure pleasure washed over her, making her arch her back further still as she thrust herself against his hand. His tongue on her clitoris was blissful, and as his long, slender fingers stroked inside her, she could feel the tell-tale, warm tingle of her orgasm building in her abdomen.

Severus raised his gaze while his tongue still worked at her. He could not see her face...her back was still arched and he couldn't see beyond the peaks of her breasts. While he watched, she relinquished her hold on the edge of the bench and moved her fingers to her own nipple, gripping it between her thumb and forefinger, making him stifle the groan that rose from his own throat. He throbbed with arousal as he felt her clench around his fingers, crying out as she orgasmed.

She grasped the edges of the bench once more, and then finally lowered her arched back, her breasts rising and falling as she panted for breath.

"Godammit, Severus," she said, opening one eye to peer at him. "Your talents are limitless."

He gave a short laugh as he kissed his way up her stomach. "I'm glad you think so." He gently pulled her into a sitting position, the damp curls of her pubic hair pressed against his stomach.

They kissed, hands tangled in each other's already tossed hair. He moaned as she lowered her fingers to his still-bulging trousers. "Good lord, girl. Do you never do as you're told?" he asked, removing her hands from his groin yet again.

She pouted.

"It's *your* birthday," he said, giving her a playful slap on the behind. "And as you're shortly meeting your parents, I'm sure a shower is in order after that particular birthday gift."

Hermione laughed as he began to hand her various items of abandoned clothing. "At least I don't have to wash yellow potion out of my hair this time." She pulled him to her for another kiss. "Thank you, Severus."

"You're entirely welcome," he said with a glance at his watch, "but you're going to be late."

In the end she *was* late, but after a birthday gift like that, she didn't particularly care.

Two days later, Hermione was not enjoying the dinner party that had supposedly been thrown in her honour. She suspected Cordelia was hosting the lavish party for Narcissa Malfoy's benefit and that her name had merely been tacked on to the occasion in a hollow acknowledgement of her birthday. The only friends of hers to have been invited were Draco and Susan, and they'd declined the invitation as they were holidaying in Canada.

Hermione arrived slightly late...on Lancelot's insistence...to find that she was seated at the far end of the table from Severus, among the older Mills. On very many occasions, Severus had stopped Cordelia from sitting Hermione in the vicinity of her tedious old aunts, but either he had made no effort tonight or Cordelia had thwarted his attempts. He flashed her an apologetic glance after she'd sat down, so she expected the latter was the case.

Cordelia was very much in her element, seated next to Severus and opposite Lucius Malfoy. She'd started stroking Severus's forearm before the first course had even been served, and her constant tinkling laugh at everything either he or Lucius said grated on Hermione's nerves all through the meal.

When Aunt Jemima leaned forward and croaked, "Isn't it wonderful to see Severus and Cordelia so very much in love?" Hermione was gripped by an insane urge to rise to her feet and yell the truth to the entire room.

That, more so than Cordelia's infuriating pawing at her husband, was what annoyed her most: the fact that nobody, with the exception of Lance, could know about them.

Oh, Cordelia quite obviously had her suspicions...her triumphant glances in Hermione's direction were evidence of that much...but nobody else suspected what she felt for Severus Snape and what he felt for her in return. She was just poor young Hermione, deserted wife.

Feeling enormously sorry for herself, she allowed her gaze to fall on Severus. She remembered the night they had attended Pomona Sprout's retirement party in Hogwarts. He had looked so very dashing that night, far more distinguished than any of the other guests, and even though they were in a room of some forty guests, many of them well-groomed aristocrats like Lucius Malfoy, Severus still stood out from the crowd.

He did not look in her direction even once during dinner, and Hermione began to feel a dull ache in her chest, a longing for something from him, some little sign that she was on his mind and that he wanted her more than the mature, well-dressed women by whom he was surrounded. But as the dessert dishes were cleared away and the coffee was served, her annoyance at Cordelia disappeared and was replaced by jealousy and disbelief. The cause of these new emotions was Hestia Jones, or rather, Severus's attentions to Hestia Jones, who was seated on his right.

Hermione had read, about two months previously, that upon reaching her fiftieth birthday, Hestia had divorced her wealthy husband as she as was no longer subject to the Marriage Law. There had been rumours of an affair with Kingsley Shacklebolt, himself recently divorced, but Hestia's attire tonight suggested she was still very much a woman on the prowl.

From across the room, Hermione watched her. She had never before seen Hestia look so young or so attractive. The robes she wore were almost indecently low-cut, and Hermione suddenly regretted her decision to dress so demurely in an effort to divert attention away from her and Severus.

She eyed Severus's wine glass, which had been refilled numerous times, and she could tell by the open expression on his face that he was in one of his more conversational humours. She frowned as he leaned closer to Hestia, who whispered something in his ear, and her frown deepened as he responded to Hestia's comment with a knowing smirk.

As Hermione tore her gaze away from Severus, she made eye contact with Cordelia, and she knew by her mother-in-law's smug expression that she'd done this on purpose: Cordelia had seated Hestia next to Severus in the hope that it would anger her. Hermione cast her gaze downwards, determined not to look at them again. She had absolutely no intention of letting Cordelia see her so upset.

"Are you all right, lassie?" Lance asked from across the table.

Hermione made a feeble attempt at a smile. "I'm fine, thank you, Lance. Just a little bit tired, that's all."

Lance glanced meaningfully down the table and then lowered his voice. "It would seem there are games being played tonight, young Hermione. I'd remain above such things, if I were you. Our mutual friend might be clever, but he's often a blind fool where the manoeuvres of his wife are concerned."

"I'll try to bear that in mind," Hermione muttered, glad he'd confirmed she wasn't just being paranoid.

But as the meal came to an end and many of the guests rose to retire to the drawing room, Severus and Hestia remained where they were, apparently content to continue flirting with one another. After another hour of engaging in meaningless small talk with Cordelia's aged aunts and people from the Ministry of Magic that she barely even knew, Hermione had had quite enough. And then, as she watched, Severus lifted Hestia's hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles.

Ignoring Lance's warning glance, Hermione rose from her seat and made her way to the far end of the table, aware that Cordelia's gaze was upon her.

Severus could see Hermione approach in his peripheral vision, and with a growing feeling of panic, he raised his gaze to hers, silently pleading with her not to cause a scene.

"Excuse me," she said, gracing Hestia with a brittle smile. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Severus, but I haven't spoken to you since Thursday and something came up while I was visiting clients in Vertic Alley yesterday. I wonder if I might have a quick word?"

"Certainly," he replied coldly, casting Hestia an apologetic glance. He pushed back his chair and followed Hermione to the bar at the other side of the room, where he prepared them both a drink in order to hide his annoyance.

Hermione discreetly cast Muffliato so they could not be overheard.

"What is the meaning of this?" Severus hissed.

"What is the meaning of *this*?" she countered, irate. "Severus, are you actually trying to hurt me or are you just pissed out of your brain?"

"Excuse me?" he spat, furious.

"Are you deliberately trying to hurt my feelings? Because if so, I've no idea what I've done to deserve it." She gave him a false smile, conscious of the fact that Cordelia was still watching them from across the room.

"And what, exactly, have I done to hurt you?" he asked, black eyes flashing with anger.

"You've spent the entire evening flirting outrageously with Hestia Jones who, it would appear, has recently become single and has decided to bare her breasts to the entire room."

He gave her a smirk. "Do I detect a hint of jealousy?"

"Yes, you do. Can you blame me?"

He was angry that she'd cornered him like this, but even so, before his next sentence had left his mouth, he knew he should not say it. "I believe I'm well within my rights to flirt with other women, my dear, because I don't remember ever agreeing that you and I had embarked on a mutually exclusive relationship."

Hermione felt as though she had been slapped across the face. After staring at him for a moment, she clenched her jaw and gave him a wounded look. "Goodbye, Severus," she said, before turning on her heel and fleeing the room. She couldn't help but notice the satisfied smile on Cordelia's face as she went.

Severus watched her go, a sinking feeling in his chest, knowing he had injured her terribly. With a sigh, he crossed the room and sat next to Lucius Malfoy, the image of her shocked and hurt expression still on his mind.

Some ten minutes passed, and he presumed she must have gone home, as she did not reappear in the dining room. He became agitated, filled with regret at what he'd said and unable to concentrate on his conversation with Lucius. Lance eventually hobbled towards him on his ebony cane, an unmistakable expression of fury on his normally placid face.

"You!" he snarled, pointing his cane at Severus and then at the door. "Outside, now!"

Severus raised an indignant eyebrow, and Lucius chuckled as Lance shuffled away from them.

"Quite the character, old Lancelot," Lucius drawled.

"Yes," Severus agreed, rising from his seat. "Quite the character." He followed the old man out through the door and into the hallway.

"What the hell do you think you are playing at, you fool?" Lance said, poking him in the chest with one bony finger.

"What on earth is the matter, Lance?"

"I saw her face, boy. You've said something to upset Hermione, as if your pandering to your wife's silly games wasn't bad enough!" He poked Severus in the chest again.

"What are you talking about?" Severus said, his anger rising. He had never seen Lance like this before.

"You let that idiotic niece of mine paw at you all evening, and then you fall into her little trap and spend the night carrying on with that dreadful Hestia woman. It upset Hermione, and then, when she was talking to you, you said something awful, didn't you?" he asked, prodding Severus again.

"Will you *please* stop poking me in the chest, Lancelot? I admit that I made an unkind remark to the girl, but I'll apologise when next I see her. Now, would you please calm down and allow me to return to our guests?"

Lance shook his head. "Have you any idea how lucky you are? Have you any idea at all what is staring you in the face? That girl is worth her weight in gold, and you, my boy, are going to lose her if you don't put her before Cordelia, and appearances, and Hestia bloody Jones, and everything else that is not important. What did you say to her?"

"That's none of your business," Severus spat.

Lance glared at him. "If you were any sort of man at all you would cross that square and apologise to her before it's too late."

"I can't just leave! I'll apologise to her tomorrow. I'll even send her a note tonight if that will make you happy."

"It's not my happiness that's on the line here, Severus Snape. How do you know she isn't packing her bags as we speak? If you lose her tonight, it will be entirely your own stubborn fault." He lifted his hand and poked him once more for good effect.

Severus opened his mouth to reply, but hesitated, finally realising he might have ruined everything.

"Stop worrying about Cordelia and what the rest of those hypocrites in there think," Lance said, gesturing to the dining room. "Go to her. I'll think of some excuse to cover your absence."

He limped back to the dining room, turning to Severus once more. "Go!" he said, pointing to the door.

They looked at one another, and then Severus turned and strode to the front door, his black robes billowing behind him.

He slammed the door behind him, no longer really caring what Cordelia might think. When he reached the house across the square he let himself in, his heart hammering at the thought that she might not be there, that he might be too late. Shame overcame him at the memory of what he'd said to her. He hadn't meant it; he had no idea what had made him say such a despicable thing.

He quickly crossed to the stairs and proceeded to the basement, and he closed his eyes in relief as he heard noises coming from behind her bedroom door. He tried the knob, but it was locked. Leaning his head against the door, he realised with a pang that Lance was right: the sounds coming from within were of clothes being removed from hangers. She was packing her bags.

"Hermione?" he said urgently.

"Leave me alone, Severus," she said, her voice quivering. "I've nothing to say to you."

"Please, Hermione. Let me in."

"No!" she snapped. "I want nothing more to do with you."

"I'm sorry. I am truly sorry. I didn't mean what I said," he pleaded.

"What's said is said."

No noise came from within for a second or two, and he knew a moment of panic, wondering if she had Apparated upstairs and left quietly through the front door. His shoulders sagged with relief when he heard drawers being pulled open.

"Hermione, I'm begging you: Please don't do this. I cannot excuse what I've done; I can only apologise and ask for your forgiveness."

"Well, you don't have it!" she shouted. "You can't just behave as you did tonight, say what you said, and then expect me to forgive you at the drop of a hat."

He closed his eyes and recalled the night he had threatened to sleep at the entrance of Gryffindor Tower unless Lily came to speak with him. This all seemed sickeningly familiar.

"I'm sorry for the way I behaved at the dinner party, and I apologise profusely for the things I said. It was completely uncalled for, and I did not mean it in the least."

"Why would you say it if you didn't mean it?" she said. He could tell she was close to tears. "How could such a thing just slip out if it's not truly how you feel?"

"Hermione, I'm unpleasant man; I have always been an unpleasant man. I do not mean to excuse myself in any way, but when I'm angry or threatened I'm likely to say hurtful things." He sighed deeply, not knowing how to convince her. He could hear her snapping her trunk closed. "Please don't go. I've no idea what I would do without you."

Hermione stopped, leaning on top of her trunk. She closed her eyes; she had no idea what she would do without him, either. She turned and sat on the edge of her bed and put her head in her hands. Should she give him a chance? Did he even deserve another chance after such a deeply wounding remark? She picked up her wand and pointed it at the door.

"It's open," she murmured, putting her head in her hands once more.

He opened the door and slowly crossed the room to kneel in front of her. He reached forward to take her hands.

"Stop," she whispered, lowering her hands. "Don't touch me." She knew if he touched her, if he took her in his arms, she would crumble, succumb to tears and forgive him anything, and she had no intention of making it that easy for him.

He retracted his hands. "I'm sorry, Hermione," he whispered.

She looked into his eyes, the windows to his soul that were so often unreadable. But tonight the shutters were open, and she could see he was sorry. "Severus, how can I possibly trust you after what you said? How can I carry on as normal? I don't ask for very much; I know there's only so much either of us can offer, given the circumstances. You've implied I'm nothing more than a convenient shag, and I cannot be a part of this if there's a chance you have feelings for somebody else."

"How can you even suggest I might have feelings for Hestia Jones?"

"What about Lily Evans, Severus? Do you still have feelings for her?" He had said that Lily would never be on the agenda, but she had to know that she was something more than just an easy option.

He sighed and sat back on his heels, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Hermione, I have always had recurrent dreams. Now, I have nightmares about Albus, but before Voldemort was defeated, I dreamt nightly of Lily. It would begin in the playground where first we met, and the dream would end each night with her dying by my wand. But somewhere along the line, somewhere in between being attacked by Nagini and waking in St. Mungo's, Lily Evans stopped holding me hostage. I stopped having the dreams. I stopped seeing her face everywhere I looked. I stopped worshipping the memory of a dead woman and made the decision to live a life instead. You've seen my Patronus: you know it's no longer a doe. I assure you: I harbour no feelings for her."

She looked at him, surprised he'd been so honest. "Why couldn't you have discussed this with me sooner, Severus? Why do you have to wait until my trunk is packed to tell me this?"

He shrugged. "It's partly habit. I'm not comfortable speaking of such things, Hermione. I don't believe I'm entirely unique among my gender in that regard."

She looked away from him, still seething. Lily was one thing. Hestia was another. "Why did you behave that way tonight? Did you try to make me jealous on purpose?"

"No, I did not." He rubbed his forehead. "I've no excuse for the way I behaved. It was infantile. I can count on one hand the number of times I've been flirted with in the course of my life, so it is a rather novel concept. I was flattered; I responded."

"That's exactly it!" she cried, her brow creased. "How can I possibly trust you? If you *responded*, to Hestia Jones, how can I trust you won't do the same to the next woman who fancies a shot at you?"

He closed his eyes. He had clearly said the wrong thing. "I honestly believed it was harmless. I would not have behaved in such a manner if I'd thought it would injure you like this."

She stood up and crossed to her trunk, ignoring the alarm in his eyes. "What am I doing with my life?" she asked the room at large. "Padma said I was jumping from the frying pan into the fire, and she was right."

He rose and stood before her, aching to touch her. "All I can do is ask you to give me another chance. Please."

She folded her arms across her chest, glaring at him. "I would never, ever have embarked on this if I didn't think it was a mutually exclusive relationship, Severus. I might technically be married to another man, but you are my only lover, and I cannot continue after the remark you made tonight."

He looked distraught. "I did not mean it, Hermione. *Of course* this is a mutually exclusive relationship. I've no idea what possessed me to make such a cutting statement. I don't deserve you. I've no idea why a girl like you would want anything to do with me, but I'm grateful that you do." He took her gently by the arms. "I. Am. Sorry," he whispered. "Please, Hermione. Don't leave me."

Tears poured down her cheeks. "How could you say something like that, Severus, after what you did on my birthday? How is that the same man? I don't know if I'll ever understand you."

He pulled her tenderly against his chest and wrapped his arms around her, letting her sob onto his black coat. "I'm not sure I'll ever understand myself," he muttered into her hair. After a moment, he pulled away from her. "Can you forgive me?"

She looked at him for a long moment through her tears. "Do I have your word that this is a mutually exclusive relationship?"

"The most mutually exclusive relationship there ever was," he whispered.

"Then yes, I forgive you."

He sagged with relief and kissed her on the forehead. "Thank you, Hermione. It's more than I deserve."

"I seem to have made a mess of your coat," she said, pointing to his chest.

He looked down. "I think the state of my coat is quite far down my list of priorities at the moment." He took her by the hand and pulled her towards the bed. "Come," he said, sitting against the headboard and drawing her up against his chest. They lay in silence for a while, and he stroked her hair, thankful that history had not repeated itself. She had found it in her heart to forgive him where Lily Evans had not.

Sometime later, Hermione said, "If I wasn't around, would you fancy Hestia?"

He snorted. "Definitely not." He glanced down his nose over her shoulder. "You have far nicer breasts than she does."

Hermione chuckled. "Can I ask you a question?"

Severus grunted. "The absence of my permission has never yet stopped you."

"You said you'd had two lovers since you married Cordelia. Who were they?"

He frowned. "Nobody you know."

She sat up. "Who?"

"One was a one-night-stand as it is generally termed: A woman I met while I was trying to drum up some business in South Africa. The other was a client for a while, and we saw one another for about three months. That was three years ago."

"And who was she?" Hermione asked, determined to find out.

He sighed. "A French woman."

She raised an intrigued eyebrow. "What was her name?"

"Sophie Verrier," he admitted.

Hermione looked disappointed. "No, I don't know her." She glanced at her watch. "I suppose you should go back before Cordelia sends out a search party."

"I've no intention of leaving you tonight," he whispered, kissing her on the head.

She looked up at him in amazement. "You're going to stay?"

He nodded. "If I'm welcome."

"Of course you're welcome," she said. "But won't Cordelia cause a scene tomorrow?"

"Perhaps," he replied. "But perhaps it will be worth it." He wrapped a strand of her hair around his finger and gave her a flirtatious smirk.

If she had needed any further evidence to show that he was sorry, Hermione knew that this was surely it. "You don't mind what they think?"

He shook his head. "I find I'm caring less with every passing week."

"I was dreading not seeing you this weekend."

"As was I," he said, leaning forward to kiss her.

They rose early the next morning, and Severus left for his own house as soon as it had grown bright. Anxious about what would come of their flight from the party the night before, Hermione decided to go for a stroll in Hyde Park. She walked for almost two hours, until the sky grew overcast and a light drizzle began to fall. When she returned home, she made for the kitchen and brewed a cup of tea. Taking her steaming mug with her, she climbed the stairs again, intending to curl up in the sitting room with a good book for the afternoon.

Her book in one hand and her tea in the other, she pressed her back to the door and pushed it open. As she turned to enter the room, movement in her peripheral vision made her gasp.

A tall, dark figure was ensconced in her favourite armchair, his long legs stretched out before him.

"Hello, Hermione," he said with a smirk.

She met his dark blue eyes in disbelief.

Theo was back.

A/N: Naughty author, leaving you with an evil cliffy. Don't shoot, please. But if you beg nicely, I'll have the next chapter up asap. :) LB x

Eternity

Chapter 27 of 34

Theo and Hermione debate their future.

A/N: Ladies, ladies (or gents, if there happen to be any reading). You truly are an awesome bunch of gals. Your amazing reviews for the last chapter made my

week, and you begged so very prettily that I rather thought you deserved this chapter a day early.

A shout out to the lovely BrenaMarie, who recommended Denial on the Petulant Poetess FB page last week. Thank you, BrenaMarie!

And now ... what does Theo have to say for himself???

LB x

He who binds himself to a joy

Does the wingèd life destroy

But he who kisses the joy as it flies

Lives in eternity's sun rise.

- William Blake, *Eternity*

Hermione gaped in disbelief at her husband across the sitting room. She had been expecting his return for many weeks now, but it was still something of a shock to find him in what she had begun to see as *her* house.

She felt many things as she stared at Theo: anger for everything he had put her through; disgust at the cowardly manner in which he had fled and the devious way in which he had returned; sadness that it had all gone so badly wrong for them. Struggling to remain calm, she crossed the room and placed her mug of tea and her book on the mantelpiece before she let them fall.

"Did you miss me?" Theo asked with a smug smile.

She whirled to face him, suddenly overcome with rage. "You're the most cowardly, underhand, spineless wanker I've ever met in my life," she spat. "So no, I did not miss you."

He chuckled maddeningly. "Fair enough."

She couldn't help herself: she whipped her wand from the pocket of her jeans and cords flew from the tip of her wand, binding Theo where he sat.

He looked down at the ropes around his chest, shocked. "Can't we behave like adults?"

"You hardly behaved like an adult the day you ran away." Hermione took the armchair opposite him, her hands shaking with a mixture of anger and shock. It suddenly occurred to her that he could have been in the house for hours; he could have heard her and Severus in the bedroom, or maybe he'd watched them part at the front door. Panic and guilt joined her already warring emotions. "You hardly behaved like an adult the day you ran away."

"We are not going to resolve anything if I'm tied up," Theo said, twisting in the chair.

She pointed her wand at his face. "I think a few ropes are the least of your problems, Theodore Nott."

Barely able to move his arms, he held up his hands. "Okay, okay. Calm down. I behaved badly. I can't deny it. Would you like an apology?"

She ignored his question and lowered her wand. "How long have you been here?"

"Almost an hour. You weren't here when I arrived." His smirk returned. "Why? Afraid I might have walked in on you and your lover?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. Did he know? She flicked her wand and the ropes disappeared.

Theo sighed and rubbed his arms. He held up his ring finger. "I've had enough of this stupid ring, and seeing as it burned for almost an hour last night and for even longer this morning, I decided it was time we reversed our wedding vows."

Hermione glared at him, relieved he hadn't asked the identity of her lover. "So you can dish it out, but you can't take it, Theo? You weren't one bit concerned when you made *my* ring burn, but as soon as the roles are reversed, you want out. You're such a selfish bastard." To her surprise, he actually blushed.

"I knew we'd feel it if either of us was unfaithful, but I'd no idea it would be so painful. I might have been more considerate if I'd known," he said. "I didn't ~~mean~~ *mean* to cause you so much pain."

Hermione sat back in her armchair and sighed. "Your timing was pretty poor," she said, the anger beginning to fade. "The first time my ring burned was in the middle of Lance's birthday party. An audience of fifty people wasn't ideal."

Theo looked horrified. "My mother knew?"

Hermione nodded. "It was all kept fairly discreet, thanks to Lance's quick thinking. But yes, she knew."

He shrugged. "Well, it would be rather hypocritical of her to criticise *my* behaviour."

"You know about Everard?" Hermione asked.

Theo looked surprised. "Yes. *You* know about Everard?"

"I spotted them together in Scotland while I was having dinner with a client," she explained.

"A client? Since when does the Department of Mysteries have clients?" he asked, confused.

Hermione had forgotten how little Theo knew of her current situation. "I no longer work for the Ministry of Magic: I was fired."

"Fired?" he repeated. "*You*?"

"Yes, me," she said, angry again. "Remember when you abandoned me, Theo? Well, I was rather upset. *You* might not have cared about being in limbo, but I did. I was angry, upset, ashamed; I curled up into a ball of misery and didn't want to face the world. I didn't turn up at work for two weeks, so they presented me with my dismissal."

"But things had been going so badly between us...I didn't think you would've cared, particularly," he said.

"I didn't care about *you*; I cared about being a deserted wife. My parents are Muggles. The wizarding world sided with me and believed you were in the wrong, but my

parents were terribly upset and would have preferred me to have a clean-cut divorce."

"Why?"

"So that I wasn't still shackled to you; so that I could have another relationship if I wanted," she explained.

Theo gave a wry laugh. "Well, it certainly hasn't stopped you having another relationship. Or has it been more than one?"

"How dare you?" she snarled. "Maybe you've been hopping into bed with every tramp that comes your way, Theo, but there's only been one man for me."

He raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "And that would be?"

"And that would be absolutely none of your business."

"Not my business? You're still my wife, Hermione."

She looked at him in disbelief. "You gave up all your marital rights the day you walked out that door. I owe you absolutely nothing, and my private life is none of your business."

They glared at one another in silence for a moment until Hermione said, "Why did you leave like that, Theo? Why did you sneak away in the middle of the night?"

Theo shrugged. "I'd had enough; I wanted out."

"Why didn't you ask me for a divorce?"

He sighed. "It seemed like such a complication. I just wanted to get out of here; I honestly didn't think you'd want a divorce. I thought, if I asked for one, you might try to make me stay, that you'd start banging on about wanting a baby again."

Hermione's cheeks grew warm. She knew she was not entirely blameless when it came to the disintegration of their marriage. "So you just ran away? Like a coward?"

"Yes, I just ran away. I don't see why it was so wrong."

"It was wrong. I'm not saying that you were the only one to blame for our shambles of a marriage, and perhaps it was time for us to part. But it was the way you did it, Theo."

"You and I come from very different worlds, Hermione. Don't you realise there are marriages of convenience all around us, and that the people in those marriages pursue their pleasures elsewhere?"

"Yes, I do realise that," she said, "but you were wrong to just abandon me. Even your family agrees. You should either have stayed and had an affair, or have divorced me before you left. Your mother was horrified at what you did."

Theo rolled his eyes. "Yes, I got a few Howlers from her. Look, maybe I was wrong, and I'm sorry I got you fired, Hermione, but it gave us some space ... And if we'd divorced, we would have had to remarry by now, thanks to the stupid Marriage Act."

She watched Theodore in silence for a moment. She knew what she wanted of him, and the best way of getting it was by remaining calm. "Why did you marry me, Theo?"

"So that I had the option of travelling, or coming home to Britain if I wanted," he admitted.

"So I was nothing more than a passport?" she asked sadly.

He grunted. "Look, when I graduated from university, I knew I had to leave the country or abide by the law and marry. I couldn't decide, and I talked the subject over with Severus on many occasions. Mum wanted me to marry and have the choice of returning home when I wanted, but Severus knew that any future bride I might have would be unlikely to want to travel for very long. He had almost talked me round, and I was on the verge of moving to Berlin. But then ..."

"And then?"

"I noticed you," he said simply. "I wouldn't have considered marrying any of the other girls, but you just ... caught my eye. I thought you were pretty, clever ... I thought there was a chance we'd be suited."

"I thought so, too," Hermione said. "But I suppose we weren't meant to be. It's strange how it's worked out for everyone. Draco and Susan; Pansy and Michael ... They seem so happy, yet I would never have put them all together. Demelza and Dennis are divorced; Neville and Hannah are separated; Blaise is cheating on Katie. And then there's us."

They looked at one another for a long moment. "How did it get so bad, so fast?" Theo asked, frowning.

Hermione shrugged. "Let's not re-examine all the old issues. We just wanted very different things from life; I don't think either of us is to blame. The biggest mistake we made was these ridiculous rings," she said, twisting her wedding band on her finger. "What on earth made you suggest it, Theo?"

He shook his head. "I don't really know. Some rash impulse to convince both of us that I was really willing to commit, I suppose."

Now that she had recovered from the shock of his return, she took a minute to look him over. He looked happier, somehow, than he had the last time she'd seen him. He looked less haggard, less restless. "What have you been up to since you left? Apart from the obvious," she added, gesturing to his ring.

"The usual," Theo said vaguely. "Travelling, hanging out with Hans. I've bought an apartment in Berlin, so I've been spending a lot of time there these past few weeks."

Hermione grimaced at the mention of Hans.

Theo smiled. "Hans had no sympathy for me when my ring burned," he said. "He thought you deserved to get your own back. It was his suggestion that I return and sort this out. Anyway, what about you? I wasn't sure if you'd still be living here. What did you do after you lost your job?"

She willed her expression to remain neutral. "I've been working for Severus...in his Potions business. He was kind enough to offer me the job after you left, seeing as I was qualified to master's level."

Theo looked surprised. "That must be fun," he said sarcastically. "I never got the impression you particularly liked one another."

Hermione studied her fingernails. "He's not so bad once you get to know him, and the job is fascinating ... I really enjoy it. The money's good, too."

"Rather you than me. His bark has always been worse than his bite, but I don't think I'd like to spend all day in a laboratory with him."

Changing the subject, she said, "So what do we do now, Theo? Will you agree to a divorce?"

He looked at her for a moment and then nodded. "Yes. Will you?"

She met his gaze, knowing she would have to abide by the Marriage Law and remarry in six months if they divorced. If she was single again it would complicate her relationship with Severus, but she wanted to be free of her disastrous marriage. "Yes. I'll agree to a divorce and a magical reversal of the vows if we can work out the details."

Theo gave a small sigh of relief. "I'm glad to hear it."

"Have you met someone you'd like to be with?"

He shook his head. "Not particularly, but I'd prefer to be free. Germany hasn't opted for the Marriage Act, and I don't think they will." He looked at her curiously. "If you're determined to stay in Britain, a divorce will mean you have to marry again. This bloke of yours...will you marry him?"

Hermione avoided his gaze and shook her head. "No, I can't marry him."

"He's a Muggle-born?" Theo asked and then smirked. "Or is he already married?"

She shrugged. "It's complicated, and I would rather not discuss it."

He sat forward. "Well, then. To business. I've spent the last few weeks researching British wizarding Marriage Law, and you're entitled to half of everything I own."

"No. I don't want half of everything. The details are negotiable as long as we both agree to them, and there's very little I want. I'm certainly not interested in half your fortune."

"There has to be a settlement of some sort. What *do* you want?"

She looked around the room. She had come to regard this house as home. Lance's sporadic and often hilarious company was very welcome, and Moe had become a friend and confidante. Hermione had no desire to leave, and she couldn't stand the thought of living further away from Severus. "I want this house. That is, the half of it that's yours. Nothing else."

Theo frowned. "This house? No, I can't agree to that. This is my only property in London. Where am I meant to stay when I visit?"

She glared at him. "I don't give a damn where you stay. Stay in a bloody hotel for all I care. I don't think I'm asking too much of you, Theo: You own a property in Berlin; I know you still own that house in Cambridge...that's hardly far from London. Besides, I know you can afford to buy another property in London, and Cordelia owns another house in Grosvenor Square. You've lots of places to stay."

"You can continue to live here, and half of my share of the property will be yours, but that's all you're entitled to," he said with a scowl.

"Theo," she said, her heart thumping with anger now, "I'm not asking for half of anything else. I want to live here; I want the bottom stories of the house to be mine and mine alone. I can demand half of your Berlin property and half of your money if I want, but I'm willing to waive those rights if you sign over your share of this property to me."

He shook his head. "No."

She rose from her chair. "Theo, I want to continue living here. That's all I'm asking."

"I've already said you can continue living here," he said.

"Yes, but I don't want you wandering in every couple of months if the notion takes you. Would you like it if I could just pop into your apartment in Berlin whenever I feel like it?" she asked, her voice rising.

"Be reasonable, Hermione! Why should I give you the whole fucking house?"

"Why?" Hermione shouted in disbelief. "Because you owe me, you stupid sod. How dare you ask *me* to be reasonable?" The now cold mug of tea on the mantelpiece shattered, and she looked at it in surprise. It had been a long time since she'd been angry enough to let her magic escape her.

Theo rose and stood facing her, his hands on his hips. "I thought we'd agreed that the failure of our marriage wasn't just my fault?"

"It wasn't just your fault, Theo, but you're the one who walked out, and this is the only concession for which I'm asking."

They stared at each other, both of them fuming.

"No," he said stubbornly. "I won't agree to it."

"Then I won't grant you a divorce," Hermione said through clenched teeth.

They glared at one another, and then, simultaneously, they drew their wands. But before either of them could act, the door was flung open and Lance hobbled in on his cane.

"What's the meaning of this racket? I heard something smashing! What ..." His words died in his throat as he took in the sight of his great nephew. "You!" he cried, shuffling over to Theodore.

Theo lowered his wand. "Hello, Uncle Lance."

Lance brought up his cane up and hit him on the arm. "You stupid boy!"

"Ow!" Theo said, cringing away from his irate uncle.

Lance hit him with the cane again. "You no-good, self-obsessed mummy's boy." He hit him once more.

"Stop hitting me, you crazy old man," Theo said, rubbing his arm. "What's gotten into you?"

Hermione grinned.

"What were you thinking, deserting your wife like that, you silly boy?" Lance asked, brandishing his cane.

"Lance, perhaps you could help us out," Hermione said. "Theo and I have decided we'd like a divorce, but we're struggling with the terms and conditions."

"You better give her everything she deserves," Lance said, narrowing his eyes at Theo. "I used to think you were an all right sort of lad, until you ran away like a lily-livered juvenile."

"There's only one thing I want, but Theo is reluctant to grant me that one favour. I'm glad you're here, Lance, because it would also require your approval," said Hermione.

Lance continued to glare at Theodore, but lowered his cane. "What have you asked of him, Hermione?"

"I want his half of this house and nothing more," she said. "I will comply with whatever your wishes are as to whom you eventually bequeath your share of the property, Lance."

Lance gave a snort. "Well, I've no intention of popping my clogs just yet, so we can cross that particular bridge when we come to it." He returned his scrutiny to Theo. "Why won't you give her the house, boy?"

"Where am I meant to stay if I wish to return to London?" he asked.

"Where do you stay when you visit Paris? Or Rome?" Lance asked.

Theo frowned. "With relatives or friends, or in a hotel."

Lance shrugged. "Well, that's what you'll do when you visit London. Your family live here, you moron. Stay with your mother; stay with Gawain; stay in the Dorchester or the Savoy. You're hardly short a few bob."

Hermione glanced at Theo: he didn't look pleased to find his uncle was siding with her.

"You and I have shared this property since I turned seventeen, Uncle Lance," Theo said sulkily. "Don't you care that I won't be around anymore?"

Lance rolled his eyes. "Stop playing the sentimental Nancy-boy, Theodore Nott. Have you ever stayed here for long? No! You take off around the world with that no-good cousin of yours, puffing the magic dragon, if you'll pardon the expression. Hermione, on the other hand, has been marvellous company for Moe and me. She works just across the road, too. Give her the house, Theo. You know I'll miss you, but it's the least you can do for her."

Theo crossed his arms and moved his furious glare from Lance to Hermione. Finally, he gave a disgruntled sigh. "Fine, she can have the bloody house."

Lance beamed. "That's more like it! Now, come here and give your old uncle a hug."

Shaking his head, Theo crossed the short space and hugged his uncle, rolling his eyes at Hermione over the tiny man's head.

Hermione smiled, feeling rather choked up at Lance's defence of her and delighted that she could continue to live in the house.

Lance stepped away from his nephew and thumped him in the arm with his cane again.

"Ouch! You insane old bat," Theo said. "What the hell was that for?"

"Never treat a good woman like that again!" Lance said, wagging a bony finger at Theo. "Now. When are you going to file for divorce?"

"Tomorrow morning, I guess," Hermione said, looking at Theo for confirmation. He nodded enthusiastically. "The Ministry of Magic opens at nine, and it should only take a few hours for the divorce to be granted. We'll probably both be free and single this time tomorrow."

Lance frowned at Hermione's left hand. "You've still got the problem of your wedding bands. The magical vows require powerful magical reversal, and there are precious few witches or wizards who are familiar with the appropriate incantations."

Both Hermione and Theo's faces fell.

"The rings were forged in Reykjavik," Theo said. "Do we have to go there to have them removed? Iceland is too far for Apparition."

Lance shook his head. "I don't believe so, and I think the solution may be closer than we think." He looked pointedly at Hermione. "I think we know someone who has some experience when it comes to Fidelity Vows...someone who has probably, in the past, done his research on exactly how to reverse the magic with which those rings are imbued."

Hermione gasped. "I think you may be right, Lance. Do you think he'll know the incantations?"

"I'm almost sure of it," Lance said, hobbling back to the door. "I would seek his aid if I were you." He gave Hermione a meaningful glance as he passed and then left the room.

Theo looked confused. "Who's he talking about?"

She paused and said, "Severus."

"Severus? Why would Severus know how to reverse the vows? He and my mother had a civil ceremony without any magical vows."

"I think he knew someone who took a vow of fidelity," she said, afraid of revealing too much. "Should we ask him to come over?" She knew Theo was unlikely to want to see his mother or Severus.

He rubbed his brow. "I suppose we'd better. Can you send him a message without letting my mother know I'm here? I'd rather this was all done and dusted before I see her."

Hermione nodded. She cast her Patronus and watched fondly as the silvery otter sprung through the window and disappeared from view. "Now, we wait."

She took a seat in her favourite armchair, and Theo stood by the fireplace.

"Haven't you been in contact at all with your mother, Theo?"

"I sent her a note to let her know I was fine after I left, but apart from that, no. I haven't seen her or spoken to her. I imagine I'll get quite a tongue-lashing from her when I see her ... Damaging the family honour and all that."

"I'm sure she'll forgive you. I don't think she was ever exactly fond of me."

He raised an eyebrow. "What makes you say that? I thought she quite liked you."

She shrugged. "Whether she likes me or not is immaterial, really. You're her only child, so I'm sure you'll be welcomed back with open arms."

Theo looked unconvinced. "Yes, well, Lance didn't seem too happy to see me."

Before Hermione could respond, they heard the creak of the front door. "Hermione?" Severus called.

"In the sitting room," she replied.

The door opened and Severus stepped into the room, his black robes billowing behind him. "Is something the matter? Your message ..." He stopped as soon as he laid eyes on Theo.

"You!" he snarled, pulling his wand from beneath his cloak and pointing it at his stepson.

Theo was flung across the opposite side of the room until he was flush against the wall, gasping for breath as if invisible hands held him by the neck. His fingers groped uselessly at his throat.

Hermione sprang from her chair as Severus strode across the floor, his dark eyes flashing with livid intent. "Severus, no!"

Severus stopped only inches from Theodore's face, his wand almost touching the younger man's nose. "Have you *any* idea how much anguish you caused her when you ran away like the coward you are?" he growled, his yellow teeth bared.

Hermione reached his side. "Severus, let him go!" she begged.

He ignored her. "Not that you care, but she cried for weeks when you left, you selfish bastard."

Theo was struggling to breathe, and Hermione's eyes filled with tears.

"Severus, please," she whispered, putting her hand on his forearm. "Don't do this on my account. You know we are both far happier apart than we ever were together."

Severus looked at her hand upon his arm and then met her gaze. Slowly, he lowered his wand, and Theo slumped against the wall, his hands on his knees, coughing and spluttering.

Shooting him a look of deepest loathing, Severus replaced his wand beneath his robes. "Tell me why I shouldn't hex him where he stands?" he asked, meeting Hermione's gaze once more.

"Because we both made a stupid mistake when we got married, Severus." She glanced at Theo, who had recovered and was regarding them curiously. "And if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here now; I wouldn't have a job that I love."

She looked back up at Severus and their gazes locked; she knew he understood that she meant they never would have gotten together if Theo had not left as he had. He stepped away from his stepson and crossed the room to lean against the mantelpiece.

Theo stood up straight and glared at Hermione. "Have you Confounded all the male members of my family?" he said, massaging his neck.

She smirked. "No, you've done that all by yourself."

"So what has brought you crawling back to London, Theo?" Severus drawled. "Missing mummy?"

Theo narrowed his eyes at his stepfather. "This has brought me back," he spat, holding up his ring finger.

"Aw," Severus said with mock sympathy. "Has Miss Granger been a naughty girl? Had a little revenge? Unless I'm very much mistaken, Theodore, you were the first one to, shall we say, go astray? Right in the middle of one of your mother's dinner parties, in fact."

"So I believe," Theo replied. "I mightn't have done it if I'd known how much pain I was causing."

"Your concern is touching," Severus said, his voice heavy with sarcasm. He looked at Hermione. "Why has my presence been requested?"

"We've agreed to a divorce," Hermione said, watching Severus's reaction. "But we also need our vows to be magically reversed."

"I see," Severus said, his expression remaining neutral.

"Lance said you might be able to help us," Theo added.

Severus arched an eyebrow. "Did he, indeed?"

"Is it true?" Hermione asked. "Do you know how to reverse the magic of the rings?"

He looked from Hermione to Theo. "It's not something I've ever attempted before, but yes, I believe I have an understanding of the process involved, and I'm familiar with the required incantations."

"Will you do it?" she asked.

He considered the question, running the tip of his finger along his lower lip. "If you wish it. At the very worst, I'll fail to reverse the vows; there should be no ill effects if something goes wrong."

Hermione and Theo both nodded.

"Let's give it a go," Theo said.

"Do you need time to research the method and the incantations, Severus?" Hermione asked.

He shook his head. "My recollection of the incantations is quite clear; I've no need to review them."

Hermione knew he must have learned the method by heart when he was at Hogwarts, with the intention of one day freeing his mother from the torture of her burning ring.

Severus withdrew his wand and stepped away from the fireplace. "The process is comprised of two components: First, the vows you made during the marriage ceremony must be revoked; second, the magic with which the rings are imbued must be reversed."

He beckoned to them to stand before him. "You faced one another when your vows were made, and in order to reverse them, you must stand facing away from each other, back to back."

They did as they were told and stood facing in opposite directions, their backs touching. After whispering a brief incantation that Hermione had never heard before, Severus reiterated each of the marriage vows they had taken and asked if they wished to reverse that particular promise, the tip of his wand glowing with blue light each time they retracted a vow. He came, at last, to the vow of fidelity.

"Hermione Granger Nott," he said. "You agreed to remain faithful to your husband, Theodore Nott, for as long as you both were wed. Do you wish to revoke and reverse this vow of fidelity?"

Hermione winced as her Goblin wrought ring grew suddenly hot. "Yes, I do," she said emphatically.

Severus placed the tip of his wand to her ring, and their gazes met before he turned to Theo. "Theodore Nott. You agreed to remain faithful to your wife, Hermione Granger Nott, for as long as you both were wed. Do you wish to revoke and reverse this vow of fidelity?"

Theo grunted, and Hermione knew his ring had begun to burn, too. "Yes, I do," Theo said through clenched teeth.

Severus pressed his glowing wand to Theo's ring, and both Hermione and Theo gasped as the burning increased.

"They're burning," Hermione said, alarmed.

"That is to be expected," Severus said. "They will burn until their magic is completely undone. I need you to turn and face me, but it is of vital significance that you do not make eye contact until I tell you it is advisable to do so."

They turned to face him, both of them frowning at their wedding bands.

"Hold your left hands out," Severus instructed, "but do not allow your hands to touch."

Hermione and Theo did as they were told, and Hermione watched in fascination as Severus placed his wand between their hands and began to chant rapidly in Latin, his voice so light and the words coming so quickly that it was almost like song. She watched his face, admiring the way his brow was furrowed in concentration, the way his black eyes reflected the blue light of his wand. The spell was a powerful one...she could tell that much from the level of magical effort he was putting into the task, and she looked on in awe as he emanated more magical strength than anyone she had ever seen.

The spell went on for many minutes, but eventually Severus tapped his wand first to Hermione's ring and then to Theo's. Hermione watched, stunned, as the burning sensation stopped and the Goblin wrought ring glowed with a bright, white light before disappearing completely from her finger.

"It's gone," she said, fascinated. "The ring's completely disappeared!" She held her hand out before her in amazement, wriggling her fingers.

"Mine too," Theo said with a smile. "Thank you, Severus."

Severus grunted in reply and stowed his wand within the folds of his cloak once more. He glared at his stepson. "I understand the reasons why you ended your marriage, Theo, but I'm gravely disappointed with the manner in which you chose to leave. It was both ungallant and unkind."

Theo bravely held his gaze. "We all make mistakes, Severus. I will not deny I've behaved badly, and I regret any distress I caused Hermione."

Hermione and Severus exchanged a glance. "Do you intend to seek a divorce in addition to having reversed your magical vows?" Severus asked.

"Yes," Theo replied. "We've agreed the terms and we intend to seek a divorce first thing tomorrow morning."

"The terms?" Severus asked.

"Theo has agreed to sign over his half of this property to me," Hermione explained. "I want nothing more."

"Neither of you will suffer any further from the Goblin wrought rings. Are you sure it's wise to divorce?" Severus asked, frowning. "Hermione's life, in particular, could be greatly complicated by the Marriage Act if she becomes single again."

"It's what I want, Severus," Hermione said. "I want to be free of this, and so does Theo. I'll deal with the legal consequences as they arise."

They regarded one another in silence, the dread of the upheaval this would cause in their relationship almost palpable.

"Very well," Severus said finally. "I will bid you both good day."

"I'll see you to the door," Hermione said.

Before he left the room, Severus turned to Theo. "I suggest you visit your mother before you leave the country, Theo. I suspect she has missed you, and I know she has been worried about you."

Theo nodded. "I'll speak to her tomorrow, after our divorce is official."

With a brief nod, Severus left the room, Hermione behind him. She closed the front door, and they stood on the pavement outside.

"You're certain this is what you want?" he asked. "Don't just grant him a divorce because he has asked for one, Hermione."

She shook her head. "I want to be free of this marriage, Severus. I don't want to be a part of the Mill family anymore." They looked at one another, and she longed to touch him. "I know, Severus. I know this will complicate things, but I want to be rid of him once and for all."

He inclined his head and stepped away from her. "It is your decision. I'll see you on Tuesday morning."

Hermione watched as he took another step away from her and Disapparated with a crack. Uttering a deep sigh, she opened the front door and returned to the sitting room.

"Well," she said, smiling nervously at Theo. "We're halfway there."

Theo was standing by the fireplace, a strange expression on his face.

"Is something the matter?" she asked. "Aren't you relieved to be free of the ring?"

He crossed his arms and frowned at her. "So," he said, his voice almost a whisper. "You've been shagging my mother's husband?"

In shock, Hermione reacted automatically: she slapped him soundly across the face. "How dare you say that?"

Theo gave a short laugh and raised his hand to his jaw. "What a homecoming: three physical attacks in the space of an hour." He gazed at her. "You deny you're seeing Severus?"

No-one had yet asked her outright like this, and even though her heart was hammering in panic, she didn't want to deny she was seeing Severus. Stalling, she asked, "Why would you say such a thing, Theo?"

"Do you think I'm stupid, Hermione? I saw the meaningful looks that passed between you ..."

"He was concerned about us, that's all," she insisted. "He's been kind to me since you left."

"I might not have noticed, but when you touched his arm and he looked at you, my ring began to tingle." He held up his now bare left hand. "It started to itch, the way it does just before it starts to burn, the moment your eyes met." He frowned at her again. "Something's going on between you and Severus. *He's* the man you can't marry."

Hermione looked at him, wide-eyed, lost for words. She had felt that same tingle on many occasions before her ring had burned.

"Do you deny it?" he asked.

"I've already told you that my private life is absolutely none of your business," she said. "And given the fact that your mother has been seeing another man for years, I'm sure Severus is free to see whomever he chooses."

Theo shot her a triumphant glance and bent to retrieve his travelling cloak from the arm of the nearest chair. "Don't worry, Hermione. I've no intention of ratting you in to my

mum. As you say, it's none of my business." He strode to the door.

"Where are you going?" she asked, alarmed.

"To visit Draco. I'll spend the night at my place in Cambridge, and I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"Nine o'clock?" she asked.

He nodded. "Nine o'clock. I'll meet you in the Atrium at the Ministry."

Hermione chewed her lip as he left the room and slammed the front door behind him. She lowered herself into the closest armchair, her knees suddenly weak. It had been quite a morning.

The following afternoon, she stood in the bright, golden light of the Ministry of Magic Atrium. Gone was the forbidding sculpture of the throned witch and wizard that had filled the massive space during Voldemort's reign: the Fountain of Magical Brethren had been rebuilt.

Hermione and Theo stopped at the first fireplace they came to.

Hermione faced her former husband, her newly drafted divorce papers clasped in one hand. She extended the other. "Goodbye, Theo," she said with a small smile.

He shook her hand and returned her smile. "Goodbye, Hermione. I'm sorry for ... well ... everything, I suppose."

She shrugged. "I'm sorry, too." She searched inside her robes and extracted her solitaire engagement ring. "Here...you should take this," she said, holding the sparkling ring out to him.

"No!" he insisted, holding up his hands. "I bought it for you; you should keep it."

She shook her head. "I don't want it. I'd prefer if you took it back."

He reluctantly took the ring from her and put it in the pocket of his jeans. An awkward silence fell between them. They eventually spoke simultaneously.

"I guess I should ..."

"I better go and ..."

Hermione giggled, and Theo grinned. "I'm going to Floo straight to Mum's house before I head back to Berlin," Theo said. "It's about time I let her have a good rant at me."

She nodded. "I'm going to go home. My parents are probably both at work: I'll tell them later tonight. How do you think Cordelia will take it?"

"I think she'll be pleased we sorted it all out," he said. "And don't worry, I won't mention anything about ... you know ... you and Severus."

She knew she should deny it, insist there was nothing going on between them, but she simply hadn't the heart, and for some reason she couldn't explain, she knew Theo wouldn't say anything to Cordelia. "Thank you, Theo. I'd appreciate that."

They shook hands again, and she turned to approach the next vacant fireplace.

"Hermione?" he asked before she could walk away.

She turned to him once more.

"Do you love him?"

She opened her mouth to deny it, to tell him to mind his own business, but she was emotionally drained, and her shoulders suddenly sagged. "Yes, Theo. I love him." She laughed at her own stupidity and shook her mop of brown curls. "Tragic, isn't it?"

He laughed. "Brave, I'd call it. He's a difficult man. But a good one, I suppose." He took a handful of Floo Powder from the pot next to the fireplace. "Good luck, Hermione," he said and disappeared in a rush of green flames.

She gazed at the spot where he had vanished, hoping she hadn't just made an incredibly foolish mistake. With a troubled smile, she strolled to the next fireplace, feeling simultaneously freer and entirely more trapped than she ever had in her entire life.

On Tuesday morning she pushed open the front door of Severus and Cordelia's house, hoping her former mother-in-law would not be inside. The hallway was empty, and she made her way down the stairs to the laboratory.

She felt the same rush of pleasure she always did when she found Severus already at his bench, his black-clothed back to the door, steam issuing from his cauldron. Her back against the door, she stood there for a moment, watching him, wondering what changes the next six months would bring to her already complicated life.

"Good morning," he said without turning to face her.

She left the door and walked to her workbench. "Good morning, Severus."

He cast a Stasis Charm on his potion and turned to face her. Their gazes locked, and they regarded one another for a very long moment in silent acknowledgement of the fact that things had changed irrevocably.

"So," he said finally. "You are officially Miss Granger once again."

She gave him a crooked smile. "Yes, the bane of your classroom."

He continued to look at her. "I don't know whether congratulations or commiserations are in order."

Hermione sighed. "Severus, I know this complicates everything, but can we just continue as we were for the moment? The law allows me six months; I'll think this through another day."

He gave her a small nod and returned to his work. "As you wish," he said.

She took her wand from beneath her robes and began to Summon jars and phials from the shelves, imagining she could hear the ticking of some giant, phantom clock.

She had six months.

The countdown had begun.

A Mind at Peace

Chapter 28 of 34

Neville pays Hermione a visit.

1

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
This mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to the gaudy day denies.

2

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling place.

3

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!

- Lord Byron, *She Walks in Beauty*

After a long day of meeting with his clients, Severus pushed open the door of the house he called home. Before he crossed the threshold, he heard a heated discussion underway in the drawing room. Standing still, he could tell that one voice belonged to his wife, the other to her son.

Two weeks had passed since Theo and Hermione had divorced, and, alarmed by the return of his stepson after only a fortnight, Severus closed the door silently behind him, straining to hear the conversation in the nearby room.

Hermione had told him that Theo had guessed there was something between them and that she had not, in the end, denied it. He knew Theo had promised not to reveal their relationship to his mother, but this sudden return was cause for concern.

Inching closer to the drawing room door, he cast an amplification spell and uttered a small sigh of relief: their argument was about the fact that Theo had granted Hermione full ownership of his property across the square. Cordelia did not sound pleased.

Crossing the hallway, he climbed the stairs to his study, casting a wistful glance at the kitchen as he went. He was ravenous, but for now a strong drink would have to suffice. A Firewhisky, perhaps. He might need it. He had no doubt that Cordelia would seek an audience with him before the evening was through.

Severus opened the top two buttons of his frock coat and gently massaged his throbbing neck. The damp of October always made his wounds ache, and this year was no exception. Pouring himself a measure of Firewhisky, he downed it in one, his eyes smarting as the burning liquid set his throat aflame. Having refilled his glass, he sat behind his desk, eyeing the paperwork that required his attention with a grunt. There was little point hoping to get through it all tonight.

He stared into the depths of the amber liquid and allowed the image of Hermione's face to float to the forefront of his mind as it so often seemed to do these days. He had been only too glad to rid her of her burning ring once and for all, but he very much regretted not having made more of an effort to persuade her to remain wed. Cordelia's jealousy aside, he rather liked things the way they were, but the situation had begun to evolve, and he felt increasingly unsure of how he should proceed.

He glanced through the window, wondering where Hermione might be. It was already after six, so he doubted she was still in the laboratory. They had spent most of the weekend together, and things had already changed between them. Hermione was no longer a married woman. While they had both been wed, there'd been a sense of balance about their relationship. Now that status quo had been shattered and things no longer felt so equal.

Regardless of everything Hermione had been through: war, university, marriage, separation, divorce, and even though he had discovered the passionate spirit that lay behind the intellectual exterior, he saw her, in a way, as innocent. Pure. She radiated goodness, and he had wondered if he was doing her a disservice by allowing their affair to continue. He knew she desired stability, a home and a family, and he knew he was not the man to offer her such a future, even if he had been in any position to do so. Perhaps the kindest thing to do would be to simply let her go, to allow her what time remained to her to find a husband who could give her everything she wanted and deserved.

The door of his study was flung open, shattering his reverie, and Cordelia marched into the room.

"Why didn't you see fit to inform me that Theo, in some moment of madness, signed over his house to Hermione?" she snarled.

Severus raised an eyebrow and gestured to the seat in front of his desk. "I presumed he'd told you," he said, taking a fortifying gulp of whisky. "You went out to dinner with him after they divorced; I assumed he'd told you the terms and conditions to which they had agreed."

Cordelia took the seat and folded her arms, her dark blue eyes flashing. "Well, she has obviously Confounded the poor boy. Why would he agree to such a thing?"

"It was her sole demand, Cordelia. She could have asked very much more of him."

"But that property has been in the family for generations," she cried. "I object to it passing to some Muggle-born blow-in."

He grimaced. "You're beginning to sound rather like a Death Eater, my dear," he said, his tone icy.

She ignored his remark. "She's no longer a member of the family ... She has no right to continue living there, never mind the right to ownership."

"Cordelia," he said with as much patience as he could muster, "you know she has every right to continue living there. She was due half of Theo's share of that building, and as she requested nothing else, Theo agreed to sign over his share of the property in its entirety."

"Why would he do it, Severus? What would he get out of it? He would never have done it if she hadn't tricked him into it somehow."

He shook his head in disbelief, knowing she was flinging accusations in her anger. "Cordelia ~~he~~ left *her*. Theo might be self-centred, but he has a conscience, and he is fundamentally a good man. Perhaps he did it to compensate for the distress he has caused her."

Cordelia narrowed her eyes. "Or maybe you suggested it, Severus. How convenient for you to continue to have your *assistant* living across the road."

He glared at her. "And why would that be convenient? I'm sure the girl can Apparate to work perfectly well from any part of the country, Cordelia."

Cordelia watched him through half-lidded eyes. "One can't help but wonder why a young woman of her age would *want* to share a house with an elf and an eccentric old fool. Perhaps she finds the proximity to her employer comforting."

He uttered a short laugh. "Would you care to add any further insinuations?"

She leaned forward in her seat. "You disappeared for the *entire night* of Hermione and Narcissa's birthday party, Severus, only minutes after Hermione herself had left. Where did you go?"

He too leaned forward, mimicking her aggressive posture. "You disappeared for the whole of last weekend, Cordelia, yet I know for a fact that you did not stay in your Edinburgh cottage. Where did *you* go?"

She remained silent for a moment, tapping her nails on his desk. "Well, at least I won't have to worry about you disappearing at family events from now on: Hermione is no longer family, so I'm under no obligation to invite her."

Severus smirked. "I'm sure she'll be devastated," he drawled, his voice sarcastic. "However will she cope without the scintillating conversation of your Aunt Jemima?"

Cordelia ignored him and continued. "And what is she supposed to do? She has less than six months to go until she's forced to marry once more; does she intend bringing her new husband to live in a house with Lance living upstairs and her former in-laws living across the road?"

He sighed deeply. The thought of Hermione married to some nameless stranger was not something he wished to dwell on. "I'm sure she will cross that bridge when she comes to it. She's an intelligent girl: she'll find a solution to the problem."

"You can't resist any opportunity to defend her, can you?" She rose from her seat, seething. "And to think I once believed you had taste, Severus."

"I find I've developed an appetite for all that is wholesome this past year, Cordelia. I've rather lost my fondness for all that is painted, superficial, and infinitely less satisfying."

She walked to the door and turned to face him, her hands on her hips. "I may be less than a year away from my fiftieth birthday, but it takes two to tango, darling. You might do well to bear in mind that a divorce requires more than one signature."

He arched both eyebrows. "Is that a threat?"

"Yes. I do believe it is." She slammed the door behind her.

He stared at the door for some minutes after she left, wondering if he would pay for his failure to hold his tongue. Knocking back the last of his Firewhisky, he breathed deeply, determined not to follow his wife downstairs and hex her to oblivion.

But as he flexed his fingers in an effort to dissipate his anger, he realised that the source of his distress was not just Cordelia. He was considerable more upset by the idea of Hermione Granger wed to another man than he was by the thought that his wife might never grant him a divorce.

Hermione met Lance's gaze across the kitchen table. "Why the look of concern, Lancelot Mill?"

"You look happy," Lance said, frowning.

Hermione smiled, her mouth full of roast chicken. "Is that a bad thing?"

He sat back in his chair, continuing to scrutinise her over his spectacles. "Why are you happy?"

"Because I feel free, Lance. I have no need to feel guilty anymore. I'm a single woman."

Lance grunted.

"Adultery didn't suit me, Lance. Severus might still be married, but I am not, and Cordelia is no longer my mother-in-law. I feel like a huge burden has been lifted from my shoulders; I feel liberated."

"But three weeks have passed, girl. You only have five months to go before you are subject to the law. Have you discussed your predicament with Severus?"

Her face coloured and she dropped her gaze to her half eaten meal.

Lance tutted. "You haven't, have you?"

"I've no wish to discuss it with him yet, Lance. Five months is a long time ... There's time to sort it all out," she insisted.

"Five months is nothing! Five months will pass in the blink of an eye. Cowards, the pair of you, too scared to sit down and have a frank discussion about how you feel," he said, annoyed.

Hermione was hurt. "But Lance, you know what he's like. I've no idea how he really feels about me. For all I know, I'm a convenient bit of comfort and very little else."

Lance snorted. "You know that's not true."

"No, I don't know *what* the truth is. You've said yourself he's a difficult man. When we're working together, talking, I often get the impression that he's fond of me, that he enjoys my company, but when we're more intimate he is much more guarded of his feelings, in very many ways."

"I thought things were going well between you?"

"They are!" Hermione said, willing him to understand. "He's told me things I know he has never told anyone else; he's allowed me to stay the night with him; he's allowed me past his defences. But we've never discussed how we feel about one another or where this is all going ... We've always skirted those issues."

"Well, you can't skirt those issues any longer," Lance said. "You have to draw him out, Hermione. It would kill him if you married another man; I know it would."

Hermione felt suddenly sad. "Would it really, Lance? I've no idea what he wants; I haven't the faintest notion whether or not he would like to be with me. He dislikes complications, and after all he's been through, maybe he deserves a simple, quiet life."

"He deserves *happiness*," Lance said adamantly. "You can make him happy, but if he's not careful, he's going to ruin it all because of his emotional repression. You can't allow him to ruin it for you both, Hermione."

"What am I meant to do?" she said. "Demand he divorces Cordelia and marries me instead?"

"Yes. Why not?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Lance, you know what he's like. We'd have a blazing row, and that would be the end of everything. Severus Snape does not give in to demands, and he absolutely hates melodrama."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to wait. The ball is in his court, now. I'm free and single; he's not. It's not my place to interfere in his marriage or to suggest what he should do. Besides which," she said with a sigh, "I still have no idea how he feels about me, so discussion of a future together is pointless. I suspect Severus has an awful lot more thinking to do than I."

Lance gave an exasperated sigh. "Perhaps you're right about Severus." He regarded her thoughtfully. "But what about you, my dear? What do you want?"

"I don't know. I decided I would allow myself to enjoy my first month of freedom, and after that, I would start to think about a solution."

He fell quiet for a moment and then began to laugh. "A husband who doesn't mind your continued entanglement with your boss would be ideal: You could always marry me."

Hermione sniggered. "That would certainly be the social bombshell of the year."

"Although I must warn you," Lance continued, "being one-hundred-and-five and a rampant homosexual would leave me hopelessly inadequate in the sack compared to Severus."

Hermione choked on her chicken.

Lance's expression grew serious once more. "Can you picture yourself without Severus?"

Hermione thought about it for a moment and shook her head. "I don't know what I'd do without him." She was instantly drawn back to the night she had packed her bags, when Severus had pleaded with her not to leave, when he'd said *I have no idea what I would do without you* Surely that was more than a mere glimmer of hope?

"You love him, don't you?" Lance asked gently.

She nodded. "Yes, I do, fool that I am."

"You're not a fool. And he loves you, too, Hermione. Even if he hasn't realised it himself, I'm sure of it."

"I hope you're right, Lance. And I hope he realises it sooner rather than later, because time is surely running out."

Some ten days later, Hermione poured herself a glass of wine and settled into her favourite armchair in her sitting room. It was a Wednesday evening in late October, exactly one month since she'd officially become a single woman, and, after a busy day in the laboratory, she had donned her pyjamas and dressing gown and had decided she would toast this minor milestone all by herself.

She had permitted herself one month to enjoy her new freedom, and now the time for serious reflection must commence.

Two paths lay before her: one path led to a life in which Severus Snape featured, and the other led to a life in which he did not. The second path was almost more than she could bear to imagine. She didn't want to think about a future without Severus, but if he decided he did not want to continue seeing her, she would be left with two further options: abide by the law and marry once again, or flee the country and rebuild her life somewhere else.

But if, by some miracle, her feelings were reciprocated, there were even more possibilities: she could enter another marriage of convenience and continue her affair with Severus; she could move abroad and they could embark on a long-distance relationship; or, most unlikely of all, Severus could get a divorce, allowing them to leave the country together or, more improbable still, they could marry.

Severus was a half-blood...if he was single, he could marry anyone of his choosing. But he'd never suggested that he wanted something more than the bizarre liaison in which they were currently embroiled. Besides which, Cordelia was still an obstacle. Hermione knew her former mother-in-law was only ten months away from turning fifty, and when that happened, Cordelia would no longer be subject to the Marriage Law, leaving her free, finally, to marry Everard Monroe.

Hypothetically, Cordelia could divorce Severus in only four months' time, and by the time her six-month period of grace was at an end, she would no longer be affected by

the Marriage Law. But no matter what the timing, the consent of both parties was required for a divorce, and there was no guarantee that Cordelia would give Severus the satisfaction of such a simple solution.

As Hermione frowned into her glass of wine, her quiet evening was disturbed by a sharp knock on the front door. She glanced at her watch: it was only nine o'clock, but she was in her pyjamas, so she crossed to the window and waited for Moe to answer. As she peered through the darkness outside, trying to see who her late-evening visitor might be, she heard the sound of a familiar male voice. Without waiting for Moe to announce his arrival, she flung open the door of the sitting room, exclaiming, "Neville!"

Neville Longbottom stood on her doorstep, dressed in a thick, dark-green travelling cloak. He had a Muggle safari hat on his head, and a large wooden trunk on the ground to his right. He looked startled when Hermione appeared in her dressing gown.

"I'm terribly sorry, Hermione," he said, flushing. "I've arrived at a bad time ... I should have sent an owl ..."

Hermione shook her head, beaming. "It's fine...don't worry about it. I spent the day working on some noxious potions, so I showered when I came home and pyjamas seemed the comfier option. Come on in." She stood to one side and motioned for him to enter the sitting room, looking on curiously as he Levitated his trunk through the door.

"Is you wanting tea?" Moe asked, clearly delighted to have someone to cater for.

"Yes, thank you, Moe," Hermione replied. "That would be lovely."

Moe disappeared with a click of her fingers, and Hermione followed Neville into the sitting room. "What's going on, Neville? Are you going somewhere?" she asked as she settled into her favourite chair.

Neville grinned, and Hermione thought he looked both younger and happier than he had for a very long time.

"It's a bit of a long story ... Something unexpected happened at the weekend, and I'm leaving," he said, smiling. "I've said all my goodbyes; I've made sure Mum and Dad are settled. You're the last on my list, and when I've told you the story, I'll be Apparating straight to Madrid, and from there to Africa."

Hermione looked stunned. "But ... But I thought you couldn't leave?"

Neville beamed. "Last Saturday morning, I was struggling in the greenhouses when a big snowy owl tapped on the window and delivered this letter." He extracted a length of parchment from his robes and handed it to Hermione.

She opened the letter and began to read.

Dear Mr Longbottom,

I'm pleased to inform you that a care suite has been acquired on your behalf at our premises Cunningham's Care Home for the Confuddled and Confused, for your parents, Frank and Alice Longbottom. A benefactor, who has insisted on remaining anonymous, has kindly paid in advance for two full years of premium standard care for your parents, and an appointment has been made for you to inspect our care home and to discuss all relevant details at two o'clock this afternoon.

Please find attached a map detailing our whereabouts.

Yours in care and compassion,

Herbert Hippocrates

Hermione looked up, her eyes wide. "Did you go?"

"At first I was too annoyed to go. I've only told a few people about Mum and Dad and about me wanting to travel, and I was annoyed that someone would go and do this behind my back. But I decided to go and take a look, and you should have seen it, Hermione. It was amazing! The home is in a beautiful old building in a village in Devon called Fremington ... It overlooks a bay. I thought ..." he paused, looking embarrassed, "well, I thought they'd like to be able to see the sea ... Gran always said that Dad loved the sea when he was a kid."

Moe suddenly appeared with a crack, a tea tray laden with scones and cakes in her tiny hands. After they'd thanked her, Neville continued.

"I don't know if you remember, but before that summer at Belgrave house, I went looking for suitable homes all over the country. Everything I saw was either way too far above my budget, or, if I could afford it, it was little better than St. Mungo's. But regardless of price, this place blows everything else out of the water. I told the proprietor that I wouldn't even look around unless he was willing to tell me who this mysterious benefactor is. But he wouldn't budge ... All he told me was that it was someone of wealth and impeccable character who wishes to see me content, and my parents well cared for."

Hermione was dubious. "So, he talked you into having a look around?"

Neville nodded. "I've seen about ten wizard-run care homes around the country over the years, but never anything like this. Mum and Dad will have their own little suite of rooms and twenty-four-hour carers...all of them qualified Healers. The patients are entertained all day long, even if they're not ... you know..." He blushed again. "Aware of anything, I suppose."

Hermione shook her head in wonder. "It sounds great, but are you really going to accept it without knowing who's behind it?"

Neville shrugged. "Even though the place was fantastic, I decided I couldn't possibly accept, but I changed my mind after I talked to Gran. She thinks I've a lot of admirers since the war," he explained, laughing at himself, his cheeks growing redder still, "and she presumes it's one of them, or maybe Minerva or something. She said no matter who it is, I'd be mad not to accept. She thinks I'm playing the coward, staying at Hogwarts, not heading off for an adventure. And maybe she's right ... You only live once, after all. I'm twenty-five years old...the same age Mum and Dad were when they lost their sanity. Maybe it's time to take the bull by the horns, so to speak, and live a little."

"But what about Hogwarts? That's a great opportunity, too ... To be a Professor at such a young age is unusual; you can't just throw that away."

Neville smiled again. "Well, that's where the story gets even more interesting. After I viewed the home, I went straight to Gran to talk it over with her, and when I got back to Hogwarts, I went to see Minerva. She acted as though it was a shock when I told her I was keen to travel and that I was thinking of taking up the offer of the home so could go abroad. But it was strange ... I can't quite put my finger on it, but I felt as if it was all an act on her part. That's what made me think it was her...she pretended to be all surprised and troubled about me leaving my position, but then she came up with an idea. She said her cousin, Morag McTaggish..."

"Oh! I know Morag," Hermione interrupted. "She's one of my clients!"

"Yes, she owns that shop in Vertic Alley. Well, apparently she has a degree in Herbology and Potions, so Minerva suggested her as a stand-in for two years if I want to travel for a while, but still keep the Hogwarts position open. She sent a message to Morag who turned up within minutes, and before I really knew what was going on, they were pushing me out the door and telling me to have a nice time!"

"Hmmm ..." Hermione murmured. "Sounds suspicious to me!"

He nodded in agreement. "It was either McGonagall, or she's in on the secret. A few knowing looks passed between her and Morag, especially when I mentioned that some

mysterious stranger was paying for it all."

"Could it have been Pomona Sprout?" Hermione suggested. "She's always been very fond of you."

"It could, I suppose. I don't think she's well off, though."

"I think Minerva's family are the more likely option, really. We always reckoned she was the one who bought Harry that Nimbus 2000 when we were in first year."

"I thought of that, too," Neville agreed. "But if it was Minerva, why didn't she do all this before the first of September? Why would she wait until October and disrupt everything?"

"That's a good point," Hermione agreed, pouring tea for them both. "Does anyone else know about Luna, Neville?"

Neville shook his head. "You were the only one, really. Gran guessed it, too."

"Could it have been one of your Gran's friends or something, then?"

He shook his head again. "I don't think so. Not many of them are moneyed, and they're all a bit batty, to be honest. My money's on McGonagall." He helped himself to a scone. "No use Apparating on an empty stomach," he said with an excited grin.

Hermione returned his smile, her misgivings about this mysterious benefactor evaporating at his happy expression. "So you're going to hunt for Luna?"

Neville nodded. "I went to see Xenophilius Lovegood yesterday. He said that last he heard, she was somewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. Hence the hat," he added, pointing to his safari hat.

"It's quite exciting, really," Hermione said. "What will you do when you find her, Neville? And what about Hannah?"

"Hannah and I are still married. She was really supportive about me heading off, though, and we've agreed that we'll divorce as soon as either of us wants to. She hasn't started seeing anyone yet, and to be honest, things are easier if we're still legally wed." He looked up from his tea, his expression suddenly doubtful. "Do you think I'm being terribly selfish, Hermione? Abandoning my parents like this to take off after some girl who might not even want anything to do with me?"

"Oh, Neville! Of course not," Hermione insisted. "This is what I've wanted you to do all along, and now you can do it with a clear conscience because you know your parents will be well looked after. The benefactor thing is a bit of a puzzle, but they obviously know you well enough to know that if they had offered you this gift in person, you probably would have turned them down."

Neville mulled this over for a minute and raised an eyebrow. "You know, I think you're right: I couldn't have accepted it...not knowing who it is makes it an awful lot easier."

Hermione smiled. "Your Gran is right: you'd be crazy to turn down an offer like this. You've been a good son, and your parents would have wanted you to be happy."

"Everyone's been so supportive. I thought people would think I'm crazy for trusting this benefactor and leaving Mum and Dad, but everyone seems to think it's a great idea."

She grinned. "Do you promise to write?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "Of course. And will you say goodbye to Harry and Ginny for me? I haven't had a chance to visit them. I'll be back every so often anyway, to check on Mum and Dad."

Hermione nodded. "Neville, would you like me to pop in to see them every few weeks to let you know that they're okay? If you let the care home know my name in advance, maybe I could drop in unexpectedly, just so that the staff knows someone is around to make sure your Mum and Dad are doing well."

Neville looked delighted. "Would you mind? And I'm sure Mum and Dad would be pleased, even if they haven't a clue who you are ... They really like visitors."

"I can send you a note each time I visit to let you know how they're getting on."

"Hermione," Neville said, rising from the sofa, "I owe you ... I really owe you. You've always been so kind to me." He looked at his watch. "I should get going, I suppose. It's getting late." He suddenly looked ashamed. "Hermione, I'm so sorry ... I heard about you and Theo getting an official divorce, and I haven't even asked you about it!"

Hermione stood up and shook her head. "It was amicable, so there's really nothing to tell. He granted me ownership of this house, and that was all I wanted."

Neville frowned. "But what about the Marriage Law? And what about, you know ..." He jerked his head in the direction of the opposite side of the square. "Snape."

She sighed. "I haven't a clue how it's going to work out, Neville. I'll just have to wait and see."

"But are you ... You know ..."

"Together?" Hermione asked, amused.

Neville nodded.

She sighed again. "Seeing as you're going abroad, I guess I can tell you without having to Oblivate you. Yes, we're together. Or at least as together as we can be while he's still married."

Neville gave a short laugh and shook his head. "You're the bravest girl I've ever met."

Hermione giggled. "He takes a bit of getting used to, but he's not all that scary when you get to know him."

"I'll take your word for it." Neville took out his wand and reduced his trunk to the size of a wallet. Once he'd stowed it inside the folds of his cloak, they walked to the front door.

Hermione drew him into a tight hug. "I'll miss you, Neville. Just make sure you find her, and when you do, tell her I said she's a lucky witch."

"If I find her," Neville corrected her.

"No, *when* you find her," Hermione insisted. "I know you will."

Neville nodded and rummaged inside his cloak. "Just before I go ... Take a look at this and tell me if you recognise the writing. I got it yesterday...it's from the benefactor."

Hermione accepted the crumpled piece of parchment and unfolded it.

Dear Mr Longbottom,

I have received word from Healer Hippocrates this afternoon in connection with your parents' care. I was gratified to find you have decided to accept my offer.

It is imperative that my anonymity, for personal reasons, be preserved. I expect your full cooperation to this end. Healer Hippocrates has signed a magical agreement to protect my identity, and if you attempt to coerce my name from him, you will both suffer an ailment of the most uncomfortable and personal nature.

Please rest assured that your parents' every need will be catered for over the coming two years. I trust you will use your time and freedom wisely, and I wish you the very best of luck for the future.

Yours in debt,

There was no signature and the note itself was written in capitals throughout, making it almost impossible to recognise the script. Hermione shook her head.

"It's written in block letters. Perhaps if it was handwritten ... But no, I haven't a clue."

Neville took the letter and tucked it beneath his robe. After a final farewell, he Disapparated, leaving Hermione to stare into the darkness.

She closed the door, deep in thought, when suddenly, something occurred to her. Stopping in her tracks, she thought about the words with which the anonymous patron had ended the letter: *Yours in debt*. She felt as though she had been doused in freezing cold water as comprehension hit her, and she whispered, "Severus."

She could hardly believe it, but it all made sense. Severus had told her he considered himself in Neville's debt, and she had told him about Neville's desire to find Luna and his reluctance to leave his parents in the care of St. Mungo's. What was more, if Severus could afford custom made golden cauldrons, money was obviously not a problem.

"Moe?" she called.

The little elf appeared before her.

"You is calling, Miss Hermione?"

"Moe, I urgently need to talk to Severus. Could you Apparate to his house and tell me if Cordelia is at home and if she's still awake?"

Moe nodded solemnly and Disapparated with a click of her fingers. She reappeared seconds later.

"Mistress Cordelia is being in the bath on the third floor, and Master Severus is being in his study," she announced.

Hermione grinned. "Thank you, Moe."

Not caring about the fact that she was still dressed in her pyjamas, Hermione summoned her cloak from her bedroom and dashed to the door. Once outside, she Apparated across the square and pressed the tip of her wand to Severus and Cordelia's front door. Closing the door as quietly as she could behind her, she tiptoed up the stairs, wincing as one of the floorboards creaked. When she reached the door of Severus's study she gently pushed open the door, and, smiling at his expression of incredulity, she pressed a finger to her lips as she cast a Silencing Spell and warded the door. The she raced across the room to where he sat at his desk, flung her arms around his neck and climbed into his lap.

"What is going on?" Severus asked, battling to clear his face of her curls. "What the devil do you think you're doing, girl?"

"You are the loveliest, kindest, most thoughtful man I've ever met!"

He arched an eyebrow. "Have you finally succumbed to madness?"

She kissed his face repeatedly until he took her by the wrists and pulled her away.

"Would you be so kind as to explain what, exactly, has gotten into you?" Severus whispered. "You are well aware that Cordelia is at home."

"It was you, wasn't it?" she asked.

"What do you mean, it was me?"

"Neville came to say good bye," she said, watching his reaction closely.

He paused before saying, "And that sent you tearing over here why, precisely?"

"Because you, Severus Snape, are the one who has anonymously arranged for his parents to spend two years in the best care home in Britain," she said, scrutinising his black eyes.

He tried to push her from his lap, but she wound her arms around his neck. "I've no idea what you're talking about, silly girl."

"He showed me the letter, and you signed off by saying *Yours in debt*, Severus. I know it was you! The day I told you all about Neville and Luna and how he couldn't leave his parents in St. Mungo's, you *said* you felt indebted to him."

"You're completely insane," he said.

"Fine," she said, rising from his lap. "If you won't admit it, I'll Apparate to Hogwarts and get the truth out of Minerva McGonagall."

He grabbed her by the hand, and as she turned to look into his eyes, she knew she was right.

"If you go thundering off to Hogwarts at this time of night, demanding to know about my dealings with Minerva McGonagall, it's going to look suspicious. If Minerva McGonagall knows about us, we might as well take out a full page advert in the *Daily Prophet*!"

Hermione smirked triumphantly. "Then admit it was you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, relinquishing her hand.

"Severus," she said, glaring at him.

"What?" he snarled, returning her glare.

"Admit it."

"Admit what?"

"Severus!" She stamped her foot.

He rolled his eyes. "Good Merlin, will my life ever be my own again? Fine, fine," he growled, looking angry. "It was me. Satisfied?"

She threw herself on him again, and after a moment, he reluctantly put his arms around her and began to stroke her hair. "Tell me you didn't mention my name to Neville Longbottom?"

She shook her head. "No, he thinks it was Minerva or Pomona Sprout or someone like that," she said, her voice thick.

Severus pulled away from her and pushed her hair from her face. "Why are you crying?" he asked quietly, his brow furrowed.

She shrugged and wiped at her eyes. "I'm just so overwhelmed. I've been worried about him for so long ..."

His gaze dropped to her clothes. "Are you wearing pyjamas beneath your cloak?" he asked in disbelief.

She nodded and pulled her cloak more tightly around her.

"You entered our house unannounced at nearly eleven o'clock at night in your *pyjamas*? I would have liked to see you explain *that* to Cordelia if you had met her on the stairs."

Hermione pouted. "I'm not stupid, you know. I sent Moe over ahead of me to scout the territory; I happen to know that Cordelia is currently bathing on the third floor."

Severus grunted, but then entangled his hand in her hair and kissed her soundly. When he eventually pulled away, she wrapped her arms around his neck and laid her head on his shoulder.

"What made you do it, Severus?"

He shrugged. "I fancied a snog."

She swatted his shoulder. "Not the kiss ... I mean Neville."

He chuckled. "I felt I owed him a debt; I have repaid that debt. I was also very impressed by the manner in which he stood up to the Carrows during my short reign as Headmaster...I rather thought he deserved a little happiness." He fell silent for a moment. "Besides, I was touched by your concern for him. I thought it would please you."

She wrapped a strand of his hair around her finger. "It certainly does please me. It was very generous of you, Severus, but I don't understand the reasons behind all the secrecy."

"Do you honestly think that Neville Longbottom would have accepted such a gift from *me*, of all people?"

She shook her head. "I suppose not."

"Then I can rely on you to keep it a secret?"

"Of course you can," she whispered, feeling tearful again. She felt that voice rise up once more in her mind, and the instinct to whisper *I love you* was almost more than she could stand. But she knew that the time had not yet come, if ever it would.

"You're really lovely," she said with a sigh.

"Lovely?" He snorted. "I rather think not."

"No, you are," she insisted. "You're lovely."

"I let you away with calling me funny once, but I'm not sure I should be so lenient this time."

Hermione gave a short laugh. "Well, you might not like it, but I happen to know you are both lovely and funny."

They sat in silence for a few moments before Hermione said, "I suppose I should go home. Can I use the Floo from here?"

Severus nodded. "I think that would be wise."

She sat up. "Come with me. Stay the night."

He did not immediately refuse. "I thought we agreed to abide by the rules? What if Cordelia should discover I'm missing?"

"Is that likely? Won't she just assume you've gone to bed? You can leave my house first thing in the morning."

He sighed. "Appealing as that may be, I'm not sure it is a good idea."

She stood. "Come," she beseeched him, holding out her hand.

He looked at her outstretched hand and then met her gaze. Taking her hand, he rose from his chair. "You will yet prove to be my undoing," he whispered. "But perhaps it would be an altogether pleasant undoing."

Smiling, she led him to the fireplace, knowing that the events of the evening had proved, if she had ever needed proof, that here was a good man worth keeping.

And she fully intended to fight for that privilege.

A/N: Well, there we have it. That's poor old Neville sorted. Theo gone? Check. Neville happy? Check. Now, if only Severus would get a move on.

In answer to some questions: Yes, after this there are only six more chapters, including the epilogue.

And Hermione was only entitled to EVERYTHING Theo owned while she was an abandoned wife. As a divorcee, she was entitled to HALF. But, as we know, she only wanted the house.

And yes again, Cordelia is 10 months away from her 50th birthday, and will no longer be subject to the Marriage Law. So, as Hermione reasoned out in this chapter, Cordelia could divorce Severus in four months, and by the time her six-month period of post-divorce grace is up, she would be 50 and no longer subject to the law. BUT, as Hermione also knows, it takes TWO signatures to secure a divorce.

I am very behind in responding to reviews again. Please forgive me. Basically, time is short, so I have a choice: Edit the last six chapters or respond to reviews. So, until we are done, I will mostly edit the story so you won't have to wait. Later, I will respond to your reviews. But please do know that I read every single word of every single one of them. So please do keep them coming they are a joy.

LB x

Be Not Afraid

Chapter 29 of 34

Severus finally faces his fears.

A/N: Happy Friday, lovely readers. I'm going to make this note brief so that you can get on with the chapter, which I think is one of my very favourites. I hope you enjoy it.

Thank you for your continued support. Your reviews still make my day every time. I have a busy weekend ahead, but if you bribe me, I'll do everything in my power to have the next chapter up on Monday. Heck, Sunday if I can manage it. Bribes will be accepted in the form of reviews, but chocolate and tea are also permissible.

Have a great weekend,

LB x

As Adam early in the morning,

Walking forth from the bower refresh'd with sleep,

Behold me where I pass, hear my voice, approach,

Touch me, touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass,

Be not afraid of my body.

- Walt Whitman, *As Adam Early in the Morning*

Another month had passed since Hermione and Theodore's divorce, and Hermione walked Kensington High Street alone amongst the other shoppers, the Christmas lights twinkling elegantly above her.

It would soon be dusk, and, having finished her shopping, she discreetly Transfigured her shopping bags into a handful of silver coins and stowed them in the pocket of her thick winter coat. Her cheeks were raw from the cold evening air, and she pulled her scarf more tightly around her face in an effort to ward off the chill.

Slipping her gloved hands into her pockets, she crossed the busy street and headed towards Kensington Gardens, desirous of a brisk walk in the park before the gates were closed at sundown.

As she thought about her current dilemma, she walked until she came to the statue of Peter Pan. She smiled as she looked up at the dark figure of the boy who never grew up, his pipe in hand, fairies and animals clinging to the column below. Her father had taken her to this exact spot many times during the summers of her childhood, and as she had stood before the statue she had often wished for someone to come and take her away to Neverland, to the fairies and the pirates and the mermaids. How tame the idea of Neverland now seemed in comparison with the magical world of wizards and elves and centaurs. She had found her fantasy world, after all.

She continued to gaze at the statue, wondering what moment of inspiration had resulted in Peter Pan's creation. J. M Barrie's understanding of the male psyche had been accurate. In many ways, Hermione thought there was a little of the boy who never grew up in almost every man. Despite marriage and babies, Harry and Ron were still as boyish as ever, making any excuse to grab a Quaffle and head out to the garden with their brooms. Draco was still a clown, and Lance, regardless of his one-hundred-and-five years, was still obsessed with Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans.

Her thoughts turned to Severus, and, with a frown, she realised how very different he was, in some respects, to all the other men in her life. She certainly couldn't imagine the austere, black-clad Severus knocking a Quaffle around on a Sunday afternoon, or dressing in lilac like Lance, just to cause a scene. In many ways, Severus wasn't afraid of growing up. But he was afraid of his own feelings.

After staring at the statue for another moment, she jumped as the clanging of a loud bell announced that the park was about to close. Turning, she made her way to the gates, but stopped as a small barn owl alighted from a nearby tree and swooped towards her, dropping a folded piece of parchment into her hands with a screech.

Hermione walked on as she unfurled the note and peered at the script through the gloom. Grinning, she hurried on. The note was from Susan and Draco, announcing the slightly early but safe arrival of their infant son earlier that day. She hoped for Draco's sake that he'd held his wise-cracking tongue while Susan was in labour.

Just before she reached the gates, a larger owl landed on the back of a wooden bench in front of her. It dropped another letter onto the seat and clicked its beak impatiently at her, taking off as soon as her fingers touched the parchment. It was almost too dark to see, so she stood under the glow of a streetlamp to read her second letter, and she gasped aloud in delight: Harry and Ginny's baby had arrived within an hour of Draco and Susan's. She chuckled as she read the names they'd chosen for their second son, and made her way back to Kensington Square. Severus would not at all be pleased.

Severus looked up from his paperwork with a satisfied smile as Hermione crossed his study. How he loved his Saturdays. Cordelia was rarely in London on a Saturday, and despite the fact that he and Hermione generally went their separate ways in the morning, the evening was always theirs, as was the night.

He put down his quill as she unbuttoned her coat and hung it on the back of the chair in front of his desk, taking her seat with her legs tucked beneath her. Her cheeks were a becoming shade of pink from the cold evening air.

"Have you heard from the Malfoys?" she asked, grinning.

He picked up a length of blue parchment and waved it at her. "Indeed I have. Lucius proudly announced the arrival of his grandson just over an hour ago. He assumes the child will be the newest addition to Slytherin House, of course."

Hermione chuckled. "So Susan doesn't get a say at all? We'll see!"

"What do you make of the unfortunate child's name?"

"Draco didn't mention the name in his letter!" Hermione said with a gasp. She reached forward to grab the letter from Severus's hand.

He held it out of her reach and announced, "Scorpius Abraxas Phineas Lucius John Malfoy."

"Scorpius?" Hermione shrieked. "*Scorpius*? I thought that was a joke!"

Severus smirked. "I was more amused by the baffling inclusion of John. Draco's idea of humour, no doubt."

"He must have Confounded Susan," Hermione said, shaking her head. "Really, Severus. The girl can't possibly be in her right mind. He's Confounded her, or poisoned her or something."

Severus laughed at her expression. "The Malfoys have always had questionable taste in names."

Hermione gave a sigh, but then beamed as she remembered her other item of news. "Harry and Ginny's son arrived today, too."

Severus grunted. "Another male Potter... I'm ecstatic."

"And while we're on the subject of names," she added, "you'll never guess what they've called him?"

He rolled his eyes. "Something dreadful, no doubt: Sirius."

She shook her head.

"Remus."

"No."

"Prince James the Second ..."

Hermione giggled and shook her head again.

"I don't know," he said gruffly. "Petunia; Dobby; Tom Marvolo."

She snorted. "Even worse."

"Worse than Tom Marvolo? I've no idea; please enlighten me."

"Albus."

Severus groaned and raised his hands to his face. "I feel positively nauseous."

"Albus Severus," she said.

"Yes, I know, I heard you the first time," he said.

She shook her head again and laughed. "No, I mean that's his full name: Albus~~Severus~~ Potter," she said with a grin, pronouncing every syllable clearly.

Severus's face fell. "What?" he snarled.

Hermione smirked. "Aren't you honoured?"

"Honoured?" he spat. "My name gets thrown into a mixing bowl along with Albus and Potter and I'm supposed to be ~~pleased~~?" He stood up. "Where does Potter live?"

Hermione doubled over with laughter. "Severus, sit down, you arse."

"They have no right to do that. How ... How *dare* they!"

"I wish you could see yourself right now," Hermione said, her hands on her stomach. "Please sit down, Severus. My sides hurt."

"Well, I'm delighted to be such a source of hilarity," he snapped, taking his seat again. "What were they thinking? You'll have to insist they retract this."

"I will not insist they retract it, Severus," she said, becoming serious. "The child has been named, and that's that. I'm sure it's Harry's way of thanking you."

"Thanking me? Thanking me for what?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "For all the times you saved his life; for all the other lives you saved over the years; for playing a vital role in saving the wizarding world."

"Stupid Gryffindor sentimentality," he grumbled.

She arched an eyebrow. "What about stupid Slytherin sentimentality? You offered me the job out of a sense of debt; you sorted out Neville's parents out of a sense of debt. This is Harry's way of honouring the things *you* have done."

Severus grunted. "And so another generation of wizards becomes lumbered with contemptible names. Well, I hope Malfoy and Potter's sons never forgive their parents."

Hermione smiled. "It took me quite some time to forgive my parents. I hated my name when I was young, but I rather like it now."

He returned her smile. "It is a touch eccentric, perhaps, but very pretty." He raised his index finger and beckoned her to him, his anger abating.

She walked around his desk and sat on his lap. "What did you do today?" she asked, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Nothing but paperwork," Severus said, one arm around her waist. "You?"

"I made one of my impromptu visits to Neville's parents thing this morning."

"Was everything to your satisfaction?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, their care is really excellent, and they seem perfectly happy. I sent a note to Neville to let him know, and then I started some Christmas shopping."

"It's not even December yet," Severus said.

She shrugged. "You know me, super organised. Besides, time seems to be slipping away these days."

"Indeed it does," he agreed, thinking of the time that was left before she was subject to the Marriage law once more.

Hermione stared into the blazing fireplace across the room for some minutes. "Severus," she said eventually, "I've only four months left until I have to abide by the law again. I was wondering ... Could I have your consent to confide in Padma about ... about you and me?"

He looked at her. "Lance knows about us; Theo knows; I'm almost certain Cordelia knows," he said quietly. "It seems to me that the more people know about these things, the more likely it is that they will be uncovered."

Hermione bit her lip. Neville also knew, but she hadn't yet found the courage to tell Severus. "I know, and I agree with you. It's just ... time is running out for me, Severus, and I need a friend to talk to. I can't talk to Harry and Ginny about this; Harry could never view it objectively, not where you are concerned. Padma has always been good at viewing the bigger picture; I need a fellow female to talk to."

He eyed her troubled face, wondering what her friend would say, how she would counsel the girl sitting on his lap. "If you were insisting on telling the other Patil twin, I think I would have to Oblivate you."

Hermione chuckled. "Don't worry, Padma and Parvati are about as different as you can get."

"You're certain she can be trusted?"

She nodded. "I would trust her with my life. I know she'll tell Dean, I imagine they have no secrets, but he's as trustworthy as she is. Besides, he would have to face the wrath of Padma if he dared tell anyone, and believe me: no-one wants to make Padma angry."

He regarded her for another few seconds. "You have my consent; I understand your need for a confidante."

"Thank you, Severus," she said, tucking her head beneath his chin with a satisfied sigh. "I wonder who Albus Severus Potter looks like."

Severus's growl made her smile.

The following evening, Hermione answered her front door, more nervous than she had been for quite some time. She smiled as Padma stepped into the hallway, shaking out her umbrella and stowing her gloves in her pockets.

"I hope Dean didn't mind me stealing you for the evening," Hermione said, closing the door behind her friend.

"Not at all," Padma said cheerfully, following Hermione towards the stairs. "He's taken the girls over to his aunt's house for a visit."

They descended to the kitchen, where Hermione had already set the table. "I made some of that vegetable soup you like and some sandwiches."

"Sounds good to me," Padma said, removing her coat and laying it across the chair next to her.

Hermione shot her an admiring glance. "You've completely got your figure back!"

Padma patted her stomach. "Yes, well, it did take nine long months. Nine months to get huge, and nine to get slim again!"

"Would you have another one?" Hermione asked, ladling the soup into two bowls.

Padma nodded. "We've agreed we'd like another baby, but not for a while yet, not until the twins are three. With such a high incidence of twins in the family, I'm not risking anything less than a three-year gap."

Hermione grinned. "Two sets of twins; now *that* would be interesting."

Padma rolled her eyes. "Not to mention exhausting, infuriating and unbelievably expensive. Can you imagine if they were twin boys? I'd have no hand-me-downs from the girls, and four sets of Hogwarts uniforms to buy." She watched Hermione curiously as she carried the soup to the table. "What did you want to talk about? I've been intrigued by your note all day."

Hermione sat at the table and took a deep breath. "Do you promise you won't hex me?"

Padma's eyes widened. "I'll do my best."

Hermione began drinking her soup, avoiding Padma's gaze. "Well, I only have four months left to sort my life out, and I want your advice."

Padma sighed. "To be honest, Hermione, I'm not sure my advice is worth much. Don't forget I was the one who told you to just jump in there with the Marriage Act and encouraged you to marry Theo. It worked out well for me, but there are loads of unhappy couples out there, and I've never forgiven myself for talking you into the Marriage Law."

"Padma!" Hermione said, surprised. "Don't feel like that! It's what I wanted: I wanted to stay in Britain; I wanted to be happy like everybody else. You said yourself it was pot luck at the end of the day, and I was just one of the unlucky ones. I'm glad it happened the way it did. If I hadn't married Theo, I wouldn't own this house; I wouldn't have a job that I love. And I certainly would never have ..." She looked down into her soup, her cheeks flushing.

Padma stopped, her spoon half way to her mouth. "It's to do with Snape, isn't it? That's what you wanted to talk about."

Hermione looked up, her heart pounding at the thought of how her friend might react. "I've felt so, so deceptive over the past few months, Padma. There were so many times when I badly wanted to tell you ... But I'd promised him, you see ..."

Padma finally swallowed her mouthful of soup and shrugged. "I've kind of known there was something going on for months now."

Hermione gaped. "You *knew*?"

"I didn't *know*, but I suspected. You used to talk about him all the time ... It was 'Severus said this' and 'Severus did that'. But after that ball in the summer, after you'd told me how you felt about him, you suddenly stopped talking about him, and you've avoided the subject every time I tried to bring it up. I assumed that the reason was because something had happened between you, so I decided to let you bring it up in your own time."

"Well, aren't you the clever girl?"

"I am a Ravenclaw, after all," Padma said, grinning. "So, go on ... Spill the beans."

Hermione bit into a sandwich, relieved her confession wasn't going to come as a huge shock. "Do you remember that chat we had, the day after the ball?" Padma nodded, and Hermione continued. "Well, I took your advice, and I decided that it was an impossible situation, and that I had to start getting over him. But a few days later, my hairclip came loose while I was in the middle of a really complex potion, and I asked him to tie my hair back. He wasn't pleased, but when he scooped my hair back, without any

warning at all, he just kissed my neck. Next minute, we were kissing, and then ... One thing led to another. I still have no idea what made him do it."

Padma raised an eyebrow. "One thing led to another? In the laboratory?"

Hermione was mortified. "Well, yes."

Padma giggled. "Steamy!"

Hermione gave her an embarrassed grin and hid her face in her hands. "You're embarrassing me. I'll spare you the sordid details. Anyway, we had a bit of an argument, and I ran away, but to cut quite a long story short, we came to an agreement, and we've been together since that day."

"So, you've been shagging him senseless in that dungeon?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, her cheeks burning. "No, I haven't: that was part of the agreement. With the exception of one or two nights, we've limited the 'shagging', as you so romantically put it, to weekends when Cordelia is away. And it's a basement, not a dungeon."

Padma looked intrigued. "And is he a good shag?"

"Padma!"

Padma giggled again. "Well, is he a good snog?"

"Padma, stop," Hermione said.

"Oh, come on," Padma moaned. "You didn't tell me about this for months; you could at least tell me whether or not he's a good snog."

Hermione gave an exasperated sigh. "Okay, he's a fabulous snog. Satisfied?"

Padma clapped her hands together excitedly. "Oooh! I thought he would be. And I bet he has a seriously sexy bedroom voice. Does he?"

Hermione shook her head. "I thought you were against me seeing him?"

"Well, it's too late for that now ... What's done is done. I might as well get all the juicy details."

"Have I ever given you the juicy details about my previous boyfriends?"

"No, you haven't," Padma admitted. "Is that what he is? Your boyfriend?"

Hermione laughed and wrinkled her nose. "Boyfriend is not a word that suits Severus Snape, is it? I don't know what I'd call him at this stage; we're certainly not committed enough for me to call him a partner."

"Lover, then. Your secret lover ... How exciting!"

Hermione put down her spoon. "You don't know how fantastic it is to have a decent chat about all of this. It was all so simple at the start; it was just a fling, really. It might sound strange, but while both of us were married it was all less complex, somehow. We didn't have to worry about the future or about commitment, because neither of us was free and single. But now, since Theo and I divorced, things have changed."

"Have they just changed for you, or has it changed for both of you?" Padma asked.

"For both of us. I suppose we've both had a lot of thinking to do, and with only four months left until I have to marry again or leave the country, it's changed everything. It was all quite light-hearted for the first two months. Well, as light-hearted as it can be where Severus is concerned. What I mean to say is that it was a bit of a no-strings-attached sort of relationship."

"You mean it was all about the sex?" Padma said with a smirk.

Hermione's colour deepened. "Well, yes ... I suppose it was. We were friends and colleagues at work, and at the weekends it was all about the sex. That's not to say we didn't make any progress. You know the kind of thing: we've shared meals; we've shared showers; we've talked into the small hours of the morning. He's told me a lot more about his past; it's much easier to understand where he's coming from, now."

"How has it changed, then? Since the divorce ..."

Hermione sighed, wondering how she could explain it. "It's become ... quieter, somehow. I don't know how to describe it ... We seem to spend more time just holding hands, sitting in front of a fire ... He strokes my hair. It's almost as if it's become more meaningful. I feel as though ..." She paused, knowing her eyes were filling, but determined not to cry. "As though we're both conscious that time is running out, and we're trying to savour what little we have left of it."

Padma pushed her empty bowl away from her. "Have you discussed what's going to happen?"

"No. Not at all. We've been avoiding the issue."

"What do you want, Hermione?"

She shrugged, and despite her best efforts to control herself, a tear slipped down her cheek. "I want him; I want Severus. Marrying a man I didn't love in order to abide by the law was one thing; marrying someone else while I feel like this about Severus is an impossibility. I couldn't do it, not while I feel like this about him."

"And has he given you any sign that he wants a future with you? Does he love you, Hermione?"

She sighed deeply. "He's never told me he loves me, but one night we had a terrible argument, and I packed my bags ... I fully intended leaving. But he told me ... He said ..."

"Yes," Padma said encouragingly.

Hermione looked up at her friend. "He said he had no idea what he would do without me. He begged me not to leave."

Padma gave her a small smile. "That sounds promising. But what about his wife? Is he willing to ask her for a divorce?"

"We've never spoken about it. I really and truly have no idea what he wants. Lancelot thinks I need to confront him about it, that I need to demand he divorces her or else I'll leave, but I don't think that's the right way to go about it."

"Hmmm," Padma said, chewing thoughtfully on a cheese sandwich. "From what little I know of Snape, I'm not sure that's the right way to go about things. Maybe he needs more time, but unfortunately, time is not something you can afford."

"I've no idea what I should do."

Padma looked at her across the table. "You really love him, don't you? I can hardly believe it ... Severus Snape, tormentor of first-years and big bat of the dungeons ... You love him."

Hermione smiled. "Hard to believe, isn't it? He can still be nasty, he hates children, he's scared of attachment, and I still want him."

"You see, Hermione," Padma said softly. "That's what worries me ... I want you to have someone kind, loving and gentle; someone who wants what you want; someone who'll give you a family. In a strange sort of way, I understand why you love him, but I don't know if he's the right person."

Hermione looked down, thinking of all the times he had shown her kindness and patience over the past year, of what he had done for Neville. "I know it seems unlikely, but underneath it all he is one of the kindest, most loving and caring people I've ever met. He says he's never wanted children, and that's a problem, but I love him. I would be willing to give that up for him."

"Have you told him you love him?"

"No," Hermione replied, shaking her head. "I wouldn't do that unless I was certain he loved me, too."

Padma rubbed her forehead. "Okay, let's be practical. If he sought a divorce, is it likely his wife would give him one?"

"Look, I didn't tell you this before because Cordelia was my mother-in-law, but now she's not. She's been involved with another man, Everard Monroe, since before her first husband died. She had to observe a period of mourning after Theo's father died, and then the Marriage Law came along. She couldn't marry Everard as he is also a pure-blood, but they are still very much a couple."

"Does Severus know about this?"

Hermione nodded. "He knew about it before he married her. But the most important thing is that Cordelia is older than Severus. She will turn fifty at the end of next August, and the law will no longer apply to her. She'll be free to divorce Severus and marry Everard."

"But she can divorce before she turns fifty...she'll have six months before she has to marry again ..." Padma paused and counted on her fingers. She grinned. "She could divorce Severus at the end of February, and you don't have to marry again until the middle of March!"

"But there's no guarantee that she'll grant him a divorce ... and she's forbidden from marrying Everard until she officially turns fifty. It would be just like her to make Severus wait until then, by which time it'll be too late for me. Even when she turns fifty, who's to say she'll let him have a divorce? She suspects something's up between me and Severus, and it would be exactly like her to refuse him a divorce because she's so possessive."

"Look, no matter what she's like, and no matter how nasty she gets, it's certainly better than her being five years away from fifty ... At least there's some hope of him being free from her in the not too distant future. If she won't grant him a divorce in February, maybe you could just go abroad for a few months until Severus is free."

"Look, this is all null and void, Padma. It doesn't really matter what Cordelia wants; it's what Severus wants that's more important. And I'm clueless as to whether or not he wants *me*."

They fell silent for a moment, until Padma said, "Okay. If it all goes wrong, and he's not willing to commit, what will you do?"

"I'll leave the country. I can't go for another marriage of convenience. I would move abroad, get a job, and pour all my energies into mounting a massive legal campaign against the Ministry of Magic until they repeal this ridiculous law. There are quite a few activists working against it, and if the *Daily Prophet* is to be believed, they're making serious progress."

"I can't say I'd blame you. France is still free of the law, and we have lots of contacts there. That's option number one. Now, let's say he decides he wants you, but Cordelia won't grant him a divorce. What will you do then?"

"Well, if that happens and he truly wants to be with me," Hermione said, hardly daring to hope such a thing might come true, "I would hope he'd be willing to leave the country with me and live on the continent...continue our business over there. I'm not sure what the situation would be financially ... I hope Cordelia's money isn't too tied up in his business."

"Okay," Padma said. "That's option number two. And if she grants him a divorce?"

"Then we live happily ever after." Hermione smiled. "Or at least we do most of the time, when he's not in a foul humour."

"Right," Padma said, looking suddenly business-like. "Option one is a last resort, and options two and three are more preferable. The problem, it would seem, is Severus. So, what do we do about him?"

Hermione crossed her arms and thought for a moment. "I can either force the issue, or I can wait. My head tells me I should sit down with him, discuss it like a rational adult, and give myself more time to sort my life out."

"And your heart?" Padma asked.

Hermione gave her a sad smile. "My heart tells me I have to wait; I have to give him more time to decide how he feels. I'm free and single; the ball is in his court, now."

Padma sighed. "I can't believe I've changed my mind about a man from whom I once thought you should run a million miles. But who am I to stand in the path of true love?" She frowned at Hermione. "At the risk of sounding awfully like the lyrics of a Celestina Warbeck song, I really do think you need to follow your heart."

"No matter what the outcome?"

Padma nodded. "No matter what the outcome. You've decided you're not going to marry somebody else regardless of what happens with Severus, so give him more time."

Hermione gave her a grateful smile.

"And no matter what happens," Padma added, "you'll have my support. And Dean's. We'll help you in any way we can."

"Thank you," Hermione whispered, too choked up to speak properly.

"Are we going to cry again, now?" Padma asked, already wiping her eyes.

Hermione laughed through her tears, overcome with joy to know she had her best friend's blessing. "Don't we always?"

Another two weeks passed in a whirlwind of visiting new-born babies and preparing for Christmas.

Hermione smiled as Severus began his customary post-coital stroking of her hair. It was a Sunday morning, and they had three hours left to them before she was due to meet her parents at her aunt's house for Sunday lunch.

"I don't suppose there's any chance you could cancel this appointment with your parents?" Severus asked, running his fingers through her curls.

Hermione gazed at him, glad he was so keen to spend the afternoon with her. "I'm afraid not," she said with a sigh. "I haven't seen them for weeks, and I've turned down the last three invitations to my aunt's house."

"In that case," he said with a smirk, "I'm glad we managed to fit in such an action-packed morning."

She chuckled and raised herself up on one elbow. "Yes, but the morning is not yet over." Flashing him a grin, she leaned forward and planted a light kiss on his lips. She kissed her way across his cheek until she came to the sensitive spot just below his ear, knowing her attentions there always made him groan. She was not disappointed.

"You harlot," he whispered, making her smile against his skin.

Still smiling, she ran the tip of her tongue along his jaw and pressed her lips to his neck, but he pulled away from her, as was his habit. She looked at him, suddenly determined not to let him evade her.

Since the day he had finally admitted he still suffered from his injured neck, she had been certain the wounds were still visible, but that he kept them magically concealed. On those occasions when her fingers strayed to the right side of his neck, she could feel, barely discernible, the tingle of magic beneath her fingertips, and he always removed her hand or backed away from her when she got too close to the spot where she had watched Madam Pomfrey pour Dittany onto his skin in the Shrieking Shack.

Frowning, she reached forward and ran her fingertips along his cheek, trailing them down towards his neck once again. As soon as she reached two inches below his jaw, he gripped her hand and pulled it away from his skin.

"Don't," he said with an irritated grunt.

She wriggled free of his grasp and reached for his neck once more. He stopped her before she touched his skin.

"Don't," he said more forcefully, glaring at her.

She looked into his black eyes. "I won't hurt you," she said quietly.

"I know you won't hurt me," he snarled. "But I could do without reading the pity in your eyes."

He rolled away from her, but she grabbed his shoulder. "Severus, don't just turn away from me," she said angrily.

He turned to face her again, his eyes blazing.

"We've been lovers for months," she said. "Have you once, in all that time, ever known me to pity you?"

She valiantly held his gaze, his eyes boring into hers. Her heart beat increased as he continued to glare at her, and she was sure he would rise from the bed in fury. But instead, he gave a deep sigh.

"There are times when I really don't understand you," he said.

"You need to learn that there is a world of difference between pity," she said, returning her fingers to his cheek, "and concern."

Tearing her gaze from his, she trailed her way from his cheek to his neck once more. She could feel him stiffen beside her in the bed, but she continued her path to his shoulder, her touch so light that she could barely feel his skin beneath her own.

He flinched when she found it: the first of two puncture wounds. But he did not stop her this time.

Hermione concentrated on keeping the expression on her face neutral, and even when she found the first circular ridge of skin, larger and more puckered than she had expected, she did not betray any emotion. She moved her fingers further and found the second wound.

"Am I hurting you?" she whispered, aware that his gaze was fixed upon her face.

"No," he said.

Moving the pad of her thumb tenderly across the invisible lesions, she finally met his stare. She pushed a strand of black hair from his face.

"You need hide nothing from me, Severus Snape," she said quietly, hoping she wasn't pushing him too far.

He looked into her eyes with such intensity that she could almost feel him probing her mind, searching her thoughts for any trace of pity. He seemed to regard her with a mixture of curiosity and disbelief, and, as if he had found something, he suddenly uttered another deep sigh.

Slowly, he reached out and took his wand from the bedside table, and she drew a deep breath, her heart hammering painfully against her ribs. She sat up straighter, allowing him to bring his hand to his neck. He whispered, "*Finite Incantatum*," and the charm that had concealed his scars for so long was lifted.

As Hermione drew her gaze from his face to his neck, she first felt shock and dismay. Even after all these years, the abrasions were still a livid, angry red against the wan pallor of his skin. Then she felt sad that he'd never revealed this to her before now.

Hoping she was doing the right thing, she leaned forward and, closing her eyes, she pressed her lips to the first of the rigid scars with infinite softness. She could feel the entire length of his body rigid against hers, but as she moved with the lightest of kisses to the second scar, his muscles began to relax. He pulled her tighter against him and moaned aloud.

She felt him tangle his hands in her hair, and when he gently pulled her away from his neck and looked into her eyes, that strange, probing look of curiosity had returned. He rolled her onto her back and after one more deep, lingering stare into her brown eyes, he lowered his lips to hers.

They had shared many, many kisses since that fateful morning in the laboratory, but Hermione felt a change in this kiss. This embrace was simultaneously more passionate and yet more tender than any they had shared before. She could feel hope swell within her chest, and tears of emotion sprang to her closed eyes. Wrapping her arms around his broad shoulders, she put everything she could into the kiss, willing him to know that she loved him, that she had no desire to ever be without him. And somehow, she knew he understood.

Severus watched from his bedroom window as Hermione made her way across Kensington Square, the hood of her winter coat pulled up to shield her from the cold December sleet. He missed her already, and as she disappeared into the little park at the centre of the square, he realised that his hands were shaking.

Cursing this uncharacteristic lack of control over his emotions, he turned and crossed the room, throwing open the door and heading for the staircase. His footfalls echoing in the empty house, he went to his study and took his seat behind his desk, lacing his fingers together as if to somehow channel his thoughts.

He had not used Legilimency on Hermione that morning: there had been no need. As if she had spoken the words aloud, her thoughts, her innermost desires, had been laid bare in her brown eyes.

She loved him.

He had often wondered, during the weeks and months of their affair, how she felt about him. The idea that she might have formed a serious emotional attachment to him had been repugnant at one stage, but now everything had changed, and he could not quite define what, exactly, he felt.

She loved him.

Why did that thought now please him? Why did he feel such turmoil? Why did his hands tremor so?

"Moe?" he called into the silence.

The tiny elf appeared with a crack. "Yes, Master Severus?" she said, her eyes wide.

"Might I ask if you could provide me with a meal?" Severus asked, picking up his quill. "I intended to prepare something myself, but I'm snowed under with paperwork."

Moe beamed. "I has just made a nice roast beef, Master Severus, sir." She clicked her fingers and disappeared from view.

Severus tossed his quill back onto the desk. He had lied: he'd no intention of tackling any paperwork this afternoon. It was his thoughts that required attention, not his potions business.

Moe returned with a laden tray minutes later and Levitated it onto his desk.

"Many thanks, Moe," he said. "I am most grateful."

"You is welcome," she said, taking a step back from the table. "I know you is liking roast beef. Maybe it is stopping you being sad that Miss Hermione is gone, sir."

He raised an eyebrow. "And why would I be sad that Miss Hermione is gone, Moe?"

"Because she is always making you smile, Master Severus, sir," she said as if this were the most natural thing in the world.

He frowned as Moe Disapparated, thinking about her parting remark. He sneered on an almost daily basis; he smirked with great regularity; but rarely did he smile. And now that he thought about it, he had probably smiled more in the past few months than he had in the entire previous forty-five years.

Picking up his knife and fork, he began to devour his dinner. Some potions did not sit well on an empty stomach, and the one he intended to ingest was among them.

When he had finished, Severus knelt before the drinks cabinet and pushed the decanter of brandy to one side. There, at the back of the shelf, stood the small crystal phial of colourless liquid: one dose of Exostraserum.

With an unsteady hand he took the potion from the cabinet, knowing the time had come at last to face his fears.

He crossed the room and sat behind his desk once more, twirling the tiny phial between his fingers. He glanced at the calendar on his desk: it was the eighth of December, and there was only a little over three months left until Hermione would be forced to abide by the law once more or flee the country.

He had tried to convince himself that he would be happier without her in his life, that a future with Hermione Granger would cause too many complications, too much upheaval. But he recalled the night she had danced with the young German man at Cordelia's ball: The sight of her laughing in the wizard's arms had struck him like a Bludger to the stomach, and the very idea of her walking up the aisle to meet another man made him feel positively ill.

But was he willing to go through the inconvenience, financial upheaval and undoubted nastiness that a divorce from Cordelia Mill would entail? He knew, without any doubt, that Hermione loved him. Thus, it all hinged on one thing: whether or not he loved her.

He had spent his adolescence and much of his adult life harbouring an unhealthy, obsessive love for a woman who had not returned his affections, who had not found it in her heart to forgive harsh words spoken in anger. And now, for the first time in his life, he was loved by a beautiful, intelligent, beguiling young woman, and he could not figure out how he felt about her in return. The truth was, he had little experience when it came to love.

He had hurt Hermione Granger; she had forgiven him. He had told her about his past; she had not taunted him. He had lifted the concealment charm on his neck; she had not pitied him. She was the embodiment of all that was good; he did not deserve her.

Sometimes, he watched her as she slept next to him, or as she frowned in concentration over a difficult potion, and on those occasions he had often felt a tightening in his chest, a dull ache of longing. Was that love?

He eyed the Exostraserum with trepidation. Uneasy as he was about discovering how he really felt about Hermione Granger, there were other issues he had no wish to visit while under the influence of the potion. What if he still had feelings for Lily Evans? What if he discovered that he had, after all, derived enjoyment from the act of killing Albus Dumbledore? Would he feel the agony of his own soul tearing apart as he had felt it in his nightmares?

Taking a deep breath, he uncorked the phial and raised it to his lips. He closed his eyes and emptied the contents into his mouth; it was barely a mouthful, and he swallowed the bitter potion in one gulp. His eyes watered as the burning liquid made its way to his stomach, and he rose from behind his desk, crossing the room to lean on the mantelpiece as he waited for the Exostraserum to take effect.

Severus had never taken this potion before, nor had he ever witnessed anyone else do so, and he had little idea what to expect. After a few seconds, he felt the first tingling in his veins as the magical properties of the liquid began to take effect.

The first sensation was not unlike the effects of Veritaserum: he felt strangely blank, detached from himself, yet perfectly aware of his own mind. With Veritaserum, the mind remained in this state until a question was asked and the relevant pictures and emotions connected with the answer flashed before one's eyes. But in this case, he was his own interrogator, and he must do the questioning.

His first thought was of Albus Dumbledore, and as soon as the old wizard came to mind, he rocked on his feet, overwhelmed by images and memories. He examined his feelings, and knew that while he was still bitter and resentful towards the former headmaster, there had been no pleasure in the casting of that *Avada Kedavra* on the Astronomy Tower. There had been relief that the task was at last complete and that he was free of the Unbreakable Vow, but no enjoyment. His soul remained whole. He knew a sudden throb of euphoria, but before he could enjoy the sensation, his thoughts turned to Lily Evans.

A pang of regret made him wince, and as he remembered her when they'd first met, a girl of only eleven years, remorse thrummed through his veins. He was enveloped by fear, by a sudden longing to get away from this memory of Lily, lest he discover that he was consumed by her still.

But before he could stop it, the image of her as a young woman came to the forefront of his mind, the memory of her on that swing near Spinner's End as he had seen her while he lay dying on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. He looked at her face, at the green eyes that had haunted him for almost all of his adult life, and with sudden liberation he knew, for certain, that he had let go of her. He had stopped loving Lily Evans.

He lingered over the memory of her from the Shrieking Shack, trying to recall the words she had spoken: "There is somebody for you, Severus. You do not yet know it; nor does she. It will take time. Just remember this: love often comes to us in the most unlikely of places, and in the most unlikely of guises. If you choose to return, Severus, happiness will find you eventually."

His eyes flew open. Had happiness found him?

He remembered how everything had become misty again, how Lily had suddenly disappeared and how he had found himself on the filthy floor of the Shrieking Shack once more, Hermione bent over him, tears coursing down her cheeks.

Hermione.

Images of her began to flick through his consciousness as if on a projector. Hermione as she bent over him in the Shack; Hermione, looking apprehensive, when she had returned his memories to him in St. Mungo's; Hermione insisting that a marriage between her and Theo could work; Hermione in her wedding dress; Hermione wiping her eyes on her sleeve, accepting the position as his assistant, smiling at him in the laboratory.

And that was when the pain began: Hermione on his arm as they entered the doors of the Great Hall; Hermione on the cliff in the west of Ireland, her hair whipping about her in the sea breeze; Hermione on the roof garden in her black dress; Hermione's lips upon his own; Hermione asleep next to him, her hair fanned out across the pillow; Hermione as she had been that morning, pressing her mouth to the wounds on his neck.

Here was the pain he had anticipated; *here* was the agony in his chest that he had expected to feel while his soul ripped in two.

Clutching breathlessly at his sternum, he sank to his knees before the hearth. The pain was almost unbearable, yet his soul had never felt more whole, and he had never felt such elation.

For in his potion-induced state of reason and clarity, he recognised this pain for what it was.

He loved Hermione Granger.

With all his heart.

The Deeps of my Heart

Chapter 30 of 34

Severus tries to find the right time to talk to Hermione.

A/N: To thank you for your lovely reviews, here is the next chapter early, as promised. I know it's Mother's Day in the US (we had ours in March), so Happy Mother's Day to you all. I'll have the next chapter up by Thursday.

LB x

All things uncomely and broken, all things worn out and old,
The cry of a child by the roadway, the creak of a lumbering cart,
The heavy steps of the ploughman, splashing wintry mould,
Are wronging your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart.
The wrong of unshapely things is a wrong too great to be told;
I hunger to build them anew and sit on a green knoll apart,
With the earth and the sky and the water, re-made, like a casket of gold
For my dreams of your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart.

- **W. B. Yeats, *The Lover tells of the Rose in his Heart***

Severus knelt before the fireplace, staring with unseeing eyes at the glowing embers in the grate...all that remained of the blazing fire he had lit some hours earlier. The effects of the Exostraserum were at last beginning to wear off, but as he tore his gaze from the hearth, he felt as if he were viewing his study for the first time, as if the scales had fallen from his eyes. His perspective had changed utterly, and he knew nothing would ever be the same again.

He rose stiffly from the carpet where he had knelt for over an hour and leaned against the mantelpiece, glaring at his reflection in the mirror. After a whispered incantation, the candles mounted on the walls cast their glow, brightening the gloom of the winter afternoon.

He stared at his own face in the looking glass: his skin was even paler than usual, and he had not yet replaced the concealment charm on the wounds to his neck. The puncture marks stood out against the alabaster of his skin, and he touched his fingertips to the scars, remembering how Hermione had, only hours earlier, pressed her lips to them in a gesture of acceptance and compassion.

His gaze moved to his own black eyes, and he realised he was examining the visage of a fool, the face of man who, at the age of almost forty-six years, had needed a potion to examine his own thoughts. He'd been living in denial for so many months, denial of his true desires and aspirations. It was not peace that he craved, nor wealth, nor success. He did not care, after all, for the approval of wizarding society, or for the convenient state of equilibrium in which he had lived, soullessly, for so very long.

It had taken the ingestion of a truth-potion to reveal to him the longing of his own heart: He wanted Hermione Granger. It really was that simple. He yearned for love, and happiness, and acceptance, and she alone could give him all those things. And he could offer them in return.

He loved her, and there could be no more conjecture. Looking down at his hands, he saw that the trembling had stopped. He turned and strode across the room, taking the seat behind his desk with a sigh. Shaking his head at his own stupidity, he wondered how he could ever have contemplated a future in which Hermione did not feature significantly.

It was true she was not glamorous, and she might not have fit many men's definition of the word beautiful, but he remembered her that morning, brushing her curls from her face and gracing him with a tired smile, and he thought he had never seen a woman more breath-taking. She was intelligent; she was passionate; she was innately

good. She was one of the most magically talented witches he had ever come across in his life, and she could be his if only he was willing to lay his heart on the line.

He frowned as his thoughts turned to his wife. Cordelia would not easily agree to a divorce. Of that he was certain, especially if she discovered her suspicions were true and he *had* been involved with Hermione. His skills in espionage had proven fruitful over the years, however, and he had amassed a number of chips with which to bargain his way out of his marriage. Cordelia might not be the insurmountable obstacle that she appeared.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose, dread washing over him at the thought of the inevitable confrontation that lay before him. Whether it took place now or in a few months' time, it would not be an enjoyable experience, and his wife had, after all, the might of her Ministry of Magic friends behind her. A request for a divorce would make his life difficult indeed. Was Hermione worth the struggle?

He imagined her walking down the aisle to meet another man, and he rose determinedly from his seat. Straightening his coat, he strode to the door. There was much to be arranged. Hermione Granger *would* be his. He was damned if some nameless stranger was going to rob him of the woman he loved.

There were only seven days left until Christmas, and Hermione had no idea what to get for Severus. Giving it up as an impossible task, she left Harrods and walked in the direction of Kensington Square. There were only fifteen minutes left of her lunch break, and her impromptu shopping excursion had proved fruitless.

Severus's behaviour since the morning she'd persuaded him to remove the concealment charm from his neck had puzzled her. He had become quieter, more sedate in a way, and at times he seemed lost in thought. He had disappeared from the laboratory for hours one day, and upon his return he had been evasive, secretive even, about his absence. Hermione had caught him gazing at her on more than one occasion, his expression a mixture of tenderness and sadness.

She was finding it increasingly difficult to sleep, and it was easy, as she lay alone in the darkness, to interpret his behaviour as a bad sign. Maybe he was, she thought, trying to find a way to end their relationship without destroying their working partnership. Or, worse still, maybe he wanted to be rid of her completely.

But then, tired and anxious after a sleepless night, she would enter the laboratory, and the small smile he gave her every time made her heart thump with hope, because she knew he was glad to see her.

Her return this afternoon was no different, and they chatted easily as they worked into the evening. It was shortly after five o'clock when Hermione tidied away the last of her ingredients and delivered an entire trunk full of potions to St. Mungo's via the Floo network. She Summoned her cloak from the hook on the back of the laboratory door.

"I'll be out for most of the day tomorrow," she said, picking up her Potions journal. "I'll see you on Saturday afternoon?"

Severus shot her a glance. "I wanted to talk to you about the clients you're meeting tomorrow," he said, crossing to her bench.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"I'm afraid they've all cancelled."

"What?" Hermione asked in disbelief, her jaw dropping. "What do you mean? It's my last batch of appointments this side of New Year ... Of course they didn't cancel!"

He smirked. "I'm afraid they did."

"All of them?" she asked suspiciously. "What are you up to?"

"Perhaps it would be more correct to say that I cancelled your appointments for tomorrow."

"You cancelled all my appointments? Severus ... How could you? Some of them were really important!"

He gave a shrug. "They were nothing that can't be dealt with after Christmas. And it was my prerogative. I am, after all, the Principal Potioneer, and if you examine clause twenty-nine of our contract you'll discover I have final say in all matters regarding the running of this business."

"I'm well aware of that," Hermione snapped, furious. "I can't believe you had the gall to go behind my back and cancel my appointments." She slammed her Potions journal onto her bench and put her hands on her hips. "What is going on, Severus?"

He chuckled maddeningly and kissed her on the forehead, confusing her. "Hermione, you are enchantingly pretty when you're angry," he drawled.

She stepped away from him and examined his face. "Are you winding me up?" she asked.

"I thought the next two days might be better spent doing something other than dealing with our clients. I wondered if you might accompany me on something of a field trip," he explained.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "A field trip? You want to go to some gloomy forest to collect bloody fungus?"

"No," he said patiently, "not a gloomy forest. Paris."

"Paris? You want to go on a field trip to Paris? There's some rare herb growing in Tuilleries?"

He smirked again. "Perhaps field trip is the wrong term. There's a conference in the Sorbonne this weekend. I wondered if you would care to join me."

Her eyes widened in delight. "The conference hosted by the editors of *The Potioneer*? But that's invitation only!"

"I've published in *The Potioneer* twice over the past six years, and I've received an invitation. That invitation extends to Potions Associates."

Hermione clapped her hands. "Really? You'd like me to go, too?"

"Of course," he said, enjoying her enthusiasm. "I hope you don't think me too presumptuous, but I've already arranged our accommodation."

She threw her arms around him and kissed him soundly on the cheek. "Oh, Severus! Thank you so much. I'm so excited ... I'll get to introduce you to some of my professors from the Sorbonne. I could show you where I used to work when I was at college ... and where I used to live!"

He gave her a brief kiss and disentangled her arms from around his neck. "We'll need to Apparate to Paris first thing in the morning, so you need to go and pack your trunk."

"I will," she said, grinning. "I can hardly wait!"

He watched fondly as she practically bounced to the laboratory door. "And pack some formal Muggle attire," he called after her.

"Muggle attire?" she asked, turning. "Why?"

"You'll soon see," he said enigmatically. "Ask me no further questions ... *Imay* change my mind."

His gaze followed her as she disappeared from view, and his smirk faded. He hoped he would find the courage to say all that needed to be said.

Hermione looked around the lecture theatre in the Sorbonne where she'd attended so many classes during her four years in Paris. The speaker at the lectern was possessed of a dull, monotonous voice, and Hermione allowed her attention to wander. Although she'd enjoyed many of the papers that day, the current paper was on the magical properties of extinct flowers, devoid of practical application. She was bored.

Severus uttered a discreet yawn to her left, and she watched as he chanced a glance at his watch. For most of the day, he'd been distracted and preoccupied, as he had done for the previous two weeks, and she wondered if he'd had some agenda for bringing her here. He certainly didn't appear to be enjoying many of the presentations.

"Bored?" she whispered, glad they'd chosen seats at the back of the room.

"Exceedingly," he answered under his breath.

Hermione grinned, relieved she was not alone in finding the paper utterly tedious.

"I'm considering casting a non-verbal *Silencio*," he added.

She stifled a laugh. "But someone would reverse it, and we'd end up simply prolonging the agony."

He uttered a sigh. "Perhaps you're right." He looked around the room. "We have an unimpeded path to the door; I suggest we leave as soon as this paper is finished."

"And skip the final session?"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You'd rather attend three papers on ..." He consulted the timetable in his hand. "The uses of hormone-stimulating potions in Flobberworm husbandry?"

She smiled. "Could we go for a walk instead?"

"Given that I would rather turn my own wand on myself than attend the next session, a walk sounds like a good idea." He fell silent as the speaker shot them an irritated glance.

As soon as the questions of the delegates had been answered and the session formally concluded, they left and made their way to the ground floor before they could be delayed.

Hermione gave a sigh of relief when they emerged into the cold evening air and pulled her cloak around her. "That man makes Professor Binns seem positively fascinating, and that's saying something. All the boys in our class used History of Magic for an afternoon nap."

They strolled towards the Seine.

"I'm absolutely appalled at how many utter imbeciles there appear to be in our field of expertise," Severus said, shaking his head.

"Didn't you enjoy *any* of the papers?"

He frowned. "The paper this morning on Veritaserum was vaguely informative."

"I thought it was fascinating," Hermione gushed. "And that Polish witch was very interesting."

"The woman who gave the talk on Dragon's blood? I hope you jest, Hermione?"

"What do you mean? That was *by far* the best paper of the day," she insisted, scowling.

"How can you say that? It was the most entertaining, perhaps, but where was the practical application? This is meant to be a conference for *Potioneers*, not for book-loving academics."

Hermione grunted. "Yes, well, the *book-loving academic* in me rather enjoyed that one, I'm afraid."

Severus rolled his eyes. "You might have blossomed into an attractive young woman, but that bookish little first-year is still in there, somewhere."

Hermione stopped and laughed. Severus turned to look at her, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, despite his best efforts to turn it into a frown. "What?"

She shook her head, smiling. "I love your double-edged compliments."

They walked in silence for a few moments, and, feeling suddenly plucky, Hermione slipped her hand into his, happy when he entwined his fingers through hers rather than shrug her off.

"Five months have passed since the end of July," Hermione said, referring to the day they had first made love, "but this is the first time we've ever held hands while we've walked."

"We've not had the opportunity, circumstances being what they are."

She looked at him through the dim light, wondering again if he'd brought her here for something other than a conference in which he appeared to be completely disinterested. She felt certain that he wanted to tell her something, but was that good or bad? Had he brought her here to say goodbye?

Tugging his hand in an attempt to cross the road, she said, "Can I show you where I used to work? It's a little cafe not far from here. It might still be open ... We could have a coffee ..."

He stopped and pulled her back from the edge of the street. "There will be time, perhaps, tomorrow. I'm afraid I lured you from the conference for my own nefarious purposes."

Hermione stopped and turned to him, her heart beating faster while she waited for him to explain.

Willing his expression to remain nonchalant, Severus drew a steady breath. "We have a dinner reservation in an hour, so I suggest we proceed to our hotel. We will require Muggle clothing for the evening."

"Where are we going?"

Without answering, Severus relinquished her hand and reached inside his robes. He extracted a small white envelope and handed it to her.

"What's this?" she said, taking the envelope from him and peering inside.

"A small gift," he replied. He watched, captivated, as she extracted the contents and her eyes widened.

"But, Severus! It's tickets to the Opera ... You *hate* opera!"

He smiled. "You have informed me, however, that this is the best opera ever written."

She inspected the tickets more closely. "Don Giovanni!" she said, overwhelmed. She threw her arms around his neck. "Severus, I'm so touched. Thank you. I can't believe you did this even though you don't like opera!"

He returned her embrace, pleased at her reaction. "Well," he said. "This is Herr Mozart's chance to change my mind."

Hermione descended the steps of the Opera Garnier, her hand tucked into the crook of Severus's arm. She was glad she'd decided to pack her luxurious, grey woollen coat: She and Severus looked quite at home among the smartly dressed Parisian opera-goers.

"Well, Severus," she said, smiling. "Has Herr Mozart won you over?"

"Perhaps," he said.

"Didn't you think it was amazing?"

Severus frowned. "It was ..."

"Don't you *dare* describe it as adequate," she warned.

He chuckled. "How about bearable?"

She smacked him on the arm. "You're a complete Philistine."

Severus smirked as they walked arm-in-arm along the Avenue de l'Opera. He would have been loath to admit it, but he had paid little attention to the music. He had spent much of the evening regarding Hermione through the safety of his long black hair. It had been her reactions to the performance that had pleased him, not the spectacle taking place on the stage.

They soon reached the edge of Tuilleries and stood before the Pyramide du Louvre. Hermione turned and snaked her arms around his waist.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you for taking me here and for sitting through an entire opera for me."

He gently brushed her hair from her face. "My pleasure," he replied, running his thumb along her cheek. "Hermione ..." he began, intending to tell her that he didn't want to give this up, that he wanted many more opportunities to walk hand-in-hand with her through city streets for the rest of their lives.

"Yes?" she said, giving him a contented half-smile.

He opened his mouth to say it, his heart thumping. But they had another day to spend in the French capital. What if the conversation did not go according to plan? What if he'd read the situation incorrectly and Hermione had absolutely no intention of staying with him? The following evening would be time enough for a confession.

He removed her arms from around his waist and took her by the hand. "Come," he said. "It's time we returned to our hotel. How would you feel about skipping the conference tomorrow and enjoying Paris instead?"

"Sounds good to me," Hermione said excitedly. "Can we go to the Musee d'Orsay? And the Jardin du Luxembourg? Oh, and I haven't been to the Sacre-Coeur for years!"

"I should have known you'd want to see Paris in a day. Thank Merlin for Apparition," Severus muttered, steering her towards their hotel and wondering if he was being practical, or cowardly. Perhaps he was nothing more than a yellow-belly, but he had twenty-four hours in which to redeem himself.

The day passed in a whirlwind of sightseeing, and as darkness fell, Severus felt a knot of anxiety in the pit of his stomach. He'd brought Hermione to Paris with the intention of telling her how he felt, of sitting down with her in some little cafe and asking her what she wanted from life. He had rehearsed the words so many times in his head; he had imagined how the scene might play out so often in his mind, yet the setting now seemed inappropriate, and the streets were too crowded with Christmas shoppers.

Not once had he ever seen Hermione so animated. She pointed out bars she had frequented while she'd been a student, places she'd worked and patches of grass beneath the trees in the Jardin du Luxembourg where she and Padma had studied in the springtime. How very different her life had been before her return to Britain, and Severus could not help but compare himself to the youthful, happy-go-lucky men she must have dated while at university. It wasn't the first time he'd marvelled at the fact that she appeared to be happy with him, but somehow it seemed all the more striking while she reminisced about her college years.

As they enjoyed an after-dinner aperitif, Severus noticed there were dark circles beneath her eyes.

"You're tired," he whispered across the small table.

She gave him a weary smile. "Yes, I am, a little. It's my own fault for insisting we see all the sights of Paris in one day."

"Perhaps we should return home when we've settled the bill," he suggested, motioning for the waiter, simultaneously relieved and disgusted with himself.

Hermione stifled a yawn. "I agree, but there's one more thing I'd like to see before we leave."

He arched an eyebrow. "And that is?"

"The view of the Eiffel Tower from the Jardins du Trocadero is spectacular, especially at night. If you've already sent our trunks back to London, we could Apparate from there once we have enjoyed the view."

Severus nodded. "I sent our trunks ahead this morning, so there's no need to return to the hotel."

When they'd paid for their meal, they left and strolled towards the Trocadero in comfortable silence. The boutiques and museums had closed, and the city streets were no longer packed with shoppers and tourists. And as they stood alone, looking down upon the illuminated Trocadero fountains, Severus knew this was as close to a perfect moment as he was likely to get.

But before he could speak, Hermione turned to him and said, "Why did you bring me here, Severus?"

He turned to her and took her face in his hands. "I brought you here for an absolutely riveting Potions conference," he said with a small smile.

She frowned. "A conference we failed to attend, and one in which you seemed to take no interest?" She gazed at him. "I think you have something to say to me, Severus, and I wish you'd just put me out of my misery and say it."

He could feel it again: that ache in his chest; a painful hammering of his heart. Still cupping her face, he kissed her gently, trying to put everything he found it so difficult to say into that one kiss. And when they pulled apart, her eyes were full of tears.

"Tell me that wasn't a goodbye kiss, Severus," she said, her voice shaking.

He frowned. "No, Hermione. It wasn't a goodbye kiss." He took a deep breath and opened his mouth to tell her that it would *never* be a goodbye kiss, but their solitude was shattered by a piercing wolf-whistle and a raucous chorus of laughter.

Severus sighed and turned to frown at a gang of teenagers who'd rounded the corner behind them. He was hopeless at this sort of romantic thing, and the Parisians certainly weren't helping.

Hermione gave a short laugh and shook her head. "Talk about spoiling the moment."

He dropped his hands from her face. "Let's go home," he suggested, feeling thoroughly defeated.

She nodded her agreement, her expression still troubled. "Your house or mine?"

"Mine."

They walked away from the rowdy party of students, and when they were unobserved, they turned on the spot and Disapparated to Kensington Square. They entered the welcome silence of the house, and Severus closed the door behind them.

"Free of Parisians and tourists at long last," Severus said, removing his thick winter coat.

Hermione nodded mutely, and he could tell she was still upset, unsure of his motivations. He reached out and pulled her to him by the lapel of her grey coat. His gaze still fixed on her face, he opened the silver buttons and pulled her coat down her arms, turning to hang it next to his own on the coat rack.

He looked at their coats hanging side by side and thought how very fitting they looked, as if they somehow summarised their owners. His was long and black; hers was much smaller, lighter in colour and of a more feminine cut. They were different, and yet, they looked good together, hanging side by side.

He returned his attention to Hermione, who was watching him, a puzzled expression on her face.

"Kiss me like you did a few moments ago, in Paris," she whispered.

Nodding, he brought his hands up to cup her face, the way he'd done as they'd stood above the Trocadero fountains, and pressed his mouth tenderly to hers, parting her lips with his tongue.

She uttered a soft sigh into his mouth, then she brought her hands up and entwined them in his hair, returning his kiss hungrily, pressing herself against him.

"Take me to bed," she said hoarsely.

He cleared his throat. "Gladly."

He took her by the hand and led her to his bedroom, not letting go until he'd reached the edge of the bed, where he sat down and pulled her onto his lap. Raising his hands to her hair, he freed her curls of their band and admired the way her chestnut locks tumbled about her shoulders. He dropped the band to the floor and reached to undo the buttons of her blouse, but she pulled away from him, tugged the blouse over her head and tossed it across the room.

Pressing his lips to the swell of her right breast, Severus released the clasp of her bra and slid the straps down her arms. Her nipples were already hard, and he took one into his mouth, groaning as she wriggled in his lap, her thigh brushing his erection. He gripped her waist and tugged her tighter still against his groin, enjoying the way she arched her body against him, throwing her head back, making her glorious hair brush against his knees. Grazing her nipple with his teeth, he was rewarded with a moan, and he released her from his mouth, turning to lay her on the bed.

He undid the button at the top of her jeans, and she kicked off her shoes, raising her hips and allowing him to strip her of the remainder of her clothing. He stood above her, admiring her naked body through half-lidded eyes while he divested himself of his clothes.

They'd been lovers for many months now, and although he had explored every inch of her body, there always seemed to be something he had never noticed or appreciated before. Tonight he admired the way her quickened breathing made her chest rise and fall. Her breasts had never looked so full, and he gave her a contented smile as he moved his gaze to her face to find her lower lip caught between her teeth, as was her habit while she waited for him to undress.

Finally naked, he lowered himself to the bed beside her and ran his fingers along the curve of her hip, a gasp escaping his lips when she cupped his testicles with her warm hand. She pressed her lips to his and wrapped her leg around his hip, rolling onto her back and pulling him with her.

He made love to her with infinite gentleness, and when they were both satisfied, she rolled onto her side, her back pressed against him to allow him to wrap her in his arms as was his custom. But, to her surprise, he pulled her back to face him.

"Look at me, Hermione," he whispered.

She turned to face him, confused, and they regarded one another for a very long moment. And then he kissed her.

Although she wasn't sure why, Hermione felt hope surge within her chest, and she could not help but be moved to tears. She had waited so long and so patiently to know how he felt, and it was there, in this kiss.

Severus kissed her until he felt dampness against his cheek. Shocked, he pulled away to find tears streaming down her face.

"Hermione," he said, a lump forming in his own throat. "Why are you crying?"

She sat up and covered her face with her hands. "I don't really know, Severus," she said, her voice choked. "I just feel like an emotional wreck; I don't know what's the matter with me." She tugged the bed sheet up to her neck and hugged her knees to her chest.

He watched as she closed her eyes for a few seconds and took a deep breath.

"I feel as though things have changed between us, and I don't know how to interpret that change," she said quietly, struggling against her tears.

Severus sat up with a sigh and swung his legs over the edge of the bed, his back to her. He had not meant to upset her; he had envisaged many different scenarios for this evening, but not one filled with tears and confusion.

"Things *have* changed," he said softly, half-turning to her, but not meeting her gaze. "Everything has changed."

He picked up his wand from the pile of discarded clothes on the floor and Summoned his dressing gown.

"How, Severus?" Hermione asked desperately. "How has it changed?"

He stood and shrugged into the gown, tying the belt around his waist. "We used to fuck," he said simply.

She winced, unused to such crude language from him. "And now?"

He turned and looked at her. "And now we make love."

He began to walk away, across the room. He would go to his study and retrieve the documents on which he had worked since the day he had taken the Exostraserum. He would prove to her that he was determined to secure a divorce before she was subject to the Marriage Law once more.

Hermione's eyes widened, and she scrambled to the edge of the bed, hardly daring to breathe, the sheet still clutched to her chest. Never, ever before had the ~~word~~^{love} escaped his lips. "Does that mean you love me, Severus?"

He stopped, his hand upon the doorknob.

Hermione stayed still, watching as he stood at the still-closed door. Her heartbeat was ringing in her ears, and as his silence stretched across what felt like minutes, she was filled with regret. She had sworn she would wait for him, that she would not force the issue.

"I ... I'm sorry, Severus," she said, closing her eyes. "I shouldn't have asked. *I* like things the way they are. If it wasn't for the Marriage Act, I could happily go on like this forever ... I just..."

He slowly turned to face her. "Yes, Hermione."

She stopped mid-sentence, her lower lip trembling. "Yes?"

"Yes, I do," he said.

She couldn't help it: a tear rolled down her cheek.

His crossed the room once more and sat on the bed, facing her.

"Do you want to be with me?" he asked.

Hermione nodded. "More than anything," she whispered.

He leaned forward and gently wiped the tear from her cheek. "Then there is much to be arranged."

He stood, and with one more lingering look at her tear-stained face, he left the room, closing the door behind him.

Hermione sank onto the bed and buried her face in her pillow, wondering why, when it seemed that all her dreams had just come true, she felt the need to cry as if her heart was breaking.

It was more than an hour later when Severus left his study, satisfied at last with his paperwork. He had been meticulous in his gathering of information since he'd become betrothed to Cordelia Mill, and he'd spent a fortnight adding to the file that he intended to present to his wife.

Papers in hand, he quietly opened the bedroom door, intending to lay the evidence of his commitment before Hermione. But even in the dim, flickering light of the single candle, he could tell by the steady rise and fall of her chest beneath the quilt that she had fallen asleep. He crossed to the bed and laid the documents on the bedside cabinet with a deep sigh. They would have to wait until morning.

He slipped beneath the covers and wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her snugly against his chest. She did not stir, even when he planted a kiss on her shoulder. He extinguished the candle and lay awake for many hours, trying to fathom what his wife's reaction might be, until sleep eventually claimed him.

Severus woke the next morning feeling refreshed and optimistic. He showered and dressed while Hermione slept on. She often tossed and turned in her sleep, tickling his face with her mop of curls, but last night she had barely moved at all, so deep had been her repose.

When he was fully clothed in his customary black, he knelt beside her sleeping form. She was pale, and even though she had slept soundly, there were inky smudges beneath her closed eyes. He suspected she had not slept well for some weeks, fretting, no doubt, about what the coming months might bring. A pang of guilt gnawed at him. Perhaps he should have taken the Exostraserum sooner and spared her needless weeks of worry.

Deciding he could manage without Moe's help, he descended to the kitchen to prepare some breakfast. When the table had been set, he returned to the bedroom and knelt beside Hermione once more.

"Hermione?" he whispered, shaking her gently by the shoulder.

Her eyes flickered open, and she looked around, disoriented.

"Good morning," Severus said with a smile.

"Good morning," she said, yawning. "What time is it?"

"Almost ten. I've made some breakfast. Would you like to come to the kitchen, or shall I bring it up here?" He looked at her in concern: she was still unusually pale.

"I'll come downstairs," she said, sitting up. "Just give me a few minutes to shower."

He pressed the back of his hand to her forehead. "Do you feel unwell?"

She managed a weak smile. "I feel fine; I'm just worn out. I haven't been sleeping too well."

He kissed her on the forehead and rose. "I'll see you in a few moments; we have much to discuss."

When she appeared in the kitchen, she looked better, but she only picked at her breakfast.

"Hermione, you need to eat," he said.

"I can't; I'm too nervous," she said, pushing her plate away from her. "What happens now, Severus?"

He sat forward, his elbows on the table. "I ask Cordelia for a divorce."

Hermione gazed at him. "Is she likely to grant you one?"

"I'm certain she won't agree straight away, but in February she will be only six months away from her fiftieth birthday, and she'll be able to divorce without becoming subject to the Marriage Law again. She'll be free to marry Everard; it would be in her best interests to secure a divorce."

"You don't think she'll refuse just out of spite?"

"It's not beyond the realms of possibility," he agreed, "but I've accrued a few chips with which to bargain my way out over the years." He pushed the bundle of parchment across the table towards her.

She looked at the documents. "What's this?"

"Information I've gathered over the years: legal documents detailing our rights in case of divorce; the pre-marital agreement we both signed; and details of my finances."

"What about the lab, Severus? I thought you used Cordelia's money to begin your business? How much do you own her?"

"I used her financial backing to begin the business, it's true, but I have more than ample funds to pay back everything I borrowed. A divorce will not come cheap, but thanks to Albus Dumbledore, she cannot refuse me on monetary grounds."

She frowned. "What has Albus Dumbledore got to do with anything?"

"The Telenium cauldron," he explained. "He bequeathed it to me. I've had the means to produce some extremely rare potions, and I have many clients who have been willing to pay exorbitant sums of money to ensure a continuous supply over the years." He tapped the documents with his index finger. "Take a look for yourself. I am a wealthy man, Hermione."

Hermione glanced at the bundle of papers on the table. "I trust you, Severus; I'll take you at your word. But I'm still not convinced she'll just let you go, and I only have three months remaining before I have to marry again." She coloured at the mention of marriage. He had not, after all, asked her to marry him.

"She may protest at first, but she'll concede eventually. She has no reason not to do so."

Hermione bit at her bottom lip. "When will you ask her?"

"Today. I want to get things moving, and we will need to find new premises for the laboratory. I think it would be unwise for us to continue working here in Cordelia's house. Business always comes to a halt for the Christmas period, and that means I have two weeks in which to locate and prepare new premises. The timing is good."

"I suppose you're right," she said. "But where will we go? We could always convert one of the rooms in my house into a lab."

Severus shook his head. "Lance is still her uncle, and even though you own part of the building, it is still Mill property. I would prefer somewhere neutral."

"But what will you do?"

"I'll find somewhere to rent for now."

Hermione rubbed her brow, tears coming to her eyes. "This could all be such a mess, Severus. I don't want to be the reason your life is turned upside-down; I never meant to make things so difficult for you."

"Not everything worth doing is easy," he said, taking her hand. "Things will have to change, there is no denying that. But don't you think it will be worth it?"

She met his intense, black gaze, still unable to believe this was finally happening. She felt as though she was living through a dream. "I suppose it will be, if it comes to pass."

They looked at one another in silence for a moment, until Hermione asked, "What time will Cordelia be home?"

Severus shrugged. "This evening, I would guess. She's rarely back before lunchtime."

Hermione looked at her watch: it was approaching eleven. "Maybe I should go, just in case. You really intend telling her today?"

He nodded. "She's usually in good form when she's been away for a few days. Besides, I'd like to get it over with."

Hermione rose from the table. "I promised I'd meet Ginny at the Leaky Cauldron for lunch, but I'll be home early this evening. Will you send me word as soon as you can? I doubt I'll be able to do anything other than pace the floor this evening."

Severus stood up and nodded again. "I'll send you a note as soon as I have anything to report."

They climbed the stairs and turned to one another in the hall. Severus gathered her in his arms and pressed his lips to the top of her head.

"Good luck," Hermione muttered against his chest.

"Try not worry," he said. "Cordelia's bark has always been worse than her bite. She may refuse at first, but she'll come round."

He pulled away to find that tears were coursing down her cheeks once more. "Hermione, why are you so upset?"

She put her hands to her face and sobbed. "I ... I don't know ... I just ..."

"Come," he said, taking her by the hand and pulling her into the sitting room.

He sat on the sofa and pulled her onto his lap. "Dry your tears," he said, Conjuring a handkerchief.

She did as she was told and raised swollen eyes to his. "I'm just so afraid she won't let you go, Severus. You've already said it annoys her more because it's ~~me~~ ^{me}. What if she refuses you a divorce just to ruin everything? What if I have to go abroad? It just ... It all feels so much more desperate now."

"What do you mean?"

She looked at him and took a deep breath. "I had no idea how you felt, Severus. I didn't think you'd want to go through with a divorce, just for me. But after last night, it's like ..."

He waited for her to continue and wound a curl around his finger.

Hermione gazed at him. "I love you, Severus. I couldn't bear to be without you, and now it just seems like there is so much more to lose!"

He pulled her to his chest, stroking her hair as she succumbed to a fresh wave of tears. He closed his eyes; he had known, deep down, that she loved him, but to hear it on her lips was something else entirely.

"Hermione, we *will* be together. You have to trust me."

"I trust *you*," she said. "I just don't trust Cordelia Mill to let you go."

"What does it matter?" he said, willing her to understand. "Hermione, if she refuses me a divorce we will leave this place. There are plenty of countries that have not adopted the Marriage Law. If we have to go to the ends of the Earth, we *will* be together."

She pressed her forehead to his, soothed by his words. Wiping her face with the handkerchief, she took a deep, steadying breath.

"Now, much as I dislike sending you away while you're upset, I have more paperwork to prepare, and it's imperative that you leave before Cordelia returns," he said

Hermione nodded and stood, smoothing her clothes. "Walk me to the door," she said, holding out her hand.

He took it and rose from the sofa. When they reached the hall, they both stopped.

There, by the door, stood a large wooden trunk that had not been there only moments before. Inscribed on the top was the name *C. A. Mill*.

They looked at one another in horror. The sound of footsteps came from the floor above.

"Cordelia's back?" Hermione whispered, her face stricken. "Already?"

"So it would appear," Severus said grimly.

"Do you think she heard us?" Hermione asked, desperate for him to say no.

Severus glanced at the open door of the sitting room, only feet from where his wife's trunk sat. "Almost certainly."

Sweet Unrest

Chapter 31 of 34

Severus tackles Cordelia, and Hermione has a surprise.

A/N: Dearest readers. See what happens when you leave me awesome reviews? You get the next chapter a day early!

I've promised to explain and clarify a few things for some of you, so rather than respond to you individually, I'll do it here. Feel free to skip on!

Why did I remove Denial from the internet? Why did I edit and rewrite? I can assure you, I wasn't playing the drama queen. I was just scared. Let me explain: In 2009, I began to write original YA fiction. Later that year, I undertook a university course in 'Creative Writing for Publication'. I befriended one of my author-teachers on the course, a novelist called Suzanne, who has been of enormous encouragement.

In September 2010 I won a runner-up spot in a national short story competition. My prize was a one-day workshop with authors, editors, publishers and agents. At that workshop I met the (at the time) chief editor of Puffin Ireland, who expressed interest in my YA novel and asked me to send the opening chapters. I did, and only hours later she requested the full manuscript and told me to get cracking on the sequel.

Suzanne, my writing teacher friend, told me to use Puffin's interest to try to get an agent. Within a week, I had interest from three London agents, and when the one who was top of my agent wish-list offered representation, I accepted. I was incredibly lucky. That agency receives up to 15,000 submissions a year, and only takes on between two and five new authors. I was ecstatic.

I went to London to meet my agent and the agency editor. While we had lunch, I told them all about my adventures in Fanfiction. I also expressed some concern about whether or not I should leave my fanfiction online. My concerns were: 1) If I found a publisher, might it be interpreted that I had my start from, and therefore made money from, the HP series? 2) Now that I was a YA author, would it be a bad thing if my link to stories with a fairly adult theme, using characters from a children's series, was discovered? 3) I felt my writing had improved and changed over the three years since I'd started Denial, and I was cringing at the fact that Denial was (to my mind) so over-written and littered with adverbs.

My agent pretty much dismissed the first two concerns, but about the third she asked would I have been embarrassed for her to read Denial? The answer was yes, I would have been. She said that was my answer. I also sought Suzanne's advice, and hers was similar.

And so, after some tears and doubts, I pressed the delete button. Denial was gone, along with the thousands of reviews it had received. It was a very, VERY hard thing to do, believe me. I could have left it online and edited it there, yes, but I knew it might be some time before I would have the time to tackle it. I was right more than two years passed before the chance to sit down and edit came along.

So, what of my YA novel? Well, after the rewrite, it went pretty far at Puffin. But in the end, they rejected. And so did all the other major publishers. So I wrote another novel. My agent said it was the best YA thriller she'd ever read. No-one wanted it. Then my agent left the agency, and I was convinced that would be it, her opportunity to dump me. But no, she set up her own agency, told me she believed in me, and asked me to go with her, along with 18 of her published authors.

We spent many months rewriting my first novel, and meanwhile, I landed a small job writing for a series fiction company. My agent submitted my first novel again in February. Still, no luck. She's submitting my second novel again now, she encouraged me to put my fanfic back online, and I'm working on my third novel. I'm beginning to lose hope. There are times when I very badly want to give up. But I've come so far. I have an agent, which is something most writers dream of. And more importantly, I've had so much encouragement from family and friends and my readers. For now, I will keep going.

Please believe me when I say I did not remove Denial out of vanity or in a fit of melodrama, but out of a genuine fear that some editor would read it and think 'Geez. She sucks. Look at all those adverbs!' So now, when I write or edit, I think 'Would I be happy for my agent to read this?' If not, I edit again. So WWMAS (What Would My Agent Say?) has become my litmus test.

Would you care for an example? Consider this, when Severus finds Harry and Draco on his doorstep in Chapter 13. New version: *The spectacle of them united made him wonder if the fumes from his cauldron had affected his usually razor-sharp wit.* Old version: *The spectacle of them united served to stagger him so violently that he wondered if the fumes from his cauldron had affected his usually razor-sharp wit.* "Served to stagger him so violently"? Really? REALLY? What was I thinking? For the most part, this edit has been about deleting and simplifying. It is more than 30,000 words shorter. And I no longer sound so much

like I swallowed a thesaurus.

There you go. A few of you have asked after Dr Beloved (my hubby). He is very well, and is still my greatest champion. I read him out all of my reviews, so he loves you almost as much as I do.

Right, I will end the epic there for today. But there's one more thing. I do recall, first time around, that a few readers were unhappy with this chapter and the next. They were frustrated; irritated. They wanted to smack Severus, and Hermione, and probably me. I consider that a job well done. There is often a calm before the storm. This is the storm before the calm. Trust me, please. Your patience and loyal readership will be rewarded.

LB x

Bright star! Would I were steadfast as thou art...

Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night

And watching, with eternal lids apart,

Like Nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,

The moving waters at their priestlike task

Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,

Or gazing on the new soft fallen mask

Of snow upon the mountains and the moors...

No...yet steadfast, still unchangeable,

Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,

To feel forever its soft fall and swell,

Awake forever in a sweet unrest,

Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,

And so live ever...or else swoon to death.

- John Keats, *Bright Star!*

Standing in the hallway, Hermione covered her mouth with her hand, and Severus nervously fingered his bottom lip, his mind racing as he tried to remember what he had said only moments before in the sitting room.

There was little doubt in his mind that Cordelia's untimely return meant she'd heard every word. His gaze strayed to his wife's trunk, sitting on the floor, her name inscribed in florid script upon the lid. He'd *known* he must approach the subject of his hoped-for divorce with great delicacy. *Why* had he suggested they return to his house instead of Hermione's when they'd left Paris? *Why* had he spoken of such significant issues with the door of the room wide open? The knowledge that he might have ruined his chances of a divorce burned like acid in his stomach.

Locking gazes once again with Hermione, he gave a short laugh of disbelief. Then, pressing a finger to his lips, he motioned Hermione forward and opened the front door. He had expected her to give way to tears once more, but her eyes remained dry, and her horror was evident on her pale face.

"It cannot be helped, Hermione," he whispered, leaning close. "I will proceed as planned, and if she overheard our conversation, I will deal with the consequences."

Hermione whispered urgently, "But, Severus, if she heard what we said ..."

"I repeat: It cannot be helped. It may make things difficult in the short term, but it changes nothing."

Hermione looked at him for a moment, her eyes wide, and finally nodded her understanding.

He pressed his lips to the top of her head. "Try not to worry," he said, motioning for her to step through the open door. "I'll send word as soon as I can."

"I'll be back by three, so please, Severus, let me know when you can."

He nodded. "We may lock horns for hours, so don't fret if the day passes without a message; I promise to contact you as soon as possible."

Severus watched as she gave him a final nod before walking across the road. When she had disappeared from view, he shut the door and leaned his head against its cold, varnished surface, closing his eyes and steeling himself for the confrontation that was only moments away.

Cordelia had been his wife for almost seven years, and during that time they had managed to live in relative harmony. He had allowed her to continue her private life undisturbed, and until Hermione had arrived in his life, Cordelia had returned the compliment. They'd not once exchanged angry words before Hermione had begun work as his assistant, and he knew his wife well enough to know she could be dangerous when her pride had been injured. Getting her to agree to a divorce would not now be easy. An outright refusal was certainly not beyond the realms of possibility.

With a glance at the ceiling, he made his way to Cordelia's private sitting room on the second floor, feeling like a man condemned. When he reached the door, he paused outside, listening to the sound of a quill scratching on parchment. He drew a deep breath, knowing that this interview could have serious consequences for his and Hermione's future. With a silent reminder to keep a tight rein on his temper, he opened the door.

Cordelia sat at her mahogany bureau, her back to the door, one perfectly manicured hand clutching a quill with which she was scribbling furiously. Severus closed the door gently behind him. He stood motionless, his arms folded across his chest, waiting for her to speak first.

"Why don't you have a seat, Severus," she said icily without turning her head. "I'm sure the discussion we are about to have will be neither pleasant nor brief, so you might do well to take the weight off your feet."

Severus took the armchair nearest her bureau, wincing at the dangerous composure of her voice. He could sense suppressed rage in her tone, and he watched as she continued her writing, wondering if the letter was in any way connected to what she had overheard on her return. The minutes ticked by slowly, and he knew she was deliberately prolonging his agony, making him suffer. He remained quiet, aching to speak, but determined to let her begin the proceedings.

Eventually, after what felt like an hour, she signed her name with a flourish and put her letter inside an envelope. Pushing it to one side, she tossed her quill onto the bureau, splattering the wood with black ink. She laced her hands and turned to face him, her dark blue eyes flashing malevolently.

"I often wondered how you spent your weekends while I was away, Severus," she began. "And now, I know. I never suspected you to be so lacking in taste as to *fifty* house with your whores."

He gritted his teeth, reminding himself that it was in Hermione's best interests for him to keep his anger under control. "That remark is both ungallant and unjust, Cordelia."

She narrowed her eyes, a taunting smile on her painted face. "There are only a few days left until Christmas, so I decided an early return home was in order to finish my shopping. Little did I know I would walk in on such a touching scene. It was almost worthy of one of those dreadful short stories in *Witch Weekly*," she sneered.

Severus curled his hands into fists, determined not to be goaded into reacting in anger.

"I'd believed you incapable of love, Severus. You've always seemed so ... How shall I put it? Soulless? But now I find that you're willing to ... What was it you said? Go to the ends of the earth to be with your Potions assistant. Now, isn't that just the sweetest thing I've ever heard?"

"Cordelia," he began with a sigh. "I'm sorry you were witness to such a conversation; I would have spared you that if I'd known you would return so early."

"How charitable of you, Severus," she said, smirking. "Well, I'm afraid I'll have to request that Miss Granger be refused entry *to my* house from now on. I'm sorry if that's inconvenient for your business, dearest, to say nothing of your little weekend hobby, but I'm sure you understand how it is."

He regarded her, choosing his next words carefully. "Cordelia, I would like to leave Hermione out of this conversation as much as possible. I will concur with your wishes and ensure that she stays clear of this house, but I'd much rather we concentrate on the situation as it pertains to you and me."

"Well, Severus, I'm quite keen to discuss Hermione Granger at the moment, seeing as the suspicions I've had for months now have been proven correct. Tell me, did you fuck her while she was at school? Fancied a go at a schoolgirl?"

It took all of his resolve not to stand, and he itched to draw his wand. "How dare you?" he spat. "I might have been many things, Cordelia, but I never would have taken advantage of a student."

"Well, forgive me for casting such aspersions on your impeccable character, but is it so difficult to imagine? Given how you've taken advantage of your work colleague, your former daughter-in-law ..."

He folded his arms. "Shall we just sling mud, Cordelia? Behave like children? Or shall we try to reach a resolution?"

She glared at him. "And what sort of resolution do you want, Severus? What is it you want of me?"

"In February you will be only six months away from your fiftieth birthday. You know that means you'll never again be subject to the Marriage Law. I think it would be in both our best interests to secure a divorce at that time."

Cordelia uttered a scornful laugh. "I don't think so, Severus. Our arrangement suits me perfectly well, thank you. I've no intention of signing divorce papers any time soon."

"Cordelia," Severus said, "are you honestly trying to tell me you had no intention of seeking a divorce as soon as you turned fifty? What would be the benefit of continuing to live in a marriage of convenience?"

"The law may no longer apply to *me* when I turn fifty, Severus, but as you're almost four years my junior, I had every intention of staying wed until you reached your fiftieth birthday. I was going to spare you the necessity of marrying again."

He knew she was lying, and he remained silent for a moment, considering how best to continue. "I wish to request a divorce, to become legal on the last day of February," he said calmly.

"Request denied," she spat.

This was going to be a long day, he knew. "On what grounds do you deny my request?"

"On all grounds! On the grounds that I will not turn fifty until August; on the grounds that I'm perfectly happy with our current situation; on the grounds that you could not possibly afford to pay back everything you borrowed to start your business, never mind what I might demand as a divorce settlement."

"You are legally entitled to half of my fortune, Cordelia, and I will offer you that without reservation, in addition to paying back what I borrowed to set up my laboratory. With interest."

"Half of your *fortune*? I hardly think your meagre sum from the sale of your parents' house could be described as a fortune, Severus."

"I refer to the fortune I've amassed over the past six years. My Potions business has been rather more lucrative than I ever dared to hope it might be; I'm far wealthier than you might imagine."

She raised a sceptical eyebrow. "I'd need to see proof of that. Besides, I've little use for money. It does not suit me to divorce."

"Cordelia, you will never again be subject to the Marriage Law once you are six months from your fiftieth birthday. What's more, once you turn fifty, you will be free to marry Everard Munroe if that is your wish." He watched in satisfaction as her eyes widened. Although he had referred to her lover before, Everard's name had never been mentioned.

She tapped her nails angrily on the surface of the bureau, her jaw clenched. "I've no idea who you're talking about."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Cordelia, spare me your play-acting. I knew about you and Everard before we married. Half the wizarding world knows about you and Everard Munroe, so do not even attempt to deny it."

Cordelia pursed her lips and regarded him in stony silence.

"You spend almost every weekend in his company, mostly at your cottage in Edinburgh, or at his estate near Aberdeen. You've been seeing him since before Gilbert Nott died. Not only do I have ample evidence to support my allegation, I have numerous witnesses who can verify the fact that you have been lovers for many, many years."

She glared at him. "Moe?" she called, and the little elf appeared before them with a loud crack.

"You is calling, Mistress Cordelia?"

"Strong coffee, if you please, and lots of it," she barked.

Moe gave a nod of her head before disappearing with a click of her fingers.

Cordelia turned from Severus and extracted a number of papers from within the locked drawer of the bureau. She looked through the documents in silence, until Moe returned with a tray of coffee and sandwiches.

"Thank you, Moe," Severus whispered, taking the tray from the elf and setting it on a coffee table.

Cordelia maintained her silence until after Moe had left. Leaning forward to pour the coffee, she said, "Well, Severus, I would very much like to see some of this evidence of which you speak, and I presume you have accounts that can confirm this supposed *fortune* of yours?"

"Of course, Cordelia," he said, his lip curling in dislike as he met her gaze. "All relevant documents are ready for your perusal."

"Well, bring them here," she said. "I have a copy of our pre-marital agreement, and I have all day to inspect the small print."

He rose from his seat and left the room, resisting the temptation to slam the door behind him. Descending to the basement, he exhaled deeply, finally allowing anger to wash over him. His hands shook as he recalled some of the remarks his wife had made about Hermione. Much as he would like to hex Cordelia to oblivion, the resultant life sentence in Azkaban would not be worth that brief moment of satisfaction.

Hermione was grateful that Albus Severus Potter's feeding schedule meant Ginny had to leave the Leaky Cauldron before two o'clock. She had considered cancelling her lunch date with Ginny, but she knew her friend hadn't had many opportunities to get out of the house since Albus's birth, and she just hadn't had the heart to let her down. Anxiety was eating her up, and she knew she should stay out of the house, keep herself occupied with visiting friends or doing some shopping, but she was drained, both physically and emotionally, so she Apparated to the steps of her house as soon as Ginny had returned to Godric's Hollow.

Wondering if she should take a dose of Pepperup Potion, Hermione went in search of a cup of tea. Lance was sitting at the kitchen table, a collection of old black and white wizarding photographs spread out before him.

"Hello, lassie," he said when Hermione entered the room. "I've just made a nice pot of tea."

"Hello, Lance," she said with a tired smile, taking a seat and Summoning a mug from the press. "What are you up to?"

"Just looking through some old photographs," Lance said, smiling at one in his hand. "Look: the day I became a fully qualified Healer."

Hermione took the photograph from him and gasped. The young man in the picture, dressed in traditional St. Mungo's robes, was incredibly handsome. He couldn't have been much older than she was now, and his hair was dark brown and reached his shoulders. His face was clean-shaven, his jaw was strong and chiselled, and even through his robes it was evident that he was of muscular build, despite his short stature.

Lance smiled across the table. "I was about your age in that picture."

"You were so good-looking!" Hermione exclaimed. "I bet you broke a few hearts in your time."

Lance chuckled. "Here's one of a whole gang of us up in Scotland when I was about fifty. One of Newt Scamander's field trips. Great fun!"

Hermione reached for the picture and peered at the group of witches and wizards, instantly picking out Albus Dumbledore from the crowd. His lengthy hair was auburn and only barely flecked with grey, but his crooked nose was still recognisable. "Is that you?" Hermione asked, pointing to the smallest man in the picture.

Lance peered through his glasses. "Yes, that's me. Guess who that is standing next to me?"

Hermione squinted at the woman standing next to Lance in the picture, who looked to be in her early thirties. "No!" she gasped. "That's never Minerva McGonagall?"

"The very one!" Lance said.

Hermione grinned at the picture of her former professor, and the Minerva in the photograph smiled and waved. She was without her spectacles, and her hair, which was free of its usual severe bun, was long, dark and glossy.

"Ah, look," Lance said fondly, handing her another. "Theo on his fifth birthday."

She took the photo and smiled at the image of her ex-husband as a young boy. The five-year-old Theo was, even then, long and stringy, standing next to a birthday cake and a pile of wrapped gifts. Beside him, gazing at him with adoration, was Cordelia, and Hermione felt her breath catch in her chest. Cordelia was always well-groomed, but in this picture, her eyes filled with unmistakable love for her son, she was very beautiful.

Lance was holding up another picture. "This is a group shot of all the Slytherin students when Cordelia was Head Girl."

Hermione tore her gaze from the photograph of Theo and took the next picture, instantly recognising Cordelia and a young Narcissa Malfoy. Her gaze moved through the faces until she eventually found Severus, thin and miserable-looking, his lank hair obscuring his face. Many of the other boys were casting admiring looks in Cordelia's direction, and Hermione realised for the first time how many wizards must have envied Severus in his choice of wife. The thought worried her, and she gave a troubled sigh.

Lance frowned at her. "Is something the matter, young lady?"

"It's been quite a weekend." She chewed at a fingernail, wondering if she should tell Lance what had happened. She desperately needed someone to tell her it would all be okay. "Severus is, as we speak, asking Cordelia for a divorce."

Lance thumped the table. "At long bloody last," he said, obviously pleased. "Did he ask you to marry him?"

Hermione instantly coloured. "No, he didn't. But he did say that we would be together, no matter what happens today."

"Wonderful, wonderful," Lance said, clapping his bony hands together.

"Is it really wonderful?" she asked, worried. "Do you really think she'll let him go?"

"Not without a fight," Lance admitted. "But you have until late March before you're forced to remarry, and if Severus gets the ball rolling today, that will give her plenty of time to get over her little hissy-fit."

Hermione jumped as a loud crack echoed through the room, and Moe appeared. The little elf wiped her hands on her apron and made her way to the stove, humming as she went.

"Hello, Moe!" Lance said cheerfully. "Have you been across the road?"

Moe nodded solemnly. "Mistress Cordelia was wanting coffee."

"I see," Lance said. "And how were Severus and Cordelia? Was there much shouting?"

"No shouting," Moe said. "They are just glaring. Lots of glaring."

Hermione and Lance looked at one another, and Lance started to chuckle.

"Ah, I think Severus could glare for Britain, even on a good day." He patted Hermione on the hand. "Don't worry, lass. It'll all come good in the end."

Hermione dropped her gaze and nodded, wishing she could share his optimism and hoping that the hours would pass quickly until she heard from Severus. It wasn't even three in the afternoon, and it already felt like the longest day of her life.

Severus sipped at his coffee while his wife sat across the room from him, records and accounts spread out before her, her reading glasses perched on her nose. He examined her face, which was set in an attitude of annoyance. Her obstinacy was not unexpected.

As she perused the documents, it occurred to him that the outcome was dependent, at least to some extent, on her relationship with Everard Munroe. If she truly loved him and wanted to be with him, this could go well. But if she had grown unhappy with Everard, or if they had grown apart, she would have much more reason to refuse his request for a divorce.

More than two hours had passed since he'd retrieved the documents from the kitchen, and it had already grown dark. Severus lit the candles and lamps around the room, and they were soon bathed in a warm light that did little to dispel the chilly atmosphere in the room. He lit a fire in the grate and poured himself another cup of coffee.

Cordelia eventually raised her gaze from the accounts, and Severus could tell she was impressed by the extent of his wealth.

"I presume one of the Gringott's goblins can be called upon to verify the authenticity of these documents?" she asked.

Severus nodded. "Once my capital had increased to a certain level, I was granted a high-security vault and a financial overseer by the name of Grimbleshank. You may refer to him for verification." He smirked: he could tell Cordelia was trying to appear disinterested.

She tossed the parchment onto the table in mock indifference. "Your money does not really interest me, Severus. I have a settled income for life; I've little need of your money."

"Nevertheless," Severus said patiently, "you cannot deny I have the ability to repay all that I borrowed when first we wed and to offer you, in addition, a handsome divorce settlement."

"In order to offer me a divorce settlement, you would have to persuade me to grant you a divorce, Severus," she said with an artificial smile, "and I've not yet seen or heard anything that would persuade me to give you one."

With a clenched jaw, Severus took a roll of parchment from the bundle on the table. He threw it to Cordelia.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Evidence," Severus said.

"Evidence of what?" she snapped.

"Evidence of your infidelity spanning over the last seven years," he said glad that he could finally confront his wife.

Cordelia glared at him through narrowed eyes for a minute before loosening the ribbon with which the documents were bound. She picked up the first sheet of parchment and frowned as she read.

"A list of supposed liaisons? Times, dates and locations?" she asked with a sneer. "I think you would require something more substantial to back all of this up, Severus."

"If you open that yellow envelope you will find evidence to back up each of the times and dates listed on the first page."

Cordelia uttered a grunt and opened the envelope. She appeared outwardly calm, but Severus could see the tremor in her hands as she withdrew the photographs from the small package.

Her eyes widened as she regarded the first picture. "You spied on me!" she cried. "*Howdare* you invade my privacy? *How dare* you!" She dropped the photographs onto the table as if she'd been burned.

Severus glanced at the photograph. The one nearest him showed Cordelia smile in greeting as Everard arrived at her cottage in Edinburgh, and then lean forward and kiss him soundly on the lips. It would have been impossible to maintain that the people in the picture were anything other than lovers.

"I've known about you and Everard since before I offered for you, Cordelia. Not once have I insisted you stop seeing him. I've never interfered in your private life, but I thought it wise to collect the evidence in the event that I should require a divorce. You are proving that such a clandestine move was, indeed, a wise one. I have an abundance of information that proves you've been unfaithful, and I could use it in a wizarding court to force you to grant me a divorce."

Cordelia was red-faced with anger. "If you knew about my relationship with Everard before we were married, that suggests you were willing to accept the situation, Severus. And if that was the case, it can hardly amount to grounds for divorce. If you willingly consented to live under such circumstances for seven years, they can hardly constitute a legal reason for separating now."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. "In the name of Merlin, Cordelia. There's no reason for us to stay married come February. You will at last be free to be with Everard Munroe, and I will be free to see whom I choose."

"Oh, spare me your artificial concern, Severus. You don't give a damn whether or not I'm happy with Everard. You want a divorce so you can be with Hermione Granger. I'm not stupid; I overheard your conversation this morning, and I particularly liked the bit about how you know me so well, and how you can handle me. Well, this is *me* proving *you* wrong, Severus Snape. You don't know me; you have never known me." She thumped on the table. "I refuse to grant you a divorce. I don't care if you leave ... You will be the one who loses face if you chose to leave, so by all means, go and do it. But I absolutely refuse to give you the satisfaction of a divorce."

"If you refuse to grant me a divorce, I'll take my case to the Wizengamot, Cordelia. I will uncover your on-going relationship with Everard; I will summon credible witnesses; and I will drag your name through the mud."

"Why don't you try it, Severus? I'm sure you're well aware that more than one close associate of mine currently resides on the Wizengamot. What's more, the wizard who oversees the Ministry of Magic department dealing with divorce happens to be a close personal friend of mine."

Severus sat back in his chair with a triumphant smirk. Cordelia had led him to the very subject that formed his trump card. He had hoped it wouldn't come to this, but she seemed determined to make things difficult for him.

"I'm well aware that your friend heads that department at present, Cordelia, and I'm also aware that he was in sole charge, until last year, of the Office for Development and Planning within the Ministry."

For the first time since their debate had commenced some five hours earlier, Cordelia looked genuinely alarmed. "I don't see what that has to do with anything," she said, her dark blue eyes wide.

Severus leaned forward. "Two years ago, you sought permission to magically renovate and enlarge your listed building in Grosvenor Square. When permission was denied

you, you quickly sought an introduction to the head of that office...a small, fat Welshman by the name of Zebulum Williams, whom we entertained here, in this house, at a number of your dinner parties."

"We're straying very far from the terms of reference here, Severus ..."

He held up a hand. "I think you'll find my train of thought here entirely relevant," he said calmly. "In order to secure planning permission to alter the building as you desired, you seduced Williams and you were eventually granted the right to make the changes."

Cordelia stared at him, her expression a mixture of distress and fury. "And I suppose you can prove this, can you?"

"Absolutely," Severus said with another smirk. He placed another envelope in the centre of the table. "I have copies of correspondence sent from Williams to you and vice versa, in addition to a number of incriminating photographs."

With trembling fingers, Cordelia reached forward and picked up the thick, brown envelope. She opened it and glanced briefly at the contents. Severus watched her, until she raised eyes filled with wrath to his own.

"You are the most underhand, deceitful, devious man I've ever met in my entire life," she hissed.

Severus uttered a brief, wry laugh. "Under the circumstances, my dear, I would watch whom I call deceitful or devious. I've never used the art of seduction to get planning permission; I've simply used my talents as a spy to ensure I always have a back-up plan."

"You're hardly a saint, Severus. At least I've never been tainted by the Dark Mark."

Severus's eyes narrowed, and his hand flew instinctively to his forearm where he had once been branded.

"And what do you intend to do with your ill-gotten evidence, Severus? Seeing as Zebulum is the one who decides what evidence is or isn't admissible in each divorce case, I don't see what good it can possibly do you."

"I've no intention of showing my little portfolio to Zebulum Williams," he explained. "I can think of a far worthier recipient for my 'ill-gotten evidence', as you call it. I'm sure Everard Munroe would find it riveting."

Cordelia immediately sprang to her feet, and Severus knew by the look on her face that he had been right in his speculation: Everard had not known about her brief tryst with Zebulum Williams.

"How dare you think you can blackmail me," Cordelia snarled, withdrawing her wand from inside her elegant robes.

"I've no wish to blackmail you, Cordelia, but if you're not willing to be reasonable, you leave me with no choice. If you're not willing to grant me a divorce, I will send those photographs of you and Williams to Everard Munroe. He might tolerate your sham of a marriage to me, but I'm sure he would not be pleased to discover your little affair."

Cordelia pointed her wand directly at Severus's chest. "You bastard," she whispered.

Severus shrugged. "Am I worth a sentence in Azkaban?"

She glowered at him, and he could tell she was considering her next move. After a few moments, she lowered her wand, pointing it instead at the pile of photographs and sheets of parchment on the table. Severus stood up and withdrew his own wand.

"Destroying your precious photographs won't get me a jail sentence," Cordelia said, a look of victory in her eyes.

"Move your wand away from those documents ... *Now*," Severus ordered, his wand pointed at her head. He was no fool: he had made duplicate copies of all the photographs and correspondence, and they sat, untouchable, in his Gringott's vault. But he had not taken such precautions with his financial accounts, and they would take many months to reproduce, perhaps delaying his divorce beyond the time left to Hermione.

"Make me," Cordelia spat. She stood resolute, her wand pointed at the stack of parchment.

Severus stood still, his wand pointed straight at his wife, his mind whirling.

Before either of them could move, the door was thrown open, and Lancelot Mill hobbled in on his cane.

"Well, isn't it fortunate that I decided to drop in to say hello," he said, peering over his spectacles and looking from Severus to his niece.

"Uncle Lance, this is none of your business, and I would like you to leave immediately," Cordelia said, her wand still pointed at the documents, her gaze still fixed on Severus's face.

"Nonsense," Lance replied, sitting himself at the table.

"She's right, Lancelot," Severus said. "This really does not concern you."

"Fiddlesticks!" Lance cried. "This mess involves my niece, my friend, my housemate and a man with a rather nice beard, so it's of great importance to me."

Cordelia frowned. "A man with a nice beard?"

"Everard, you twit," Lance said with a dramatic roll of his eyes.

Cordelia gasped. "You know about Everard?"

Lance chuckled. "Everybody knows about Everard. Severus, I wonder if I might have a private word with my niece."

"As you can see, Lance," Severus said. "This really is not the time."

"It's the perfect time," Lance assured him. "What I have to say may be of benefit to you both."

Severus gave an exasperated sigh and stowed his wand inside his robes. "Very well. I'll be in my study."

He made for the door, turning to take a final look at Lance and Cordelia, and as he turned to leave, he discreetly cast an amplification spell.

He had just closed the door to his study when Lance's magically enhanced voice came from the floor above.

"Cordelia, sit down; I beg of you."

Severus heard Cordelia utter a deep sigh and retake her seat.

"Be careful what you say, Lancelot Mill," Cordelia said, her voice strained. "This is my house, and I will not be blackmailed or bullied."

"Cordelia," Lance said in a gentle tone, "I love you."

"Stop it, Uncle Lance."

"No, my girl, I mean it. I love you very much."

"What are you playing at?" Cordelia snapped.

"I've loved you since the very first moment I held you in my arms when you were a baby, yet I've stood by and watched you make a series of poor decisions, spurred on, no doubt, by the lack of affection shown you by my idiot brother, your father. As a result of those decisions, you've been kept from knowing true joy with the only man you've ever loved, and you've compounded your own misery by refusing to allow yourself to be happy."

Severus winced, sure Lance's scheme would not work with his wife.

"What do you mean, I haven't allowed myself to be happy?" Cordelia asked. "What choice have I ever had?"

"Are we being honest at last?" Lance asked. "Are we having the first honest conversation we've had since you were eight years old?"

"Fine, here's some honesty, Lance: I was seduced at the age of eighteen by a man I believed loved me with all his heart, on the orders of a dark wizard; I had to watch my only son suffer because his father was a Death Eater, and when I eventually met someone I loved and was freed from my first husband my chance at happiness was ruined by the Marriage Law."

Cordelia fell silent for a moment, and Severus held his breath.

"I married Severus because I believed the marriage would benefit us both. It did, but it still hurt that he never wanted me. I know that I draw the admiring gaze of many wizards, Uncle Lance, but my own husband was never one of them. Yes, I know I never loved him either, but I haven't enjoyed watching him fall for a younger girl who was once my daughter-in-law. I owe him nothing. I don't see why I should grant him a divorce, and I presume that's why you are here, Lance, to try to talk me into letting him go. Well, it won't work!"

"Cordelia, my love, stop focusing on everybody else. Forget them all for a moment and let's focus on you. Do you love Everard Munroe?"

"Damn it, Lance, this is none of your business!" Cordelia hissed.

"Do. You. Love. Him?" Lance repeated.

Severus heard Cordelia sigh again.

"Yes, I love him."

"Does he love you?"

There was a pause, and then Cordelia said. "Yes, he does. He's the only person in my life of whose love I've ever truly felt assured."

"Then why don't you grant yourself the freedom to be with the man you love?" Lance asked desperately.

Cordelia slapped the table with the palm of her hand. "It's not that simple, Lance!"

"Yes, it is!" he insisted. "It really is that simple, Cordelia. You turn fifty next August. This time next year you'll be free to be with the man you love, without having to hide yourselves away. You can be happy, truly happy, for the first time since you were a child!"

Cordelia stayed silent.

"You deserve to be happy, Cordelia. Everard is a good man, and you'll be very happy together. But don't cut off your nose to spite your face. Don't hang on to Severus just so you can make him suffer. He's a good man, too. He deserves to be happy."

Cordelia gave a laugh of disbelief. "He's been seeing my former daughter-in-law behind my back for months! You think he deserves to ride off into the sunset with her?"

"What does it matter?" Lance asked, becoming impatient. "You love Everard; Severus loves Hermione. You have the happiness of four different people in the palm of your hand, Cordelia. Do the right thing, girl. Let yourself live. Let Severus go!"

Silence fell again for a minute.

"I want to live to see you happy," Lance continued quietly. "I want to see you able to walk down the street, hand-in-hand with Everard Munroe with a smile on your face, and you can only guarantee that happens by granting Severus a divorce. If you don't want to do it for him, do it for yourself, Cordelia."

Cordelia gave a soft laugh. "Lancelot Mill, you are an impossibly nosey old busybody."

"Yes, I know I am. But the last thing I will say is this: Your life has been marked out by poor decisions that have made you unhappy. Don't hang on to Severus out of jealousy and add it to the list of disastrous choices you have made. Let everyone concerned be happy, my dear."

Severus heard a chair scrape along the ground, followed by the unmistakable clatter of Lance's cane.

"I'm going home now. Give your old uncle a hug."

Severus quickly removed the amplification spell with a flick of his wand, and two minutes later, there was a knock on the door of his study. He opened it and found Lance on the other side.

Lance poked him in the chest with his cane. "I saw you cast your amplification spell, you nasty old spy." He sounded annoyed, but his eyes were twinkling.

"Guilty as charged," Severus muttered.

"Give her a few minutes to think about what I said," Lance said, turning his back and heading for the stairs, "and then go and talk to her. Calmly, maturely, and without resorting to blackmail."

Severus watched the old man go with a frown, wondering if Lance's talk of love and happiness might possibly have succeeded where his own approach of demands and threats had so obviously failed.

Hermione woke and opened one eye, peering at her alarm clock. It was only six in the evening, and she hadn't meant to fall asleep. She sat up, reached for her wand and lit the room with a gentle flick, feeling unwell. With a frown she raised her hand to her forehead: her skin felt cool, but she Summoned her Muggle thermometer just to be sure.

Popping the thermometer into her mouth, she tried to concentrate on her book, but found reading the small print nauseating. She withdrew the thermometer after a few minutes: no, her temperature appeared to be perfectly normal. There was no explanation for her flu-like fatigue. She had no temperature; no sore throat; no headache. Just a vague feeling of illness and a lack of energy.

She plumped up her pillow and rolled onto her side, putting it down to stress and overwork. The calendar on her dressing table caught her eye, and she groaned at the reminder that there were only four days left until Christmas. Time was passing much too quickly, and she was about to embark on making a mental list of all the gifts she had still to purchase, when something occurred to her.

She sprang from her bed and grabbed the calendar. Frantically, she flicked back to the previous month, where she had placed a ring around the first of November. Closing her eyes, she counted in her head. Four weeks from the first of November would have been the twenty-ninth, but glancing again at the calendar, she saw that she'd made no such pencil-mark on that date.

With a mounting sense of panic, she realised that her period was weeks overdue. Her cycle had always been regular...sure, she'd occasionally been a few days late, but never by more than a week. And certainly never *three* weeks.

Her hands shaking, she put the calendar back on the dressing table and walked numbly to the bed, sitting on the edge, accepting that there could be an obvious explanation for her odd symptoms. But how could this be? She'd been careful about casting contraceptive spells, and she couldn't recall a single occasion when she might have forgotten. Although, she had to admit, she'd been distracted over the last few months. On many occasions, she'd lain awake for hours after she and Severus had made love, wondering what would become of them, what he was feeling. Was it so difficult to imagine that she might have forgotten the spell?

She heard Lance's cane on the floor outside and dived, still shaking, beneath the covers of her bed. She loved the old man dearly, but she was in no fit state to talk to him, and she wanted to be alone.

He tapped on her bedroom door. "Are you awake, lassie?"

She closed her eyes, hoping he wouldn't peep around the door.

He knocked again. "Hermione? Are you there?"

She remained silent, and, after a minute or two, she heard him walk away. Clutching the quilt around her, she tried to breathe deeply, staring at the calendar on the dressing table, her mind in turmoil.

Severus gingerly opened the door to Cordelia's room. She was seated at the table, exactly where he had left her, staring at the fireplace, apparently lost in thought. He thought she looked calmer, and the documents remained untouched at the centre of the table. He took the seat opposite her, unsure of how to begin.

"Why did you offer for me, Severus, all those years ago?" she asked, raising her dark gaze to his.

He arched an eyebrow. "Because I wished to stay in Britain. Unhappy as I've been here, at times, it was preferable to making a new start abroad. That day when we met at Westminster Abbey, I felt certain you were the solution to my problem, and after I'd done a little research and found out about Everard, who is a pure-blood, I realised you also stood to gain from such a marriage."

"I can't believe you knew about Everard, yet you were still willing to go ahead with the marriage," she said.

"It did not bother me, Cordelia. Neither of us was marrying for love; it levelled the playing field, in a way."

She stared at the fire again for a moment, before saying, "I wish I'd known. All these years...the lies, the secrecy. Why weren't we just honest from the start?"

Severus gave a gentle laugh. "A lifetime of habit, perhaps. A Slytherin pair, through and through."

She smiled. "Everard is a Gryffindor."

He inclined his head, resisting the temptation to mention that Hermione, too, was a Gryffindor.

Cordelia looked at him and laughed. "Go on, Severus, you can say it: As is Hermione."

He gave her a confused, uncertain smile. "As is Hermione," he murmured.

She sat back in her chair and sighed. "It hurt that you didn't desire me, Severus. Out of necessity, we consummated our marriage, and you didn't want me."

He had not expected the conversation to take this turn. "I knew you were in love with another man, Cordelia. You know you are an attractive, intelligent, desirable woman, but I could never have desired a woman I knew to be involved with another man."

She gazed at him. "Is it true that Hermione saved your life, when you were grievously wounded during the final battle?"

Severus tried to disguise his shock. "How did you know?"

"Narcissa had her suspicions; she suspected it was Hermione or Harry Potter who came to your rescue that night." She regarded him closely. "Is it one of the reasons you love her?"

Severus gave an ironic laugh. "Quite the contrary: for a very long time, it was one of many reasons I had for disliking her."

Cordelia frowned. "But, oh, how things have changed."

Severus mirrored her frown, aware that the next few moments of their conversation were vital. "Things *have* changed, Cordelia, that cannot be denied, but this day was always going to come. There was always going to come that time when you neared your fiftieth birthday and would at last be free of the confines of the Marriage Law."

She looked away from him and stared at the flames in the grate once more. Seconds passed, and Severus held his silence, wary of saying the wrong thing.

"I was grateful when you offered for my hand, Severus," she said finally. "I had always been fond of you at Hogwarts, and I was grateful for kindness to Theo while he was your student. Everard could not have left the country when the law came into effect: his parents are elderly, and he could not have abandoned them. You provided me with an opportunity of staying in Britain to oversee my son's education, remaining with my family, and continuing to live within Apparition distance of Everard's estate." She sighed and looked at Severus with an expression of regret. "We lived together so amicably for many years, Severus. Where did it all go wrong?"

Severus leaned forward, his hands clasped. "I was also grateful for your acceptance of my offer, Cordelia. I've always been antisocial, and you spared me the agony of having to make new contacts abroad. More importantly, you enabled me to start what has become a lucrative business. But you must believe me when I say that I never meant to become involved with Hermione Granger. Even when it became obvious that we had feelings for one another, I resisted the temptation to act upon those feelings for some time. It was never my intention to cause you hurt or embarrassment."

She looked at him intently, and he held her gaze. After a long moment, she said quietly, "I have one condition to ask of you, Severus: I would ask that you and Hermione

not live across the square. I know she owns her half of the house, but she and Lance will have to reach some kind of financial agreement in that regard. Perhaps it is unforgiving of me, but I would not relish the thought of my ex-husband and his lover living across the road from me."

Severus nodded, his heart-rate quickening, hardly daring to believe he might be on the verge of securing a divorce. "I will fully concur with your request. It seems perfectly reasonable to me."

Cordelia gave him a small, satisfied smile and pulled a length of parchment from the pile of documents in the centre of the table. "In that case, Severus Snape, I am willing to grant you a divorce."

He resisted the urge to smile or to rise from his seat simply nodded instead. "Thank you, Cordelia. I hope it may benefit us both, and you will have my eternal gratitude."

He watched, his heart thumping in joy, as she Summoned her quill from the bureau and read through the document. She paused at the blank space where the date of divorce was yet to be added. She raised her eyes to look at him.

"Is the twenty-third of February agreeable to you?" she asked.

He nodded enthusiastically. "Certainly."

She looked at the document, frowning, and chewed the end of her quill. "Actually, Severus, I can do better than that. Would you be available to accompany me to the Ministry of Magic tomorrow morning?"

He frowned. "Tomorrow morning?"

"Yes," she said, suddenly resolute. "Why wait? Let's get this thing over with and finalise the divorce tomorrow morning. Will that give you enough time to pack your belongings?"

"But ..." He was almost lost for words. "But you won't turn fifty until August. If we divorce now, the six-month period of grace will end two months before your birthday; you would become subject to the law again."

Cordelia shrugged. "Two months is not such a very long time. I have enough friends at the Ministry to enable me to pull a few strings. And if that doesn't work, I can reside in France until I turn fifty."

Severus gazed at her in disbelief.

Cordelia laughed. "Severus Snape's cutting wit stopped in its tracks. Who'd have thought?"

"You're certain an immediate divorce will not cause you untold complications?" he asked, unable to take in what was happening.

She shook her head. "It's nothing I can't deal with." She scribbled the date and her signature on the parchment, pushing it across the table to him when she had finished. "Now, all that's required is your signature, Severus."

He accepted the quill and the document from her, almost giddy with relief. He was on the precipice of becoming a free man once again.

Hermione re-read the instructions on page eighty-seven of *Diagnostic Spells*. Her hands trembling, she reached for her wand and pointed it at her abdomen. The most confusing thing of all was that she had no idea whether she wanted the result to be positive or negative. She closed her eyes, concentrating on the incantation in the book, and finally whispered it aloud.

Her heart thumping painfully in her chest, she opened her eyes to find a glowing white circle hovering in the air by the tip of her wand.

Raising her hands to her face, she slid from the bed to the carpeted floor of her bedroom, tears already flowing.

She was pregnant.

My Mind Aches

Chapter 32 of 34

Hermione considers her new discovery.

A/N: Dear readers. Thank you so, so much for your lovely reviews and messages this week. They meant an awful lot. And Dr Beloved enjoyed them too. :)

You may find this chapter frustrating. Never fear the next chapter will be up on Tuesday, and you will have answers. And then, next Friday, I will post the epilogue, and Denial will be finished. Then I will try to respond to your kind reviews.

This chapter is the storm before the calm, so sit tight. And if you're in Europe like me, enjoy the Eurovision Song Contest. :)

LB x

My mind aches, and a drowsy numbness pains

My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,

Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains

One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk.

- John Keats, from *Ode to a Nightingale*

Hermione stared in numb disbelief at the fading white circle that still hovered inches away from her stomach.

"Pregnant," she whispered to herself.

She was simultaneously elated and terrified; she was shocked, but at the same time accepting. This was what she had wanted for so very long: a child of her own to love and to nurture. She had so often envied the happiness of her friends; she had so often gazed at Padma's twins as they slept and felt a throb of longing deep within her. One of her most cherished dreams had just come true, but the circumstances were not what she would have desired.

She rose from the floor and sat on the stool before the dressing table, inspecting her white face eagerly. It looked no different, save for the fact that she was paler than usual, and her eyes were rimmed with red. Lowering her gaze to her stomach, she placed her hand below the waistband of her jeans, but she could detect no alteration.

It was almost impossible to believe, and, wondering if her mind had been playing some sort of cruel trick, she bent to pick her wand up from the floor. Pointing it to her abdomen once more, she repeated the spell, her eyes widening when the white circle shot from the end of her wand and hovered in the air before her still-flat stomach. There could be no denying she had conceived.

She gazed at herself in the mirror again. She was really, truly, carrying a child. Her child; Severus's child. As her thoughts turned to what his reaction might be, she covered her face with her hands once more. He would not be pleased. He had admitted that he'd never had any desire for a child, that his miserable upbringing had divested him of any aspiration to continue his line.

Was it possible he would want nothing to do with her now that she was carrying his child? He had insisted they would be together no matter what, but he had not bargained on having to deal with a pregnancy; he had not signed up for fatherhood.

She stood up, wondering what could be taking him so long. It had been hours and hours since she had taken her leave of him, and she was beginning to fret that all was not going according to plan. She had known it would not be easy to talk Cordelia into a divorce, but she had expected to hear something from him by now.

She remembered the black and white image of Cordelia gazing at Theo on his fifth birthday, and she wondered if Cordelia, with her beauty, and her gift for seduction, had somehow managed to persuade Severus to remain her husband.

Hermione shook her head. No, it couldn't be possible. Focusing on the assurances Severus had given her that morning, she sat on the edge of her bed. He would send word soon. She was sure of it.

Severus bid Cordelia goodnight and headed straight for his study. In less than twenty-four hours he would no longer be a married man, and he felt a stiff drink was in order. Pouring himself a double Firewhisky, he raised his glass as if to toast his own success, realising as he did that he owed an enormous debt to Lancelot Mill. How perceptive, he thought, of the old man to realise that love would win where enmity had failed.

He smiled. Never, in his wildest dreams, had he thought the catalyst that would end his marriage would be Hermione Granger. He had never expected to love anyone enough to turn his life upside-down to be with them. And even though he was about to be rendered homeless, and despite the fact that he had just lost his business premises, he knew she was worth every hardship, every harsh word that had been exchanged, and every difficulty that would need to be overcome in the future.

He looked at his watch: he and Cordelia had spent many hours coming to their final agreement with regard to the money he owed her, and it was now after ten. He knew Hermione must be eager to hear from him by now, so he set his whisky on the mantelpiece and Summoned his cloak from across his study. The thought of how she might react to his astonishing news made him smile, and he wondered how best he might break it to her.

He'd almost reached the front door when he stopped, suddenly revising his plan. What if he told her now and it all went horribly wrong? What if Cordelia changed her mind during the night? He would hate to raise Hermione's hopes only to dash them to pieces the very next day.

Tomorrow morning he would finally be in a position to ask her to spend the rest of her life with him. Perhaps it would be better to surprise her then, to appear before her as a single man, his divorce papers in hand. His romantic idea of declaring his love for her in Paris had gone wrong, but he would do it properly this time.

Climbing the stairs once more, he decided he would send her a note to allay her fears for tonight, and tomorrow, she would know the full story. After all, he had his personal belongings to pack, to say nothing of the contents of his laboratory. He also needed to start contacting people who might be able to furnish him with temporary living quarters. They would need to be large enough to house his laboratory, and he wondered if Hermione would want to live with him immediately, or would she, perhaps, prefer to wait until they were wed? It mattered little: he was not short of money, so he would acquire premises that were big enough for two, just in case. His mind full of the new life on which he was about to embark, he returned to his study to write to Hermione.

Hermione stared at the note in her hand. Twelve hours had passed since she and Severus had parted company, and she'd expected something rather more informative than the hastily scribbled words his owl had delivered only moments before. With mounting alarm, she read it once more:

Hermione,

Although we have made some progress, the situation has become rather more complex than I had anticipated. There is much that requires my attention, and I will contact you with a full explanation tomorrow. I beseech you not to worry.

Yours,

Severus.

She crumpled the slip of parchment into a ball and threw it across her bedroom. Why would he send such a cold, impersonal note? Surely he knew she'd spent the entire day fretting, and yet, he had made her feel even worse by hinting that something had gone terribly wrong in his negotiations with his wife.

She gave a rueful laugh as she recalled the last line: *I beseech you not to worry*. It was true that he couldn't know how drastically their situation had changed, but he had been aware that she'd been both fatigued and distressed when they'd parted, and the negligent manner with which he had treated her peace of mind was a cause for concern.

Hanging her head, she pressed a hand to her temple where a vicious headache throbbed. His lack of consideration was worrying, and it boded ill for his reception of her news. Hermione curled into a ball on her bed, and with one hand pressed protectively to her stomach, she cried herself to sleep.

Severus tried to keep his expression neutral as he signed his name on the legal document before him. He knew a moment of deep satisfaction as his signature glowed bright blue for a moment before fading to black. Sitting back in his chair, he pushed the sheet of thick parchment across the table to Cordelia and watched as she signed her name beneath his own. When she had finished, the Ministry of Magic clerk Summoned the document from across his desk and sealed it with a flick of his wand.

Severus turned to face Cordelia, and she raised her gaze to his, bestowing him with a small smile.

"Your divorce is now legally recognised," said the clerk in a disinterested tone of voice. "You are no longer man and wife, and you will both be subject to the Marriage Law once more when the six-month period of grace has elapsed." He made duplicate copies of their divorce certificate and handed them one apiece. His gaze immediately moved to the door of his office. "Next!" he cried.

Severus raised an eyebrow as he and his now ex-wife headed for the door, which had already been opened by another divorcing couple. Outside, he smirked at the long line of disgruntled-looking couples in the queue. Despite Kingsley Shacklebolt's protestations to the contrary, it appeared that the Marriage Law had reached crisis point.

He walked with Cordelia to the Atrium, feeling unusually light-hearted.

"Well, Severus," Cordelia said. "What will you do now that our separation is a fait accompli? Where will you go?"

"I've made arrangements to view a number of properties in Diagon Alley," he said. "I promised I would not move across the square, and I will keep that promise."

"Have you spoken to Hermione?"

He shook his head. "I decided against telling her last night; I thought it would be preferable to approach her when we had secured our divorce."

Cordelia laughed. "You did not trust me, Severus? You thought I would renege on my promise?"

"Not at all," he lied. "But I had little faith in the divorce clerk to grant us a divorce so speedily. It's apparent, however, that the Ministry are snowed under with potential divorcees; I wouldn't be at all surprised to find the Marriage Law abolished in the near future."

Cordelia glanced behind at the long queue of witches and wizards. "I think you might be right."

Severus examined his former wife's face. "Why did you suggest we divorce two months early, Cordelia?"

"Do you suspect me of foul play, Severus?"

He shook his head. "I'm simply curious. If you forgive my saying so, it's not in our Slytherin natures to suggest something that is likely to put us out rather than to benefit us."

"Contrary to popular opinion, I'm not quite the self-centred dragon-lady some might think I am." She stopped and turned to face him. "You and I have reached a compromise, Severus, but I'm not the most forgiving person in the world. That is why I requested you and Hermione do not live across Kensington square. It's the girl's home, however, and I do feel guilty for having forced you to agree without consulting Hermione herself. I suggested we move the date forward in order to ease my guilty conscience. So perhaps you are right; perhaps I only did it because it was of benefit to me. I can sleep more soundly knowing that I offered something in exchange."

Severus met her gaze for a moment, until he was assured she spoke the truth. "Regardless of your motivations, Cordelia, you have my gratitude." He'd only slept for an hour the night before. His packing had taken considerably longer than he'd foreseen, and when eventually he'd made it to his bedroom, the memory of the letter she had been scribbling the morning before had weighed on his mind. "Might I ask a question?" he ventured.

Cordelia nodded.

"To whom were you writing when I entered your sitting room, yesterday morning?"

She smirked. "More conspiracy theories? I was writing to Everard," she admitted, looking embarrassed. "I've been telling him for months that I thought there was something going on between you and Hermione. I was writing an 'I-told-you-so' kind of letter."

Severus chuckled. "Did you write to him last night?"

She shook her head. "I thought I would Apparate to Scotland today and tell him the good news in person."

They'd reached the fireplaces in the Atrium, and Cordelia proffered her hand. "Good luck, Severus," she said with a genuine smile. "I wish you well."

"And I you," he replied, shaking her hand.

She turned and walked away from him, giving him a brief wave before she took a handful of Floo powder and disappeared in a rush of green flames.

Severus gazed at the spot where she'd vanished, still hardly able to believe that he was, at last, free of his marriage. It was almost lunch time, and eager though he was to see Hermione, it was imperative he select premises to rent before the day was through. Taking a fistful of Floo powder, he stepped into the fireplace and said, "The Leaky Cauldron."

Hermione paced the kitchen, feeling, if it were possible, even more of a nervous wreck than she had the night before her NEWT exams. It was early afternoon, and, after a fitful sleep, she'd risen at seven in the morning, eager to see if another letter from Severus might have arrived while she'd slept. She'd even found his note from the night before crumpled in a ball in the corner, and she'd reread the contents, hoping something would give her a clue as to what, exactly, might be going on across Kensington Square.

He'd promised he would contact her as soon as possible, yet here she was, it was already after lunchtime, and he'd not even obliged her with another note. She knew she was feeling more emotional and vulnerable than usual; she knew her hormones were playing havoc with her mind, but she could not help feeling abandoned.

Finally, in a fit of paranoia, she sent Moe across the square to find out what was going on. The elf reappeared in the kitchen with a loud crack a few minutes later, her large, protuberant eyes even wider than was normal.

Hermione dropped to her knees before Moe. "Well? Did Severus say anything?"

Moe shook her head. "They is not there, Miss Hermione. I is checking every room in the house, but Master Severus and Mistress Cordelia is not there."

Hermione's stomach lurched. "You're sure, Moe? Did you check to see if Severus was in the laboratory?"

Moe regarded her for a second, her big eyes troubled, and then lowered her gaze without speaking.

"Moe?" Hermione asked, her panic mounting. "What's the matter? Has something happened?"

Moe let out a long sigh. "The things in the laboratory is being gone, Miss Hermione."

"What? What do you mean, the things are gone?"

"All Master Severus's things, Miss Hermione: the cauldrons; the tins; those icky, slimy things that is being in the jars ..."

Hermione sat back on the cold stone floor, overcome by shocked disbelief. "He's gone?" she asked in a whisper. "Why would he have cleared out the laboratory? Did you check his study, Moe? Or his bedroom?"

Moe's big, doleful eyes filled with tears, and she nodded slowly. "His books is all gone, too. And his clothes."

Hermione covered her face with her hands, determined not to cry again. "What about Cordelia's things, Moe? Are they all still there?"

The little elf hesitated. "Her trunk is being gone, but her other things is still there."

Hermione frowned in confusion. Severus had cleared the house of his belongings, and Cordelia's trunk was also missing. What's more, neither of them was at home, and Cordelia always hosted her coffee mornings on Mondays. Something significant was obviously going on, and Severus had not even had the courage to tell her.

Despite her turbulent thoughts and her hammering heart, she rose calmly to her feet. She stared at the stove for a moment, then, turning to Moe, she said, "I have to leave for a little while, Moe. An awful lot has happened in the last twenty-four hours, and I really need to go somewhere and think about what I'm going to do. I'll need your help with some packing, if you don't mind."

Moe wrung her bony hands. "But where is you going, Miss Hermione?"

Hermione hesitated. She'd only known she was expecting a baby for one day, and she wanted to go somewhere where Severus was unlikely to find her, at least for the moment. It was important that she get her head around this and think about what lay ahead. Whether she was to raise this child as part of a couple or as a single mother, she knew it was a welcome development in her life. But she needed some time and space to think. If Severus was going to come to her and admit that he had decided to stay with his wife, she wanted to face him with courage and dignity; she wanted to confront him with this change in their circumstances without tears and despair.

There were only three days to go until Christmas, and she knew her parents would be distraught if she didn't come home for the holidays. But Severus knew where they lived, and she wanted to keep her distance for at least the next twenty-four hours. The thought of spending a few nights completely alone in a hotel room certainly wasn't appealing, especially at this time of year. Where else could she go? She thought about Harry and Ginny, but she was almost certain Severus knew they lived in Godric's Hollow.

"I'm going to stay with my friend, Padma, for a day or two," she said to Moe. Although Severus knew that she and Padma were friends, she was confident she'd never mentioned their address. "I might call on you for help over the coming days, Moe, but I need you to promise that you won't tell Severus where I am. Can you to keep it a secret?"

Moe regarded her for a moment, her big, glossy eyes sombre, and then she nodded. "Yes, Miss Hermione. I is keeping your secret." She stepped forward and looked at Hermione, her gaze finally coming to rest on Hermione's stomach. "I is keeping all your secrets," she added with a small smile.

Hermione raised an eyebrow, wondering how Moe had figured it out. "Thank you, Moe," she whispered, touched by the happy smile on the elf's face. Turning away, her eyes brimming with tears, she headed to her bedroom to pack her trunk, determined not to succumb to yet another crying fit.

Severus bade his new landlord good day and closed the door of his freshly acquired property with a sigh of relief. He had spent the afternoon visiting three different properties in Diagon Alley, and the third had proven adequate to his needs. It would certainly suffice until he and Hermione had reached an agreement on where they would like to live.

He crossed the small hall of the little mews and opened the door to the living room. It was pleasant enough, and he could picture Hermione curled up on the armchair next to the window, an open book on her lap, a blazing fire in the grate. A door at the end of the room opened into a small dining room and a kitchenette. With a start, he realised that he had no idea whether or not Hermione liked to cook. It was true that she'd prepared a meal for both of them on more than one occasion, but he'd no idea if she'd enjoyed the exercise or if it was a chore. How little he really knew about her.

Would she approve of the house he'd chosen? He moved the curtain at the tiny kitchen window and looked at the outbuilding in the courtyard. Although it looked like little more than a shed from the outside, the interior had been magically enlarged, and was perfectly suited as a makeshift laboratory. Severus wondered if he should, perhaps, have involved Hermione in the process of house-hunting. Although he could picture her here, he truly had no idea whether or not she would approve, and for the first time since Cordelia had agreed to the divorce, he wondered if Hermione would be furious with him for having agreed to what would amount to a full surrender of her Kensington Square property.

He thought of the life she led there: she seemed happy in the company of Lance and Moe. Maybe he had been presumptuous in sourcing a house for two. Maybe she would be perfectly happy to continue to live where she was. But then he recalled the moment on Saturday night when he'd asked her if she wanted to be with him, when she had answered, "More than anything." And that, surely, was evidence enough?

Leaving his boxes and trunks unpacked in the hallway, he left and headed back towards the Leaky Cauldron, keeping his face hidden behind his hair, hoping to avoid the curious stares of the Christmas shoppers. After he'd left the wizarding district and re-joined Muggle London, he paused at the window of a jeweller's shop. A tray of gleaming rings had caught his eye. It had not occurred to him before to purchase an engagement ring, and as he gazed upon a row of solitaire diamond rings, he almost dismissed the idea.

But then a glint of brightest red from the next window made him stop. On a satin-covered tray behind the glass sat a dozen rings, each of them set with rubies. One in particular had drawn his gaze: it was an eternity ring made of gold with alternating rubies and diamonds in the band. He smiled: it was perfect for a Gryffindor. Checking for his Muggle credit card beneath his cloak, he entered the shop. He *would* do it properly this time.

Hermione would have laughed at Padma's facial expression if she hadn't been feeling less inclined to gaiety than she ever had in her entire life. Padma was bouncing Preeya on her hip, and Hermione could hear Shivani screaming furiously from the living room.

"What's happened?" Padma said with a frown. "There's something wrong, isn't there?" She gazed at Hermione, ignoring her daughters for a moment.

Hermione nodded slowly. "I'll tell you all about it, but first, I imagine you could use a hand."

Padma held Preeya out to her. "Here, take your goddaughter while I sort out the screeching ball of fury in the living room."

Hermione shut the door and took the tearful baby from Padma. "What's wrong with them?" she asked, giving Preeya a kiss on the forehead.

Padma rolled her eyes. "I've magically sealed all the presses and drawers in the living room, so they're throwing a combined temper tantrum."

Hermione followed her into the front room and gasped: the room looked like a bomb site. "I take it this is what happens when they learn to crawl?"

Shivani stopped crying when they entered the room, and after a brief glance in their direction, she resumed the activity of trying to force bits of toast into Dean's DVD player.

Padma nodded and picked her up. "Toddlers and all these Muggle electrical thingies just do not go together." She sat down and started bouncing Shivani on her knee. "I've put a magical barrier around that DVD thing twice, but either it hasn't held, or they've removed it, somehow."

"Clever girls," Hermione said, grinning. "Showing magical ability already!"

"I can't understand it," Padma said with a weary sigh. "They were little angels until about two weeks ago, but as soon as this crawling thing took off, they turned into little

demons. They're determined to get their own way."

"I'm sure the novelty of breaking things will wear off soon."

Padma didn't look convinced. "Come on. Let's put them in their playpen in the kitchen with their toys, and you can tell me what's going on."

As soon as the babies were settled, Padma put on the kettle and sat opposite Hermione at the kitchen table. Hermione gazed at the little girls as they played with their toys, lost in thought.

"What's happened, Hermione?" Padma asked gently.

Hermione tore her gaze from the twins, and despite the fact that she'd intended telling Padma everything that had happened since she and Severus had returned from Paris in precise chronological order, she just suddenly needed to blurt it out.

"I'm pregnant," she said, her voice tremulous.

"Oh, Hermione!" Padma said, her dark eyes wide. "Is this a good thing or a bad thing?"

Hermione sighed, determined not to cry again. She had done enough crying for one day. "It's a little bit of both, I suppose. I've longed for a baby for ages, but Severus has told me he doesn't want children, so that's not so good."

Padma shook her head. "What did he say when you told him?"

"I haven't told him ... yet," Hermione admitted.

"When did you find out?"

"Last night. A lot has happened this weekend."

"Did he propose in Paris? I had my suspicions when you told me he'd cancelled all your clients ..."

Hermione shook her head. "Not exactly."

She told Padma about what had happened since their return from the French capital. "And he's been acting so strangely for the past two weeks. He's been quiet, thoughtful. And when we've been alone he's been ... I don't know." She looked up, blushing. "More loving, I suppose. I got the idea into my head that he was trying to let me down gently in Paris; that he was trying to tell me he didn't want to ask Cordelia for a divorce, but I was wrong."

"Okay, let me get this straight," Padma said, sitting up and looking business-like. "He didn't ask you to marry him, but he told you he loved you?"

Hermione frowned. "Well, he didn't tell me he loved me so much *as admitted* he loved me when I asked him. He never actually said the words. Then he asked me if I wanted to be with him, and, of course, I said yes."

"But then that dragon bitch from hell turned up the next morning and overheard a delicate conversation?"

Hermione snorted. "Yes, she did."

Padma frowned. "What exactly *did* she overhear?"

Hermione rubbed her forehead. "I can't recall, exactly, but I was ... I was upset because I was sure she wouldn't let him go, and I started to cry. It's easy to see why I was feeling so emotional in hindsight, but he pulled me into the sitting room and assured me that no matter what happened, even if we had to flee the country, we would be together."

Padma gave her an encouraging smile. "That sounds good to me ... It's just a pity the bloody wife had to go and overhear it. But what's happened since then? Why haven't you told him?"

"I don't *know* what's happened since then. He promised me he'd send me word as soon as he could, and the entire day passed before I got so much as a note from him." She took the crumpled note from her pocket and pushed it across the table to Padma.

Padma picked up the wrinkled parchment and read it with a frown. "And this is it ... You haven't heard anything at all from either of them since then?"

Hermione shook her head. "I've no idea what's going on. The worst of it is, I sent Moe over to try to find out what was going on, but neither of them was there. And all of Severus's belongings are gone."

"What?" Padma asked, looking horrified. "All of them?"

Hermione nodded. "Everything. All the stuff from the laboratory, his books, his clothes. Everything is gone."

"Maybe she's thrown him out," Padma suggested. "Maybe she was so angry she just told him to leave."

"But why the lack of contact? Why hasn't he told me what's happening? And Moe told me Cordelia's trunk is gone, too."

Padma frowned again. "And you think that means what, exactly?"

Hermione's eyes filled with tears. "I think she's persuaded him to stay with her. She's so manipulative, Padma, you have no idea. She can be so nice; so persuasive. And she's rich and beautiful. Severus hates drama and upheaval ... I'm almost certain she's talked him into staying with her."

"But why would you think that, Hermione? If she's persuaded him to stay, why would all of his belongings be gone?"

"Because they've obviously gone somewhere else, somewhere away from me ... Cordelia has lots of properties, and she's obviously made him clear out and go somewhere else!"

"Hermione," Padma said kindly, "you've been through an awful lot in the past twenty-four hours, and I think you're just being paranoid. Granted, I don't know Severus Snape very well, but I don't think he would be talked into such a radical change of direction that easily. He doesn't make promises lightly, and if he told you that the two of you would be together, he meant it."

"But what's happened?" Hermione asked desperately. "If he really wants to be with me, why hasn't he even bothered to tell me what the hell is going on? And what if she's bewitched him, or poisoned him, or slipped him a Love Potion or something?"

Padma rolled her eyes. "Hermione, we're talking about Severus Snape: He fooled Voldemort and a whole pile of Death Eaters for years; I'm certain he's able for Cordelia Mill. You're just tired and emotional, and you're anxious and worried and thinking the worst."

Hermione put her face in her hands. "Something's going on ... I just know it."

"Look," Padma said, patting her on the hand. "Why don't you send him a note? Tell him you're worried and that you need to talk to him."

"No, I can't," Hermione insisted. "I just ... I want to get my head around the fact that we're going to have a baby before I talk to him." She put her head in her hands again. "I have no idea how he'll react. It's possible he won't want anything to do with either of us."

"Hermione, I can't believe how negative you're being. I know he hasn't actually said the words, but he's made it obvious that he loves you. Why would you think he won't want you now that you're carrying his child?"

Hermione sighed. "He had a miserable childhood, Padma. He was an only child, and he came from such a broken home that he has absolutely no idea of the happiness that a child can bring. He told me he's always been scared of turning into his parents, and that he has never, ever wanted a child." She looked at the twins, who were busily throwing every single one of their toys from the playpen. Padma was sending them all back over the sides with lazy flicks of her wand.

"What if he thinks I did this on purpose, Padma? What if he thinks I did it to force him into action?"

"Hermione, of course he won't think that. Isn't he a Legilimens? He'll know you're telling the truth. And there are lots of men who think they don't want children. You know the type: they're all awkward with other people's kids, but fantastic with their own. Parvati said that's the way Seamus was: He didn't want kids at all, but when little Aidan happened along, he was delighted."

"Severus will never be like that," Hermione insisted, a tear leaking from the corner of her eye. "He really never wanted kids, and now I don't know if he even wants me anymore."

"Aw, Hermione," Padma said, coming round the table to hug her. She pulled a chair next to Hermione's and took both her hands. "Look, you've been through an awful lot in the past two days, and you're not thinking straight. This is a good thing ... something to celebrate! You're going to have a baby!"

Hermione gave her an uncertain, watery smile. "Do you really think it's a good thing?"

"Yes, of course I do! He might be shocked at first, but Severus will come round. And as for what's going on between him and Cordelia, maybe she's agreed to a divorce, and they just have an awful lot to sort out with solicitors and accountants and stuff. Let's look on the bright side until we hear otherwise."

"I'll try," Hermione agreed, wiping her eyes on her sleeve.

"You never know ... Maybe Cordelia agreed to a divorce straight away, and they've spent the day at the Ministry of Magic sorting it all out!"

Hermione grunted. "That's not likely."

Padma smiled. "Maybe not, and I think you're right to want a bit of space to get your head sorted before you speak to him. Why don't you sleep here tonight?"

"You're such a good friend, Padma. Would you mind? I don't want to be a pain in the neck just before Christmas, but I'd really love to sleep on this before I tell Severus or my parents or anything. I promised Mum and Dad I'd go home on Christmas Eve, but I'm sure they'll be glad to see me a day early. I could stay the night here, think about what's best to do, and then go to their house tomorrow night. Are you sure Dean won't mind?"

Padma shook her head. "His department are really busy, so I'm not expecting him back until the small hours. I could use the company, to be honest, not to mention the extra pair of hands."

Hermione smiled in gratitude, glad she wouldn't have to spend hours alone, waiting to hear from Severus.

Severus stood in the hallway of Lance and Hermione's house, a frown creasing his brow. He'd called Hermione's name three times, but there had been no answer. Lance had not responded either. The house was cloaked in darkness, and nothing stirred from any of the rooms above or below.

"Moe?" he called, but the little elf failed to appear.

Perhaps Hermione was annoyed with him for failing to contact her sooner. Perhaps she was here, but she was determined to ignore him. He took his wand from beneath his robes and cast a spell to determine whether or not anyone was at home, but the house appeared to be empty. He looked around, wondering where she could have gone. Maybe she had decided to go shopping; maybe she had gone to visit one of her friends.

He descended to the basement, intending to wait in the kitchen. It was past dinnertime, so surely she would return home soon? At the very least, Lance might come back and know where she had gone. It was cold in the kitchen, so he lit a fire in the grate. He considered preparing a meal for her return, but then decided he would take her out to dinner instead, in order to celebrate their unexpected good luck.

An hour passed while he sat at the kitchen table, and the deserted house began to feel oppressive. A glance at the clock above the stove told him that it was after eight, and for the first time since he'd left Diagon Alley, he began to worry. Where was she?

He left the kitchen, heading in the direction of her bedroom. Pushing open the door, his stomach gave an unpleasant lurch: The wardrobes were lying open, and although some of her clothes still remained on their hangers, many were missing, and her trunk had disappeared from the foot of her bed. Feeling like a sleepwalker, he crept forward and looked at the empty spaces in her wardrobe. With another sickening lurch, he recognised the black dress she had worn to Cordelia's ball: the altered wedding gown. He slowly reached out and touched the material, and, as if it had somehow goaded him into action, he turned on his heel and marched from the room.

Taking a fistful of Floo powder from a little clay pot on the mantelpiece in the kitchen, he stepped into the flames and returned to Diagon Alley. Without bothering to dust the powder and ashes from his robes, he strode into the hallway, where he took parchment and a quill from one of the boxes lying on the floor. After scribbling a brief note, he took his owl from its cage and attached the message to its leg. Carrying the bird to the little window in the kitchen, he whispered, "Find Hermione Granger. I have no address to give you, as I don't know where she is. Wait for a reply, and if there is none forthcoming, return to me here."

The owl gave a hoot and flew into the cold night air. Severus sat in his new living room and took the velveteen box from within the folds of his winter cloak. He opened the little box and gazed at the diamond and ruby ring within. The elation and hope he had felt only hours ago was gone, replaced instead by a growing sense of panic.

Hermione had just finished singing the twins to sleep when Padma crept through the door of the little pink bedroom.

"I can't believe you got them off to sleep so quickly," she whispered.

Hermione gave a quiet laugh. "Maybe the maternal hormones have kicked in already."

Padma smiled and took a slip of parchment from her pocket. "A little owl just delivered this note for you."

Hermione frowned and accepted the letter. "Tawny owl?"

Padma nodded.

"Severus," Hermione whispered, unfolding the note. She grunted. "It just says: 'Where are you?'"

"The owl is still at the kitchen window. Do you want to reply?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. I'll contact him tomorrow. It's after nine o'clock, and I really don't want to go into the whole thing tonight. I'm too tired. I'll get some sleep, and tomorrow I'll face the music."

Padma nodded again. "Okay. I think you need to rest; you're very pale," she said, concerned. "I've made up the bed for you in the guestroom, and I've put your trunk at the end of the bed. Would you like me to bring you up a cup of tea?"

"No thanks," Hermione said, stifling a yawn. "I think I'll just try to get straight off to sleep." She stood up and drew her friend into a hug. "Thanks for everything, Padma. I don't know what I'd do without you."

They said goodnight, and as soon as she'd changed into her pyjamas, Hermione crept, exhausted, beneath the duvet. She wondered what Severus had to say to her, and whether the news would be good or bad. But her thoughts soon turned to the discovery she'd made the night before, and instead of worrying about what his reaction might be, she fell asleep with a small smile on her face, the image of a pale, black-eyed baby in her mind.

Severus jumped when the loud tapping on the kitchen window heralded the return of his owl. But his heart sank when he opened the window to find that the owl had returned without a note. Setting the bird on its perch in the living room, he decided there would be little chance of sleep that night unless he made an effort to find Hermione.

But where could she be? She could have gone to her parents' house; Potter was another possibility; or maybe she'd even decided to visit Draco and Susan. But he thought it probable that she'd sought refuge with Padma. To the best of his knowledge, Padma was the only one Hermione had confided in about their relationship, so it was most likely she had gone there.

Where did Padma live? He racked his brains, trying to recall if Hermione had ever mentioned their address, but he could not even remember her mentioning what part of Britain Padma and Dean lived in, never mind their exact whereabouts.

Tomorrow would be the twenty-third of December, and he suddenly remembered Hermione mentioning something about going to her parents' house for Christmas. Maybe she'd gone home early. That would have explained the missing clothes and trunk.

He was suddenly hopeful: He had travelled to the Grangers' house on the day of Hermione and Theo's wedding, and he could remember exactly where it was. Rushing to the door, he threw open the bolt and hurried into the little cobbled back yard, slamming the door behind him. Turning on the spot, he Disapparated and reappeared in the same affluent suburb he remembered so well. Feeling nervous, he made his way up the Grangers' driveway, wondering how she would react if she was there.

He reached out and pressed a finger to the doorbell. There came the murmur of voices from within before he saw the outline of a female silhouette through the bevelled glass. Jane Granger opened the door with a curious frown, and he was struck by the fact that Hermione had inherited her mother's warm brown eyes. She looked startled, but after a second she flashed him a smile of recognition.

"You're Severus Snape!" she said, proffering her hand. "We met at Hermione's wedding."

He shook her hand, feeling awkward. "Forgive me for intruding at such a late hour, Mrs Granger, but I was wondering if Hermione was here?"

Before Jane Granger could respond, Hermione's father emerged from the sitting room. "Hello," he said in greeting, shaking Severus by the hand. "It's nice to see you again. Hermione has talked about you non-stop ever since the day she started working for you."

"I ... I see," Severus muttered. "I don't suppose she's here, by any chance?"

"I'm afraid not," Jane said. "Isn't she at home?"

"Would you care to come in?" Hermione's father asked.

Severus shook his head. "Thank you, but no. I'm afraid it's imperative that I speak to Hermione."

"Nothing's wrong, I hope?"

Severus shook his head and lied. "Just an important potion we've been working on. Forgive me; I did not mean to alarm you. Have you any idea where she might be?"

The Grangers shook their heads. "You might try her friend, Padma," Jane suggested. "Or maybe Harry and Ginny Potter."

"I suspect she may be with Padma," Severus agreed. "Might I ask if you have her address?"

"I'm afraid we don't. I know they live somewhere not too far from here, but that's it, I'm sorry to say."

Severus took a step back and inclined his head. "Again, forgive me for disturbing you at such a late hour. I'm sure she's just gone to visit Padma."

He walked down their driveway, aware he had given them cause for concern. He wondered what their reaction would be when they learned of their daughter's relationship with her former professor. The thought might have worried him more if his alarm at Hermione's disappearance hadn't been growing by the minute. Without looking back at the Grangers, he turned and Apparated to Kensington Square. He pressed his wand to the lock of Hermione and Lance's house and let himself in.

The house was still dark, and little had changed since his first visit some three hours earlier. Severus quickly climbed to the first floor and knocked insistently at Lance's study. "Lance?" he called, opening the door. The room was empty. He turned and descended the stairs, calling for Moe as he went, but the elf failed to respond.

When he reached the basement, he glanced through the open door of Hermione's bedroom, but everything was exactly as he had left it: the doors of the wardrobes still lay open, and nothing had been disturbed. Hanging his head in defeat, he returned to the kitchen and crossed to the fireplace. He would return to his newly rented lodgings and send her another letter. It was after ten o'clock, much too late to call on the Potters and the Malfoys, both of whom had young children.

He stepped into the fireplace with a deep sigh.

Tomorrow, he would find her.

Severus knew a brief moment of satisfaction at the expression of shock on Harry Potter's face when he opened the door of his Godric's Hollow cottage the following morning. The younger man was still in a pair of striped pyjamas, and a small red-haired boy was clinging to his leg.

"Good morning, Mr Potter. I can see my appearance has come as something of a surprise," Severus said.

"Yes ... I ... Good morning," Harry managed, his green eyes wide behind his glasses.

"You were expecting St. Nicholas, perhaps?" Severus asked with a smirk.

Harry grinned. "It would have been less of a shock than finding Severus Snape on my doorstep. Won't you come in?"

Severus shook his head. "I apologise for disturbing you, and I won't detain you long. I can see you are ... busy," he said, looking at James Potter with distaste.

Harry chuckled. "That's the understatement of the year. What can I do for you?"

"Is Hermione here, by any chance?"

Harry frowned. "No, I haven't heard from her since last week. Is something the matter?"

Before Severus could answer, Ginny appeared at her husband's side. "Professor Snape!" she said with a bewildered smile.

"Have you heard from Hermione?" Harry asked her.

Ginny frowned. "I met her in the Leaky Cauldron on Sunday, but I haven't been in contact since then. What's happened?"

"Nothing has happened," Severus said. "I just need to contact her with regard to a small business matter, and she was not at home yesterday. Have you any idea where she might be?"

"Have you tried her parents' house?" Ginny asked.

Severus nodded. "Yes, I called on them last night. Might she be with your brother and his wife?"

Ginny shrugged. "It's unlikely. I know they're on speaking terms again, but I don't think she's ever visited them. I'll Floo them to check." She turned and headed for the sitting room, where Severus could see her take a pot of Floo powder from a bookshelf next to the fireplace.

Harry was watching him, an expression of curiosity on his face. *Has something happened?* he whispered.

Severus met his gaze. "I am unsure; I need to find her."

"Just to discuss a business matter?"

Severus was spared the necessity of answering by the reappearance of Ginny. "No, she's not there. I checked with Draco and Susan, too, but they haven't seen her. Have you tried Padma's house?"

"I'm almost positive she is with Padma, but I've no idea where they live," Severus replied.

Harry and Ginny exchanged a look. "We don't know where they live, either," Ginny muttered. "I know it's near Oxford, somewhere, but I don't have the address."

Severus uttered a sigh. "Thank you, both of you. I appreciate your help." He gave them a nod, ignoring the knowing glance that passed between them. Stepping away from the house, he Apparated back to Diagon Alley. It seemed another note was in order. He felt lost, powerless without her.

Hermione returned Dean's embrace.

"Padma told me your news," he said, grinning. "Congratulations, Hermione. I know the circumstances mightn't be ideal, but it'll all be fine. Babies are fun!" he added, picking up both of his daughters and carrying them from the kitchen.

Hermione returned his smile as she watched him go. "Thanks, Dean."

"Have a seat," Padma said, setting a pot of tea on the table. "How are feeling? You look a bit peaky."

"Just tired, really. I haven't gotten sick, or anything. Not yet."

"Maybe you won't at all," Padma said, placing two envelopes before her on the table. "The first letter arrived for you late last night, and the second arrived first thing this morning."

Hermione looked at the them with a frown. "I'm almost afraid to read them."

"Don't be. I think he's frantic to find you, Hermione. A letter arrived, addressed to me, half an hour ago." She passed a sheet of parchment across the table.

Hermione picked up the letter, her hands trembling.

Dear Mrs Thomas,

I hope this letter finds you, as I've no idea where you live. I am desperately seeking Hermione's whereabouts. It's imperative that I speak to her as soon as possible. She has not been at home since last night, and I have sought her at her parents' residence and at a number of her friends' houses.

If you have seen her, or if you know where she might be, I urge you to contact me as soon as you possibly can at the above address.

Sincerely yours,

Severus Snape.

Hermione glanced at the top of the sheet of parchment: the address was for a house in Diagon Alley.

"Diagon Alley?" she said, raising her gaze to Padma's. "What's going on?"

Padma shrugged. "Don't ask me. Are you going to read your letters?"

Hermione nodded. "I'll try to eat, first."

Padma frowned. "Did you sleep? You're very pale."

Hermione sipped at a mug of tea. "I slept until about four, but I kept waking up with cramps. I presume it's my uterus stretching or something. Did you get that when you were pregnant?"

Padma's frown deepened. "No, not until the last two weeks. Maybe you should take a trip to see a mid-witch, just to make sure everything's okay?"

Hermione sighed. "I think I should probably face Severus before I do anything else, before I lose my nerve."

Padma smiled. "It might all go better than you think; he certainly seems eager to find you. Why don't you take your toast upstairs and read your letters in the privacy of your room? Then you can come back down and tell me what he's said."

Hermione nodded, pressing a hand to her churning stomach. "Okay," she said. She rose from the table and picked up her mug of tea with one hand and the letters with the other. But she'd barely stepped away from her chair before she was gripped by a wave of pain so intense that she cried out. The mug of tea fell to the floor with a crash, and she sank to her knees.

"Hermione!" Padma screeched, jumping from her seat. "What's wrong?"

"Pain," Hermione muttered through gritted teeth, her eyes closed and her hand pressed to her abdomen. The letters fluttered, forgotten, to the floor. She doubled over, her head almost touching the tiles.

"Dean!" Padma screamed, and seconds later Dean came crashing into the kitchen.

"What's going on?" he said, alarmed.

"Get me some Floo powder and help me get her to the fireplace," Padma hissed.

Hermione could barely hear them anymore above the ringing of her own heartbeat in her ears.

"She needs a Healer," Padma said desperately. "*Now!*"

Tread Softly

Chapter 33 of 34

Severus finally finds Hermione.

A/N: My dearest readers. This is, essentially, the last chapter, although there is one more an epilogue yet to come. I won't say much more, because I know you are eager to find out how everything is resolved. This was the hardest chapter to write, and I would dearly love to hear your thoughts. I'll have the epilogue and my last author note (sob!) up for you on Friday.

LB x

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,

Enwrought with golden and silver light,

The blue and the dim and the dark cloths,

Of night and light and the half-light,

I would spread the cloths under your feet:

But I, being poor, have only my dreams;

I have spread my dreams under your feet;

Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

- **W. B. Yeats, *He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven***

Severus placed the last of his most volatile ingredients in a magically reinforced cupboard in his new laboratory and looked around, his hands on his hips. Six hours had passed since his trip to the Potters' house, and it had already grown dark outside.

He'd spent the afternoon unpacking boxes and trunks and arranging his laboratory to his satisfaction, hoping the activity would help to distract him, that it would somehow ease this sense of gloom. But nothing he did detracted from the fact that it seemed Hermione Granger had slipped from his grasp when he had been so very close to making her his.

He had delayed telling her of his divorce with the best of intentions: he had wanted to come to her a free and single man, a man who was in a position to ask her to become his wife. It had been his objective to come before her with a home to offer and with a ring for her finger. But now, it all seemed so foolish, and he wondered if he would pay for his mistake for the rest of his life.

Leaving the outbuilding that now housed his laboratory, he warded the door and returned to the house, admitting as he walked that Hermione had every right to be angry with him. He'd been so preoccupied with securing a quick divorce that he had failed to soothe her fears; he'd gotten so carried away by the idea of the new life on which he was about to embark that he had neglected the one person who was central to that life...the only detail that really mattered.

When he'd returned from Harry and Ginny's house that morning, he had Apparated to Kensington Square, but Hermione had still not returned, and her bed had not been slept in. Lance wasn't at home either, and Moe had failed to respond to his summons.

He'd walked all the way across London in an attempt to quell his anxiety, and, for the first time, he'd worried that something was wrong, that her absence meant something more than mere annoyance. On his return to his new abode, he'd written her another note, apologising for his failure to have contacted her with an explanation and begging her to reply to him. He had also written to Padma, but his correspondence had gone unanswered.

He entered the little house in Diagon Alley, an uncomfortable, empty feeling in his stomach that had little to do with hunger. Hours had passed, and still he had not heard

from Hermione. He had thought about putting his skills in espionage to use: he knew that Padma and Dean worked at the Ministry of Magic, and it would not be all that difficult to coerce one of their colleagues into telling him where they lived, or to find their address in a filing cabinet in the payroll office. He had been on the verge of Flooing directly to the Atrium at the Ministry, but he had revised that plan. He thought he should, perhaps, allow Hermione time to read his letters and get over her anger. What's more, if something was wrong, maybe he should let her tell him in her own time.

He hated this. He abhorred the feeling of helplessness in which he had wallowed for almost twenty-four hours. Where the hell was Lance? He wondered if the old man was in any way involved in Hermione's disappearance. Somehow, he doubted it, but he was almost certain that Moe knew where Hermione had gone. The only other time he could ever remember Moe ignoring his repeated summons was when Theo had left and Hermione had ordered her to admit nobody to the house. He scribbled a note to Lance, requesting a meeting at eight o'clock that evening.

When he had seen his owl to the window, he made his way to the bedroom to unpack the remainder of his belongings, hoping the activity would help to pass the time, feeling as if a year had passed since he had last laid eyes on Hermione Granger.

Severus looked up from the trunk of books through which he had been sifting, his attention arrested by a tapping at the kitchen window. His eyes widened when he recognised the beautiful snowy owl at the window. He had been present on more than one occasion when Hermione had received a message from her best friend, and there was no mistaking the striking owl that belonged to Padma and Dean Thomas.

His heart thumping with a strange mixture of relief and dread, he opened the window and untied the note from the bird's leg, his hands shaking. The piece of parchment was disappointingly small, and he frowned as he read the brief message:

Dear Professor Snape,

Forgive me for not contacting you before now, but events have prevented me from doing so. I wanted to let you know that I have received your letter, and that I'm currently with Hermione, although I cannot say where.

I know this has probably done little to calm your fears, but rest assured that I will contact you as soon as both time and Hermione allow.

Best wishes,

Padma Thomas.

Severus read through the letter a second time, his alarm growing as he took in the line *but events have prevented me from doing so*. What was that supposed to mean? To what events could she possibly be referring? He was gripped by panic: he was suddenly certain that some dreadful calamity had befallen Hermione and that the location Padma could not mention was St. Mungo's. What if she was ill? What if she had had an accident of some sort? He Summoned his travelling cloak and left the kitchen, standing for a moment in the icy drizzle that was falling in the little back yard. He could hear the festive sound of Carol singers coming from Diagon Alley, and the optimism of the music made his terror seem all the more extreme by comparison.

He turned his face up towards the starless sky and closed his eyes, allowing the rain to fall against his skin. His heart rate slowed, and his breathing became less laboured. He was surely overreacting; if Hermione was unwell, Padma would have told him. On the verge of Apparating to the wizarding hospital, he suddenly rethought his plan and Apparated instead to Kensington Square. It was already half past seven: perhaps Lance had returned by now.

He turned into blackness and reappeared on the steps of Lance's house. He could see that the lamps had been lit in the old man's study on the first floor, and he uttered a sigh of relief. Here, at last, was someone in whom he could confide what had happened. Pressing the tip of his wand to the front door, he let himself in, calling for Lance as he shut the door behind him. Lance's reply came from upstairs, and Severus hurried to the study.

"You're early," Lance remarked, peering at him above his spectacles. "Is something the matter?"

"Where have you been?" Severus asked, taking the seat before Lance's desk.

"I was staying with friends in Cardiff," Lance said, a frown deepening the lines on his forehead. "I do hope you're going to tell me Cordelia has agreed to divorce you in February?"

Severus grimaced. How inconsequential his divorce now seemed compared to the fact that he could not find Hermione. "I'm happy to say your niece excelled herself. We divorced yesterday."

Lance gasped. "What? You've divorced already?"

Severus nodded.

Lance beamed. "I believe this calls for a celebration!"

Severus watched as he Conjured a pair of glasses and extracted a decanter of mead from beneath his desk. "What are you doing with a drinks cabinet under your desk?"

Lance chuckled. "I wasn't much of a drinker in my youth; I've decided the time has come to remedy that. Besides, I find both mead and elf-made wine have a beneficial effect on the arthritis."

Severus shook his head and accepted the glass of mead. "I think you might be a little hasty in your celebration, Lancelot."

Lance held up a hand. "Yes, I can tell by your face that all is not well, but for one moment, let us toast your successful escape from the Mill family. If only I could do the same!"

They raised their glasses, and Severus took a small sip of his drink, eager to move to more pressing matters.

"Now," Lance said with a sigh. "Tell me what's going on. Don't tell me the girl has refused to marry you?"

"When did you last see or speak to Hermione?" Severus asked.

Lance raised an eyebrow. "Sunday evening, shortly before I spoke to you and Cordelia."

Severus frowned. "You didn't see her later that evening?"

He shook his head. "I knocked on her bedroom door when I returned from your house, but no, I didn't see her or speak to her. I presumed she was asleep, and about an hour later I left for Wales." Lance glared at Severus across the desk. "What have you done?"

"It's not so much what I have done as what I have failed to do."

Lance tapped his crooked fingers impatiently on the desk. "Meaning?"

"Cordelia agreed to a divorce on Sunday night, and we spent hours going through my accounts before we reached a financial settlement. I had intended coming straight

over here and telling Hermione of what had come to pass, but I decided instead to come to her the following afternoon, once I'd secured a divorce and was a free and single man. I sent her a note asking her not to worry, but I can see in hindsight that it was insufficient."

"Insufficient?" Lance asked in disbelief. "The girl was worried out of her mind about what was going on across the road, and you didn't even tell her that Cordelia had agreed to a divorce?"

Severus shook his head. "I told her not to worry, and I promised to explain the situation in full the next day."

"And how long did it take you to get here?"

Severus lowered his gaze, ashamed to admit the truth. "It took most of the morning to arrange the divorce, and one of the details to which I had agreed was that I would vacate Kensington Square immediately and that I would not live in this house, nor set up the laboratory here. Three individuals in Diagon Alley had suitable premises to let, so I travelled directly there and agreed to lease one of them."

Lance covered his face with his hands. "So, what time was it when you eventually arrived here?"

"Late evening; about seven o'clock. She has not been here since then."

"Good grief, man!" Lance exclaimed, lowering his hands. "You left her all that time without an explanation?"

"How was I to know she would disappear?" Severus spat. "Her trunk is gone and half her clothes are missing from the wardrobes."

"You hadn't even asked her to marry you, you fool! Did you tell her you loved her? Please tell me that she at least knows you love her?"

"She ... She knows I love her ..."

"Did you spell it out for her, Severus?"

Severus frowned. "Well, I..."

"Did you actually say the words?"

"She asked me if I loved her, and I admitted that I did."

"So you have never, in fact, uttered the words *I love you*?"

Severus pressed his fingers to his temples. "Not in so many words, no."

Lance thumped the desk with his fist. "Severus Snape, you idiot! How can someone so intelligent be so utterly foolish?"

"It's not my fault that women set so much store by such things," he said, affronted.

Lance sighed. "Where have you looked for her?"

"I visited her parents' house last night: she has not been to see them for the past ten days. This morning I called on Harry Potter. She is not there, and his wife contacted both Ronald Weasley, and Draco Malfoy, neither of whom have seen her or heard from her since Sunday. I presume she is with her friend, Padma, but neither her parents nor her friends had Padma's address."

"Hmm ..." Lance murmured, fingering his beard. "I agree with you: she's probably with Padma."

"Have you any idea where Padma lives?"

Lance shook his head. "Have you tried to contact Hermione by owl?"

Severus nodded. "Every letter has gone unanswered, except for one I sent to Padma. I received a brief letter from her about twenty minutes ago, admitting she is with Hermione and assuring me she will make contact as soon as events allow."

"What events?" Lance asked with a frown.

"I don't know; I've no idea what is going on, Lance. At first, I thought Hermione was just angry with me, but now I suspect something more may be afoot."

Lance stroked his beard, his gaze fixed upon his glass of mead.

"I need to find her, Lance. I've called for Moe many times since yesterday, and she hasn't responded. It wouldn't be the first time Hermione has confided in her, and I suspect she may know what's happened."

The older man looked at him for a moment and then called, "Moe?"

The elf appeared immediately with an echoing crack. "Yes, Master Lancelot?" she asked, her protuberant eyes widening at the sight of Severus. She stared at him for a moment and then pursed her lips.

"I wonder if we might trouble you for some tea, Moe?" Lance asked gently.

The little elf gave him a brief nod and disappeared again.

"Well, she did look ruffled by your presence," Lance said. "She knows something."

"Ask her, Lance," Severus said, sitting forward. "I cannot rest until I find Hermione."

"It's not always that easy, Severus. She may be a free elf, but she has her loyalties, and fond as she is of you, I know she has a great sense of devotion to Hermione. If Hermione has forbidden Moe to tell us of her whereabouts, she will be unmovable to that end. Do not forget that she is still bound by the enchantments of her kind."

"I know, Lance, but you've known her almost all her life, and you alone can persuade her to tell us what she knows. It's my last hope. If I haven't heard from Hermione by ten o'clock tonight, I'll have no choice but to break into the Ministry of Magic and find out where Padma lives."

Lance regarded him for a moment. "I'll do my best, Severus."

Moe reappeared with a tea tray, determinedly not making eye contact with Severus as she Levitated the tray onto the desk.

Lance cleared his throat. "Where's Hermione, Moe?"

Moe looked at him, her eyes wide, and shook her head.

"Does that mean you don't know or has she asked you not to tell us?" he asked, his voice kind.

Moe shook head again and wrung her hands in her pink apron.

"I'll take that to mean she has asked you not to tell us, Moe, and we will respect that. Perhaps you might answer some other questions, if you can. When was Hermione last here?"

Moe looked at the floor. "She is going yesterday morning, because she is being upset." She looked up and narrowed her eyes at Severus. "Why was your things gone, Master Severus?"

Severus arched his eyebrows. "How did you know my things were gone, Moe?" There was a sinking feeling in his stomach as realisation hit him. "Did Hermione ask you to go across the road to find me?"

Moe nodded, her eyes still narrowed. "You was making her sad."

"Did you tell her that all my things were gone, Moe? Did you tell Hermione I'd left?"

"Yes," Moe said defiantly. "Your icky potions things, and your clothes, and all your books."

Severus gave a brief laugh of disbelief.

"Oh, dear," Lance said. "I can only imagine what must have been going through the girl's head."

"Where is she, Moe?" Severus asked desperately.

Moe lowered her gaze again and shook her head.

"Moe," Lance said quietly, smiling down at her. "I know you cannot tell us where she is, but perhaps you can help us, nonetheless. Has she been in only one place since she left here yesterday?"

Moe looked at him for a moment and then shook her head once more.

Lance's smile widened. "In that case, can you tell us where shewas? Miss Hermione forbade you to tell us where she *is*, but not where she *was*."

Moe looked uncertainly from Lance to Severus, who was gazing expectantly at her. He dropped to his knees in front of her.

"Please, Moe. I need to know where Hermione was. All I want is to make her happy."

The elf regarded him for a few seconds, and then a big tear rolled down her ancient face. She wiped her eyes on her apron. "She was being at Miss Padma's house."

Severus exchanged a glance with Lancelot, his worry increasing at the sight of Moe's tears. Something was very wrong.

"And do you know where Padma's house is, Moe?" Lance asked.

Moe nodded. "They was calling me for help," she explained, wiping her face on her apron again.

Severus shot Lance another troubled look. "Can you bring me there, Moe?"

Moe turned to look at Lance, who nodded encouragingly. She turned back to face Severus. "Yes, Master Severus," she whispered.

"Good luck, Severus," Lance said. "Do not hide your feelings from Hermione, or the rest of the world, for that matter. You no longer have any need to do so."

Severus stood and gave him a nod before Moe reached up and placed her bony hand on his forearm and Apparated them both away with a click of her fingers.

Opening his eyes, Severus glanced quickly around at his new surroundings. Moe had brought him to a small, neat housing estate, and they stood at the bottom of a garden path, which lead to the red front door of a semi-detached house.

He looked down at Moe. "This is where Padma lives?"

Moe nodded, her eyes still full of tears.

"And Hermione was here?"

Moe nodded again and wiped at her face with the back of her small, frail hand.

Severus lowered himself to one knee, so that his face was level with Moe's. "Thank you, Moe. I know this has been difficult for you, but you have my eternal gratitude. I am aware something has happened that has upset you, and I will do what I can to make sure that Miss Hermione is always safe and happy."

Moe looked intently at him, tears still trickling from her big eyes, and, after uttering a sob, she stepped back from him and Disapparated with a loud crack.

He rose to his feet, and only seconds after the house-elf had disappeared, another crack echoed through the stillness of the night. Padma Thomas had appeared before the door of her little house, a dark blue travelling cloak wrapped around her petite frame, the hood pulled up over her dark hair.

"Miss Patil?" Severus said urgently, hurrying up the short garden path.

She turned at the sound of his voice, her hand reaching instinctively beneath her cloak for her wand.

"I meant ... Mrs Thomas ... Forgive me," Severus said, giving her a moment to compose herself.

"Professor Snape!" she said, stowing her wand beneath her robes once more. "I'm sorry ... You startled me."

"I apologise," he whispered, standing before her. She had taken down her hood, and he could tell by the circles beneath her eyes that she was exhausted. "Is she here?"

Padma shook her head. "No. I was about to write to you." She looked up and down the short street. "Please, come in." She opened the door and beckoned for him to follow her inside.

As soon as she had closed the front door behind them, Dean emerged from the sitting room.

"Professor Snape!" he said, clearly surprised. After a slight hesitation, he offered his hand.

"Mr Thomas," Severus countered, shaking his hand awkwardly.

Dean's gaze turned to his wife. He laid his hand on her arm. "You okay?"

Padma nodded sadly. "I'm fine; just drained. Are the girls in bed?"

Dean nodded and looked from Padma to Severus. "I'll just go up and check on them," he said, clearly uncomfortable.

"We can talk in the kitchen," Padma said, leading the way to a door at the far end of the hallway.

His heart thumping in anticipation of what she might have to say, Severus followed her and took a seat at the kitchen table.

"Can I offer you some tea or coffee?" she asked, giving him a shy smile.

"No, thank you," he replied. "I just need to know where Hermione is."

Padma chewed nervously at a fingernail. "She asked me not to tell you until tomorrow morning: she wanted a few more hours to get her head around what's happened, but I'm not so sure that's a good idea. She's distressed: she's not thinking very clearly at the moment."

"What has happened?" he asked desperately. "Is it that she's upset that I failed to contact her for so long, or has something untoward occurred?"

Padma sighed. "I hope you'll forgive me for asking, Professor Snape, but why didn't you contact her? I don't mean to pry, but I need to know what's been going on before I decide what I should tell you."

Severus rubbed his brow, uncomfortable with having such a personal discussion with a woman he barely knew. But there were much more important things than his pride at stake. "She told you I had decided to approach my wife for a divorce on Sunday?"

Padma nodded.

"Our negotiations were rather complex and took up most of the day, but Cordelia eventually agreed to a divorce. I had expected her to agree to a date in February, but she consented to grant me a divorce the very next day. We divorced yesterday."

Padma gasped, and her hands flew to her face. "I joked about that very possibility; neither of us believed it could be true!"

Severus sighed. "Look, I know that Hermione's house-elf, Moe, discovered I'd removed all my belongings from the house and passed that information on to Hermione, and I know, in hindsight, that I was very wrong to keep Hermione waiting for such a terribly long time, but I'd just secured what we had thought was almost impossible: I was to become a free man the very next day ... I also needed to acquire new premises immediately, so..."

"Why couldn't you just have stayed with Hermione?" Padma interrupted.

"That was one of the clauses in the divorce: Cordelia requested that I never inhabit the house across the road. It was imperative that I find somewhere to stay. I wanted to come to Hermione the following day with my divorce papers in hand...a free man."

Padma sighed. "Oh, what a horrible mess." She gazed at him across the table. "Hermione wasn't really thinking straight: she was tired, overwrought. She misread the situation, and she had a lot of things to think about." She got up and crossed to a pine sideboard. "Here," she said, handing him two folded lengths of parchment. "She never even had a chance to read these letters, in the end."

Severus took the letters from her. "What's going on? Where is she?"

Padma looked torn. "She made me promise not to tell you; not until tomorrow. But isn't it better to break that promise if I think it's for her own good?"

Severus's mouth had gone dry; he imagined all kinds of dreadful things that might have come to pass. "Please, Mrs Thomas. I need to know where she is."

"Do you love her?" Padma asked in a whisper, her eyes filled with tears.

Severus frowned. "I really don't think that..."

"I know it's none of my business," she said, interrupting him again, "but I cannot tell you where she is unless I'm sure."

He looked at her for a few seconds, and then he recalled Lance's words about no longer needing to hide his feelings from the world. "Yes, I love her. And once I find her, I have absolutely no intention of ever letting her out of my sight again."

Padma looked at him, her face stricken, and a large tear rolled down her cheek. "She's in St. Mungo's."

Severus rose rapidly, almost knocking over his chair, hardly able to believe that his instincts had been correct, that she had been there all along. "Is she ill? Is she in danger?"

Padma gave a small shake of her head. "She needs to tell you that herself; it's not my information to give. I know it's well past visiting hours, but you can get to her if you really want to. She was on an emergency ward on the fifth floor when I left, but they were organising to move her to a private room."

His heart hammering, Severus nodded. "I'll find her; I'll leave immediately. Thank you for your help."

He turned and threw open the door of the kitchen, but before he could leave the house, Padma followed him to the front door and called, "Severus?"

He stopped, surprised she had used his first name.

She placed her hand gently on his arm, and he realised, with a start, that she was crying freely now.

"I'm so very sorry," she whispered.

His sense of dread doubling at her words, he awkwardly patted her hand and stepped away from her.

"Be good to one another," Padma added as he stepped through the front door.

With a final glance at her unhappy face, he turned on the spot and Apparated back to London.

Severus looked at the grubby shop front of Purge & Dowse Ltd. He had not been to this part of London since the day he'd been discharged from the wizarding hospital, but such was his anxiety that he did not even think of the months he'd spent recuperating inside these walls.

The streets had emptied of late-night shoppers, and Severus glanced left and right before whispering to the shabbily dressed dummy, "I'm here to find Hermione Granger."

After a second, the dummy gave a small nod and beckoned with its jointed finger. Casting a Disillusionment Charm on himself, he stepped through the glass and into the reception area of St. Mungo's. He knew that the charm would not make him completely invisible, but if he moved slowly and silently, he was more likely to blend into his

surroundings. As visiting hours had finished, the rickety wooden chairs in the reception area were mostly unoccupied, and a young couple holding a blue-skinned toddler were gesticulating urgently to a Healer in lime-green robes a few feet in front of him.

He moved slowly towards the enquiries desk and stepped quietly around an old wizard whose arm was dangling uselessly by his side. Peeping over the edge of the desk, he squinted at the list of names on the Welcomewitch's clipboard, and, after a few moments, he spotted it: *Hermione Granger ... Fifth Floor ... Gunhilda Youdle Ward ... Room 502.*

Walking as silently as he could to the stairwell, he climbed to the next floor. When he'd passed the doors leading to the wards on the first floor, he quickened his pace, only slowing when he passed a green-clad Healer on their way downstairs.

He reached the fifth floor without meeting anybody else in the stairwell, relieved that the occupants of the portraits that lined the walls hadn't seemed to notice him. Pausing outside the double doors, he peered through the small round window set into one of them. A sign pointing left showed the way to the visitors' tearoom, while the one pointing right announced the *Gunhilda Youdle Ward*.

The corridor was quiet: there were one or two Healers moving from room to room, checking on their patients. Severus breathed a sigh of relief: he could see a room a little way down the ward with the number *502* engraved on a small plaque. The door was ajar, and no-one was around.

Pushing open the double doors, he stepped gingerly onto the polished tiles of the corridor, hoping that the squeak of his shoes on the linoleum would not give him away. He reached the door of her room within seconds and stopped outside: he could hear an unfamiliar voice coming from within. Inching forward, his heart thumping, his breathing shallow, he pushed the door open a little further so that he could step into the room.

He knew both joy and fear when he at last set eyes on Hermione. She was propped up in bed, her curls spread out against the stark white of the hospital pillows. His breath caught in his chest at the sight of her face, and he felt a throb of longing. Her skin was almost as ashen as the bed linen, and the dark hollows beneath her eyes told him that she had been through much since he'd last seen her. The cold sensation of fear intensified, and he suddenly dreaded finding out what ailed her.

He wanted nothing more than to rush forward and gather her in his arms, to press her to his chest, but a green-clad Healer was fussing around the bed, tucking the blankets neatly beneath the edges of the mattress. She was a middle-aged witch with a kindly expression.

"There you go, dear. You've got your jug of water beside your bed, and I'll leave you this Pain Potion in case you need it during the night. If you want me, all you have to do is wave your wand." She patted Hermione's hand gently. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, thank you," she said, her voice hoarse.

The Healer walked to the door, and Severus stepped a little further into the room to ensure she would not brush against him, his back pressed against the wall. The witch paused and turned back to face Hermione.

"I know how difficult it is for you to believe you'll get over this, my dear," she said sympathetically. "But you will get a little bit better every day. I know: It happened to me when I was about your age."

Hermione gave her a small, sad smile and nodded. "Thank you," she muttered.

The Healer returned her smile and stepped through the open door, closing it softly behind her.

Severus's gaze was fixed on Hermione, and as soon as the door closed, she uttered a tremulous sigh and closed her eyes. He continued to watch her for a moment, transfixed by her delicate, white face, a gut-wrenching ache in his chest. He watched until he had drunk his fill of her, and then he took a deep, steadying breath, steeling himself and begging any deity that might be listening to let her be all right and to let her forgive him for the hurt he had caused her.

Stepping forward, he whispered, "Hermione?"

Her eyes flew open, and she sat upright in the bed, one hand pressed to her stomach, her eyes suddenly wide with alarm. She looked frantically around the room. "Severus?" she said.

He took his wand from beneath his robes and removed the Disillusionment Charm, his eyes never leaving her face.

She pressed her fingers to her mouth. "How ... How did you find me?"

He walked to the edge of her bed. "I've been searching for you since yesterday evening. I tried everyone I could think of: your parents; Harry and Ginny; Draco and Susan. Moe refused to tell me where you were, but I persuaded her to bring me to Padma's house, and Padma eventually told me you were here." He wanted so badly to gather her in his arms, but he was suddenly unsure of where he stood. "I was frantic with worry, Hermione," he continued, his voice constricted. "What has happened?" He took her hand in both of his. It was cold to the touch.

She swallowed hard. "Before I tell you," she began, her voice shaking, "I need to know what's been going on. Why didn't you contact me, Severus? I thought ... I thought you'd decided you didn't want a divorce after all. All your things were gone ... I ... I didn't know what to think."

He continued to hold her hand, encouraged that she did not withdraw from his grasp. "I'm truly sorry that I kept you waiting." Still holding her hand, he lowered himself onto the chair by the side of the bed. "Cordelia initially refused me a divorce, as we had expected her to do. We argued well into the evening, but Lancelot eventually interceded, and he persuaded her that a divorce was as vital to her own happiness as it was to ours. We debated a little further, and, much to my astonishment, she agreed to a divorce."

Hermione looked shocked. "She agreed? She actually signed an agreement?"

Severus gave her a small smile and reached beneath his robes. He extracted his divorce papers and laid them before her on the bed. "She did even better than that. See for yourself," he said, indicating the documents. "We divorced yesterday morning; I am a single man, Hermione."

With trembling fingers, Hermione picked up the papers, her expression one of shocked disbelief. "She's divorced you ... already? You're no longer married?"

He nodded.

Hermione frowned. "But why didn't you tell me? And why were all your things gone from the house?"

Severus sighed and shook his head. "That's where I was rather a fool, I'm afraid. I intended crossing the square and telling you that very night, but I revised that plan, deciding instead that I would surprise you by coming to you the following day with these divorce papers in my hand. A misguided shot at romanticism."

"I still don't understand why Moe found the house empty ... You'd even cleared out the laboratory. Why would you do that?"

"Cordelia agreed to a divorce, but there were a number of clauses to which I was bound, and one of them was that I would not, at any time, inhabit your and Lance's house, nor would I set up my business there. I cleared out my belongings, and after we'd finalised the divorce at the Ministry, I found suitable premises in Diagon Alley and moved all my trunks and boxes there. I know, Hermione, that I made an erroneous decision in that regard. I should have contacted you without further delay. It was unforgivable of me."

Hermione shook her head and pulled her hand from his grasp. She placed her head in her hands. "Oh, Severus. I'd imagined so many different scenarios in my head. I

thought Cordelia had persuaded you to stay. That was unforgivable of *me*. I should never have doubted you.

She lowered her hands again, and he frowned. He'd never seen her so pale and so drawn. He leaned forward, his elbows on the bed, his heart hammering against his ribs once more. "It matters little: I've found you and that's what's important. I need to know what's happened to you, Hermione. Are you ill?"

She stared at her hands, which were entwined in her lap. "On Sunday night ... shortly before I got your note, I ... I found out ... Well, something I hadn't been expecting."

He reached out and placed a finger beneath her chin, gently lifting her face until she met his gaze. "You found out what? Are you unwell, Hermione?" He could feel her shaking. "What is it? Tell me."

"I ... I found out that ... that I was pregnant," she admitted, her voice quivering.

His mouth opened in shock. He had imagined a whole variety of dreadful illnesses over the preceding hours; he had thought about all the terrible accidents that might have befallen her. But not once had it occurred to him that she might have been pregnant. He stared at her, aware that she was hungrily examining his face.

"That's why I left, Severus. I didn't know what to do, what to think. I needed space."

"You're ... pregnant ..." he said, barely able to comprehend it.

She swallowed hard. "I was pregnant. I ..." she continued to look at him, a forlorn expression in her eyes. "I lost the baby, Severus. *Our* baby ..." her voice cracked, and she lowered her gaze to her stomach, where her hands now rested.

Feeling as though someone had emptied a bucket of ice-cold water over his head, he rose from his seat, hardly knowing what he was doing, what he was feeling. He walked to the little window behind the bed, leaned his hands on the window sill and stared at the damp, lamp-lit street below. His thoughts were in turmoil, the words *our baby* echoing around and around in his head. It was as though he was drowning: he felt he could not breathe, as if there was some sort of crushing weight on his chest.

"I didn't mean for it to happen," Hermione said from behind him. "I was careful ... I'm almost certain I never failed to perform a contraceptive spell. But I mustn't have been careful enough. I don't know how it happened ..."

Severus leaned his head against the cold glass of the window, trying in vain to steady his breathing, to quell the surge of emotions. The burning pain in his chest was almost more than he could bear, and he knew that there was guilt mixed in there along with shock, and he knew that if she had lost this baby because of the stress he had caused her, he would never forgive himself.

As if she had read his mind, she said, "The Healers said we shouldn't blame ourselves. I told them ... I said that the last few days had been stressful, tiring. But they said that the placenta was defective, that it was inevitable and nothing could have been done to prevent it ... They said it happens to so many women ..." she trailed off, her voice thick with emotion.

He closed his eyes, knowing that, despite her words, he was guilty. He had not been there in her hour of need; he had not been there to share in the tragedy that was equally his to endure. She had gone through this ordeal without him to hold her hand, to stroke her hair, and to tell her that everything would be okay.

"They said it was a boy," she added.

He felt like an arrow had pierced his heart. For a short time he had, unknowingly, been a father. For a few days, weeks, maybe, he'd had a son, and he hadn't even known.

He was gripped by a pain that almost brought him to his knees with its intensity. And as he tried to identify exactly what it was, he realised that he'd felt this way before, a long time ago, in Dumbledore's office. This crushing emotion was familiar: he had felt this way as he'd sat, doubled over, keening in misery on the night he had learned that Lily had died. This was grief. He didn't need Exostraserum to tell him that.

"I know you've never wanted children, Severus, and when I first found out I was pregnant I was so confused, so scared. But once I had gotten over the shock, I realised that this was a good thing. I wanted this, Severus. I *wanted* this baby so badly! There was a time when I was willing to sacrifice that just to be with you. But now, knowing what I've lost ... I don't know if that's something I can just sacrifice anymore ..."

He turned and looked at her, and he found the grief that was tearing at his chest reflected in her eyes.

"This has broken my heart," she said, her voice breaking once more. "I can't even cry anymore. I've cried so much today that I feel like I'll never cry again ... I just feel numb. I know you never wanted a child, but I do, and it's no longer something that I can deny. I feel so very empty."

He gazed at her, at her grief-stricken eyes, her forlorn expression, her clenched jaw, brave and determined despite the fact that she was trembling with sorrow and loss, and he knew that he loved her even more for her stubborn Gryffindor courage.

He walked from the window back to her bedside, feeling as though he was standing at the edge of a vast precipice. With sudden clarity, he understood that the next few moments were the most important of his life. He held the key to his and Hermione's happiness in his hands, and he felt as though the path before him was strewn with their hopes and dreams, and that he must tread carefully, choose his words with the utmost care. He would offer her his heart; never again would he hide anything from her.

"Say something, Severus," she whispered.

He took both her hands in his and pressed them for a moment to his lips, his eyes closed. Then he opened his eyes and gazed into hers.

"It's true: I've never wanted children; I've never had that desire. You know my upbringing made me determined never to inflict unhappiness on an innocent child, so no, I've never longed for a son or a daughter. Even as a married man, I had no wish to continue my line. But don't you understand, Hermione, that with you, the rulebook that has governed my life for so long goes out the window?"

She looked at him wide-eyed, confused. "What do you mean?"

"With you, Hermione, I want it all: the whole package."

She watched him in silence.

Severus took a deep breath, trying to ignore the agony that still had him in its clutches. "I know that nothing can ever replace the baby that you ~~were~~ have lost. But there is time ... There will be other children."

"Other children?" she asked.

He brushed a stray curl from her face and tucked it behind her ear. "You are young and healthy. *We will* have a family of our own."

"But ... but you didn't want children ..."

"You're right ... I didn't," he said. "But with you, I do. Sometimes we don't realise what we want until it is gone. I want everything that I've never wanted before: I want to wake up beside you every morning and find you there when I reach for you; I want to have a house and a garden and an irritating cat; I want to watch you grow large with our children and bring them into the world; I want to help you raise them and wave them off on the Hogwarts Express; I want to grow old and grey with *you* at my side!"

Her bottom lip trembled. "But if you've never wanted that before, why now?"

He stroked her cheek with his thumb. "Because I love you, you silly girl. Don't you understand that I love you with all my heart and all my soul?"

She closed her eyes and leaned in to his touch. "Really?" she whispered.

"Really and truly," he said, his voice strained. "I love you."

He waited for her to open her eyes again, and when she did, he took her solemnly by the hands. "Marry me, Hermione Granger. Not because of the ridiculous Marriage Act, but because you love me as much as I love you. Marry me *despite* the Marriage Act, because that is truly what you want, and not because it is what you have to do."

She squeezed his hands, and her eyes filled with tears. He thought of the ring that was nestled within the velveteen box in his robes, but it suddenly seemed so unimportant, so surplus to requirements. She was all that mattered.

"You saved my life all those years ago in the Shrieking Shack, but you've saved me a second time this last year. I never want to be without you again, and we will get through this loss together."

He cupped her face with his hands and kissed her reverently on the forehead. "Marry me, Hermione; spend the rest of your life with me; raise a family with me; grow old with me."

She had thought there were no more tears left, but suddenly, there they were, streaming down her face. They were neither tears of joy nor sorrow, but rather a strange mixture of the two.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Yes?" he repeated, searching her face, his voice hoarse. "To which part?"

"To all of it," she said, reaching for him. "To every last little bit of it."

He clutched her to him as if he would never let her go again, and a moment later, they pressed their foreheads together in a gesture of unity, and Hermione was never sure, in the weeks, months and years that were to follow, which tears had belonged to whom.

Epilogue - I Think My Love As Rare

Chapter 34 of 34

Two years later ...

A/N: Well, dear readers, we have reached the end of the Denial road. Again. I'm sad to be finishing, as I've enjoyed your reviews and messages more than I can say. Thank you for your readership, your enthusiasm, and your feedback. You are the reason I write.

I would like to renew my thanks to my original betas, Robisonrocket and Ladyinthecloak. They were completely awesome, and I learned much from them. To the moderators of the various sites and archives, I would also like to extend my thanks. They give of their time and expertise without expecting any reward. We wouldn't be reading without them.

I've had thoughts about turning Denial into an original story. I may yet do it. I have a few short SS/HG stories to upload, AND I've been bitten by a rather insistent plot bunny with an idea for a longer, chaptered SS/HG tale. So watch this space. If you add me as a favourite author/set me to alert, you will know if and when that happens.

So, here is the epilogue. As the wonderful amr mentioned in a review, the story really ended with the last chapter, but, as fanfiction readers, we cannot help but long for loose threads to be all tied up. I hope this epilogue will do just that, and I also thought it important to see our couple in happier times.

I hope you all enjoy the last instalment, which is dedicated to all of my readers. I would love to hear from you, and now that the editing is complete, I should have the time to respond to your reviews.

Thank you, each and every one of you, for making this such a good experience.

Much love,

LB x

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;

Coral is far more red than her lips' red:

If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;

If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

I have seen roses damask'd red and white,

But no such roses see I in her cheeks;

And in some perfumes is there more delight

Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

I love to hear her speak, yet well I know

That music hath a far more pleasing sound:

I grant I never saw a goddess go,...

My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare

As any she belied with false compare.

- William Shakespeare, *Sonnet No. 130*

TWO YEARS LATER

"Severus?" Hermione called.

She peered into the sitting room and then turned and squinted down the spiral staircase that led to the basement. The door to the laboratory was lying open.

"Severus?" she called again, frowning.

As she made her way into the kitchen, her frown eased into a smile as she spotted the black-robed figure in the back garden, a Levitated herb-basket by his side. Her smile widened when she saw him talking to the cat, his arms crossed and a scowl of annoyance lining his brow. The unfortunate cat had obviously attacked the floating basket yet again.

Severus had promised her a cat, and two weeks after they'd moved into their cottage, a sleek, black moggy had appeared at the kitchen window. The stubborn animal had refused to leave, and after a week of throwing him scraps from the kitchen window, they'd allowed him inside the house and had adopted him as their own. Not that they'd had much say in the matter: Kitty, as he had been appropriately named, might allow them to wallow in the illusion that they were his 'owners', but Hermione was only too well aware of who really called the shots.

She watched as Severus finished berating the cat and returned to his task of collecting his Potions ingredients. It was a crisp December morning, and she could see his breath on the air. She decided she'd make him a cup of tea and take it outside. The herb garden was climate controlled, but it was just one of those mornings that begged for a warm mug of tea in the hands.

She looked on, amused, as Kitty settled himself a few feet from Severus and turned his yellow gaze to the irresistible floating basket. They had quite a tempestuous relationship, Kitty and Severus, but Hermione knew that despite referring to their pet as a 'flea-bitten piece of filth' and 'the most infuriating feline to ever have walked the Earth', Severus was fond of his black cat.

As she busied herself with the tea, she felt that same rush of pleasure from her surroundings that she'd felt each day since they'd moved here over a year previously. It had taken six months for them to reach an agreement on where they should live: Severus had had some romantic notion about living in a cottage in the thick of a forest, but Hermione couldn't even have a picnic in a forest without being reminded of the terrible months she'd spent on the run with Harry and Ron.

She had imagined them living in a wide open space, airy and bright; she had even suggested the cliff top in the west of Ireland to which he had taken her the day he'd offered her a permanent contract, but every house she had found had been pronounced as 'too exposed'.

They had finally reached a compromise and had settled for a large cottage in the Lake District, which, while being surrounded by lush, fragrant gardens, was near a dense copse, where Severus was kept amused by a vast array of interesting fungi, and Kitty was kept busy by a nice selection of rodents. The basement had been transformed into a laboratory, and the cottage was more than large enough for what they hoped would eventually be a growing family.

Hermione spooned tealeaves into a clay pot and glanced at the calendar on the kitchen wall. There were two days to go until Christmas, which meant that it was exactly two years since they had lost their son.

The year before had been hard: she'd woken in tears and had spent most of the day red-eyed and despondent, aching for the child they'd lost. Severus had been awake before her, watching her, waiting for the misery to come and prepared to do his best to soothe it, and she had felt guilty for provoking the look in his eyes, for being the cause of the anguish and concern that had lined his face. She had spent that evening curled on his lap before the fire, the two of them staring into the flames for hours, lost in their own sorrow.

"Do you know," she had said with a sigh, "it's not even the fact that it's a year ago today. What makes it worse is that we ... we would have had a child this Christmas. A son ... he would have been four or five months old ..."

Severus had pressed his lips to her forehead. "I am ready to try again, Hermione. Whenever you decide that is what you want."

"But what if it doesn't work, Severus? What if I can't have children? What if we lose another one?"

"It's a possibility," he had concurred. "But nothing worthwhile is ever easy, and nothing worth doing is ever without risk. ~~We~~*we* will have a family. If we cannot conceive, we will adopt. You will hold your own baby in your arms, Hermione, and Moe will have her opportunity to knit and crochet to her heart's content."

Hermione had sat up a little straighter. "You'd really be willing to adopt a child?"

He had nodded. "Of course," he'd said. "If that is what it takes, of course."

"Soon," she'd whispered, kissing him on his over-large nose. "I'll be ready to try again soon."

And somehow, from that day, it had gotten better. She knew she would never forget the child they'd lost, but the grief had begun to fade, to be replaced by mere sadness, and soon after that she had found that she could think about the son that wasn't to be without it hurting her chest. And this morning, when she had woken, it had been the first thought in her head, but when she had opened her eyes to find Severus already awake and watching her, she had greeted him with a smile, because this year there was much to look forward to, and life had been kind.

She Summoned a pair of mugs from the cupboard and wondered what she would wear on Christmas day. She had plenty of robes that were suited to summer weddings, but Hogwarts was always draughty at this time of year, and a Christmas day wedding in the Great Hall would require something more substantial than the gauzy outfits she'd worn to previous weddings. The thought of what kind of robes Luna Lovegood might wear on her wedding day made her smile: something outlandish, no doubt, accessorized with a pair of radish earrings.

Neville had returned to his position in Hogwarts that September, his bride-to-be in tow. He had finally found Luna in Sumatra, after almost a year of searching, and a few months after that the Marriage Act had finally been abolished, allowing them to return to Britain without the fear of being subject to the law once more. Between his Hogwarts salary and the small fortune Luna had earned from publishing about her travels, they could afford for his parents to continue to be cared for in Devon, and Hermione had never told Neville the identity of his mysterious benefactor.

Hermione smiled as Moe entered the kitchen, humming to herself, knitting busily as she walked.

"Moe," Hermione said, chuckling, "I really don't think there's any room in the nursery for more booties."

The little house-elf smiled. "I is spending the morning making the wardrobe and the presses bigger, Mistress Hermione. There is being lots more room, now."

Hermione laughed and shook her head. "Should we invite Lance to dinner tonight, do you think?" she asked, gazing fondly at the elf. "We've to dine with my parents tomorrow; we'll be at the wedding feast on Christmas Day; and we'll be at the Potters' on Boxing Day. It might be the last chance we have to see him for a while."

Moe's eyes widened in delight. "I is asking him immediately," she gushed.

"Tell him we're having turkey and ham pie. Oh! And tell him he is not, under any circumstances, to wear that ridiculous hat with the enchanted badger on it. Poor Kitty nearly died of fright last time: he wouldn't come into the kitchen for a week."

Moe nodded and disappeared with a snap of her bony fingers.

Hermione hoped Lance would be able to make it. Two years had passed since she had lived in the same house as the old man, and she still missed him, despite the fact that he was a regular guest. He had provided some much needed entertainment for them in the months that had followed her miscarriage, and she would never forget his generosity when she and Severus had wed.

"You look radiant, Hermione," he had told her at the small reception that had followed their spring wedding. "It's good to see some colour back in your cheeks, lassie."

She had smiled. "You look rather radiant yourself, Lance," she'd said, eyeing his bright orange outfit.

"Now, to business," Lance had said, pulling her into a quiet corner. "I've deposited your share of what the house in Kensington Square was valued at in your Gringotts account."

"What? Lance! You know I said I didn't want the money ... I told you I was giving you the full deeds to the house regardless."

"Nonsense, nonsense! It's your money ... I have plenty," he'd insisted, waving his hands. "But I also wanted you to have this," he'd added, extracting a box from his pocket. "It belonged to my mother, and it passed to me on her death. It's the kind of thing a father would give to his daughter on her wedding day, and, well ... you've been like a daughter to me, Hermione Granger Snape."

Hermione had watched as he'd brushed the back of his hand across his suddenly tearful eyes. She had never before seen Lance moved to tears, and she had felt her own eyes fill. Inside the long, rectangular box there had been a delicate gold bracelet, which he had extracted and placed on her wrist.

"It goes rather well with your wedding band," he'd said, pleased.

"Thank you so much, Lance," she'd murmured, her voice choked. "I ... I don't know what to say, except ... thank you."

"I have one more thing. Not a gift, exactly, as it is not truly mine to give, but it's something that will be of great benefit to you. I want you to take Moe with you, Hermione."

Hermione's jaw had dropped. "Lance! I couldn't possibly take Moe ..."

"Please," he'd said. "Do it for her, Hermione. She is a free elf; she is not mine to give, as such, but I've talked it over with her, and I know it's what she wants. She has always wanted a family to look after, babies to watch over. You will give her that, someday. She has too big a heart to spend the rest of her long life shackled to an old pansy like me."

"How could I possibly separate the pair of you?" Hermione had said. "You've been together for ninety years. I can't get in the way of that! She is dedicated to you, Lancelot!"

"Hermione, please. It's what we both want. I have no doubt that she will Apparate back to Kensington Square every bloody day of the week to check on me, in fact, I've spoken to her about this very plan, and that was her one condition."

Hermione had eventually conceded defeat, and she had not regretted it when Lance had summoned Moe, and the little old elf's face had lit up at the news that she was to look after Hermione and Severus.

As she poured milk into Severus's mug of tea, she caught his eye through the window and gave him a small wave, touched by the way he examined her expression with concern before turning back to his task, apparently satisfied that she was happy. She smiled at the sight of his permanent frown, remembering Christmas Day two years previously.

Severus had escorted her to her parents' house on Christmas Eve, when she had been discharged from St. Mungo's. He had tried to insist that he be there for her when she broke the news of their relationship and her subsequent miscarriage to them, but Hermione had been adamant that she needed to do it on her own, that they needed to get over the shock before they met with him.

She had put on a brave face, explaining her pallor by blaming it on a cold, and only crying over her loss in the privacy of her old bedroom. She had wanted to allow her parents to enjoy their Christmas Day, and they were expecting her godparents for dinner, so she had decided to hold her tongue until their guests had departed.

Later that evening, when the house had fallen quiet and the dinner dishes had all been cleared away, Hermione had taken a seat on the sofa in the sitting room, eyeing her parents apprehensively.

"Mum and Dad," she'd begun. "Would it be okay with you if I invited someone to dinner tomorrow?"

Her mother had looked up, surprised. "I don't see why not. A friend?"

Hermione had shaken her head. "A bit more than a friend. Severus."

Her parents had exchanged a glance. "Severus Snape? The chap who called here two nights ago?" her father had asked.

"The man with the permanent scowl?" her mother had added with a scowl of her own. She had eyed her daughter knowingly. "Is there something going on between you, Hermione?"

She had swallowed nervously. "He's asked me to marry him, and I've said yes."

Her father had looked as though he'd been hit by a Stunning Spell, while her mother's scowl had deepened. "We're talking about the man who is married to Cordelia Mill?"

"*Was* married to Cordelia Mill," Hermione had explained, her voice shaking. "They've divorced."

Her father had opened his mouth to speak, but had evidently thought the better of it.

"And you've been seeing him?" her mother had asked, her eyes wide.

Hermione nodded.

"How long has this been going on?"

"Since July," Hermione had said.

Her mother had put down her brandy and had laced her fingers. "Since July? Since before you divorced Theodore?"

Hermione had nodded again. "Neither of us meant for it to happen, but it just did."

Her mother had turned to her father. "Well ... say something!"

Hermione's father had looked at her for a long moment, before asking, "Are you marrying him because of that Marriage Act, or because you love him?"

Her shoulders had sagged in gratitude. "Because I love him, and he loves me," she'd whispered, suddenly afraid she was going to cry.

"Well," her father had said, nervously eyeing her mother. "That's something, at least."

"There's something else," Hermione had said quickly, suddenly determined to say it before she lost her nerve. "I was pregnant, but I lost the baby. Only two days ago. That's why I'm not ... feeling too well ... I'm sorry ... I hate to tell you like this ..." She had buried her face in her hands, overcome by emotion.

She had sobbed into her hands, and within seconds, her father's arms had been around her heaving shoulders. Lost for words, he hadn't known what to say, except, "I'll make us all a nice cup of tea."

He had left her side, and when Hermione had lowered her hands, she'd found her mother kneeling before her on the carpet, her own face streaked with tears.

"Oh, Hermione," she'd whispered. "I'm so sorry, and you know I understand how you feel."

They had thrown their arms around one another and wept. Hermione had always known her mother had had three unsuccessful pregnancies before she had been born, but she still had not expected such empathy. She and her mother had not been on good terms since her return from France, but in the space of a few mere minutes, their differences had been forgotten.

She had sat in her mother's arms for hours while Jane Granger had told her about the babies she herself had lost. And it had given Hermione hope to know that life would go on, and that someday she, too, would be able to speak openly about her loss without being besieged by grief.

Later that night, she had Apparated to Diagon Alley, and she had lain awake all night in Severus's arms as they had begun, tentatively, to discuss what they hoped the future might bring. And shortly after dawn, he had told her about the ruby and diamond ring he had bought, and he had slipped it onto her finger, moving her to tears once more. Dinner with her parents that day had been understandably awkward, but over the months they had warmed to her husband, and now they got along as well as could be expected.

Hermione glanced out the window once more before she picked up the mug of tea and carried it to the kitchen door, giggling as she watched Severus turn to snarl at the cat.

She knew he worried about what kind of father he would make, and she knew he would be his own sternest critic when the time came, but she also knew that he would love his children with all his heart, and that, in the end, would make everything be just fine.

He was still impatient; he still snapped at her; he was still bad tempered and incommunicative. He was still, when all was said and done, the quintessential black character.

But she loved him more with every passing day.

Severus bestowed a small smile on Hermione when she emerged from the kitchen and handed him a mug of tea. He felt that same surge of happiness he had felt so often of late each time he laid eyes on her. Every time he looked at her, he could barely tear his gaze away from her growing stomach, the swell beneath her robes where she carried their unborn daughter.

There were only five more weeks to go until she was due to give birth, and he knew, for reasons he could not quite explain, that this baby would be radiant with health. He could almost feel his daughter's strength, her magic, each time he placed the palm of his hand on the swollen mass that was his wife's midriff.

"How are you feeling?" he asked as he took a sip from the steaming mug.

"Perfectly well, thank you," she said, smiling. "You don't have to ask every time you see me, you know."

"I'm afraid you will probably have to put up with that newly acquired habit for at least the next five weeks, and possibly for the rest of our lives."

Hermione giggled. "I've asked Lance over for dinner tonight."

Severus rolled his eyes. "We have five weeks left to ourselves before things change forever, and you seem determined to fill our evenings with half the wizarding world and a couple of Muggles to boot."

"It's Christmas ... That's the way it's meant to be. You can have me all to yourself again after a few more days."

"I shall hold you to that," he said, leaning forward to kiss her forehead. He frowned as he looked down. "Are you in your bare feet?"

"I have stockings on," she said.

"Good grief, woman. It's December. Into the house with you, now," he growled. "And I beg you to take that irritating, flea-bitten excuse for a cat with you before I transfigure him into a garden gnome: one of the garishly painted Muggle kind."

Hermione laughed. "Come on, Kitty," she said. "Let's leave poor Severus to himself."

He watched as Hermione made her way back to the door, her hand pressed to her lower back and the black cat following in her wake.

When she had opened her eyes that morning, he had been relieved to see her smile. They would always remember that this was the day they had lost their unborn son, but it was heartening to know that they had truly begun to recover from their loss. And perhaps they would yet have a son, if luck was on their side. Hermione was not yet thirty; they had many years left during which to try.

The months following that fateful night in St. Mungo's had been among the most difficult of his life. For such a long time he had felt, as if tangible, the weight of grief pressing on his chest, but what had hurt him more was the haunted look in Hermione's eyes. Stricken as he had been by the loss of their child, he knew he would never fully grasp what it was to have carried a baby only to have suffered a miscarriage. For months he had worried incessantly about her. Sometimes she had even cried in her sleep, and he had even found himself stirred to tears on those occasions.

But as the weeks and months had passed, she had slowly recovered, and she had begun to be able to talk about their loss and about her fears for the future. Her imagination had run riot on occasion, and she had believed there might be all sorts of dreadful reasons why she might never carry a baby to term. He had talked her through those worries time and time again, reassuring her that they were in no hurry, that she should take her time and wait until she felt strong and secure before they tried for another baby.

And one day, after she had returned from a visit to Harry and Ginny, she had taken a deep breath and told him that she was ready, that it was time. And luck had been with them: they had conceived almost immediately. On the day she had performed the spell to confirm her pregnancy they had sat side by side on the bed, their hands entwined.

They had stared in silence at the white circle as it had hovered in the air. He had expected to feel jubilant, ecstatic, but as he'd turned to face her, he had known they had both felt the same emotion: fear. Yes, they had been happy, but they had also felt numb with fear; fear that this pregnancy would end like the first. They had kept the secret to themselves for weeks before hesitantly sharing their news with family and friends, and each week that had passed without incident had seemed like a milestone. The terrible fear had eventually subsided, but he knew they would worry until the moment they finally held their daughter in their arms.

Severus sipped his tea and watched Hermione through the window as she pottered about the kitchen. A glint of silver caught his eye on the wall behind her, and he smiled at the memory of the gift she had given him the day before their wedding: He had once joked that she should frame the delicate silver hair clip that had precipitated their relationship, and so she had.

They had decided they would only tell Hermione's closest friends and her parents about her miscarriage, and on the day she had travelled to the Potters' house to share her story, he had looked up from his book as the fireplace had flared with green flames. He had wondered, for a moment, what had brought her back so early. It was not Hermione that had stepped out of the grate, however, but Harry Potter, dusting ash and Floo powder from his robes. Severus had found himself quite robbed of his cutting tongue.

"Hi," Harry had muttered. "I ... I hope you don't mind, but I wanted to say ... well ... congratulations on your engagement. And the girls are crying and stuff, so, you know ... I fancied a bit of fresh air."

Severus had raised an eyebrow. "I daresay there is rather a lot more fresh air to be had in Godric's Hollow than in Diagon Alley."

Harry had chuckled nervously. "Yes, good point. Can I sit down?"

"Of course," Severus had replied, indicating the armchair opposite his own and putting his book to one side. "Can I get you a drink? Or will mere fresh air suffice?"

Harry had grinned. "Fresh air will do fine, thank you."

"Might I ask what this is about? Have you come here to curse me, perhaps? Or to deliver a lecture on how I should leave your friend alone?"

"Neither," Harry had said, becoming serious. "I meant what I said: I came to congratulate you. It wasn't much of a surprise, to be honest: she's done little but talk about you for months. And then, when you called to our house looking for her last week, we did suspect something was going on. It's a good thing ... I think. She's been happier, these past few months. Well, I know she's unhappy at the moment ..."

Severus had dropped his gaze and looked towards the fireplace.

"I'm sorry to hear about the baby. Ron's wife lost twins last year, but they have a lovely little daughter now. I'm sure Hermione will be fine, after a while."

"I'm sure she will, in time," Severus had agreed quietly.

Harry's smile had suddenly returned. "She told us you weren't impressed by us using your name for our son."

Severus had scowled. "You might have asked my permission."

"Would you have granted it?"

"To be stuck in there with Albus and Potter? Never!"

"Then I'm very glad we didn't ask permission. I think his name suits him."

Severus had grunted. "Well, if some day we are lucky enough to have a son, don't expect us to return the compliment."

Harry had risen from his chair, smiling broadly, and had walked to the fireplace. "You know, I used to take your comments so personally, but now I realise you're actually quite witty. Funny, I suppose."

"Funny?"

"Yes, funny." Harry had taken a fistful of Floo powder from the mantelpiece. "Before I go, I just wanted to say ... to ask ..." He'd hesitated.

"Yes, Mr Potter, I will look after her; I will be kind to her; and I will spend the rest of my life trying to make her happy. There is no need to ask."

Harry had flashed him a smile of relief. "Thank you, sir," he'd said before disappearing in a rush of green flames.

Although Severus was reluctant to admit it, Harry Potter didn't irritate him nearly as much as an adult as he had done in his youth. Having said that, he hated the fact that they seemed to feel the need to visit so often: his house was often far too full of Gryffindors these days for his taste.

He wondered into what house his daughter might one day be Sorted. He had imagined what their little girl might look like many times in his mind: he always envisaged her with her mother's errant mop of curls, her mother's smile. But, perhaps, she would have his black eyes. He hoped the poor child wouldn't have his unfortunate nose; she would never forgive him if she did.

He stooped down to pluck a few leaves from one of the pots, and his wedding band caught his eye. He had hated the wedding ring he'd had while married to Cordelia: it had been made of highly decorated platinum, and he had always thought it far too fussy. This ring, in contrast, was made of plain, unadorned gold, and he found it infinitely preferable; it symbolised something...it was not merely a decoration.

He and Hermione had exchanged rings in a short, intimate ceremony in Hermione's favourite chapel in the Sorbonne. In defiance of the Marriage Law, she had insisted they wed outside the country, and one day *after* her six month period of grace had ended. He had thought it rather pointless, but she'd seemed pleased by the idea, so he had agreed.

The gathering had been small: Hermione's parents and godparents; Lance and Moe; Padma and Dean; Harry and Ginny; Draco and Susan; Minerva McGonagall and Neville Longbottom. But Severus had been most touched when Theodore Nott had shown up some twenty minutes before the ceremony had begun.

Theo had looked apologetic. "I'm not here to cause trouble, Severus, don't worry. Hermione sent me an invitation, although she said she didn't expect me to turn up. I hadn't really planned on attending, but I changed my mind."

Severus had extended his hand. "You are welcome here, Theo. I'm just surprised to see you."

Theo had given him an uncertain smile. "Well, I knew Hermione would have her parents and friends here, and I know you have Lance and McGonagall, but I just thought, you know, since you don't have any family ... I was your stepson until recently, so I thought I'd come and show you a bit of support."

Severus had hardly known what to say. "Thank you, Theo. That was ... incredibly thoughtful of you. Thank you."

He had not seen, or heard from, his former stepson since, but he had appreciated the gesture, and he had felt the occasional pang of guilt that he had not made more of an effort to be involved in Theo's life during the early years of his marriage to Cordelia.

He hoped he would make up for his shortcomings with his own child. On numerous nights he had lain awake in bed, listening to Hermione's gentle breathing, wondering what sort of father he would make. He still felt ill at ease with her friends' children. He could see that Padma's twins were very beautiful; he could even see that Albus Severus Potter was unusually clever and observant. But what did one do with infants? He panicked every time one of the toddlers came near him, and only Hermione's expectant gaze prevented him from fleeing the room. He could only hope that he would react instinctively with his own child, and he was determined not to repeat the mistakes of his own inept parents.

But he knew, with complete certainty, that he already loved his daughter. He never tired of sitting with his arms around his wife, his hands on her bump; the detection of movement beneath her skin never ceased to thrill him.

He would not become his father, and the fact that he thought constantly about what it would be like to hold his little girl, and the fact that he grew increasingly impatient to meet her and get to know her, gave him hope that he would compensate for his own miserable childhood by giving his children the best life he possibly could.

He looked towards the kitchen window again, where he could see Hermione stirring something in a large pot on the stove.

She was still stubborn; she still drove him insane with her infernal humming; she still tickled his nose with her unruly mop of curls and kept him from sleep. She was still, when all was said and done, an insufferable know-it-all.

But he loved her more with every passing day.

THE END