

The Act

by ladyofthemasque

Government-in-action. Oh, crap.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 2

Government-in-action. Oh, crap.

Yes. I am this twisted. And yes, this is sooo AU... ~Lotm

I.

"...Married to a Muggle-born??"

The outraged yell startled all of the students in the Great Hall. Forks clattered to plates, goblets of pumpkin juice sloshed as they were hastily set down, and three Hufflepuffs, two Gryffindors, five Ravenclaws, and no less than sixteen Slytherins choked on their food as they all realised in stunned silence just who had made that shocked outburst.

Severus Snape, Defence Against the Dark Arts professor.

Only one person in the whole of the stunned Great Hall dared intrude on the moment. Lowering knife and fork, Headmaster Dumbledore studied him with a remarkable display of calm, considering the younger wizard was near-purple with apoplexy, and was spluttering words which, had they been successfully formed in full through his near-incoherent rage, would've surely forced the Headmaster to dock Slytherin a hundred points, collectively.

"...Is there something you wished to share with us, Professor Snape?"

"I...you...this...this...*Page 16!*" he finally roared, slapping the newspaper in his hands down on top of the remains of his abandoned breakfast.

Frowning in confusion, Albus Dumbledore shifted to untie and shake out the pages of his own copy of *The Daily Prophet*. Other sheets of paper rustled around the hall, about a dozen in all, as the staff members and few students who carried subscriptions to the wizarding journal opened their own copies. Seated between a confused Harry Potter and a puzzled Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger flicked through her own copy, interrupting her breakfast reading. She scanned page 16 for anything out of the ordinary, knowing she would have to go back and read the intervening four pages later...

A sharp, indrawn breath had her two best friends peering closer. Ron's brow furrowed. "What? I don't see anything!"

Ignoring him, Hermione silently read the column that had been squished...in tiny print...next to the Classifieds section. It was one of those RCW-style Law Notices.

'INTERBREEDING ACT: After reviewing the genetic inbreeding of Pureblooded family relations, and the disproportionately high incidence of Squib-births and miscarriages, the Ministry of Magic has enacted the Interbreeding Act, Effective Immediately. All unmarried Purebloods [Definition of Pureblood: anyone whose ancestors were wizarding-kind for more than two generations; Squib ancestors do qualify as wizarding] between the ages of 18 and 80, will only be allowed to marry Muggle-borns between the ages

of 18 and 80 [Definition of Muggle-born: anyone whose ancestors were Muggles for more than two generations; Squib ancestors do not qualify as Muggles]. Any unmarried Muggle-born may petition a Pureblood for their hand in marriage. Any Pureblood receiving a bona fide offer of marriage must accept within 30 days from the receipt of the first offer in written contract form; if there is more than one such offer made during this 30-day grace period, the Pureblood has the right to choose between petitions.

To induce the Muggle-born community to comply with this Act, all property and assets of the Pureblood will fall under the jurisdiction of their Muggle-born spouse upon the moment of marriage, including inheritances, incomes, and management of other tangible assets, up to and including the retention or disposition of family retainers. As the majority of the Wizarding World consists of Half-Bloods [Definition of Half-Blood: anyone with at least one Wizarding and one Muggle or Muggle-born parent or grand-parent], the Wizengamot feels this law will not disrupt the wizarding community unduly, and has ruled the Ministry's Decree to be legally acceptable. Furthermore:

All contracts with fellow Purebloods currently pending in the Ministry of Magic's Department of Marriages and Licensing are hereby suspended, and no future contracts between two Purebloods will be considered. All contracts currently pending between a Pureblood and a Half-Blood will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. No future contracts will be accepted between Purebloods and Half-Bloods.

As the aim of this Act is to promote the birth of genetically diverse wizards and witches, all such marriages are further faced with the following requirements: that the spouses be primarily male/female in pairing; that any female/female or male/male pairings must agree for at least one of the spouses to take the Parandrogynum Potion; that, should a wizard or witch be medically certified as sterile due to age or circumstances that they consult with the Healers to seek all reasonable remedies to their condition; that both spouses of any gender pairing agree to be Oathbound in the Fidem Maritum wedding ceremony as a concession to the longstanding Pureblood tradition of begetting only legitimate children; that the marriages are to take place within 30 days of acceptance of the proffered contract; that the marriage be consummated within 24 hours of the wedding ceremony; that there be a minimum of 2 procreative conjugal encounters between legally married spouses affected by this Act per week until conception; and that the spouses affected by this Act understand that a minimum of three 3 wizarding children [Definition of Wizarding Children: children who have demonstrated an aptitude for magic sufficient to be accepted into a standard wizarding institution of learning, such as Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, by the age of 12] are to be conceived, born, and raised to a minimum of the age of 12 in the youngest-born before any Act-enacted marriage may be legally dissolved. If any of the children born into an Act-affected marriage are proven to be Squibs by the age of 12, the marriage may be legally dissolved.

Any Pureblood who refuses to accept one of the Muggle-born bids for their hand in marriage will have their status as a wizarding citizen stripped, their properties confiscated, their wand snapped, and will find themselves cast out into Exile. [Definition of Exile: strict banishment into Muggle society until such time as the exiled person chooses to comply with the Ministry of Magic's decree.] ~Rufus M. Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic; ~Priscilla Philliston, Chief Witch of the Wizengamot; ~Judeth Everleigh, Healer General.'

Hermione let out a low whistle. That it had the backing of the Ministry, the Wizengamot, and the Chief Healer of the nation meant it had a lot of hefty hitters backing it. Minister Scrimgeour was a politician and had no doubt figured out some angle of benefit for his own causes, but Madam Philliston was renowned for her impartiality and clear-headed thinking, and Healer Everleigh was regarded as one of the foremost mediwitches of the ages. Getting this Interbreeding Act repealed was going to take a lot of time and a whole lot of money.

Given that the war with Voldemort was now officially over...she had witnessed it first-hand, helping Harry and the rest of their friends to defeat the Basilisk-Snogging Bastard in a showdown at Riddle Manor during the Halloween Feast last month...a lot of the older members of the Purebloods had their numbers reduced with their unmasking as Death Eaters and their subsequent defeat. That meant the younger set would mostly bear the brunt of this burden. A glance across the Hall showed Draco Malfoy looking so pale, his skin threatened to turn as grey as his eyes. His birthday, if rumor held true, was in early June, but just the mere thought of some Muggle-born petitioning his hand had him looking on the verge of a genuine fainting spell.

"I still don't see it," Ron muttered. Hermione tapped the column in question, and heard him swearing under his breath a few moments later. Her attention, however, wasn't on her friend. It was on the sight of a lone owl, swooping into the Great Hall, a letter tied to its leg with a bit of black ribbon. The owl was one of the grey-feathered ones used primarily by the Ministry of Magic. Ron shook his head, leaning back and blocking her view of the owl as it flew to the Head Table. "Thank god I've got until the first of March; they've got to repeal this stupid of a law!"

Hermione leaned back further, watching as a still visibly upset but currently silent Professor Snape untied the letter. He turned it over as the owl launched itself away again, and his fury-reddened face paled, his mouth pinching and his eyes widening visibly. Even his hands trembled discernibly from her position halfway across the room as he cracked the seal on the letter. It didn't take him more than fifteen seconds to scan the contents of the letter, and by the time those fifteen seconds were through, he was even paler and greener than Malfoy.

Lurching from his seat, letter abandoned on the table, he bolted...actually**bolted**...for the door that the staff preferred to use. The panel banged open against the wall, juddered halfway shut...but everyone could hear retching sounds echoing from the side-hall. Whatever was in that letter was so horrendous, it made the man who hadn't flinched at spying on the Dark Lord, the man who had killed Albus Dumbledore, and had him secretly revived and replaced with a dummy corpse in a spectacular feat of legerdemaine almost a full year ago, literally sick to his stomach.

Speculation ran rampant.

Reaching across Professor Flitwick's plate, the revived and restored Headmaster snagged the letter, perused its contents with an increasing frown of consternation, and finally refolded it, tucking it into his robes. Rising from his seat, he walked across the head table dais at a decorous pace and waved his hand at the door. It opened wide enough to let him pass, then closed quietly but firmly in his wake. The other staffmembers exchanged looks as bewildered as the students, though with more concern than sadistic glee as the rumors began.

Everyone wanted to know if it was an actual petition for Snape's hand, and if so, who was insane enough to send it.

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No information on the contents of that letter came forward, and though Professor Snape was crueler and colder than usual in his Defence class, it only took one day of snickering, whispering, and sly looks being passed around in his class, resulting in massive point-loss and detention assignments for the students, for the matter to be dropped. In his presence, that was. Speculation still ran rampant through the school, but only in subdued whispers. No one wanted to chance the Head of Slytherin's anger.

It was nearly three weeks into the Act...which had raised a ruckus among the Pureblooded community, but which they could not get the Ministry or the Wizengamot to back down on, no matter how outrageous the bribes offered, a curious fact which *The Daily Prophet* listed as 'reliable information coming from confidential sources within the Ministry'...when Hermione found herself confronted by Professor Dumbledore just as she was about to leave the castle and go down to Hogsmeade with her friends.

"Miss Granger, there you are. I would like to have a word with you, if you please."

Startled by the request, Hermione shrugged, her hands tucked into her back pockets. Clad in jeans and a soft cream jumper under her cloak, she removed the cloak as they re-entered the castle, giving Ron and Harry an apologetic look over her shoulder. "...Of course, Professor. What did you want to discuss?"

"Something best suited for my office." With that, he led the way, saying nothing more until they reached the gargoyle statue guarding his chambers. A mutter of the password...*ferrero rochers*...and they rode the spiralling staircase to the top. Opening the door to his study, he ushered her inside, gesturing her towards a trio of leather armchairs by the roaring fire, rather than towards his desk across the book-and-portrait lined room. "Please have a seat, Miss Granger."

Complying, she headed for the nearest chair...only to find someone was already occupying it. Professor Snape, legs and arms crossed, staring moodily into the flames. The height of the wing-backed chair had hidden him from her view. Swallowing against the unnerving suspicion rising within her, she picked the armchair across from him, and

waited as the Headmaster settled into the seat between them.

Clearing his throat awkwardly, the Headmaster began. "As you are undoubtedly aware, Miss Granger, the Interbreeding Act still firmly exists, despite ongoing efforts to abolish it. As you may also be aware, Professor Snape has already received an offer of marriage. He has, however, received only *one* offer of marriage...and is twenty-one days into his allotted grace-period of thirty, before he must by law accept that solitary offer."

Yes, the sinking feeling in her stomach was definitely forming into her strongest suspicion. "Er..."

"Please, Miss Granger, hear me out," Dumbledore interjected. "Severus Snape's father, Tobias Snape, was not a Muggle-born, as most people who know his history assume. He was in actuality a Squib, deliberately abandoned at a Muggle orphanage by his Pureblooded family at the age of twelve."

Hermione's brow furrowed briefly in outrage even as her heart ached for the poor boy's fate, abandoned callously just because he couldn't cast magic.

"The Interbreeding Act declares that Squib ancestors qualify just as much as wizarding ones do, thus Professor Snape falls under its jurisdiction. And as he has had only the one petition, it will force him to accept the petitioner's offer of marriage...unless someone else petitions for his hand. Someone far more acceptable to his sensibilities than the person who has done so."

Hermione recalled the sounds of the Potion Master's retching from that fateful morning, and frowned in confusion. If anything, she would've guessed he would be exempt from the new law simply because no one would want the sour, cruel, acerbic man. "Who would...erm...distress him so much with their offer?"

"Dolores Umbridge."

The sneer came from the black-clad man seated across from her. It dripped with vilification and loathing, as only his cold, if velvety, voice could manage. He didn't want to be here, but he had to be. At least the one woman left...however young and inappropriate, given she was still his student...was one of the few women he could tolerate listening to, since she was highly intelligent, if nothing else. Though Severus had never let her know that, up until now.

Hermione stared at him, shocked by the revelation. Professor Dumbledore nodded, recapturing her attention.

"From your own encounters with the woman, I'm certain you can see why Severus is extremely reluctant to be forced into wedding her, and...so forth."

Hermione blanched at the thought of the toad-shaped, toad-faced, repulsively-personalities witch asserting her twice-weekly conjugal rights. It wasn't really her size; there were some men who liked very plump women, though Hermione didn't think this applied to the Defence Master's personal tastes. It was Dolores Umbridge's personality that made the Head Girl and the Head of Slytherin shudder in horrified tandem.

"For the past three weeks, we have been compiling a list of eligible witches and attempting to elicit counter-offers from their ranks. Unfortunately, most of those Muggle-borns who are not already married are young enough to remember him as their teacher...and they have refused outright. Including qualifying members of the Order," Dumbledore informed her. "There weren't very many names on the list to begin with, and time is running out. In fact, there is only one name left."

"Of all of the possible candidates, only you have personally encountered and endured Miss Umbridge. You ranked high in potential compatibility, according to the chart we made," the aging wizard continued, while the man across from her snorted, "but you were low on the list of contacts, due to the fact that you are still a student here at Hogwarts. You are, however, Severus' only remaining hope. Do not delude yourself on that point, Miss Granger. I did not rescue him from those who wanted his head on a platter...thanks to all of his years as a spy, and the deception of my demise last spring...just to throw him to the horror of a near life-sentence with that odious b...witch."

Surprised at the Headmaster's tangible dislike of the woman, when she knew he very rarely spoke an ill word about anyone, Hermione found herself nodding. If even Albus Dumbledore thought the match-up of Severus Snape and Dolores Umbridge was abhorrently wrong...she couldn't even *think* of the two names in tandem. It was too horrid to contemplate. *But untold years as Mrs. Snape?* Even with the enticement of legally wearing the proverbial pants in the family, she knew not many Muggle-borns had petitioned for Pureblooded hands.

"Please, Miss Granger, I beg of you to find it within you to overlook your past interactions with Professor Snape, and remember all the good that Severus has done for our world..."

"...Sir," Hermione interjected, cutting off his pleas with a lift of her hand. "You needn't say any more."

Her mind had raced, and her heart, too. The possibility of consigning this mostly unsung hero...however much his personality resembled the hide of one of those spike-studded lizards from Australia...to a fate she herself felt was literally worse than death was enough to sway her mind. Not that she thought the other side of the coin, marriage to Severus Snape, was all that scary. Far from it, in fact.

"Fetch me paper and pen, and tell me what to write. I will petition for Prof...for Severus' hand."

The Defence Master looked at her sharply, at that. But he didn't protest. He studied her wordlessly, neither frowning nor smiling...not that she expected the latter...as Dumbledore conjured a writing stand, a piece of parchment, a quill and a pot of ink. But rather than dictating what she needed to write, the Headmaster cleared his throat.

"At this point, Miss Granger, I'm going to have to ask you to petition me formally to release you from your Defence Against the Dark Arts classes. Obviously, you cannot be graded by a professor who is also your betrothed, and future husband...you and I and Professor Snape all know that you are more than capable of passing your N.E.W.T.s in Defence with flying colours," he added as she drew breath to comment, "so that isn't a valid concern."

"Of course, Headmaster," Hermione stated, changing her response.

He was right, of course. It would drum up accusations of unfairness...either in her favour or against it, grades-wise...if they went through with this and she was still enrolled in her betrothed's class. She nibbled on her lower lip, since she loved Defence Against the Dark Arts and didn't want to give up learning from such a knowledgeable instructor, but complied.

"...Sir, I wish to formally petition you for the right to remove myself from Professor Snape's Defence classes. I, er, feel that I have more than sufficient knowledge to pass that portion my Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Trials without requiring further instruction," she added as Albus nodded approvingly, "and I would rather devote the time I would have spent in Professor Snape's class to other studies, in subjects where I am less proficient."

"Professor Snape, do you agree with this assessment of Miss Granger's skills, and this release of her presence from your instruction?"

Sighing heavily, he sat up a little in his chair, tugging fractionally at his frock-coat to straighten it. It was a stupid question, really, but he followed through with the form of it anyway. "Miss Granger has demonstrated sufficient skill in Advanced Defence to withdraw from my classes in this, her seventh year. However...if she wishes to audit my seventh-year class at some point in the future, attending without any obligation to complete classwork or homework assignments if she does not wish to do so...she has my permission to continue attending. Provided she is not a disruptive element."

"Then, with the compliance of the professor of the indicated discipline, and with the witness of the past Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, I grant Miss Granger my formal approval for her withdrawal from the responsibilities and obligations of Seventh-Year Advanced Defence Against the Dark Arts...and I suggest that you skip at least a few weeks of attendance between now and auditing his class, so that people will understand you are only going to be auditing it from now on," Albus advised her.

She grimaced internally at the thought of missing that many classes, but nodded. Pen poised over paper, she wrote down what he dictated to her as they began the betrothal petition. The text of the contract was straightforward, factual, and not very romantic. It basically just stated that she would comply with all of the Interbreeding Act

requirements, that her intentions were honourable, that she did indeed wish to marry Severus Snape, and that she was no longer one of his students.

Albus enchanted a copy for her to keep, plus three copies to be sent to the Ministry...so that one could be filed and one sent on to her betrothed after it was approved...loaned her a bit of sealing wax to seal the official copies, and even summoned Fawkes from his perch to be her personal message-carrier. Somehow, after the phoenix vanished with a *pop*, she expected the wizard across from her to express his gratitude. But he said nothing, nor did he look at her. He just brooded and stared at the fire.

Dumbledore, clearing his throat in the awkward silence, spoke the necessary words. "Thank you, Miss Granger, for your willingness and cooperation in this matter. You may go on to Hogsmeade, now, if that was your original plan for the day."

Nodding, Hermione rose, gathering her cloak from her lap. Her thoughts were a little shaken from the quickness of her decision, and her stomach unsettled from the upheaval of her emotions. She had a lot to think about, and would take advantage of her solitary walk to the wizarding village to try and make sense of what she'd just impulsively agreed to do.

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That night, another of the grey Ministry owls swooped into the Great Hall. Mail was usually delivered in the morning, not in the evening; the sight of the large bird winging its way toward the head table caused a small stir of interest among the student body. It delivered a wax-sealed letter to the Defence Master, who coaxed the owl to remain with a mutter and an offering of a chicken leg for it to nibble. Extracting the letter with a sidelong glance at the Headmaster, Professor Snape opened it without any further expression, separating out the three copies the letter contained.

He read the contents...taking a full thirty seconds, instead of fifteen...and extracted a quill and an ink jar from his robes. A flourish of red ink on the contracts, and he resealed the topmost two letters and retied them to the owl's leg. Meat-covered bone in its beak, the owl took off, exiting the chamber to the curiosity-driven whispers of the students. Professor Dumbledore tapped his goblet with his wand, rising as the Hall quieted out of respect for him.

"Over the past few weeks, it has been both my solemn duty and, in a few cases, my joy to announce a handful of the pairings affected by the Ministry's new Interbreeding Act. I have another such announcement. After receiving my permission to retire from compulsory attendance and grading in her Defence classes, Miss Hermione Granger has petitioned for the hand of Professor Severus Snape...and her petition has just been accepted."

Bedlam. The loudest of which came from an absolutely flabbergasted, enraged, and outraged Ronald Weasley, who stood and gave her the loud-voiced opinion that she'd totally lost her mind. Harry, seated between her and the fuming, foaming-mouthed redhead, was staring across the room with an unblinking, unmoving, stunned expression, as if he'd seen a basilisk through a ghost, or a mirror. He didn't even blink when Ron shook him, begging that his best friend join him in demanding how Hermione could've possibly lost all of her senses as to do such an inexplicable, heinous, reprehensible thing.

Hermione lifted her goblet of pumpkin juice to her lips and sipped at the cool liquid as calmly as she could make herself appear. It was a masterful performance, each move deliberate, graceful, steady as she set down the goblet and picked up her fork, eating a mouthful of carrots, then a helping of potatoes, and then nibbling on a piece of chicken. Harry eventually blinked, but it wasn't until Ron wound down, gave Hermione a wounded look, and made his final demand, that she faced her two best friends. A demand he'd asked her thrice.

"...*Why*, Hermione? If anything, I would've thought you'd wait until my own birthday, and petitioned for *my* hand!"

He clearly wasn't going to let the matter go. Enough of the pandemonium had died down that most of the rest of the Hall heard his query, and most of them were now all but holding their breath, waiting to hear her reply. Sipping one last time at her pumpkin juice, Hermione cleared her throat, and cleared her mind. The unadulterated truth of why she had written the petition would make it seem more like pity than what had actually prompted her decision, so she turned the focus away from Snape.

"Because, Ron, as much as I like you as a friend, we're simply too different to be compatible enough for the sort of commitment that marriage entails."

"Not compatible!" he snorted.

"You like Quidditch, chess, the Chudley Cannons, wizarding comic books..."

"...Graphic novels," he muttered defensively.

"...Graphic novels," she allowed, "the colour orange, waiting until the last minute to do anything, and consuming mass quantities of food. What do I like, Ron?"

"Um...studying, reading...taking lots of classes," he offered, groping for anything more than that. "Purple! You like the colour purple. And we've gone through a lot of experiences together."

More than one student at the Gryffindor table was giving him a pitying look. Hermione carefully refrained from doing that herself, her voice crisp in the quiet of the Hall, but not overly harsh. "Face it, Ron; we like each other enough to be best mates, and we have the shared background of best mates, but we don't have enough in common to be life-mates."

"Well, what do you have in common with that greasy git?" he demanded.

"...Ten points from Gryffindor for such blatant disrespect toward a teacher," Hermione interjected, giving her friend a hard look to remind him that they were not only in public, but that she was the Head Girl, and had to maintain discipline on such matters. "As for what we both have in common, a love of reading, a love of studying, bossy temperaments, sophisticated wit, sarcasm, an interest in furthering our understanding of the wizarding world, we both subscribe to *The Daily Prophet*, plus issues of *Ars Alchemica*, *Ars Hexica*, *Ars Medica*, *Ars Hortica*, *Ars Mathematica*, and *Ars Ogham*, we both prefer getting the important tasks out of the way first before indulging in leisure rather than the other way around, we would rather spend time with people who have a wide array of knowledge with which to converse, and we both like the colour black!"

"...Black?" Harry asked her, coming out of his trance with another blink. "You like black? But...you're always wearing purple!"

"My *mum* likes the colour purple, so she buys me gifts of purple clothes. And I don't wear black, I just like it! I don't exactly look good in black," she added half under her breath. Then raised her voice sharply. "As for any other reasons, if there are any, they would *not* be a matter for discussion in front of the rest of the school!"

The Head Girl's crisply delivered retort spurred a sudden surge of conversation around them. Silverware clinked, voices chatted, and the tension in the air was thick enough to stab with a wand. Slowly, it relaxed. Ron continued to give Hermione a wounded look, then finally sighed roughly and sat back down.

Still on his feet, Professor Dumbledore cleared his throat. A quiet hush fell over the room again. "Anyway...congratulations are in order. So that all of the students may attend and offer their congratulations before the start of the Christmas holidays and the departure of many of you for your homes and families this coming Saturday, the wedding will be taking place this next Friday in the school chapel, one hour after the end of classes, to be followed shortly thereafter by a wedding feast. Dress robes are preferred, though not required if you did not bring anything suitably formal. It is requested that no one attend in their school uniform, out of respect for the non-scholastic nature of the impending blessed event."

Reseating himself, the Headmaster resumed his meal with the same calm aplomb that Hermione had managed to fake. For her part, she hadn't even considered of how quickly the wedding would have to be arranged. She'd thought they would wait until the last possible moment of their thirty-day leeway, in the hopes of the Act being negated. Apparently the Headmaster thought it would be more convenient to marry the two of them off at the start of the holidays.

*No doubt so that we can have enough free time to get to know and grow accustomed to each other..*The thought of doing that...of marrying, and consummating that

marriage within 24 hours, of continuing to consummate it, of learning what side of the bed he slept upon and whether he squeezed the toothpaste from the middle or the end...made her feel remarkably breathless. Taking another sip of her pumpkin juice, Hermione prayed no one asked her any more stupid questions, or tried to detain her when she eventually left. She had a lot more to think about, now.

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Being a practical sort of young woman, Hermione begged leave of the Headmaster to visit her parents to explain the situation to them, invite them to the wedding. That was on Sunday, and the resulting headache of dealing with her parents' questions made her wish she'd brought a bottle of pain-relieving potion with her, and made her eternally grateful she'd left her husband-to-be at home so that her parents could absorb the shock of the matter more readily. And then on Monday evening, Hermione sought permission to Floo to Diagon Alley to purchase a few things. A suitable wedding gown, for one. Gifts for her husband were another, and of course wedding rings, enspelled so they would shrink to fit.

She was careful of her selection of the latter, too, knowing how many ingredients could be affected if they were handled with the wrong sort of metal. Severus Snape might be the Defence Professor now, but he still worked with potions, assisting Horace Slughorn with keeping the Infirmary stocked. Having done some research and expressed her concerns to Professor Dumbledore, the Headmaster had offered to help front some of the money necessary for her purchase, as his wedding-gift to the couple. Which she accepted with gratitude. Even though her parents were British dentists, and thus had a very thriving business, Hermione wouldn't have been able to afford even one of the rings she wanted, let alone the two that Albus insisted on paying for, accompanying her on her second trip and proving himself an enjoyable shopping companion, despite the circumstances...and his habit of wanting to poke and prod at every little fiddly-bit thing they ran across.

Tuesday morning, she waited with breathless worry over the arrival of her pre-wedding gift. Sure enough, when the owls swept into the Hall, two of them veered in different directions, though they bore identical packages. One dropped its package in front of her, the other in front of the Defence professor. Knowing what her packet contained, Hermione subtly watched the head table as her intended prodded the brown-wrapped object with his wand, checking for spells or traps, then methodically cut the string and unpeeled the wrapping paper with the same sort of care he used on a shrivel fig.

His eyes widened as he read the cover of the book within, and his hands slapped the wrapping paper back into place. An outraged glare was immediately aimed her way. Hermione met it with raised brows and a *go on* motion of her head and hand. He narrowed his eyes at her, glared at Flitwick and Sinistra, seated to either side of himself, and cautiously opened the book, shielding it with the paper so that neither of his colleagues could see the title of what he had received.

It was the exact same as her own book, save for one difference; his came with a letter stuck into its pages like a bookmark. Extracting it, he covered the present and read the card, brows lowering and pinching more out of confusion than distaste. Hermione practically had her handwritten message to him memorized.

'Dear Severus,

Yes, I take liberty with addressing you by both your given name and an endearment. We're about to be married together, after all, not buried together.

Please do not take offense at the title of this book. Sex for Dunderheads is not an indictment of your abilities, nor an expression of my opinion of your intellect in any way, shape or form. I simply thought it would be good to know that both of us are on the same page, so to speak, as to what our knowledge and expectations may be regarding our marital-bed obligations. This tome comes highly recommended for its broad coverage of the general subject of physical intimacy, and I thought it would be a good starting point for coordinating our disparate knowledge on the subject.

Any positive personal experience you may bring to this subject and care to share with me would of course be deeply appreciated. However, it would be equally appreciated if we looked upon this tome as a reference guide, and not some subject that I would have either of us criticised for, if we do not perform well from the start...mainly as it is an area of research in which I have not yet progressed beyond self-exploration, and consider this whole topic far too personal and intimate to want either of us to treat it, or each other, so casually, coldly, or cruelly as that.

Please do not feel heavily concerned that things have to be perfect the first time around, or even the second or third; practice, after all, makes perfect, and I plan on being a diligent learner. Perhaps I can even find an interesting thing or two to share with you. Or perhaps we can come up with something interesting mutually. Either way, I look forward to experimenting in your arms.

Yours most sincerely,

Hermione'

His frown had eased by the time he folded the letter, replaced by a thoughtful look. Still, Severus was careful to hide the nature of the book as he returned her note to its pages. His eyes sought hers, but before they could do more than connect, another owl soared past her, dropping a letter onto her own still-wrapped book. Her attention torn away, Hermione frowned at the official-looking wax seal on the flap.

Turning it over, she found the return-address to be from the Wizengamot. Opening the letter, she extracted the single sheet. Skimming past the official, engraved header, she started at the salutation.

'Miss Granger;

Pursuant to your proposed contract of marriage to one Severus Sebastian Snape, Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, a complaint has been filed by the first proffered contractor for his hand, Dolores Jasmine Umbridge. She has filed her protest on the grounds that you are still a student of said Professor.

The Wizengamot requires your presence Wednesday morning at nine o'clock in the morning, Judicial Chamber 5, Ministry of Magic, London to debate the matter in court. Be advised that failure to appear constitutes a plea of 'no-contestation', and that if you should fail to appear, the matter will be decided in Miss Umbridge's favour.

Sincerely,

Priscilla Philliston

Chief Witch of the Wizengamot

Standing quickly, Hermione carried the letter straight up to the head table, stretching up on her toes to hand it to the Headmaster. He accepted it with a puzzled frown. That frown deepened as he read the missive, until it ended in a heavy sigh. "...I will do what I can to assist you, Miss Granger. You are excused from tomorrow's classes for as long as this matter takes. And...go early, just in case they try to pull on you what they tried to pull on young Harry before his fifth year."

"Yes, sir." Hermione returned to her spot in the table just in time to slap Harry's fingers away from the wrapping paper of her own gift. Appetite gone, she scooped up the package and carried it and the letter out of the Great Hall. A lot of rapid research in the school library lay ahead of her, and she had only half an hour before her first class of the day was scheduled to start.

...

Stepping into the court room, Hermione was relieved to find it cheerfully paneled in warm golden oak, rather than the stark stone walls of the formal courtrooms down in the basement of the underground building. It wasn't a large room, but there was a curving desk-thing where the five members of the Wizengamot overseeing this proceeding

would be seated, and the two tables for the defendant and the plaintiff, a jury-box to one side that was currently unoccupied, and rows of seats at the back of the room.

She was the first to arrive, accompanied by Professor Dumbledore. They almost looked like a matched set, for his formal robes were a velvety purple, and her dress, demure but flattering with its vee-neckline and broad black belt cinching the silky material to her waist, was equally violet. Setting her notes on the table on the side of the room that the bailiff directed them toward, Hermione spent the intervening fifteen minutes or so reviewing what she'd managed to research during her spare time yesterday.

The door opened again, and in walked the plump, blond, broad-faced Dolores Umbridge. She, too, was wearing a vee-necked dress...they were a popular style at the moment...but hers was in pink with little white polka-dots. The same black velvet bow from two years before still perched on her head, like a fly daring to land on the skull of a frog, and the same narrow little eyes narrowed even further when she spotted not only Hermione, but Dumbledore waiting for her. Before she could speak, however, the bailiff called them to attention, and the handful or so of Wizengamot members entered the room.

Once the formalities were announced, Madam Phyllistion took control of the debate. "Miss Granger, you are still a student enrolled at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Liaisons between students and faculty members are strictly forbidden. You are the Head Girl of Hogwarts...surely you knew before you offered that petition that it would be declared null and void?"

"Not to contradict you, Madam," Hermione stated smoothly, picking up the first of her sheaf of papers, "but that statement is incorrect. According to the Hogwarts Student and Faculty Manual, Article VII, section 3, paragraph C, sub-paragraph b, it is illegal for a teacher and one of his or her *own* students...the ruling states '*own*' very distinctly...it is illegal for a teacher and one of his or her own students to have any sort of relationship outside of student and instructor, or a familial relation, as in that of father to daughter, or perhaps mother to son, uncle to nephew and so forth. According to sub-paragraph d of the same set of rules, it is illegal for a faculty member...note, faculty, not just instructor...to have any sort of intimate relationship outside of a familial one with any *underage* student.

"Given that my birthday is the nineteenth of September, I am currently eighteen, one year older than the majority age of seventeen decreed by the Ministry of Magic..." Hermione stated confidently.

"...*Hem hem*," Umbridge interjected. "If I may point out something..."

"...No, you may not," Hermione cut in ruthlessly, glancing at the other witch. "I am currently the person being questioned, Miss Umbridge. I am quite certain that the Wizengamot will give you ample time for speech as well, but if you interrupt anyone like that again, they might find you in contempt. When they decide it is your turn to speak, I will listen in respectful silence to whatever you may have to say, until it is time for my rebuttal, and vice versa.

"As I was saying," she continued briskly, glancing at her notes while the pink-clad witch glared at her, "I am eighteen, and the rules and regulations guiding relationships within Hogwarts do not specifically forbid my having a non-familial relationship with a faculty member. As for Professor Snape being *my* professor, it was clearly witnessed by the portraits of past Headmasters and Headmistresses of the school that I requested to be relieved of my obligations to attend Defence classes under the instruction of Severus Snape, and received permission from Headmaster Albus Dumbledore to be dismissed from Seventh-Year Advanced Defence Against the Dark Arts, *before* I wrote my petition to request Severus Snape's hand in marriage.

"Having been released from mandatory attendance in his classes, Professor Snape ceased to be *my* instructor and I ceased to be *his* student. No longer being student-and-teacher, we became student-and-faculty-member at that point in time, thus rendering sub-paragraph b ineligible for contestation. My being of legal age, as stated earlier, renders sub-paragraph d ineligible for contestation as well.

"Any other questions?"

The five-member panel, four wizards and the one witch seated at their center, blinked at her. Madam Phyllistion cleared her throat. "Well. You certainly know your rules and regulations. However, that does not clarify *why* you chose to petition for the hand of one of your teachers. According to our notes, the release from your obligation to attend Defence came on the same day as our reception of the petition to marry Professor Snape. Surely you gave the idea thought while he was still your professor?"

Hermione hadn't given this particular question thought, but she had given another, similar one some contemplation. "As we all know, Severus Snape is a decorated war-hero, but his heroism came at a great cost. He had to pretend to be someone he was not; he had to isolate himself from those who could have been his friends, and did so for many years. He certainly could not afford to enter into a personal relationship with anyone for fear of their own life being put at risk by the Dark Lord, and he has endured more cruelties and punishments at the hands of the people he spied upon than anyone still alive and not sequestered at St. Mungo's has a right to endure.

"But it is the qualities that are not often discussed that drew me to the idea of considering a friendship with him, once I left school at the end of this term. He is very intelligent, as much as I am, myself. He has a sharp wit, which I also possess. He enjoys reading all sorts of books and periodicals, including many of the same ones that I myself own or subscribe to, and he has fought along side me, saving my life and having had his own life saved by me in the turmoil and danger of the Final Battle.

"Until this law came along, I had not considered anything other than a friendship with him, but it is a friendship that I greatly desire, as I find there is much that is admirable and compatible within the man. I would certainly be hard-pressed to find anyone three-quarters as intelligent, and I doubt he could also find someone with an equally close level of intellect as he would find within me. In short, Madam Phyllistion, gentlemen of the Wizengamot," she finished, "friendship is the foundation of any marriage, and I believe with all my heart that Severus Snape and I will be able to be friends as well as husband and wife."

"*Hem hem*."

Madam Phyllistion rolled her eyes over at the other petitioner. "Yes, Miss Umbridge? You have words to add to this?"

"Certainly, Madam," the little-girl-voiced witch stated with a smile she no doubt thought was charming. Hermione wasn't the only one to wince a little as Dolores continued. "I would like to point out that marriages best work when two people are of a similar age, of a similar life-experience, of a similar level of station, and so forth. I am thirty-one..."

Albus coughed abruptly into his hand, and even Hermione wanted to choke at that lie; the woman was decidedly over forty-one, if she was a day.

"...and though younger than Severus, I have been a fellow teacher and faculty member at Hogwarts; together, we worked to improve the school during my tenure as Headmistress of that establishment."

Hermione bit her tongue; though she wanted the chance to refute the woman's claims on the spot, she knew she had to wait her turn, especially after her verbal reposte from earlier.

"In short, I have far more in common with him than some little school-girl he taught. Why, everyone knows that Severus Snape cannot abide his students! I don't even know how she got him to sign her contract," the girlish-voiced woman trailed off suggestively.

"Miss Granger, how did you get Professor Snape to sign that contract?"

"I have no idea. I'm rather surprised that you didn't summon him here as well to defend himself in this matter," Hermione added dryly. "However, with your permission, I would like to address a couple of points made by Miss Umbridge."

One of the wizards nodded.

"I will not even begin to touch Miss Umbridge's claim of her age, since her point was that she and Professor Snape are chronological contemporaries," Hermione stated dryly, causing two of the wizards to choke, and Madam Phyllistion' lips to twitch upward before it was struggled back down into firm neutrality, "and I do not contest that matter. However, she makes the claim that Professor Snape assisted her in maintaining order at Hogwarts during her tenure as Headmistress two years ago.

"Having survived the so-called 'order' of that point in time, I would like to state for the record that I never once witnessed Professor Snape assisting Headmistress Umbridge to restore order, not even in his own classroom when the chaos of her term as Headmistress stretched down into the dungeons, where his class at the time conducted. A classroom, I point out, that he ruled under all other circumstances during her tenure at the school with an iron fist.

"Either this was an indication of two distinctly different philosophies on how to successfully manage a student body, or it was an indication of his lack of respect for Miss Umbridge's authority and instructional methods. I cannot say whether or not he did respect her, not being Professor Snape, but I can say that, while I have heard him praising a number of the other teachers and their methods at the school, I cannot recall a single instance where he praised Miss Umbridge or her teaching methods."

Umbridge glared at her.

Hermione continued blithely. "To give you an idea of just how different their philosophies are, Miss Umbridge insisted on teaching only theory and book-knowledge, when she was the Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor at Hogwarts. Professor Snape, in the exact same position, insists upon teaching practical knowledge, and practical application of that knowledge, which Miss Umbridge distinctly forbade during her tenure as a professor. They have very little common ground upon which to build the foundation of a true relationship...and if I may conjecture, I do sincerely doubt that he respects her. A husband should respect his wife, and a wife should respect her husband, after all."

"I'll give you lack of respect!" Dolores hissed at her. "Breaking the school's rules, breaking into my office, lying to a teacher...!"

"Miss Umbridge, contain yourself. You, too, Miss Granger. Your speculations were out of bounds."

"My apologies," Hermione stated swiftly, demurely. "I am most anxious to express my concern for Severus Snape's welfare...and though I could go into all of the information I have researched on this matter, I would rather only offer you one final, strong argument in my own petition's favour, if I may."

Madam Phylliston gestured for Miss Umbridge to be quiet. "You may proceed, Miss Granger."

"Thank you. As I said before, Severus Snape is a war-hero who suffered grievous harm to both body and mind, during his long tenure as a spy. His reputation, his sanity, his very life were threatened time and again, by both sides. And when the war ended, he was very nearly given a Dementor's Kiss just for following his employer and mentor's instructions. Without Severus Snape's efforts, without his deceptions and his endurance in the face of two decades' worth of torments, we would not have been able to win this war.

"So I would like each of you to picture for a moment that you are Severus Snape. You are an unsung war hero. You have not even received the Order of Merlin, First Class, that you so clearly deserve," Hermione murmured pointedly in wording, but gently in tone and delivery. "You have returned to the harrowing task of instructing your ungrateful students in the art of defending themselves against all manner of Dark Arts.

"You have just patrolled the corridors to make sure the students are not breaking curfew, you've graded a mountain of papers written by children who really should've been taught how to wield the English language a lot better than like some dunderheaded American, you've dealt with House rivalries until your head aches and your temper is feeling worse than that of an adder that has been stepped upon...and you come home to your cramped suite of rooms in the cold, dank dungeons of the school.

"You set your teaching robes aside, you remove your shoes, you pad into your bedroom, aching and weary...and you see before you your wife," she stated. "Lying on your marriage-bed. Waiting for you. Waiting to reward you for enduring yet another day of extreme underappreciation. I want you to picture your wife sprawled on the covers, naked and wanton, thighs splayed, hands roaming over her flesh..."

"Miss Granger!" Madam Phylliston protested. "This kind of language..."

"...Is highly pertinent to my point, Madam," Hermione interjected smoothly. "Who would you rather imagine in such an intimate position, her passion bared for her husband to see at the end of such a terrible day? Someone like me, who is young, lithe, and nubile? ...Or someone like *her*?" she asked pointedly, tipping her head at the fuming witch standing at the other table. "Hasn't the poor man suffered enough?"

"Why, you little...!"

"*Accio wand!*" Madam Phylliston snapped, magically snatching the length of wood that had appeared in Dolores Umbridge's hand. "You are in contempt of this court, Miss Umbridge, for attempting to wield unauthorized magic against the defendant!"

"You have a point, Miss Granger," one of the other wizards stated with a visible shudder. "He *has* suffered enough!"

Nodding from the other three males made Umbridge seethe with impotent fury. Priscilla Phylliston took in her colleagues' concensus and sighed. "It seems this court has chosen to rule in your favour, Miss Granger. You may proceed with your marriage contract. You are dismissed. Miss Umbridge, you will remain behind and wait upon our leisure, while we discuss your penalty for drawing your wand in a court of law..."

Relieved, Hermione gathered up her papers, smiled at Professor Dumbledore, who had turned out to be superfluous...though his silent support was deeply appreciated...and made her way out of the courtroom. It was an unorthodox approach to winning her case, but an honest one. Even she didn't want to contemplate just how truly toad-like the other woman might look, stripped of the clothes thankfully sheltering everyone else from being struck blind.

...And it would serve the heinous bitch right, if she were thrown in Azkaban for drawing a wand in a court of law. No one got between Hermione Jane Granger and whatever she wanted. In this case, she definitely wanted to save Severus Snape from such an unplanned, horrible fate. No one could deny the fact that *she* was the far better choice for a mate.

...

The large, relatively lightweight box arrived on Thursday morning with a note attached. Being a methodical sort, Hermione opened the note first.

'My dear, blushing bride,

Enclosed is a collection of garments worthy of Chapter 6. Please select a set to wear under your wedding clothes, tomorrow. Have no fear, I have read the rest of this fascinating volume, and am prepared to submit to a practical exam demonstrating my familiarity with its full contents at the appropriate points in time...and not just the contents of Chapter 6.

Failure to wear at least two of these garments during our wedding ceremony will result in a most unpleasant public discussion of your lack of proper...attire.

Oh, and you have five minutes to get this box out of public view and up to your quarters, before it releases its contents like a vituperative, fabric-based Howler. Consider your breathless dash for privacy a lesson and a warning: you will not ever again embarrass me in public like you nearly did with that book.

Yours,

Severus Snape'

Blushing, Hermione grabbed the box even as she twisted off the bench, and dashed out of the Great Hall; if all the stairs were aligned in her favour...

Chapters 2 & 3

Chapter 2 of 2

Government-in-action. Huh...maybe this *will* work...

II.

"...*ex fidei maritum!*" Lowering his wand, the wizarding vicar overseeing the ceremony parted their hands, checking the cuts on their palms. They had healed, leaving behind no scars. A gesture with his wand, and blue monograms appeared over the spot where he had magically carved each the other's initials. Those initials were now permanently intertwined. "Excellent, excellent... You may now exchange your rings, which are the symbol for eternity, being whole and unbroken circles of...holy sweet heaven!"

Harry, handing over the rings Hermione had asked him to hold for her, arched a brow at the vicar's exclamation. Severus arched his brow, too. Holding out his hand, he accepted the smaller of the two rings from the holy man, examining it. One black brow arched upwards in enquiry. "Is this what I think it is?"

"It depends on what you think it is," Hermione returned nervously.

"A magic-forged diamond ring," her groom said quietly. "One of a very expensive pair, I see."

"Albus made them his wedding present to us," she confessed, holding up her left hand so that he could slide the clear, subtly faceted ring onto her finger. "I couldn't give you a metal that might react with your work, after all. Um...with this ring, I thee wed."

He lifted his own hand, allowing her to slide his ring into place. Both resized themselves with little squeezes, then stayed still, enchanted for strength and durability as well as for self-sizing. "With this ring, I thee wed."

It was a bit backwards, but then it was an unusual marriage. Their eyes met, their hands interlaced. The vicar stated something about powers invested, and then it was upon them. Words that were both final and inevitable, dreaded, yet anticipated: "...You may kiss the bride."

Aware of the eyes of the entire student body resting upon them...it was like a train wreck, Ron had reckoned; no one at Hogwarts could stay away from watching this particular pairing take place, all the way down to the scruffy, aging cat held in Argus Filch's arms...she lifted up on her toes to give him a quick peck. He leaned down at the same moment, their noses bumped, their mouths slid...and somehow their lips parted. Once that happened, she couldn't help exploring a little with her tongue, an exploration that he apparently felt an equal need to share.

It wasn't a very lengthy kiss...certainly it could've gone on quite a bit longer without protest from either of them...but they did part to face an absolutely stunned crowd, rather than the whooping and whistling she might've expected at a more conventional wedding. Face flushing, Hermione glanced at the vicar.

The age-balding wizard cleared his throat. "Erm...yes. It is my pleasure to introduce to you Severus and Hermione Snape!"

Dumbledore started clapping from his seat in the front row on Severus' side of the Great Hall. The school chapel had been deemed too small, in the end. He also rose to his feet, and perforce dragged most of the staff with him by sheer force of personality. That caused the students to hesitantly start clapping, and just as hesitantly to rise. Since they had already signed the registrar at the makeshift altar, with Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall acting as their two witnesses, Hermione found herself firmly walked down the aisle at a quick but not quite hurried-looking pace.

Her husband was clearly determined to escape, but just as clearly determined to preserve his dignity in their retreat. Unfortunately, they had to come back for the feast, and endure the torments of the receiving line, though when the students did file out and line up to shake their hands out in the entry hall while the Great Hall was being redecorated for supper, a pointed, recurring glare from the groom kept all of the giggling, wincing, and otherwise rude commentary to an absolute minimum. At least, within a dozen bodies of their point in the reception line. Even Harry and Ron reluctantly offered their hands in congratulations to their Defence teacher, though they each hissed in Hermione's ear as they embraced her that they both still thought she was totally nutters.

The feast was typical of Hogwarts, scrumptious and plentiful. The house-elves had outdone themselves, making it a sort of catch-all Yule Feast and wedding celebration. It came with two additional differences from the usual sort of feast, however: for tonight, and tonight alone, Hermione was permitted to sit at the head table, between her quiet husband and her puzzled but accepting parents; and when the ghosts processed into the Hall as they did for most feasts, they did so accompanying the traditional cake-on-a-pole that a beaming Hagrid carried into the chamber during the dessert portion of the evening.

The royal icing on the cake was endangered by the floating candles overhead, given how high Hagrid hoisted the ribbon-decked pole, but the half-giant presented it with a gentle flourish to the happy couple, and Hermione found herself standing and cutting the pound-cake with her husband's hands covering hers. Cheering started when she lifted the piece in her hands to those thin lips. Or rather, jeering: she could hear Neville's voice shouting along with the rest of the students urging her to smash it into Professor Snape's face...and it was tempting, she had to admit that much to herself; Hermione had felt the scathing brunt of the Potion Master's tongue aimed her way on more than one occasion throughout her school years.

Gingerly holding the first piece of cake, Hermione carefully fed the slice to her wary husband, matching his movements so delicately, not even his lips acquired a crumb, nevermind the tip of his long, thin nose. Dark eyes narrowed in wary speculation as she fed him his slice, but relaxed in appreciation by the end of it. She tensed a little when he lifted her own piece to her lips, but he, too, fed it carefully to her. No smears of frosting marred her features.

There was more than one groan of disbelief in the Hall at their respectful, staid exchange. Indeed, it would be more accurate to say that only a handful of people *didn't* moan from disappointment. No bits of dessert mushed to their faces, no frosting smeared ignobly on the prominent nose of their least-liked instructor, nor on the stubborn chin of the know-it-all Head Girl.

Bigger off, she thought silently, dismissively as they lifted narrow champagne flutes and entwined arms for the traditional draught of the bubbling vintage. *All of you might think it's funny to embarrass him in public, even a fitting sort of revenge for all that he's done to his students through the years, but you don't have to make a life with this man...and you don't have to worry about him knowing exactly where you sleep at night!*

Normally, as the guests of honor, they wouldn't have been able to leave the party early. Of course, this was a wedding, not a more normal sort of party; it was expected also for them to depart at some point in time, as the groom and bride. If they had been in love, Hermione figured either she or he would've hauled their spouse out of the room, snogged passionately in the corridors on the way down to his quarters while loosening and shedding various layers of their clothes, and romped in their marital bed shortly after sharing that sip of champagne, rather than staying for more than the first few obligatory dances of the informal Ball the Headmaster had arranged. If they had been utterly in loathing of each other, they would've stayed until well past the normal nine o'clock curfew, delaying the inevitable for as long as possible...such as staying in

the Great Hall until dawn or later.

As it was, Hermione found herself in the unenviable position of not wanting to leave early enough to be noticed and causing a scandal...which meant staying until curfew.

It also meant being the first one on the dance floor with a man who was notorious for his lack of interest in participating in social events, and staying out there for pretty much most of the other dances as well. She was therefore surprised and pleased to see that Severus Snape not only danced frequently with her, he'd had at least a few rudimentary lessons, enough to waltz gracefully with her, and then foxtrot agilely with her mother while she danced with her father. For lack of his own parents, who had passed away years before, Hermione danced with Dumbledore and Severus with Minerva, and then after that, she alternated dances between her friends and her husband.

It was strangely solicitous of him to keep partnering her on the floor, as well as courteous; he would touch the small of her back and gesture towards the dance floor in silent enquiry, or allow himself to be led towards the swirling figures whenever she slipped her fingers into his after dancing with someone else. And it was very helpful, having him join her on the dance floor every other round. By the end of the evening, there weren't very many distressed faces whenever they saw the Head Girl sweep past in the Defence professor's arms, nor very many huddles of snickering, sneering students giving them sidelong looks and bursts of rude laughter. It had become an acceptable sight, of sorts.

As it was, curfew had been extended to ten, and when nine-forty-five was announced so that the students would have time to get back to their dormitories, Hermione was grateful to be led back to the head table where she could sit and rest her feet for a moment. Dumbledore bade the students a good night and a safe journey home, as the majority of the students would be headed home for the holidays tomorrow...even Harry would be going home with Ron to the Burrow...and urged them out of the Hall with quiet murmurs and fluttering hands. Professor Mundane, the elderly Muggle Studies instructor, escorted Hermione's parents out of the hall, promising to Apparate them back to their home. When the hall was empty save for Professors Flitwick and McGonagall, who were taking down the decorations with their wands, Hermione turned her head quickly at her husband's murmur.

"Thank you," he stated. She hadn't expected that, and stared at him with raised brows. At her look of surprise, his lips twitched upward on one side in a tight smile. "Yes, I do have a sense of courtesy. I appreciate your not making a farce out of the cakes-and-ales portion of the feast."

"Oh. You're welcome," Hermione returned. "Thank you for dancing with me."

"And have rumors of my neglecting and abusing you from the very first hour circulating throughout the school?" he retorted dryly, arching a skeptical brow as he folded his arms. He was in a black satin version of his usual formal frock-coat, with jet buttons that gleamed in the light of the hovering candles. His eyes had gleamed like that, too, she realized. Right after they'd kissed as husband and wife.

"No, I just meant, thank you for dancing with me. You're a very good dancer. I hope I was good, too, though after having all that practice this evening, it couldn't possibly be otherwise," Hermione returned quietly, reaching down to slip her pumps from her feet. Her wedding gown was a slender dress of satin and lace Transfigured by Minerva McGonagall out of one of her other dresses, and the shoes equally enchanted from a pair of oxfords, but somewhere along the way, the Head of Gryffindor had forgotten to add a touch more padding to the insole. Hermione preferred dancing in glamour-altered sneakers for that reason; her feet didn't hurt as badly the next day.

Her brand-new husband surprised her by twisting their chairs to face each other with a flick of his wand. The normally surly, don't-touch-me professor startled her even further by reaching down and lifting one of her legs into his lap. Before she could do more than flinch in surprise, warm, strong fingers were deftly kneading the ball of her foot. Thumbs stroked down over the arch and rolled against the heel. Fingers gently twisted and tugged one toe at a time.

It was acutely, distressingly pleasurable. It was like he'd enchanted her nerves into marionette wires and connected them straight to her pleasure-points, to her breasts, womb, and clitoris. Even her lips buzzed with sensation as he lifted her other foot into his lap and worked on that one as well. Closing her eyes, she bit back the moan his touch was threatening to drag out of her.

And then the bastard stopped. "Are you alright?"

Sighing, Hermione wriggled her toes, wanting more.

"Hermione, are you alright?" he repeated, his fingers starting to work once more, this time in tandem on both of her feet. The combination of her given name and the touch of those hands... Those hands stopped, as he waited for her to reply.

Her dazed senses could only think of one thing to say. "Chapter...10."

"Techniques for the Tongue'?"

Her eyes snapped open, her head lifting at the gaffe she had made. Not that it didn't conjure delightful images on its own, but that wasn't what she'd meant. "...What? No, sorry; Chapter 9."

"...Ah. 'Sensual Massage,'" he confirmed, smirking at her. And then dumped her feet on the floor. "Get your shoes on. We're going for a walk."

"What?" This time she was confused, not bemused. "What do you mean, we're going for a walk?"

"A nice, long corridor patrol," he murmured, his mouth twisted in amusement garnished with a twist of habit-steeped cruelty.

"Why?" Hermione demanded, bewildered.

"Because I want your feet very sore, and very appreciative, when I massage them again."

Hermione levelled him with a hard look. While it was nice to know he had a sense of humor, it wasn't *that* amusing. "Severus, I have been dancing for two and a half hours. Just walking down to your quarters will make my feet ache abominably!"

Stooping, she slipped her feet back into the Transfigured pumps, then stood with a groan. He rose as well. Hermione found her hands being tucked around his elbow. The assistance was appreciated, by the time they reached the corridor by the Defence classroom. A muttered password to one of the sections of stone between arched support struts in the corridor outside his office and classroom, and he guided her into the short hallway that revealed itself. Waiting until the stones of the wall reformed behind them, he opened the door blocking their way, then scooped her up in his arms, lifted her over the stone threshold, and set her back down on her feet again.

"Walk to the bedroom, wife," he instructed her. "As slowly and heavy-footed as you can."

Hermione laughed, and managed an exaggerated, soft-footed tip-toe for a few steps. She had to stop when a stack of books threatened to trip her. In fact, that was the decor of the place: books, magazines, more books, article clippings, and, oh look, even more books. From the looks of the living room, the man was a veritable bibliopackrat. Books on bookshelves, books on end-tables, books on sofa cushions. Journals and periodicals in stacks that practically formed tables of their own, and even a few piles of scrolls scattered here and there.

It looked disorganized in that there seemed to be no category required for each pile, but everything was neatly stacked; apparently, the house-elves were allowed within these walls to dust and tidy and take away any bits of rubbish that might accumulate, but weren't allowed to reshelve anything. Bachelor quarters, but livable ones.

"If you drool on any of my tomes, madam..." he warned her.

"I wouldn't risk that, and you know it. But, God, if I'd known that by marrying you, I was gaining access to literary heaven, I'd've been tempted to actually kiss that amphibious harridan in sheer gratitude," Hermione muttered, unsure where to start. She'd definitely have to speak to the Headmaster about getting their quarters enlarged;

if she tried to bring her own extensive collection to such cramped quarters, they'd run out of air to breathe. An inconvenience, when breathing was very helpful if one wanted to keep reading.

She squeaked when she found herself scooped off her feet again. The strength in the Potion Master's arms surprised her; Hermione knew she wasn't petite, but he carried her with effortless ease into his bedchamber. Here, the stacks of books were different. They weren't leather-bound tomes written by wizards and witches throughout the ages. They were Muggle paperbacks. Stacks and piles of them.

Another mindless mutter escaped her, as she saw familiar, well-loved titles from science-fiction, fantasy, mysteries, and many more she didn't know but wanted to become acquainted with, preferably soon. "I think I'm getting aroused, just looking at all of these books!"

His laughter startled her twice. Once, for the hearty shock of it, and twice for the fact that she slipped in his quivering arms, making her squeak and clutch at his shoulders. Dumping her on the bed, he braced himself over her prone body as his chuckles wound down. Sobering, he studied her, the corner of his mouth still quirked up. "Then I should take advantage of the situation. Chapter 2 does state that 'Seduction Begins With The Mind', after all."

Breathless, Hermione stared up at him. Gathering her courage, she reached for the front of his frock-coat, unfastening the long row of Knut-sized buttons. "Well, don't expect to make love to me on a pile of books. The last thing I'd want is a paper-cut on my you-know-what!"

Again, that made him chuckle, though he suppressed it quickly into a mere hint of a smile.

Lifting her hand to his cheek, Hermione eyed him thoughtfully. "Why do you do that? Why do you suppress your good humor?"

"Habit." Sitting up, he finished unbuttoning his coat. She sat up as well, and he gestured for her to turn around, giving him access to the buttons at her back. "Occlumency demands emotional self-control, and my skill in that discipline was all that stood between me and death for far too many years."

"The Dark Lord is gone, Severus. Why cling to unnecessary habits? You can change yourself, you know," she offered. "It won't be easy, but you can change. You just might find yourself living a happier life, if you do."

"I'll consider it."

Hermione wisely didn't press the point. Not when an *I'll consider it* from the man who was now her husband was a lot more encouraging than almost anyone else's outright *yes*. Unfastening the cuffs of her sleeves, she slipped the gown over her shoulders and stood, letting it pool to the floor. Revealing her choice of undergarments. White, of course, a strapless bra, bikini knickers, suspender belt and stockings, all edged with bands of lace in the form of interlocking S-letters. From the arch of one of his black brows, she guessed he liked the thought of her clad in his initials.

"See something you like?" she asked as bravely as she dared. Her voice wasn't entirely steady, but Hermione didn't let any of her trepidation show on her face. Just because she'd never done it before and was therefore nervous about an entirely new realm of knowledge to study didn't mean she was going to let him think she was afraid of sex. Apprehensive about being thought inadequate, but not afraid.

Mutely, he nodded, then stood and stripped off his shirt as well as his coat. He had to sit again to remove his boots. She reached behind her back to remove the bra, and he dropped the boot in his hands, holding up one palm to forestall her. "No...I will do that."

Blushing, Hermione was pleased he wanted to be an active participant in undressing her. Waiting while he removed his socks as well, she watched him stand once more, this time unfastening his trousers. He hesitated, then turned his back to her before dropping them. The subtlety told her that he, too, was just a little apprehensive about this moment between them. Gathering her courage, Hermione lifted her hands to the muscles of his back as he stepped out of the garment. He stilled, then breathed deeply, let it out, and leaned into her hands just a little bit, accepting her touch.

Somehow, she had expected scars on his back. Physical marks to match the dangers of his long decades as a spy. But Hermione could neither see nor feel any as she smoothed her fingers over his spine and out across his shoulderblades. There wasn't much in the way of spare flesh on his body; the war had no doubt been the greatest, stress-inducing factor in keeping him lean. Stepping closer, she slipped her palms around his ribs, her fingers sliding along the grooves formed by bone and muscle. His hands covered hers as she wrapped her arms around him, his breath hitching as her satin-clad breasts pressed into his back.

He was warm, despite the cool air of his...*of their* bedchamber. It was as much her quarters now as his. Pulling back, Hermione found her wand and aimed it at the hearth on the inner wall, across from the curtained windows. Stoking the fire, she started to turn back to her husband, only to feel his own hands sliding down her back, then around the narrow dip of her waist to her stomach. Hermione found herself drawn back against the warmth of his chest...and the lump of his loins.

"Do not take this the wrong way, wife, but...I find that I am not all that eager to become a father right away. Later, perhaps," Severus murmured, resting his chin on top of her upswept hair. "But not immediately, and not for at least a couple of years, if it can be prevented. And certainly *not* while you are still enrolled as a student in this school."

Hermione nodded, relieved. "Thank goodness." At his start of surprise, she twisted her head, looking up and back at him. "Did you really think I'd *want* to turn myself into Mrs. Weasley?"

There wasn't anything he could safely reply to that, so he merely shrugged.

Hermione shook her head. "No, I studied the law while I was looking up information for that contestation hearing; we *do* have to engage in twice-weekly procreative encounters, which means no taking preventative measures *before* we copulate...but there's nothing in the law against taking the Morning After Potion. It's those who don't want to stay married that will have to comply with the three-offspring clause right away, because they're the ones that will want to hurry through their obligations. The rest of us can take our time about starting a family, so long as we start one before the first twelve years are up."

A soft sound escaped him; it could've been a laugh, but she wasn't facing the right way to see if it was one for certain. "We think alike, then. I came to the same conclusion with my own research, and brewed some in anticipation. The bottle is on the bedside, along with a pain-suppressant for your first time."

She smiled at his thoughtfulness, turning in his arms. That brushed her breasts against his chest. His dark eyes glittered down at her. "That's what I like about you, Severus Snape. I doubt I'd ever have to nag you about being prepared in advance for something."

"I think you will find, Madame Snape, that I am far superior to the other males of your acquaintance."

"Superior?" she repeated, arching one of her brows in mock-skepticism.

"In *every* way," he confirmed quietly, arrogantly. Closing the distance between their mouths, he kissed her. This time, the parting of their lips was deliberate on both sides. In this, Hermione did have some experience, thanks to her snogging sessions with Ron, before she'd decided they were just too different to date. She'd put-off the youngest male Weasley with the admittedly truthful statement that the end of the war was too important to be distracted by hormones, and then afterwards by acting obsessed with studying for their N.E.W.T.s...which was true enough that Ron had complained but let it pass, allowing her to break things off during the school year. Still, she had learned one or two things from the redhead that she was willing to share with the sable-haired man in her arms now.

Severus knew a few things about kissing, too. And about maneuvering two snogging bodies onto a bed without his partner noticing any pesky, overly-long interruptions. He wasn't too bad at unfastening the hooks of a bra one-handed, either. Those teeth of his, crooked and tea-stained, felt a little sharp as he suckled her curves, but a murmured protest from her gentled his technique readily enough. In fact, when she moaned her appreciation of the way he flicked the beaded tip of one nipple with his tongue, he increased that particular attack without instruction, and applied it to her other breast as well when he moved in that direction.

A stray thought made her roll her eyes mid-pleasure: Ron would've required brow-beating to change his technique that quickly. Fingers tangled in her husband's hair, Hermione dismissed all further thoughts of her friend. The Marriage Act had delivered to her the better choice of groom and she certainly wasn't about to quibble over her fate. Not unless he did something to displease her. Severus Snape wasn't that stupid, however; the law put *her* firmly in control of their marriage, and he was more than Slytherin enough to know that a pleased wife was a pliable wife.

Pliable enough that, when he teased her pubic mound through the material of her knickers, it was she who impatiently pushed off the last scraps of her clothing. Then scrambled off the bed in embarrassment. When he frowned at her, confused, she cleared her throat, trying to resist the urge to cover her naked self. "Um...lavatory?"

Smirking, he pointed at a door behind her. Retreating, Hermione took care of the call of nature that had risen when she had contorted herself in order to remove her undergarments. Finding a washcloth, she dampened it at the sink and cleaned herself, worried about any unpleasant smells. She couldn't delay too long, though, and opened the door with mustered bravery.

He was lounging right outside, leaning against the book-stacked bureau by the door. That startled her, but rather than pull her close, he waited for her to pass, then slipped inside the bathroom himself. Hermione debated for a moment, then decided to array herself on the bed...their bed...to await his return. Nervousness over what was to come had her reaching for the bottles on the nightstand. They were carefully labelled in his narrow but neat penmanship. Uncorking the pain potion, she used the spoon he had provided to give herself a dose. To her surprise, it tasted sweeter than expected, like a slightly tart cherry-ice.

The door opened as she licked the syrupy potion from the spoon. He had removed his underpants while in the bathroom. Seeing him naked startled her; there was a thin patch of dark chest hairs between his nipples and underneath his arms, but down at his groin, it was very thick. Short, but thick. His shaft, half-erect and bobbing in front of him as he approached the bed, was at most the length of her hand, average in length, but it was thicker than she expected. Hermione had researched anatomy...and not entirely from a scholastic need...and his was definitely thicker than average.

Hesitating, eyes riveted to the cowed head of his penis, she made up her mind and reached for the pain-killer again, measuring out another half-dose of the potion. He smirked as she did so, in a sort of superior-male way, and took the spoon from her as soon as she had finished swallowing the second spoonful. Popping it into his own mouth, he sucked the last of the coating from the utensil, then tossed it onto the nightstand and leaned in for a cherry-flavoured kiss.

Hermione found herself on her back once again, shivering with enjoyment as their bodies brushed and pressed together. Caressing what she could reach of his chest and back, she found herself edging closer and closer to his hips, until she caressed one buttock. Taking his soft moan for encouragement, she explored and kneaded that side of his body, then trailed her fingers bravely around to his front. Severus eased away from her, allowing room for her to tentatively caress his shaft. As if knowing she needed time to adjust herself to his body, he eased onto his back, letting her explore the way his foreskin slipped over the mushroom-pointed tip, revealing and concealing his masculinity in a fascinating way.

His hand covered hers after a while, showing her that she could grip him a lot more firmly than with just her fingertips. Silently, he showed her the motions he liked when caressing himself, guiding her palm up and down. Shortly after she got the hang of it, however, he pulled her hand away and reversed their positions, nuzzling her breasts once more. This time, when his fingers teased along her pubic mound, there was nothing to dull the ticklish stimulation. Nothing to prevent him from gliding through the seam of her flesh, which she aided by parting her thighs when his thumbs coaxed them wider with little caresses.

When he petted her clitoris, Hermione enjoyed it for a little while, but his technique, while nice enough, just wasn't *enough*. Taking courage from the way he had boldly showed her what he liked, Hermione covered his hand with her own and showed him the swirling, flicking pressure she preferred. The feeling of their fingers working in concert and counterpoint roused her passion quickly; she found herself gasping within a few minutes, straining into their combined touch.

His hand slipped lower, one of his long, thin fingers easing up into her body. He added a second finger as she rocked into the first. Hermione felt her opening being stretched, but it wasn't actually painful. Grateful for the potion he thoughtfully had provided, she used her free hand to pull him into a kiss. But when his fingers twisted forward and rubbed against something inside of her, she pulled back in dismay.

"Um...I have to, you know...that's making me need the lavatory again," she muttered, embarrassed. Severus responded by rolling further onto her, pinning her legs in place as he massaged that spot a little firmer. Squirming, Hermione pushed at his chest. "No, seriously, I need to get up..."

"Relax," her former teacher ordered her. "You don't need to go. Trust me."

Hesitating, she squirmed a little as she debated whether or not she could. Which made her think it was a silly question. *I trusted him when it was revealed he was still on our side, that Dumbledore's death was merely a highly complicated ruse. I certainly trusted him with my life in the final confrontation, too...*

"Trust me," he crooned softly in her ear, massaging in enervating little circles. "You will love this, I promise you. Just trust in me...trust me. Hermione..."

"I do," Hermione whispered back, and found her muscles relaxing with all the smoothness of a rowboat launched onto the surface of a calm, quiet lake. The urge to urinate increased sharply, but she ignored the threat of hygienic embarrassment. If he made her pee, it would be his own fault.

He buried his face against the side of her neck, licking her skin as the fingers inside of her rubbed just a little bit faster...

Pleasure exploded through her body, twisting her muscles with fireworks that colored her vision behind her tightly closed eyes. She cried out loudly as her body bucked; it would have startled her, if she'd had more than a vague notion of shouting and crying as he clung to her, massaging that glorious spot throughout her gyrations. But her climax overwhelmed her. Dazed, she didn't register when she started to come down again. Nor did she quite notice when he shifted her thighs further apart and settled himself between them. Vaguely, she noted the way he coated himself with the copious fluid that had literally squirted from her vagina...and thankfully nowhere else...and she felt the stretching and tearing of her hymen as a sort of negligible pinch-feeling, but the rest of her was too sated in lassitude and lingering bliss to care.

Lifting one of her legs, he managed to find the right angle to rub his shaft against *that* thing inside of her again, brushing against it as he pumped into her. Hermione shouted again, arching her back. He groaned and thrust harder, making her lift her other knee to stabilize the small of her back. The position quickly triggered another unbelievable orgasm. Clawing at his chest, she thrashed, gasping for air in the rhythmic breaks between her cries of pleasure. He cried out, too, shuddering and pressing deep into her in a warm wave of liquid heat, curling around her as his thrusting gradually slowed.

Entangling her like a sort of benign Devil's Snare plant, Severus slumped over her, breathing heavily. He wasn't nearly as heavy as she expected him to be; somehow, he had managed to brace at least half his weight on his elbows and knees. It was a courtesy she hadn't anticipated, but definitely appreciated. Then again, she hadn't anticipated the way he had wrapped himself around her, either. Cuddling her, in a way.

If anyone would've told her Severus Snape was a cuddler...and a good one at that...she would've laughed in the poor person's face, then called for Madam Pomfrey to haul them off to St. Mungo's...

Their heavy breathing slowed and their racing heartbeats steadied as they rested together, cocooned in the scents of musk and sweat. Finally, he shifted onto his side with a groan, untangling their legs but pulling her against him with his arms as he rolled onto his back. Hermione flushed in embarrassment; her thighs were embarrassingly damp, as was the patch of bedding underneath her.

"Um...I'm really, really sorry about that," she apologized, flushing hard with embarrassment.

"About what?" Severus asked her, tracing his fingers over her sweat-damp back.

"...Peeing on the bed," she muttered, pressing her burning cheek to his upper chest, letting her curls hide her face.

He laughed, surprising her. It wasn't a cruel laugh, either. "That was feminine ejaculate, not urine, Madam Snape. You just experienced what is known in the vernacular as

a 'shooter' orgasm."

"Well, don't *you* sound rather pleased with yourself," Hermione muttered, embarrassed for not having known.

"Mmm," he agreed lazily. "As I said, I am vastly superior to any other males of your acquaintance."

That, she couldn't let pass unchallenged. Snorting, Hermione lifted her head enough to look him in the eye and state boldly, "I'll reserve judgement, if you don't mind. At least until you've proved you can do it again. It *might've* been a lucky one-off, after all."

The shock in his dark gaze was priceless. Biting her lip to stifle a laugh, Hermione rolled free and reached for the second bottle. He rolled after her, catching her wrist before she reached her target. "Oh, no, wife...you have challenged me to give you more pleasure."

"But shouldn't I take some Morning After Potion?" Hermione asked as he kissed her just behind her ear, making her shiver.

"It is not yet morning," he reminded her, licking the outer curve of her ear, his breath warming her skin. "And you can only take one dose every twenty-four hours, though it will still be efficacious no matter how many times we enjoy ourselves between applications, so long as it is taken no more than twenty-four hours after our first encounter." A strain of his head allowed him to catch the time. "As it is now...eleven-fourteen...we have plenty of time before the first dose must absolutely be taken."

"Oh. Right." Hermione focused through the way he was fondling her breast and nibbling on her ear. "Well, you still owe me a sensual foot-rub, so I suppose we could start with that..."

A smug masculine smile proved that he agreed with her.

III.

Though normally it was against school policy to allow breakfast to be served in bed, whether it was the bed of a student, or that of a teacher...the house-elves woke the pair of them late the next morning by popping into the room with soft *bangs* that had both Severus and Hermione jerking awake and scrabbling for their wands. Luckily, they both realized what their targets were, and refrained from injuring the unsuspecting creatures.

Hermione, clutching the bedding to her breasts, watched as the two house-elves trotted up to each side of the bed, a leg-bearing tea-tray hoisted over their heads. Scooting awkwardly back, she let the tea-towel clad house-elf on her side settle the tray over her lap, before it bowed and vanished with another quiet *pop*. A glance to her side showed Severus being given the same treatment...and that the clock on the nightstand beyond him was showing the time, that it was well past the usual breakfast hour. She blushed, remembering why they had been up so late, to have slept in for so long afterwards.

Aware of the young woman beside him, Severus didn't bother to greet her until he had inhaled the steam from his milk-laced coffee cup, and downed at least half of the cup's contents. Once the caffeine hit his blood, he felt marginally more charitable towards the world. Of course, he had awakened feeling remarkably charitable towards his wife, to the point where his morning erection interfered somewhat with the tea-tray. Annoying little pointy-eared idiots, interrupting what could've been an even better way to jump-start his day than the usual bliss of that first mug of coffee.

Setting the half-emptied cup down, Severus licks his lips, then leaned over, careful not to disturb the tray. She turned to look at him, lifting her face up to his just in time for his mouth to meet hers. He tasted of his coffee. She tasted of her cream-cheese-and-pear pastry. It was a surprisingly good combination.

When he pulled back, she smiled shyly at him. This marriage business wasn't too bad, so far. "Good morning, Severus."

"Mm. We'll see. Eat your breakfast," he directed her. "I would rather no one accused me of starving you to death because I was too busy having my wicked way with you."

That made her laugh, strangely enough. "And who is to say I wouldn't have my own wicked way with *you*?"

He snorted. "As if anyone would believe someone as innocent-seeming as you. Eat."

"Only if you do, too." She stated that firmly, wanting to remind him that this was supposed to be a marriage of equals, not of him bossing her around. Or of her bossing him around, although legally she could do that. Hermione didn't want to, however. She wanted equality. Although...he *did* have such a masterful air about him at times...and his voice in the depths of his pleasure was just as impassioned as when he was snarling at someone in his classes... The idea of him giving her an highly irregular sort of detention was rather exciting. "Damn."

"What?" Severus asked, glancing sideways at her while cutting into his fried tomato and over-easy egg on toast.

Blushing, Hermione made herself answer bluntly. "I was just thinking, I can't get detention from you anymore, because I'm not in your class. Now that we're husband and wife, it could've been rather...exciting."

Severus froze, his forkful of food inches from his mouth. Detention. With his wife. At his authoritarian mercy. Reminding himself that breathing was a good thing, he glanced at her again. "I think a detention could be arranged anyway, for such impertinence on your behalf. A detention with a bit of Chapter 17."

"Chapter 17?" Hermione asked quizzically, trying to remember which one that was. He pointed, and she craned her head. Finding the book on the nightstand at her side of the bed, she picked it up and flipped through the pages. A blush stained her cheeks. "...*Spanking?* I was thinking of *fellatio!*"

"Mm, well, that *would* put a stopper in your know-it-all mouth rather nicely."

Still a little shocked by his suggestion, Hermione thumped the book on the bed between them, stabbing at her own breakfast. "Be advised, *husband*, that anything you plan to do to me, I will be very interested in doing right back to *you*. So if you want to spank me...!"

She let the words hang between them in an unspoken threat, cutting into her fried tomato.

"...That could be arranged, too."

Wide brown eyes lifted and peered at amused black ones. He even dared to smirk. Deciding she was *not* going to be bluffed, Hermione picked up her mug of pumpkin juice. "Well. I guess I know how to keep you in line, then."

A loud guffaw from her husband surprised her; she hadn't expected that the normally dour man at her side was capable of such hearty laughter.

It wasn't until she was finished with her breakfast that Hermione opened her mail. One was a letter from an overseas cousin. The other was from St. Mungo's.

'Dear Ms. Granger, or should I say, Mrs. Snape;

Many thanks once again to you for providing so many excellent resources, both Magical and Muggle. Your information is helping us to ensure a brighter and far less inbred future for the Wizarding World. My congratulations to you on acquiring such an intellectual prize in your new husband. The Ministry and I owe you a debt of gratitude; should you wish to seek employment or an apprenticeship in the Mediwitch industry, do not hesitate to contact me.

May all your children be Ravenclaws,

Judeth Everleigh, Healer General!

"Dammit!"

Hermione glanced over at her husband, wondering for one moment if he'd seen her letter. She had planned on making an offer for his hand *after* leaving the school, figuring that no one would dare think of asking for the snarky man sitting beside her in their marital bed...but that toad-faced witch, Umbridge, had hastened her scheme. Thank goodness the Headmaster had intervened! Between the two of them, she had long ago figured that they would raise utterly brilliant children. With potentially bad hair and teeth, but there were plenty of Muggle and magical ways of fixing such things. One couldn't, however, cure an inherited lack of intelligence.

Certainly the thought of raising a clutch of Weasley progeny had her shuddering in fear that they'd end up with Ron's studying habits.

Settling a concerned look on her face, she asked him earnestly, "What's wrong?"

"I did some research for the Ministry on the problems the Death Eaters were having with their Pureblood inbreeding schemes in the decades between the two wars...and now they have the *gall* to thank me for it, and to congratulate me on our wedding!" He flicked his letter at her. It said something similar, though it was from Priscilla Philliston, Chief Witch of the Wizengamot.

Hermione allowed herself a smirk, but only a tiny one. She passed him her letter, boldly letting him read it...since it *could* be interpreted in the same vein. "Then we're in the same predicament. We each assisted ourselves into this marriage."

"At least you saved me from that amphibious cow," Severus muttered, leaning in to kiss his wife. He paused an inch from her lips, a frown creasing his brow. Slytherin brains, honed to needle-sharpness through his years as a spy, mulled over her 'contribution' to the Ministry's newest law. "...You *deliberately* encouraged them towards this insane Marriage-Act decision, didn't you?"

Of all the many things that she was, Hermione Snape was *not* an idiot. It was clear to her that she had better confess, or regret it for a very long time. Giving him an arch look, she shrugged. "Of course. There's no denying the research. As much as I love the Weasleys, you only have to look at them to see how they'll inbreed themselves into utter stupidity in two to three more generations. The Goyles and the Crabbes are even 'purer' than the Malfoys, yet they barely have three brains to rub together between them...and let's not even touch the congenital defects clearly inherent within Bellatrix Lestrange and her cousin, Sirius Black."

Severus withdrew slightly from his intimidating pose, bemused. "You say that as if you didn't admire Black."

"Of course not," she stated firmly. "Not after I got to know him, stuck at his house the summer before my fifth year. He was an immature arse. I knew I couldn't convince Ron of it, so I gave up after Harry arrived and proved he still thought the man hung the bloody moon, rather than should be hung from it...I'm honestly surprised he didn't try to make a pass at me!"

Staring at her as if he'd never seen her before, Severus dared to ask, "And your opinion of myself?"

Since she was already in for a penny, Hermione thought she might as well toss in the rest of the pound. "A bully who needs to be turned over his wife's knee and thrashed soundly in punishment for all of his classroom cruelties and bullyings throughout the years...and then made love to until he weeps from it, as a form of positive reinforcement that he, or should I say, that *you* can still be as strict as Professor McGonagall is, *without* having to act like an utter arse...once you agree to change your wicked ways, of course."

Rather than scowling, he smirked at her. "You forget, my dear *wife*, that I would have to first display to you just how *wicked* I can be. Starting with Chapter 17, and working our way through Chapter 26, I think." Leaning back, he fetched his wand from the nightstand on his side of the bed, and flicked the trays off of their laps, sending them onto the top of his bureau. "Professor Sinistra is watching my House this week, freeing me from my duties. Neither of us have any appointments, nor expectations of visitors. We don't even have to leave our chambers. That gives me six more days to prove to you just how *wicked* I can be...without any interruptions."

Oh, he was a smart one, she had to grant him that. "Only on odd-numbered days. Even-numbered days, *I* get to be in-charge." At the quirk of his black brow, she lifted her chin, adding daringly, "...Or do I have to put you on a very strict allowance, with barely enough pin-money to buy yourself a single book a month?"

For a moment, she thought she had pushed him too far. Looming over her, making her shrink downward on the bed involuntarily, Severus addressed her impertinence with a soft, heated growl. "Remind me to inflict *several* paper-cuts on your *you-know-what*, should you think to try. You may bind me, you may spank me, you may tease me with your luscious body until I scream with frustration, *but you will not cut me off from my books!*"

She giggled. Hermione couldn't help it. She covered her mouth with her hand, but it was too late. At the pained roll of his eyes, she reached up and caressed his cheek. "This is why I wanted to snare you, Severus. I knew you'd be a perfect match for me. I was going to wait until I had left the school first, of course, but I *knew* you would be perfect for me."

Leaning back just a little, he gave her a sardonic, mildly exasperated look. "...Must you *always* be right?"

Daringly, she looped her arms around his shoulders, bringing him back down into range for a kiss. "Of course. I *am* a know-it-all!"

It was interesting, kissing a man as he laughed ruefully, helplessly.

...

Three months later, Hermione Snape was the talk of the whole school, after having visited Madam Pomfrey.

The school nurse simply couldn't stop herself from gossiping about the girl's condition to Madam Hooch, who was in the infirmary to have a splinter from one of the school brooms removed from her hand. Within the hour, the Quidditch Coach slipped the information to the Ravenclaw Beater, Alice Hooch, who just happened to be her niece. Alicia Hooch quickly proceeded to tell several of her friends. Within two more hours, the rumors had reached Gryffindor Tower.

It was Ginny Weasley, however, who gathered the courage to confront their friend on the stairs between classes.

"...Is it true?" she asked Hermione breathlessly.

Hermione frowned in confusion. "...Is what true?"

Taking a gulp of air, Ginny forged ahead with the bravery and boldness of a Sorted Gryffindor. "...Do you really have paper-cuts on your...*you know...* Your *you-know-what?*"

Only the propitious shifting of a stairwell between them as Hermione chased the other girl halfway back to Gryffindor Tower kept Ginevra Weasley from being seriously harmed.

Fin