

Nobody Told Me There'd Be Days Like These

by Subversa

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Chapter 1: The Wedding Gifts

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The entire Potterverse, in all its heartbreak and glory, belongs to the inimitable JKR.

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Chapter 1: The Wedding Gifts

Hermione Jane Granger Snape lounged in the bath of her marital home, covered in scented bubbles, and staring into space.

Today was The Day. The dreaded day when her honeymoon switched down a notch, and her bridegroom returned to work for part of the day. It was not yet time to retire from their home which they had agreed to dub Enchanté but her constant companion of the last several weeks would be spending part of his days away from her, and she was finding the emotional adjustment a bit difficult. She realized that she was reacting a bit like a ... well, like a *girl*, and she really hated it when that happened to her.

Reaching up with her foot, she used her toes to twist the faucet and bring more water into the ancient tub. It rushed in, warming her moisture-wrinkled skin. She was not unhappy no! simply in a contemplative mood. She had known when she left the university that finding a way to break through the self-imposed seclusion of Severus Snape was her first goal. She had *not* known that her successful accomplishment of this task would plunge her into the whirlpool of the Enchantment, usurping all other drives, urges, and rational thought, beneath the overwhelming impact of its imperative. She had willingly and eagerly succumbed to the wildfire passions and exquisite agitation of the senses brought on by the elemental magic that existed between her and the man who had become her husband and she had known, in her heart of hearts, that she would only be able to immerse herself in the enthrallment for a short time. Yet even so, with all the intellectual knowledge in the world at her fingertips, that traitorous vulnerability laid bare by her love for Severus made her feel weak she was terrified of being found wanting, in his eyes, because she was sick at heart to think of spending hours a day out of his presence.

With an impatient utterance, Hermione sat up in her bath, splashing the floor with cooled water. She set about washing herself in an efficient way; it was time to finish up her soaking and her sulking her husband was soon to leave for work, and it was her wifely duty to make sure he was fed before he left their home.

Severus sat on the edge of his marital bed, glaring at the perfectly unexceptional clothing laid out for him to don before setting out for Hogwarts. It was more than a week

before the students would arrive, on September 1, but there were chores to be performed, and it was his duty to attend to them.

Today was The Day the dreaded day when his honeymoon switched down a notch, and he abandoned his bride to go to work for part of the day.

Thank Merlin he was *exhausted*.

He was physically tired, as only a 41 year old man married to a passionate 22 year old woman can be tired but also emotionally exhausted from the last month of entirely unfamiliar emotional intimacy with another person. The idea of being able to walk into his rooms at Hogwarts, his home for the last twenty years, and being able to sit for a quiet half hour over a cup of coffee, with a book in his lap and his cat purring at his side, was comforting. He would need the quiet time to transition from Severus, bridegroom to Hermione and eager recipient of the fruits of the Enchantment, to Professor Snape, Potions master of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Severus knew his marriage had wrought changes in him, had allowed parts of his personality which had not seen the light of day since he was a child, to emerge and flourish. These differences would be abundantly obvious to his co-workers, as well as to his students. In the broadest sense, Severus really did not *give* a damn about what other people thought of him but it had been his habit, for years out of mind, to carefully guard all personal details of his life from the prying eyes of other people. Being a happily married man was not the type of change he would be able to hide from the people around him. He was proud of his lovely young wife and proud of the obvious verification of his virility that *her* happiness and blatant adoration affirmed yet there was an intensely private side of him that quailed from parading these things before the amused commentary of his nosy fellow teachers and his insolent students.

Furthermore, he was entirely conscious of Hermione's slight withdrawal from him this morning. He could not be unaware of her feelings regarding his return to work; it made him impatient, though. He had done exactly as she wished rushed the wedding, spent their entire honeymoon here, alone she had known it would have to end, that he would have to return to work. It was unreasonable for her to be moping about. He would have to be firm with her.

With a growl, he began to dress himself, and to inwardly prepare for the imminent assault on his fiercely protected self-image.

Hermione was setting a plate of buttered toast on the table when Severus approached the small kitchen. She saw, with a pang, that he was dressed in full bat-mode. She checked for a moment when he paused on the threshold, pulled himself up to his full height, folded his arms across his chest, and glared down his nose at her. In a flash, she was a second-year student with ill-gotten potions ingredients hidden about her person; before she could stop herself, she had averted her eyes and fallen back a step from the table.

His snort as the black robes billowed past her recalled her to her own kitchen. With narrowed eyes and a soul full of indignation, she watched him seat himself at the table and begin to serve himself from the dish of eggs and bacon.

"I can't believe you'd DO that to me!" she said, sitting down across from him and snatching a piece of toast from his plate.

Severus quirked an eyebrow at her, taking a second slice of toast from the serving plate to replace the one she had stolen from him. "No doubt the food from *my* plate tastes better than the food from the actual serving dishes?" he inquired snidely.

Preserving a dignified silence, Hermione spread her toast with jam and began to eat it. Severus let her chew for several minutes before interposing, with wry self-deprecation, "Well, I had to see if I still have the intimidation factor working in my favour."

Hermione was saved the necessity of answering by the arrival of the morning post. The tawny barn owl dropped the *Daily Prophet* by Severus's plate, while an elderly eagle owl settled by Hermione. The eagle owl had a missive on dark green parchment, written in silver ink. Intrigued, Hermione untied the unusual letter from the eagle owl's leg and offered him a piece of bacon from the serving dish. The owl accepted the slice of bacon and soared out the open kitchen window with it dangling from his cruel beak.

Hermione broke the silver wax seal on the letter and spread it open, checking first for the signature. "It's from your Great Aunt Seraphina," she said. "Why is she writing to me?"

Severus looked up from scanning the newspaper headlines. "Perhaps you'll tell me after you read her letter," he suggested.

Hermione's face drained of colour. "She's coming to pay a morning visit. Today!"

"And I have to go to work. Pity." Though his face was carefully deadpan, there was a certain malicious glee in his black eyes.

"You can't go off and leave me alone with your dreadful aunt!" she protested in horror.

The parchment drifted to the table top; Severus picked it up and read through it as he finished drinking his coffee. "She's bringing our wedding gift. I see nothing dreadful in that."

He stood, and Hermione launched herself at him, pressing her face into his chest. "She terrified me at the wedding," her muffled voice explained.

A softening expression stole across his features as one hand came up to smooth an errant curl. "She is a daunting old fright, Pet, but she was kind to me when I was a child. You will be gracious to her, I'm sure."

A resigned sigh floated up from the region below his chin. "Oh, all right. But you'll OWE me."

Severus peeled her clutching hands from his robes and gave her a somewhat taunting look. "I was previously unaware of these badger-like tendencies. You never mentioned the Sorting Hat considering you for Hufflepuff."

Hermione thrust herself away from him, incensed. "There's no need to be *insulting*, Severus. I'm not afraid of your horrid old aunt."

Severus pinched her obstinately raised chin. "That's my girl," he said softly, his voice caressing. Then without further ado, he was gone, and Hermione was on her own in her new home for the first time since her marriage.

Hermione surveyed herself critically in the mirror. The bronze coloured robes were flattering to her complexion, her make up was neatly done, and her hair was cooperating with her. "This is my home. I am the witch of this house," she muttered to herself as she turned to leave the bedroom.

"Of course you are, dear," the mirror answered encouragingly.

Hermione went into the kitchen to look over the tea tray she had arranged and made one last circuit through the sitting room to make sure the tables were dust-free. The Sweet William and carnations she had cut from the garden and hastily arranged in a vase she had transfigured from a water glass lent the room a homey touch.

"I am a married woman. This is my home," she muttered to herself under her breath as she straightened the cushions on the sofa.

The bell rang, and she took a deep breath before walking to the door and opening it with the appearance of calm.

Seraphina Susannah Snape stood upon the doorstep in a forest green travelling cloak. An extremely ugly hat adorned with feathers sat upon her iron grey hair, and a huge black hand bag dangled from one scrawny forearm. On her aristocratic face was the patented Snape sneer, thin lips curled beneath the large hooked nose and imperious

black eyes peculiar to her family. Hermione quelled the urge to curtsy, instead extending a hand in welcome.

"Please, come in. I'm so happy you could come to visit." Proper home training carried her through the beginning of her ordeal as the tiny, stooped figure swept past her into the entrance hall.

"I'm sure you're wishing me at the devil, my dear girl. You're well brought up; that's something. Where are we going to sit? I'm too old to be standing about in drafty hallways. I hope you mean to offer me tea."

Hermione hurried to show the old lady into the sitting room, ensconcing her in the most comfortable chair before excusing herself to fetch the tea tray. In the kitchen, she filled the tea pot with boiling water, murmuring a warming spell for the muffins.

"I am a married woman. This is my home," she reminded herself as she carried the tray into the sitting room and placed it on a table before the sofa. She seated herself, then offered a warm muffin to the formidable old lady across from her.

Great Aunt Seraphina waved the proffered muffin away from her. "Thank you, no. Just plain strong tea for me at this time of the day." She glanced Hermione up and down shrewdly before saying, "If I were you, young lady, I wouldn't indulge in cakes in the morning, else you'll be fat before you know it."

Hermione pressed her lips together to keep from uttering the retort on the tip of her tongue, simply handing a cup of tea to the old dragon. She then poured a cup of tea for herself and sat back to regard Great Aunt Seraphina with wide, innocent eyes, letting the silence stretch on between them. The mean old cow could give her the stupid wedding present and go away again; damn if she'd keep on setting herself up for snubs from Severus's aunt.

Great Aunt Seraphina drank her tea in majestic silence, unabashedly staring at the defiant young witch before her. When she had finished the tea, she set the cup on the table before her and opened her bag, removing an elegant cigarette holder, carved in jade, and a Muggle cigarette package. Without seeking permission, she fitted the fag into the holder, lit it with her wand, and inhaled the nicotine deeply into her lungs.

"Don't think I don't know you'd like to tell me off," she said in a reasonable voice, tapping ash into an unusual ashtray she had removed from the ugly handbag; the ashtray promptly caused the ashes to disappear. "I don't blame you. I would have wanted to do the same, at your age. Severus told me you were fit to be a Snape, Muggle-born or not. I had my doubts, but you handle yourself well. You'll do."

Hermione's lips were now but a thin line across her face as she restrained herself from hexing her husband's favourite family member. She was entirely unconscious of her near-perfect mimicry of Severus's best sneer as she inclined her head in acceptance of the old bag's grudging encomium.

Great Aunt Seraphina's sudden bark of laughter startled her. "You've even got the look of him, already. Good girl. You'll have to develop dragon hide if you're going to live with a Snape man." The old lady stubbed out her fag and the cigarette accoutrements disappeared into the hand bag again. "Come, come, child. Don't pout, it's not becoming."

Hermione found her mouth relaxing into a small smile. "What would you have me say, ma'am?"

"Tell me you love the boy and that you'll be a good wife. He's had a terrible life, that one."

"I love him with all my heart. I will work at being exactly the wife he wants and needs."

The old lady snorted. "Leave off worrying about the kind of wife he wants, and be the wife he deserves." She stood abruptly. "Will you show me about the house? I've never been to this place before; Severus inherited it from his mother's side of the family."

Hermione willingly showed her around the house, then returned to the sitting room and bore with equanimity the many strictures Great Aunt Seraphina voiced regarding the deficiencies of the old house. "All the rooms need painting and papering, the carpets need to be replaced, the draperies are faded and old fashioned, the chairs need to be recovered, and the nursery must be furnished."

Hermione gaped at her. "We don't need to have the nursery furnished."

Great Aunt Seraphina gave her a flat stare. "Don't be foolish. Of course you do. The Snape family must have an heir." Her eyes flicked down to Hermione's hips again. "Look at you. You're made for it."

Hermione's chin came up a fraction. "Severus and I have no immediate plans to begin our family, ma'am."

The old woman shrugged. "Whether sooner or later, you will need to have the nursery furnished. You may as well be prepared." From the ugly hand bag, she removed a list scrawled on a piece of parchment. "You will also, of course, need household help."

"Oh, no, ma'am, we won't be making our home here at present. We'll be residing most of the year at Hogwarts."

Great Aunt Seraphina wagged a finger at her. "Mark my words, child, you'll be glad of a place to retreat to, once you get settled at that inconvenient old castle. You'll get this house fit for a family to live in, so that when the children come, you'll have a home for them. You'll see."

The older witch scratched a note to herself on the list in her hand, muttering about upholstering. Hermione felt as if she were being swept along in the wake of a steam engine. "We don't plan to invest on redecorating at present perhaps when I begin working ..."

Great Aunt Seraphina glanced up at her, surprise on her heavily lined face. "Didn't I tell you I was bringing a wedding gift?" she demanded in some exasperation.

At that moment, the door bell chimed again. Hermione jumped at the unaccustomed sound; who in the world would be calling on her now? She stood to go to the door, only to have Great Aunt Seraphina bustle out of the sitting room ahead of her.

"That will be them now," she said with satisfaction as she passed Hermione.

"Who?" Hermione asked blankly as the stooped figure wrenched the door open.

The sight of the visitors on the doorstep caused her a moment of disorientation, as well as incipient panic. Standing before her, casting one another looks of mistrust and loathing, were a house-elf and her former Professor, Gilderoy Lockhart.

"Your household help and your interior decorator, girl, aren't you attending to me at all?" the old lady demanded peevishly.

Severus walked into his rooms for the first time in a month with a feeling of homecoming. The door had scarcely closed behind him before Bast leapt onto the bookcase by the door. From her perch, nearly on eye level with him, she surveyed him with wounded disdain.

A smile tugged at Severus's mouth. "Is there nowhere I can go without being plagued by feminine distempered freaks?" he demanded, holding one long-fingered hand out to the elegant little black Siamese cat. Bast delicately sniffed his fingers before rubbing the side of her face against his hand. When he obligingly scratched behind her ear, she relented and stepped onto his shoulder, her claws gripping his robes, and butted his face with her head.

That reunion attended to, Severus moved into his study, where he found the lesson plans for the coming term neatly filed in a drawer. He busied himself double-checking the list of ingredients for the classroom store cupboard and was soon lost in the familiar tasks he had performed over and over again for twenty years. Bast demanded access to his lap, which he granted her, and two hours were comfortably filled with the purring of the cat and the scratching of the quill on parchment.

The rumbling of his stomach alerted him to the time. For a moment he considered scrounging in the tiny kitchen for something for lunch, then condemned the impulse as cowardly. His first post-nuptial meeting with the staff had to occur sometime; better sooner than later. Squaring his shoulders, Severus strode through the dungeons to the steps leading up to the Great Hall.

His entrance caused no small stir; the entire teaching staff stood to greet him, an unprecedented event, and his hand was shaken by every single one of them, until he reached Albus Dumbledore, who seated Severus between himself and Remus Lupin.

Lupin gave him a lop-sided grin. "How does it feel to return as the conquering hero?"

Severus paused in the act of pouring water into a goblet. "Do you know, I believe that I received less attention when I was awarded the Order of Merlin than I did after marrying Hermione Granger?"

Lupin, who was swallowing a mouthful of pumpkin juice, inhaled it instead. Minerva McGonagall patted Lupin helpfully on the back as Severus went back to eating his lunch as if Lupin were not choking in his ear. When he recovered his breath, Lupin rasped, "It would be ungentlemanly of me to draw the inevitable comparison between risking one's life for one's country and marrying Hermione."

The rest of teachers were then treated to the novel sight of Severus Snape indulging in an unrestrained laugh with a co-worker, which ended only when Remus Lupin pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to mop his streaming face. Albus caught Minerva's eye over the heads of the two men boys again, in this moment and they exchanged very pleased, rather self-satisfied, smiles.

Replete from his meal and triumphant from his first encounter with the staff, Severus took his ingredients list and entered the storeroom, checking off each ingredient and making a note of the amounts needed. As he moved from shelf to shelf, he had a nagging feeling, as of some task left undone. He pushed on with his inventory, for several more minutes, until it dawned on him.

He was missing Hermione. He wanted to share with her, to tell her about lunch and how the other professors had behaved, and what Remus had said, and how Bast had received him ... Severus closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He wanted to Floo his wife, and if they had not deliberately blocked the Floo at Enchanté, he would stop right now and talk to her. He had been absent from her for all of five hours, and he wanted nothing so much as to see her beloved face and speak to her. Had he actually thought that marrying her would be the end of it, that he would stop viewing his predilection for her society as a weakness? What kind of man could not make it through one workday without wanting to talk to his wife?

With a chuckle, he went back to marking his list, reflecting to himself that he would be home in time to eat supper with her.

Hermione watched in horror as the unknown house-elf and the former Professor Lockhart were welcomed into her home by her husband's terrifying great aunt.

"Hermione, this is Gilderoy Lockhart, a well-known interior designer. He did the redecoration for my friend Cordelia Malfoy's London townhouse." Hermione held out her hand wordlessly, feeling as if she were taking part in some sort of farce. "Gilderoy, this is my great nephew's bride, Hermione Snape." Lockhart gave Hermione a glittering smile and bowed over her hand in the grand manner.

Gilderoy Lockhart had spent six years on the locked ward at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, suffering from an Obliviate Spell which had backfired and hit him rather than his intended victims, Ron and Harry. The general consensus among the law enforcement community had been that his own personality disintegration had been enough punishment, and no action was ever taken against him for his attempt to obliterate Ron's and Harry's memories. To everyone's surprise, after five years of hospitalization, a new treatment, based largely on Muggle psychiatric technique, had helped Lockhart regain a large part of his personality. His memories of his former life would never be recovered, but he remembered enough about how to be a functioning adult wizard that he was judged to be well enough to leave hospital. Within six months, he had a new career, in interior design and party planning. He had also published two new books.

Oddly enough, Lockhart's appearance had scarcely changed in the nine years since Hermione had endured a painful schoolgirl crush on him when he was her second-year Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. His golden hair was carefully coiffed, his forget-me-not-blue eyes sparkled, and his toothy smile was blindingly white. His lavender robes were carefully colour-coordinated with the bag he carried, which appeared to contain paint chips and fabric samples and to be otherwise stuffed to the bursting point with copies of his books and signed photographs. Hermione simply nodded to him politely; she dared not think of what Severus would say to the idea of Gilderoy Lockhart in their home at all, much less with some bizarre carte blanche to decorate it.

"Gilderoy," Great Aunt Seraphina said, "I would like for you to begin in the nursery, upstairs you'll find the room at the top of the stairs, on the left. I will join you directly."

"Of course, dear lady," Lockhart said, smiling engagingly at both witches, before bounding up to the first floor.

The old woman transferred her attention to the silent house-elf, who waited patiently before her, his eyes averted. "Elf, please come with me into the sitting room," she said and went back to the chair where she had been sitting earlier. The house-elf followed at a respectful distance, stopping before Great Aunt Seraphina's chair and standing once again with eyes averted deferentially.

Hermione followed the elf. Did the old lady mean to leave the elf there to give the house a thorough cleaning?

"Come here, child," Great Aunt Seraphina said to Hermione, stretching out an imperious hand. Hermione went to her.

"Hermione, this is Quirk. He is a house-elf, who has been trained in my home, by my own house-elves, and I am giving him to you and Severus as a wedding gift, to be bound to this home and to your family."

To her dismay and amazement, Quirk was bowing to her now, murmuring, "Quirk is honoured to meet Mistress."

"But ma'am!" Hermione said desperately. "This is too much you cannot..."

"Pish!" exclaimed Great Aunt Seraphina. "I can, and I have."

Hermione flashed back to S.P.E.W., and to all she had done well, all she had wanted to do for the house-elves, how ever little they wished for her to "help" them. The very idea of owning another sentient being was repugnant to her. And now, here at her feet, the little creature was waiting to be greeted to be accepted.

Without warning, her mantra of the morning floated into her mind: I am the witch of this house; this is my home.

It became a simple question, then: What would Severus have her do?

She had been born graced with the magic that flowed through her body; the wizarding community had reached out to her, in the letter that invited her to Hogwarts, and she had made the decision to embrace that world and to live within its confines and its culture. House-elves were as much a part of the world she had adopted as the goblins who ran Gringotts Bank and the centaurs that roamed the Forbidden Forest. It was not up to her to pick and choose amongst the components of the wizarding world and to decide what she would and would not allow. It was, however, up to her to honour her husband and the name he had bestowed upon her.

Hermione became aware that the autocratic old witch was watching her with a calculating air, while the poor little house-elf was still in his deep bow. She cleared her throat and said, "Welcome to Enchanté, Quirk. Professor Snape and I will be honoured to accept your service."

She had no idea from whence the words had come, but apparently they were the correct ones; the house-elf rose from his bow with a pleased flush in his cheeks, and

Great Aunt Seraphina rewarded her with an approving nod.

The old lady rose from her chair, saying, "I will leave you to begin instructing Quirk as to his duties, Hermione; Gilderoy is waiting for me above stairs. He and I will chat about the renovations before I go, and then you can have a nice long discussion with him about how you wish to proceed." She firmly propelled Hermione into the vacated seat before Quirk and hurried out of the room.

Hermione found herself alone in the room with Quirk, who regarded her deferentially, though with some obvious curiosity. As she looked at his bat-like ears and his huge green eyes, she was reminded forcefully of Dobby, who now was the paid house-elf in the employ of Harry Potter at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. For a moment, she wondered what it must be like to be taken from your home and thrust into a brand new environment as the property of people about whom you knew nothing.

"Right," she said. "Quirk, I want you to know that I have never lived in a home with a house-elf before, and I will depend upon you to let me know what your duties were at your last home." Quirk watched her with anxious eyes, nodding at her words as if he wished to carve them into his brain. "Professor Snape and I were just married a month ago, so being a married lady is still new to me, and I have much to learn about making a home. Do you think you can help me?"

Nothing could have been more apt to endear her to the creature before her. "Quirk will help Mistress make a nice home for the Master-Professor," he proclaimed in his squeaky voice.

"Did Madame Seraphina Snape tell you anything about Professor Snape and me?" Hermione asked him.

Quirk recited, as if repeating a lesson well learned, "Master and Mistress were heroes in the war against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Master is the Potions master at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Mistress is the best friend of Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. Quirk is very, very lucky to serve in the home of such famous and honoured wizards and witches." And the house-elf bowed again, his long nose nearly brushing the carpet.

"Yes, well, Quirk, you should know that Master is quite particular about his personal belongings. It is very, very important for you not to move any of Master's things from where he has placed them without his permission. Do you understand?"

Quirk nodded to her, his large eyes wide with fear at the concept of a wrathful master. Hermione smiled at him, which was apparently a novel experience for the house-elf, because he nervously looked over his shoulder, as if to see at whom she might be smiling.

"That's all for now, Quirk. Why don't you look around the house and get familiar with it, then later on we can decide what to prepare for dinner, okay?"

As the house-elf exited the room in great excitement, to survey his new domain, Hermione took a deep breath and began to climb the stairs to meet her next challenge of the day how to curb the combined creative energies of Great Aunt Seraphina and Gilderoy Lockhart.

Severus Apparated into the foyer at Enchanté and was delighted to find his bride waiting to welcome him. He took a moment to appreciate how pretty she looked, in the bronze robes, with her curls falling about her face and down her back. Then she flung herself at him, laughing and hugging and saying how much she had missed him all the long, long day. Her impetuous demonstrations of affection, as much as anything else, had helped to break down the physical barriers he had erected and used all his life to keep people away from him. Hermione simply ignored his carefully constructed defences, sure of her welcome into his arms. As a tool of positive reinforcement, he bent his head to capture her lips in a time-stopping kiss.

When he lifted his face from hers, prepared to say something charmingly wicked, he was shocked to find huge green eyes peering at him from half-way up the staircase. With a startled oath, he shoved Hermione behind him and reached for his wand.

Her cry of, "No! Severus!" coincided with the creature, whom he now recognized as a house-elf, throwing itself face-down at his feet, moaning and wailing its apologies for upsetting him.

"What the *hell* is that?" he demanded angrily, nudging the heap of house-elf with the toe of his boot.

"HE is our gift from your Great Aunt Seraphina," Hermione retorted, pushing Severus away and crouching protectively over the house-elf, one hand upon its quivering back.

"Oh, Merlin's bloody BEARD," Severus swore, throwing his hands up in his best Slytherin Drama Queen fashion. "What next?"

Hermione, however, was ignoring him. Instead, she was addressing the house-elf, whom she had assisted to stand, and to whom she was speaking in a kind, calming voice. "I beg your pardon, Quirk; I guess I forgot a very important rule. Master used to be a spy and he is very much on his guard at all times. Never, ever, creep up on Master. Always approach him from the front or speak to him so that he knows you are there. All right?"

The house-elf, obviously traumatized, nodded feverishly. Hermione, glaring at Severus in a warning fashion, said, "Severus, I would like for you to meet Quirk. Your great aunt has given him to us, to be the house-elf at Enchanté, as our wedding gift." Then she spoke again to the house-elf. "Quirk, this is your Master, Professor Snape."

Severus watched in morbid fascination as the house-elf bowed to him, saying in its shaking, squeaky voice, "Quirk is honoured to meet his Master."

Severus turned his fulminating gaze on his wife, who gave him a tight-lipped nod in the house-elf's direction.

Bugger.

Straightening himself up, Severus looked down at the tiny magical creature in front of him, reflecting that the obligations of marriage simply continued to mount. "Welcome to the Snape home, Quirk. I am honoured to accept your service."

He was rewarded with a warm, loving smile from Hermione as well as the wet-faced sniffles of the house-elf. Ah, there was nothing like the uncomplicated comforts of home, after a long day at work.

Bugger.

After they dined, Severus and Hermione retired to the sitting room, where she curled up in the circle of his arm and told him the story of her visit from his great aunt. She had carefully considered how she would excuse to Severus the presence of the despised Lockhart in his home. She had come to the conclusion that she would simply present the redecoration to him as a fait accompli, and perhaps relate, at some future date, the author of the decorating changes as a good joke. She would have Lockhart redecorate the rooms they never used first, doing the sitting room and master bedroom last, so that it would all be finished before Severus knew it had begun. She had only been married for a little while, but it was long enough to realize that as long as neither his books, his clothes, nor his wand were disturbed, Severus Snape would be unlikely to notice if the colour of the walls or the fabric of the armchairs changed.

In return, Severus related the story of his reunion with Bast, the receiving line of professors at lunch, and the joke he had shared with Remus. As he spoke, she gazed at his face, stroking his raven's-wing hair, shot through with strands of silver. When he reached the end of his story, he cocked his head to one side, looking down at her, the arm circling her shoulders tightening to pull her closer.

"What are you looking at?" he asked lazily, letting his own gaze wander down to appreciate the small bit of cleavage revealed by the v-neck of the robes and the swell beneath.

"I'm looking at my gorgeous husband," she replied huskily, leaning into him and pressing her breasts to his chest as her small teeth grazed the sharp angle of his jaw.

Severus had long ceased to argue with her or question her pronouncements regarding his physical attractiveness. He supposed it was possible, in one's forties, to outgrow a lifetime of ugliness, but it was really a moot point. If his wife believed him to be gorgeous, it was his duty to indulge her in this delusion. The results were, after all, favourable from his point of view, and if she were, in years to come, to outgrow this misapprehension, he could depend upon her love and loyalty to keep her by his side.

Hungrily, he pulled her into his lap, burying one hand in the hair at the very back of her head, just as she liked, and pulling her head slightly back, to lay a trail of kisses down her throat. She squirmed, her bottom provocatively surfing the swells of his emerging interest, and spoke his name in a breathy gasp. The Enchantment answered the call of their surging passion, pulling them beneath the wave of power, and they clung together, their hearts synchronizing and beating as one, ecstatic to be in its thrall once again.

Congratulating himself on having the foresight not to ward against Apparation within his home, Severus clasped his prize firmly against him and Apparated straight to their bed.

Severus was completely bemused, the next morning, to find that not only was Hermione not sulking about his going to work that day, but she was practically shoving him out the door. Since classes had not yet begun, he did not have to arrive at his office by a specific time, and because she had been a demanding little vixen the night before, he thought he might have a bit of lie-in but, no! She cheerfully prodded him out of bed, into the shower, and lured him down to the kitchen with promises of kippers for breakfast, before he was properly awake.

Glaring at her suspiciously over his third cup of coffee (say what you will about the little berks, but house-elves made damn good coffee), he wondered what she was up to. He was distracted from his musings by the arrival of the owl post.

While Severus glanced idly through the *Daily Prophet*, Hermione broke the seal on the official looking letter she had received. Her squeal a moment later caused Severus to look up sharply, and it brought Quirk running as if the hounds of hell were on his tail.

"Yes, Mistress?" Quirk asked nervously, no doubt wondering how long it would take him to begin to understand how his new master and mistress communicated with him.

Hermione ignored him, saying excitedly to Severus, "It's from the Ministry of Magic! The Office of Experimental Magical Solutions! Listen to this:

Dear Madame Snape,

*Pursuant to our receipt of the copy of your treatise, **The Uses of Experimental Potions in the Treatment of Trauma-Induced Injury to the Nerves, Muscles, and Tissues**, we would like to speak with you regarding a current opening on our Research Staff. This position requires the desire to pursue self-directed independent research in your own lab, to be funded by this office, under the supervision of the OEMS Head.*

If you would be interested in discussing this possibility with us, please let us know by return owl if you are available to meet with us on Wednesday, 22nd August, at 11 A.M.

Sincerely yours,

Percy I. Weasley

Assistant Head

Office of Experimental Magical Solutions

Ministry of Magic

London

Severus kept his features carefully schooled to polite interest. "I take it you find the offer of interest?" he inquired neutrally.

"Yes!" Hermione answered excitedly. "Self-directed independent research? Severus, they want to pay me to devise and run my own experiments in my own lab! Can you imagine?"

"That would make you happy?"

She was up out of her chair, dancing around the table to deliver a hug, which he stood to receive properly.

"Yes, yes, yes! Oh, I have to send an owl immediately!" She whirled around, relieved to see that the Ministry owl was still there, munching on the Owl Treat thoughtfully provided to it by Quirk. "Have a wonderful day at work!" she said to him, rushing out of the kitchen in search of parchment and a quill.

"Thanks for the good-bye kiss," he muttered grumpily, looking at the spot from which his bride had just disappeared. He noted, with a great deal of amusement, the alarm on Quirk's face as he regarded his master fearfully. "Don't worry, Quirk; kissing me good-bye in the mornings will never form any part of your duties."

And with that bit of reassurance, he collected his brief case and Apparated to work, wondering how long it would take his Hermione to wonder *just who* had sent a copy of her course thesis to the Ministry of Magic.

Hermione tied her acceptance of the invitation to come in and speak with the Office of Experimental Magical Solutions to the extended leg of the Ministry owl and sent it on its way. Leaving Quirk to deal with the breakfast washing up, she went into the sitting room and sat down on the sofa to await Lockhart. It had been a near-run thing, getting Severus moving this morning so that he would be gone before Lockhart showed up. If she did not manage to keep them apart while the redecorating was underway, she did not want to imagine the results.

Lockhart had managed to get up the nose of every professor on the staff at Hogwarts during his short tenure as the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. It was bad enough that they all recognized him as a complete fraud, without him constantly being on about every subject under the sun. He had had the unmitigated gall to lecture Hagrid about the care of magical creatures, Sprout about the care of magical plants, McGonagall about the proper way to teach Transfiguration he had even tried to best Severus in a duel before the entire student body! No, Lockhart had not endeared himself to anyone during his time at Hogwarts and Severus simply did *not* suffer fools gladly. He was forced to deal with the "dunderheads" in his classes; he would not willingly do so on his own time much less in his own home.

Hermione was not fond of Lockhart herself. She had not really forgiven him for trying to Oblivate Harry and Ron in the Chamber of Secrets, and she felt he had gotten exactly what he deserved. She had felt pity for him when she saw him at St. Mungo's, but that didn't mean she wanted him running tame in her house. She did not, however, know how to refuse Great Aunt Seraphina's gift. She certainly did not wish to offend the old lady. And it would be nice to have the old house made new inside.

With the eternal optimism of youth, she decided it would all work out in the end.

Chapter 2: Having One's Cake

Chapter 2 of 3

Hermione goes for a job interview, then steals an afternoon in a hotel room with Severus.

The entire Potterverse, in all its heartbreak and glory, belongs to the inimitable JKR.

Chapter 2

Hermione glanced one last time at her reflection. Her hair had been tamed into a professional-looking chignon and her navy blue robes gave just the right touch of career-minded witch. Her make up was neat, not at all overdone. Her leather briefcase carried her curriculum vitae and copies of her thesis papers for her projects in Charms and Potions. She presented the perfect picture of a qualified job candidate.

A sudden lurch in her tummy sent her flying once again to the bathroom. She retched for a moment over the toilet, before standing to rinse her mouth and brush her teeth for the third time that morning. Doubtlessly her stomach was empty now, and the nervous fluttering and distressing churning would cease.

For the briefest moment, she stood with her forehead pressed to the mirror over the sink. She had not entered the halls of the Ministry of Magic since she was carried out of it on a stretcher, after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries. On that fateful day, Antonin Dolohov cast a curse at her which knocked her unconscious and kept her chained to a bed in the hospital wing at Hogwarts for longer than she cared to remember. Though she never spoke of that time, she still had nightmares about it. Considering the horrible experiences that had troubled Harry, Ron, and Severus, she had never felt that her own physical maladies had been of much significance, in the larger scheme of things.

Moving resolutely back into her bedroom, she picked up her briefcase. She wanted this job; it was a perfect position for her. She could work from home, whether at Hogwarts or Enchanté, designing and conducting her own experiments. All she had to do was show up for an interview at the Ministry. She had been able to stand her own ground in duels with armed Death Eaters surely she could survive an interview with Percy Weasley?

Squaring her shoulders, Hermione walked out of her bedroom and marched down the stairs.

Quirk, the house-elf, finished with the washing up and began his daily patrol of his domain. He was so proud to be bound to his own family and to his own home; at Enchanté, he was not under the direction of an elf senior to him, as he had been in the house of Madam Seraphina Snape. No, at Enchanté, Quirk was in charge of the entire house and the whole family. He felt the weight of responsibility keenly and wanted nothing so much as to give satisfaction to his new master and mistress and to be worthy of his position.

After making all tidy in his master's bedroom and bathroom, he ventured into the room at the top of the stairs. What he saw there filled his elf soul with terror.

Quirk had, thus far, found his new mistress to be very kind and patient. She had only given Quirk one absolute rule, which he considered to be his Prime Directive: Never, under any circumstances, was he to move Master Snape's personal belongings without permission. Master was particular about his things; Quirk was to leave them exactly as he found them.

Mistress seemed to understand some important things about Quirk and his job. On his very first day at Enchanté, she had given him leave to look all over the house and acquaint himself with the rooms. He had eagerly embraced this suggestion, prowling every nook and cranny, every shelf and cupboard, from the cellar to the attics, and memorizing the location of every piece of furniture and every knick-knack. He knew which rooms needed a thorough dusting, which windows needed washing, and which old drawers and trunks needed to be tidied he was careful, and observant, and he was a *good* house-elf!

But something terrible had happened to the room at the top of the stairs.

The old ragged wallpaper, which featured faded red cabbage roses, was gone! The walls, which had been a dingy white, were now butter yellow, and some horrid paper featuring little cavorting woodland creatures mocked him from the far wall. The dilapidated red floor runner he remembered had been replaced with a tidy hooked rug in shades of saffron.

Oh, Quirk was a bad elf!

Firmly grasping the doorframe, Quirk smacked his head against the offending yellow wall.

The sharp pain brought him back to a sense of his immediate obligations. With a frown of concentration, he pictured the room as he had seen it on his first day. When he had every detail firmly fixed in his mind, he snapped his fingers, then peeked with hopeful eyes. Relief flooded his small body. Once again, the walls were a dingy white, with the torn cabbage rose paper on the far wall and the tatty old floor runner beneath his feet.

Quirk staggered out of the room at the top of the stairs, shuddering with delayed reaction as he pictured Master Snape in a rageful snit over the ruination of this room. Leaning against the wall in the hallway, he caught his breath and thanked his good luck that he had thought to inspect the house this morning. What if the changes had been discovered? It did not bear thinking about.

His breathing returned to normal, Quirk continued down the upstairs hallway to the small unused bedrooms and caused the bedroom doors to pop open at his approach. His cry of outrage at the sight of the bedrooms could be heard from the front walk.

Severus strode up the drive from the gates of Hogwarts to the castle entrance, a scowl of concentration on his face. Hermione had seemed quite distracted at breakfast this morning, picking at her food and answering him at random when he spoke to her. Used as he was to being the focus of her attention when in her presence, he was slightly miffed by her behaviour.

A flurry of activity by the castle doors distracted him from his brooding. Several wizards and witches, most of whom he did not recognize, were loitering about the entrance, chatting with one another. Each of the strangers was wearing a name tag, bearing the words, *Hello, My Name Is* with handwritten names then scrawled on the badges; the inscribed pieces of paper appeared to have adhered to the robes of the persons wearing them.

Offended by the absurd name tags, he realized he had seen them somewhere before. Had not Hermione pointed them out to him at some point? Oh, yes she had suggested that the ridiculous Muggle name tags be used during the registration process for the 157th Annual Wizarding Education Symposium. Hiring Hermione to assist

him in organizing the symposium had been Dumbledore's interfering way of throwing them into each other's company; when they had allowed the Enchantment to have its way with them and rushed into a wedding and a long honeymoon, Dumbledore and McGonagall had been stuck with the job of finishing the plans for the event. Yes, today was indeed 22nd August how could he have forgotten? The whole bloody castle would be overrun with strangers.

Abruptly changing direction, Severus headed for the courtyard and an alternate entrance to the castle; damned if he would socialize with a bunch of dunderheads if he could avoid it.

Gilderoy Lockhart sat quietly in the sitting room at Enchanté, answering a few pieces of fan mail before beginning his day's work. That young Madam Snape had ushered him into the house on her way out to some sort of appointment in London. She assured him he would be quite alone this morning, save for the house-elf; no one would be the wiser if he stole some time to sign a few photographs for his many fans.

So far, this job was going quite well. The elderly witch who hired him had paid up front, and paid quite generously, to have this small house redecorated in the finest style. She was, no doubt, dazzled by his smile and his blinding personality. The younger witch, however, who seemed vaguely familiar to him, behaved as if she were uncomfortable around him. Perhaps she was also enchanted by his good looks and felt badly about it; as Gilderoy had been informed, the young woman had been married for only a short time. Possibly she was feeling a twinge of guilt over preferring him to her new husband. Yes, that would explain everything.

The mirror hanging over the mantle lured him, as did all mirrors, everywhere, to stand before it and gaze upon the perfection that was Gilderoy. He tried a few different smiles, practiced a number of expressions of modesty, then found his attention drawn by movement on the mantelpiece. Tearing his eyes away from his own arresting countenance, Gilderoy saw a glass jar, filled with leaves and twigs, with a beetle scurrying about within; the bug actually fluttered its wings and bumped against the side of the jar, as if to attract his notice.

Gilderoy stared at the insect with some fascination. It was a curious specimen, with the oddest markings about its eyes. He had never considered it before, but undoubtedly even insects could feel the magnetism of his personality and would be drawn to him. Bestowing a kindly smile upon the bug, he went to gather his things to move to the nursery and see to the polishing of the wainscoting. There was much to be done in this house; if these strange Snapes thought that bottled beetles were appropriate ornaments for their mantelpiece, his work was cut out for him.

Retrieving his work bag, which he charmed each day to match his robes (today he was all in aquamarine), he bounded eagerly up to the nursery. What he saw when he opened the door caused him to stagger back in confusion.

Gone were the cheerful yellow walls, the carefully chosen wallpaper, and the simple, though expensive, hooked rug. Instead, the horrid room was as it had been the first day he had seen it, with tattered wallpaper, dreary walls, and seedy carpeting.

Leaving his bag where it had fallen from his enfeebled fingers, he staggered down the hall to the other two rooms he had already refurbished. With his hastily drawn wand, he popped both doors open, then stood looking from one room to the other, his jaw slack and his mouth hanging open in a most unattractive gawp.

His brain abuzz with perturbation, he slid down the wall and sat on the floor, staring at his well-manicured hands. He remembered distinctly viewing these three rooms and discussing them first with the old lady, then with the lady of the house. He had made notes, which he diligently followed the next afternoon when he returned and magicked the new paint onto the walls, added the wallpaper, and replaced the floor coverings. Using his wand, he Summoned his bag and pulled out his notes, seeing where he had checked off the tasks as completed.

Why was there no evidence of him having made any changes to these rooms?

Gilderoy had spent many years in hospital for not remembering who he was or how to get on in life as an independent person. Once the new techniques had begun to restore some sense of self to him, he had hungered to leave the closed ward and grace society with himself again. He had been told that he had done some dreadful things, by some angry people who had confronted him once he left hospital; he had no memory of doing any of those things, however. He had been shown the books he had written, falsely claiming responsibility for feats actually performed by other people; other than admiring his own photographs on the covers, Gilderoy had never paid the least mind to those books from his former life. Instead, he embraced his new life, quickly finding a place for himself where his natural interests could flourish, in party planning and decorating. He adored his existence, his celebrity, and could not bear to think that anything could interfere with his hedonistic pursuits.

A cold trickle of fear insinuated itself into Gilderoy's mind. What if the hospital people found out he was imagining things? What if his benign gaolers knew that he had distinct memories of doing things that had clearly never been done like decorating the Snape's nursery? Why, they would probably haul him off to the closed ward again. He would be locked up and would not be allowed to plan parties, or to attend them, with adoring witches fawning over him for his handsome face and his boyish charm. It was unthinkable! He could not permit it to be discovered!

Feeling a bit like a cat on a hot sidewalk, Hermione paced back and forth before the old red telephone box, gathering her courage about her like Harry's invisibility cloak. Lifting her chin determinedly, she stepped into the box, lifted the receiver and dialled six-two-four-four-two. She stated her business, then took the square silver badge from the coin chute and fastened it to her robes. It read, *Hermione Snape, Job Interview*. The floor of the telephone box then began to descend underground, into the bowels of the Ministry of Magic.

Stepping onto the dark wood floor of the Atrium, she was astounded to see that the Fountain of Magical Brethren, which had been demolished in the duel between Dumbledore and Voldemort, was spraying jets of water into the air as if it had never been reduced to rubble. She realized that five years had passed since that horrible day, but it was amazing to her that no sign of physical scars from the epic battle remained; it was as if it had never happened. If only she could forget as easily.

After submitting her wand for inspection at the security desk, Hermione moved to the lifts. She knew that the office she wanted was on level three. The nervous churning had begun once again in her stomach; for some reason, she was acutely aware of being deep under the streets of London, and there was a sensation of a great weight pressing on her, keeping her from taking a good, deep breath. Mentally chastising herself for her cowardice, she stepped into the lift. It was not until the doors slid closed, leaving her trapped in the tiny, moving box, with lavender paper airplane memos flapping about above her head, that the most acute panic assailed her.

Able to breathe only in tiny gasps, with her racing heart thundering in her ears and a fine film of perspiration across her brow, Hermione closed her eyes; in her distress, her only thought was of Severus.

With the most recent O.W.L. results spread on the desk before him, Severus retrieved his sixth- and seventh-year lesson plans from his brief case and struggled to keep his mind on his work. It really never failed to amaze him that so many of the students who could not properly brew the simplest potion in his classroom managed to waltz out of the practical portion of the Potions O.W.L. with marks ranging from improbable A's (acceptable), to impossible E's (exceeds expectations), to impertinent O's (outstanding). He had taught damn few students in his career who were actually fit to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion making. One notable exception had been his own Hermione...

Severus allowed himself a few moments of leisure time to dwell upon his bride, calling to mind in particular her enthusiastic response to his lovemaking the night before. How had he ever been so lucky as to win a woman as desirable as Hermione?

Bast leapt onto the desk top, landing neatly in the middle of the O.W.L. scores.

"Get down from there," he commanded sternly. "You know you are not permitted on top of my desk."

Staying on her feet, Bast meowed at him plaintively, the tip of her tail flicking in agitation.

Severus frowned at her; the cat was usually quite well behaved. What the devil was ailing her? As he watched her, perplexed, Bast continued to speak to him woefully,

each successive cry seeming more urgent. He reached one hand out to stroke her, to still her furor. She pressed into his touch, but continued to clamour. Oddly, as his hand caressed her sleek black fur, he found his mind to be full of Hermione her thoughts and her feelings seemed to invade his mind. He stared at Bast, who looked him fearlessly in the eye, her own cries quieting as distressing Hermione-flavoured emotions saturated him.

Severus snatched his hand back from the cat as if he had been burned; the image of an anguished Hermione stayed with him. With jerky steps, he crossed the room, as if to flee the persistent picture in his mind. From the doorway, he looked back at Bast, who stood on the desk top, watching him.

"Is it true? Does she need me?" he said aloud, as if to himself.

Bast had only to meow her affirmation once before he rushed from his rooms, the black robes billowing in his wake.

Struggling to get a calm breath, Hermione clutched at her briefcase and waited for the interminable lift trip between floors to reach an end. Sweet relief flooded her when the lift doors opened on the fourth level; she stumbled out of the horrid lift right into the arms of Nymphadora Tonks.

"Hermione!" Tonks grasped her friend by the arms, gazing with some alarm at her pale, sweaty face. "What's wrong? Why are you here?"

"Ladies' Room!" Hermione gasped. With great presence of mind, Tonks took her by the hand and whisked her around a corner and through a door into the nearest bathroom; Hermione hastened into one of the stalls and retched yet again into the toilet.

When Hermione emerged, Tonks had conjured two comfortable chairs in the lounge antechamber; she was holding a damp face flannel, which she used to carefully wipe her friend's face.

"Are you ill?" she asked.

"Just a bit of an anxiety attack, I think," Hermione said in a failing voice, falling into one of the squishy armchairs. "First time I've been back here since the battle in the Department of Mysteries, five years ago."

Tonks, who had also been injured in that battle, nodded in understanding as she settled in the chair across from Hermione. "I was in St. Mungo's for weeks. When I was well enough to come back to work, I would get all shaky every time I had to enter the building." A soft, reminiscent smile lit Tonks's heart-shaped face. "Remus was brilliant, at the time. He had these Muggle books about some kind of stress disorder. He would sit with me over a pint for hours at a time, talking about how natural it was for me to be nervous about coming into the building again."

Hermione took the flannel and pressed the cool cloth against her throat. As Tonks talked, she felt her panic subsiding; her breathing returned to normal, and her heart beat steadied. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the soft chair.

Tonks watched her carefully, prattling on about inconsequential things. "You never did say why you're here," she commented at last.

Hermione made an effort to sit up straight, opening the side zip on her briefcase and removed a small cosmetics bag. "I have an appointment for an interview on level three in ten minutes!" She began to repair the damage to her make up.

"What, the Obliviator Headquarters?" Tonks inquired with interest.

"No, the Office of Experimental Magical Solutions." She frowned for a moment, snapping her cosmetics bag closed and tucking it away. "Isn't your office on level two? Why are you here?"

Tonks shrugged. "I just had a look-in at the Werewolf Support Services." Her eyes crinkled in her engaging smile. "Are we still on for Friday night?"

Hermione smiled. "Absolutely. Our first guests!" She rose quickly. "I'd better hurry. Are there stairs I can take, instead of the lift?"

Tonks tucked Hermione's hand in her arm and led her to the stairs, beginning the trip up with her. "One floor up, then turn right. Will you be okay alone?"

Hermione gave Tonks a one-armed hug. "I'm fine. Thank you, 'Dora. You saved my life!"

Tonks made a moue and rolled her eyes. "Good luck! I'll see you Friday!" Then she turned and continued up to the next level.

Straightening her back, Hermione turned right and walked down to the door proclaiming Office of Experimental Magical Solutions. Stepping into the office, she found a harassed-looking young man with fiery red hair labouring over a pile of parchments. He looked up at her entrance, and Hermione had no difficulty recognizing Percy Weasley.

Percy, the third Weasley son, had risen quickly in the Ministry at the beginning of his career, by aping the opinions of his immediate superiors. This tactic had worked well for him, until he broke with his family and openly declared that Voldemort had not returned, and that Harry Potter was a lying, attention-seeking head case. When this declaration turned out to be wrong, he began to be shunted from one office within the Ministry to another, never rising and never staying in any position for very long. It was discovered that Percy was an excellent workhorse, but that his people skills left a bit to be desired.

Hermione had felt quite a bit of sympathy for Percy while he was still a student at Hogwarts; his desire to be at the top of his class and to follow the rules were goals with which she could identify. It was not until he left school and displayed his inglorious arse to one and all that she began to dislike him. Even though he had reconciled with his mother and was on speaking terms with his father, his siblings continued to treat him with distrust and disdain. She found herself stiffening as Percy stepped forward with his hand outstretched, saying, "Hermione!"

The imperious lift of her eyebrows would have made any Snape proud. "Mr. Weasley," she answered him, nodding her head and ignoring his hand.

Percy stood doubtfully surveying the haughty young woman before him she reminded him of someone, he just couldn't put his finger on who it was. He couldn't see why she had to be so unfriendly, but he had best treat her respectfully; the office Head wanted this witch for the research staff, and there would be hell to pay if Percy made any mistakes in this recruitment.

"The Head is right through here," he told her, stepping to the open doorway behind his desk. Hermione could see a larger desk against the wall in this second room but there did not appear to be anyone sitting there.

Percy rapped on the doorframe, saying, "Madam Snape is here."

There was a soft exclamation, then a very smartly dressed young woman came into view. Hermione stared for a moment at the other girl, whose long curls fell neatly about her shoulders, before saying, "Penelope Clearwater?"

The Head of the Office of Experimental Magical Solutions came forward with a friendly smile, her hand outstretched. "I wondered if you would remember me! Yes, Healer Clearwater now, actually. Please, come in and sit down."

Hermione advanced into the room and sat down in an armchair, thankful to be off her feet, which were still feeling somewhat unsteady. Healer Clearwater turned to Percy. "That will be all, Percy. You may go to lunch, now."

Turning from him in a gesture of dismissal, the Head returned to her desk. Neither woman spared another glance for Percy Weasley, though the quiet closing of the outer door alerted them to his departure.

Hermione tilted her head fractionally in the direction of Percy's desk. "Didn't you and he ..."

Penelope rolled her eyes. "Yes, at school. And can you believe that he dropped me when he went to work at the Ministry? I was taken on as an Apprentice at St. Mungo's, and I thought that we would carry on with our plans to be married then he decided it was 'not a smart move at this time in my career, Penny' what a prat!" Her quick smile was infectious, and Hermione found herself smiling back. "And now I'm his boss. It's perfect, really."

Hermione remembered that she was there for a job interview, and she reached for her briefcase. "I've brought my CV, Healer Clearwater, as I thought you might need it..."

Penelope interrupted her. "Please, Hermione, call me Penny! We don't stand on ceremony in my department. And put your CV away. I know you, I know your reputation, and I've read your course thesis. This is very impressive work."

Penny opened the leather folder on her desk and removed Hermione's paper. "Would you be interested in continuing this line of research? We are still trying to find proper remedies and treatments for the Cruciatus Curse and other types of spellwork that affect the body systems in similar ways."

Hermione sat forward. "Yes. I think we need to pursue the theory of nerve regeneration, taking the starfish as an example, and attempt to duplicate the process by the use of a potion."

Penny pursed her lips. "But didn't Professor Fleagle in Romania run a series of experiments attempting to duplicate that phenomenon, back in the 1980's?"

"Yes! But Fleagle used diced black hellebore, which made his subjects violently ill. If one uses an infusion, the purgative effects are retained in much milder form."

The two young women were promptly immersed in a conversation ranging far and wide over the possible efficacy of potions in various applications. They were thus involved when the outer office door opened violently, hitting the wall with a thud.

Severus erupted into the Office of Experimental Magical Solutions with his heart in his throat. Even running to the Apparition point in Hogsmeade and from the Apparition point at the Ministry, it had taken him too damn long to find Hermione.

Seeing her sitting hale and whole in the office sent a wave of relief through him that caused him to sag momentarily against the door frame. The look on her face, when she turned and saw him there, was worth more to him than a dozen pay rises.

"Professor Snape!" Penny exclaimed. "How nice to see you. Please, join us."

Severus tore his gaze from Hermione's radiant eyes and advanced into the inner office with some measure of decorum. "Miss Clearwater, good morning. I trust I don't intrude? Hermione had asked me to meet her for lunch."

Hermione bit her lip and saw Penny struggling to keep a straight face; apparently no one was going to comment on him throwing the door open as if he expected to find his wife being held hostage by renegade research staffers.

"Of course you don't intrude, Professor. Hermione and I have been talking shop, and we lost track of the time."

Severus stopped behind Hermione's chair and placed his large, warm hands on her shoulders. As soon as he touched her, an influx of peace stole through her; she felt an immeasurable satisfaction in knowing that the current ran both ways, soothing his emotions as it soothed hers. The exigencies of the morning had left her unnaturally vulnerable; though she was sitting in a job interview, she felt an instinctual desire to escape into him. Her focus was slipping; it was time to bring the interview to a close.

Standing, Hermione held her hand out to Penny, who clasped Hermione's hand between both of her own. "I've wanted you for this job ever since I found out you were both qualified and available," Penny told her. "From my point of view, all that remains is for me to inspect your premises, so that I can requisition the equipment you'll need to begin working. Is there a time that would be convenient for me to visit?"

Hermione smiled excitedly. "We're having friends over for dinner on Friday night, Penny. We'd love for you to join us we can tour the lab before dinner. Do you have a friend you'd like to invite?"

Penny gave her a conspiratorial smile. "Oh, I'm between 'friends' right now. If you have no objection, I'll bring Percy. He can use a little extra detention."

With an agreement to meet at Enchanté on Friday evening, the young women parted company, and Severus led his wife out of the office. Looking about him for the nearest alcove, he moved her down an unused hallway. After casting a Concealing Charm to divert inquiring eyes, he pulled her safely into his arms.

"What happened?" he murmured into her hair.

Hermione clung to the folds of his robes. "It's the first time I've been back here since Dolohov cursed me in the Department of Mysteries," she admitted to the buttons of his coat.

Tipping her face up to search her eyes, he demanded, "Why did you never mention that, Pet? I could have come with you."

Her lips trembled a tiny bit. "I thought I'd be all right. It seemed silly to be afraid of something so stupid. It's only feelings, after all not real danger."

His face darkened. "Never say that feelings cannot cause fear, Hermione. We both know it isn't true." He held her against him again, revelling in the soothing effect their presence had, each on the other.

"How did you know?" she asked.

His lips twitched. "A little Bast told me."

"What?" she asked, with a little choke of laughter.

"Bast came to me as if somehow, she knew. When I touched her, I could feel your panic and your fear. I came as quickly as I could."

"Oh, Severus."

The catch in her voice betrayed the emotion she was trying so hard to suppress. Hearing the longing and the need and knowing that it mirrored his own, he kissed her, uncaring that they were two well-known adult people snogging in the hallways of the Ministry of Magic.

"Let's go home," he growled into her ear, nipping her earlobe with his teeth.

Even in her befuddled state, Hermione remembered that Gilderoy Lockhart was at her home. "No can't we isn't there..."

...which is how Hermione found herself half dressed and fully engaged in amorous intrigue with her own husband in a London hotel room.

"Don't you think you could at least try to look as if you're old enough to be married to me?" he chided, kicking the door closed and tossing his robes in the general direction of a chair. He grabbed her arm and spun her around, moving his body against hers as if in a dance.

Hermione cast him a sidelong look from beneath half-lidded eyes, an expression guaranteed to drive him mad. "But don't you enjoy it when the porter gives you those envious looks and wonders what you do or say to lure young women to your bed?" she purred, slipping the robes over her head and letting them drop, unheeded, to the floor.

Severus advanced on her menacingly. She retreated, making a fetching picture in her matched bra, knickers, and suspenders hooked to sheer stockings. "All this finery for a job interview?" he taunted, trapping her with the high hotel bed abutting the backs of her thighs.

Hermione tilted her face up to his, letting him see the smouldering in her eyes and her kiss-bruised lips, tender from being violently snogged against the wall in the Ministry of Magic. Holding his gaze, she began to unbutton his fly.

"No, all this finery was actually for your pudding after dinner tonight. If you eat it all up now, whatever will you have for afters?"

"No toying with me, Madam Wife," he said, and unceremoniously tipped her onto the bed, taking matters in hand as he shifted the thoroughly damp knickers to one side and prepared to enter her. "This is what you call having one's cake and eating it too."

An hour later, her eyes fluttered open to see Severus looking down at her, his cheek propped on one hand.

"What?" she asked him softly, gazing at the crease between his brows.

"I thought you were in danger I was afraid you had been taken from me."

She reached to smooth the creased skin and allowed her fingertips to lightly trail down the hooked nose to the thin lips, held now as if he were in pain.

"Nothing will take me away from you," she murmured.

"You're mine." The voice held a note of finality, as he gently turned her, spooning up behind her, one long fingered hand snaking around her body and between her legs.

"Yours," she agreed languorously, wriggling her bottom invitingly against him.

"You belong to me," he informed her, entering her from behind, the last word a groan.

"Yes," she responded, as he began to rock her, his free hand deserting the juncture of her thighs to roam her breasts.

"Only mine..."

"Only..." she breathed.

"Always mine ..."

She could only agree, enthusiastically and repeatedly.

Reaching under the bed, Hermione retrieved the missing stocking and sat down to put it on. On the other pillow, Severus drowsed, the shoulder length black hair in total disarray, the white sheet only half covering him, leaving a line from his right shoulder to the top of his right foot bare to her eyes. With determination, she turned her eyes from him, though she wanted nothing more than to plant a trail of kisses from the arch of that foot to his jutting hipbone...

"Severus."

He stirred and reached for the sheet.

"Severus." More loudly, this time.

One eye opened. "It's called sleeping, Pet. Come sleep."

"It's three o'clock, Severus. Don't you have to speak at the Symposium dinner?"

This time the sheet went over his head with muttered words.

She stood and picked up her robes. "No, I'm not coming over there. You'll never get up, if I do."

She pulled the navy blue robes over her head and stepped into her shoes. When she turned to look back at him, he was propped up on his elbows, watching her.

"Dumbledore can stand in for me at the dinner, Pet. I don't want to leave you alone when you're upset." He scowled at her.

She gave him a soft smile from a safe distance across the hotel room. "I'm fine now. I'd forgotten about it, actually. You gave me something else to think about."

One eyebrow arched. "Come back to bed and I'll do it again."

She put her hands on her hips. "Thinking pretty highly of yourself this afternoon, aren't you?"

A dark chuckle greeted her words. "Well, I've *had* my cake..."

With a gurgle of laughter, she backed toward the door. "And now you're going to... Severus Snape, you are incorrigible! You've got to get back to Hogwarts. I'll see you tonight."

She had to admit that his command of Apparition was impressive. Before she could open the door, he pinned her to it with a sultry kiss.

"Last chance, my little cake," he murmured in a provocative baritone.

She gave his shoulder a tiny shove, slipping to the side and getting the door open. He responded with an amused sneer, folding his arms across his chest and standing naked in front of the partially opened door.

"You're *dangerous*," she said, slipping into the corridor.

"That's the nicest thing you've said today," came the wicked reply, before the door closed between them.

Hermione Apparated to the bottom of the drive at Enchanté, amidst the carefully cultivated box hedges provided for that purpose. With a dreamy smile on her lips, she began to wander up to the house, replaying the stolen hours in the hotel room as she walked. Before she had taken five steps, she heard what sounded like the cry of a house-elf; her eyes flew to the facade of the house, and she was horrified to see flashes of light, gold and red and purple and blue, illuminating the upstairs windows. Pulling her wand, she raced through the front door and into the foyer.

"Quirk!" she called, looking right and left for the elf, but she did not see him. Dropping her briefcase on the foyer table she stopped and listened; she could hear voices, one human and one elf, one uttering threats, the other speaking incantations. The elf was Quirk was that Lockhart shouting spells aloud?

Swiftly climbing up, she turned into the room at the top of the stairs and found herself viewing the field of battle. Quirk stood before the door in an aggressive attitude, his hands raised to cast his wandless magic. Lockhart was backed up against the far wall, having just cast a charm which turned the walls of the room a lovely shade of yellow. Before Hermione had time to admire the paint job, Quirk snapped his fingers, and with a flash of silver light, the walls were a dingy white once again.

"Quirk!" she exclaimed. "What are you *doing*?"

Quirk jumped as if he had been shocked and turned to face Hermione with a fierce look of determination.

"This bad man is changing Master's house!" Quirk said hotly, throwing Lockhart a look of abject loathing. "But Quirk is not letting him, Mistress! Quirk is fixing Master's house back just the way it was!"

Hermione dropped to her knees, on eye level with the indignant house-elf, and spoke to him very kindly. "Oh, Quirk I am so very, very sorry."

Quirk frowned a bit, taking a step away from Hermione.

"What is Mistress saying?" he asked fearfully, as if the solid ground beneath his little elf feet was turning to quicksand.

"I asked Mr. Lockhart to change some things in the house, Quirk. Things like the colour of the walls, the wallpaper, the carpets even some of the furniture. But he is not going to touch Master's *personal* belongings, such as his papers and his books. Those things, along with Master's clothes and his wand, are the things you are not to move, Quirk. But Mr. Lockhart is only doing what I asked him to do."

To Hermione's consternation, the little house-elf seemed to sag in upon himself and he burst into tears. "Quirk is a bad elf! Oh, Quirk is so bad!" Before she could stop him, Quirk ran head-long into the doorframe, neatly knocking himself out.

"No, Quirk!" she cried, but he was already unconscious on the floor.

"I'll move him," Gilderoy said solicitously, moving forward with wand-arm outstretched.

"NO!" Hermione was on her feet and between Gilderoy and the fallen house-elf before he could advance three steps.

"I I'll take care of him Mr. Lockhart, thank you. Please continue with *your* work," she said as politely as she could, levitating the elf and moving him ahead of her out of the room and down the stairs. The last thing she needed was for Lockhart to be disappearing all the bones in little Quirk's body, or some other "helpful" act.

After tucking Quirk into his small bed in the room adjacent to the kitchen, she made her way back upstairs again. Lockhart was not in the room at the top of the stairs now, but she could see the changes he had made. She stepped onto the hooked rug and gazed at the cheerful yellow walls and the delightful wallpaper with the frolicking woodland creatures. To her left was a cot, varnished white and decorated with stencilled animals that matched the wallpaper. To her right was a rocking chair, softened with cushions in shades of cream and gold. Next to the chair was a small bookcase, before which Hermione knelt with a wondering, "Oh!" On the shelves of the bookcase resided beautiful new copies of every one of her favourite books from her own childhood library.

What a lovely nursery awaited her unborn children here at Enchanté.

With a loving pat on the bookcase, she closed the door on the room at the top of the stairs and went down the hall to see what Lockhart had wrought in the other bedrooms.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

Chapter 3 of 3

The day of the first dinner party arrives, with all its attendant chaos.

A/N: Thanks to **LariLee** for agreeing to beta this monster of a one-shot; any mistakes contained herein are mine alone.

The entire Potterverse, in all its heartbreak and glory, belongs to the inimitable JKR.

Chapter 3

Hermione grabbed her planner and headed downstairs for breakfast. Before she entered the dining room, the planner was open and she was scanning her schedule for the day tonight was her first dinner party as a new bride and she wanted everything to be perfect.

Severus looked up from his eggs as Hermione passed him, her nose buried in that damn planner. He reached out and unceremoniously caught her about the waist, pulling her willy-nilly into his lap, where she sprawled in a highly unladylike pose. He plucked the planner from her hand and tossed it onto the table, where it slid across the surface and stopped between the teapot and the plate of toast.

"Severus!" she protested, struggling to sit up straight.

"Hermione!" he mocked wickedly before burying his nose in her throat, breathing in the marvelous scent of his wife fresh from her bath. It was a mixture of strawberries and musk and it made him a little crazy. Taste followed scent, as he applied his teeth to her skin, growling his approval.

Feeling that surrender can be the better part of valour, Hermione subsided and lay against his shoulder, stroking his hair. When she ceased her objections, his aggression lessened; they had not yet been married for two months, but she was beginning to learn how to manage her difficult husband in such a way that he hardly noticed he was being managed. With a final, though extremely thorough kiss, she was able to regain her feet and successfully reach her own chair at the breakfast table.

Severus surveyed her with lustful eyes. "Let's go back to bed," he suggested. "Sod party preparations; Quirk can handle things."

Quirk appeared at the table with a warm basket of muffins for Hermione. She accepted them with kind thanks, shooting Severus a quelling look over the house-elf's head. It was really a bit embarrassing to be propositioned by one's husband over the teacups in the presence of an elf.

Quirk, unsure of the reason behind the tension, spoke up. "Quirk will be proud to serve Mistress in any way Master wishes." This proclamation was accompanied by a deep bow.

"Thank you, Quirk," Hermione told him. "I'll discuss it with you later, okay?"

Quirk darted a quick look from the corner of his big green eyes at Severus, who gave him a sour look and jerked his head towards the kitchen. Quirk beat a hasty retreat back to his sanctuary.

Severus applied himself again to the sausages and eggs on his plate. "What is your schedule today?" he muttered sulkily.

Hermione decided to ignore his tone and simply answer his question. "Well," she said, pouring a cup of tea for herself, "I want to get the table set, and the flowers arranged, and make a schedule of when Quirk is to serve each course of the dinner. This afternoon I'll be bathing and fixing my hair and dressing before I meet with Penny and go to inspect the laboratory at Hogwarts. Then she and I will be back here in time to greet Remus and Dora and to have drinks before we eat."

Finding nothing to either approve or disapprove in this litany of mundane activities, Severus preserved his silence and finished his coffee. When her attention remained riveted on the bloody planner, he asked at last, "And when is my presence required?"

Hermione ran a finger down the list. "I'll definitely need you by six. You haven't brought up the wines from the cellar, and I don't want to try to decide what to serve. If you are home by six, you'll have time to bring the wine up before you dress for dinner."

Severus stood, a menacing figure towering over his wife in his black robes. When she continued to nibble on her muffin and jot notes in the planner with a quill, instead of jumping up to kiss him goodbye and wish him a good day at work, his lips thinned in displeasure.

"Very well, ma'am," he said in coldly formal tones, and he picked up his brief case. "I will endeavour to be at *your* party on time."

Too late, Hermione realized her error, and she scrambled out of her chair to pay her husband some proper attention. He, however, had Disapparated on the spot.

"Damn!" she said. The last thing she needed today was a pouting Severus. What in the world was the matter with him? Didn't he want the party to go well?

Severus marched up the castle drive from the gates, remembering that morning earlier in the week when he had been irritated with Hermione for being so sad about his return to work. Every morning since that first one, she had all but shoved him out the door before he finished his coffee. What in the world was the matter with her? Didn't she care about him?

Albus Dumbledore, returning from a stroll down to visit with Hagrid, saw his Potions master approaching with a look on his face that was all too familiar. Correctly divining the source of Severus' bad temper, he waited for the younger wizard to reach him, then said mildly, "Good morning, Severus. Beautiful day today, isn't it?"

Severus did not so much as slow down, responding to this pleasantry with a withering look of scorn.

Dumbledore tried again, addressing Severus' swiftly retreating back. "Are things all right at home, dear boy?"

This sally brought the angry Snape to a stop, as he whirled on the spot, in an apparently stupendous rage, and snarled, "Mind your own business, if you please, Headmaster."

Dumbledore approached Severus with a placating hand extended, as one might advance upon an angered dog. "Did you quarrel with Hermione?" he asked solicitously.

Severus sneered at the older wizard. "How many years have you been married, Albus?" he asked in a dangerously reasonable tone.

"I've never been married, Severus, you know that," Dumbledore replied.

"Then I suggest you keep your marriage counseling for someone who may value your input," he snapped before turning on his heel and sweeping into the castle.

Minerva McGonagall's greeting to Severus died upon her lips as he stomped past her without acknowledging her presence. Proceeding out onto the grounds, she met Dumbledore as he stood, his head cocked to one side, gazing at the spot lately occupied by Severus Snape.

"Albus, what is the matter with Severus?" McGonagall demanded.

Dumbledore came up to her, offering his arm. "I would not recommend that you ask him just now, Minerva," he answered.

She frowned. "Are they rowing? So soon?"

Dumbledore's lips twitched. "What is the alchemical process that turns ice to fire, my dear?"

McGonagall slipped her hand into the crook of the proffered elbow and paced with him back to the castle entrance. "Don't be ridiculous, Albus. There is no such process."

"It's called marriage, Minerva," he informed her quietly, as they entered Hogwarts.

Hermione rushed to answer the front door, admitting her interior designer. Today, he wore an ensemble in his trademark lilac, embroidered all over with spangled gold stars.

"Good morning, Mr. Lockhart," she said politely, as he stepped into the foyer.

"Good morning, dear lady," Gilderoy responded, wisely not attempting to kiss her hand. For some reason, this young witch did not seem to respond well to his gallantries. Perhaps she actually *preferred* her scowling husband. Gilderoy had not met him yet, but he had seen some photographs from their wedding in various places in the house. The unpleasant-looking fellow seemed vaguely familiar, but Gilderoy could not place him.

Hermione led the way into the sitting room. "Mr. Lockhart, I am giving a dinner party this evening. I would appreciate it very much if you could finish your work in this room today."

Gilderoy looked about the sitting room in its shabby state. "Of course, of course!" He gave her one of his brilliant smiles. "I am quite a dab hand at parties too, you know. Perhaps I could be of some assistance..."

Hermione flashed on Ron's freckled face, blanched white as he fainted at her wedding, with the words, "spangled pink confetti" on his bloodless lips. Having had personal experience of Lockhart's idea of parties she would never forget the Valentine's Day debacle of her second year at Hogwarts, when dwarves dressed like cupids stalked the halls of the school at Lockhart's instigation. Hermione suppressed an involuntary shudder and risked a friendly pat on his lilac-clad arm.

"I really, really need your help getting the sitting room fit for company," she told him with false earnestness. "I just don't know how I'll manage today without you to make this room smart before my guests arrive!" She ended this barefaced lie with a confiding smile.

Gilderoy swelled with pride at this display of neediness for his services. "Very well," he said, in his smarmiest voice. "You may depend upon me, madam!"

"Excellent!" Hermione praised him. "Before you go this afternoon, I would like to meet with you and look over all you've done in the house. Perhaps you could meet me in the room at the top of the stairs at five?"

His agreement was interrupted by the entrance of Quirk, who behaved as if Hermione were the only person in the room.

"Quirk is bringing Mistress her mail," Quirk told her, handing over a Muggle envelope bearing a sticker pre-printed with her name and direction. It was from her parents, then and was marked "Urgent."

"Thank you, Quirk." She ripped the envelope open, extracting a piece of her parents' office stationery, emblazoned across the top of the page with ***The Granger Dental Clinic***. Her mother's handwritten note bore the message that was the first indication of her day going pear-shaped.

Dear Hermione,

*I am sorry if it is not perfectly convenient for you, but you really **must** come and fetch your cat without delay. He got into your father's study last night and made such a mess that we may have to replace the carpet. We were happy to keep him so you could go on your honeymoon, but if you don't come for him immediately, your father is going to lock him in the garden shed, and I know you won't like that. Neither, of course, will Crookshanks.*

Please give my love to Severus,

Mummy

Hermione jumped up. "Excuse me, Mr. Lockhart; I must run an errand now. Please let Quirk know if you need anything," she added, with a stern glance at the house-elf. Quirk had become quite adept in the last day or so at behaving as if Lockhart were an annoying houseplant.

Lockhart cast a doubtful look at Quirk, who was ignoring him and bowing to Hermione. "As Mistress wishes," the elf said to his feet.

"Right!" Hermione said with false cheeriness, leaving the two combatants to their own devices as she rushed from the room to go make ready for her quick trip to her parents' home.

Severus completed the task of restocking the shelves of the classroom ingredient cupboard and carried the remaining crates to the storeroom by hand. His wand lay discarded on top of his robes and his coat; his shirtsleeves were rolled up as he toiled with the manual labour. His rage had dissipated, but his pique remained.

He wasn't a child; he knew that marriage was hard work at the best of times. The Enchantment was a powerful component in his relationship with Hermione, and it had certainly driven them into marrying with more haste, perhaps, than a non-Enchanted couple might have done. But there remained certain marks of attention that one must not forget to bestow upon one's spouse, if for no other reason than common courtesy. How could she tune him out so completely, just because she had a project to occupy her? Was this what it was going to be like, having a brilliant wife who was immersed in her career?

He closed the storeroom door and warded it. As he picked up his cast-off clothing, pocketed his wand, and headed into his rooms, he reflected that he had only a very short period of time left that he might refer to these rooms as "his;" all too soon, even his own quarters would become "theirs."

When he passed through the door, Bast leapt at him. It was not uncommon for her to greet him when he came into the room; it was rather unusual for her to be unseemly about it, however.

Disengaging her claws from his shirt front, he set her upon the ground. "Behave yourself," he said shortly and Flooed the kitchens for a lunch tray. Bast began weaving about his ankles and rubbing her face against the fabric of his trousers. Too preoccupied with his own morose thoughts to give much attention to the cat's behaviour, he went into his bedroom to strip out of his sweaty clothing and step into the shower for a quick wash-up. Bast, with typical cat dislike for water, did not follow him into the shower, but contented herself with sitting on the bathmat and meowing her comments at the top of her Siamese voice.

With Crookshanks' carrier in one hand, and a bag with his dishes in the other hand, Hermione walked up the drive to the front door of Enchanté. "This is our new home, Crookshanks," she told him as she entered the house.

She went straight into the kitchen, where Quirk was using levitation to move a stack of china, crystal and silver from the cupboard to the dining room. Hermione stared at the dishes.

"Quirk, where did those things come from?" she asked.

Quirk looked very pleased with himself. "Quirk found the dishes in a cupboard in the cellar. Does Mistress like them?"

"Yes, Quirk, very much." Hermione beamed at him.

Quirk completed his task with the plates and went to peer into the cat carrier as Hermione began to unpack Crookshanks' dishes.

"Who is this, Mistress?" he inquired curiously.

"This is Crookshanks, Quirk. He's my cat. I really wasn't planning to retrieve him from my parents' home until Master and I go back to Hogwarts, but my mum insisted. Would you keep an eye on him for me, please? I have so much to do today!"

"As Mistress wishes," Quirk replied doubtfully, looking at the faintly malevolent yellow cat-eyes staring at him from the squashed-in face of the half-Kneazle in the carrier.

"Excellent!" Hermione said, bustling into the dining room and leaving her affronted familiar in the care of yet another stranger.

Gilderoy finished the plate of sandwiches supplied for his lunch by the sullen house-elf and daintily wiped his mouth. The Snapes' sitting room was coming along very nicely. The walls had been repainted a flat cream barely tinted with cinnamon. The sofa was upholstered in a warm cinnamon, while the settee had been redone in a persimmon silk damask with throw pillows in various shades of straw. The armchairs were now of a soft leather the colour of nutmeg. The Axminster rug on the floor had been magically restored to its original hues. Gilderoy was pleased with his work, though he felt the family photographs the young lady of the house had asked to hang on the walls were somewhat dull. He had a few rather expensive ornaments he planned to recommend to the rich old witch who had paid for this job.

He folded his napkin and placed it neatly on his lunch tray, then went to the mirror over the fireplace to make sure his hair was in place. Once again, his eye fell on the peculiar glass jar with the live beetle moving about in it. He had attempted to move the jar from the mantel more than once, only to be foiled by the blasted house-elf, who persistently returned the jar to its original place, darkly muttering about "Master's *Personal* Things."

Gilderoy cast a furtive glance about the sitting room. If he could not remove the bug-in-a-glass-jar from the mantel, at least he could make the container more elegant. With a flourish of his wand and a spoken incantation, the unbreakable jar was transfigured into an ornamental crystal flagon with a cut-glass stopper.

He was distracted from his admiration of the jar solution by the sound of humming from a room across the foyer. He wandered in that direction and slipped through the door, to find himself in a formal dining room. The large cherry table was dressed with immaculate white Irish linen, china, old silver and crystal wineglasses.

The witch of the house was standing at the sideboard, humming happily to herself as she arranged flowers in a crystal vase. Gilderoy watched her at this for a period of time, thinking to himself that her taste was quite good and that she had a bit of an eye for the delicate art. When she had finished, she stepped back to view her work with her head tilted slightly to the left.

Gilderoy took a step towards her. "Quite charming, madam," he commented.

Hermione jumped at the sound of the voice behind her. "Mr. Lockhart!" she said, placing one hand over her thumping heart. "I didn't know you were there."

Gilderoy was not attending to her, however; he was viewing the flower arrangement from her left, before he moved to her right and considered it from that standpoint. "May I make a suggestion?" he asked politely.

Hermione opened her mouth to refuse, but Lockhart moved to her side without waiting for an answer. He chose one long-stemmed yellow rose from the detritus scattered upon her work surface and deftly placed the flower, making a minute adjustment of the greenery surrounding it. Then he stepped away again and repeated his inspection from each side.

"There. That's better, don't you think?"

Hermione gaped at the lovely flower arrangement. She couldn't explain why, but the slight change he had made in her work had improved the whole immensely. The strange man actually did have a gift for this type of thing.

"Yes," she said, softly. "Thank you, Mr. Lockhart."

At the note of true admiration in her voice, Gilderoy beamed at her, and bowed from the waist with a flourish. Hermione restrained herself from rolling her eyes; she simply moved the flower arrangement to the middle of her elegantly laid table.

After admiring it for a moment, she glanced at her wristwatch. "Please excuse me, Mr. Lockhart; I have many things still to do! I will meet with you in the room at the top of the stairs before you leave for the day."

Gilderoy stepped to the door and held it open for her. "Excellent, madam."

Hermione gave him a smile of thanks and left the room to head upstairs and begin to bathe and dress for her evening.

Severus stood rigidly behind the desk in his office, his lips compressed in a thin white line. Albus Dumbledore sat in the straight chair provided for the unfortunate visitor to the Potions master's domain with his hands folded in his lap and a look of unruffled serenity on his benign countenance.

"I *do* have work of my own to complete, Headmaster. That *is* why I am back at work before my honeymoon is properly over," he snarled at the dotty old man.

"I do understand that Severus, and I am sincerely sorry to put you to any additional trouble." Dumbledore reached into his pocket and removed a crumpled paper bag from its depths. As if he had all the time in the world as if Severus Snape were not standing five feet away from him with clenched fists, barely keeping his desire to throttle the older wizard with his bare hands in check. Dumbledore opened the bag and popped a hard candy into his mouth. "Sherbet lemon?" he inquired, indicating the paper sack.

Dumbledore was saved from the fluent swearing of his Potions master by the entrance of Minerva McGonagall. Severus swallowed the words he was dying to fling at his tormentor and took a hasty turn about the room, casting frequent burning looks of reproach at the Headmaster and his Deputy.

"Albus, the Minister is here. And the Symposium guests are gathered for the final panel discussion in the Great Hall. Do hurry!" McGonagall simply ignored the storming Snape; she had not permitted his tantrums to trouble her when he was her student and she was not about to change that policy now.

Dumbledore stood. "Severus, I am depending upon you. Filius was set to conduct the Charms panel, but he was called out of town this morning due to family illness. If you would prefer to stand in as the moderator on the discussion panel, I would be happy to relinquish the post to you and conduct the Minister about the castle to view the improvements."

At the suggestion that *he*, Severus Snape, denizen of the dungeons and chief detractor of foolish wand waving, should moderate a discussion panel on *Charms*, his look of horror was so profound that even McGonagall had a difficult time not smiling. Seeing this capitulation to his wishes, however inadvertent, Dumbledore moved with sudden alacrity.

"Excellent! I shall leave you to it then, Severus. You will find the Minister waiting for you in my office." Without another apparent thought for his put-upon Potions master, Dumbledore escorted McGonagall out of the office.

"Damnation!" Severus relieved his feelings by flinging an empty glass beaker across the room and watching it shatter on the dungeon wall. Collapsing into his chair, he pinched the bridge of his nose, the furrow between his brows deeply pronounced.

After a moment of silent fuming, he stood and walked out of his office. Planning various ways to make Albus pay for this latest insult to his dignity was a satisfactory pastime, but it did not complete the task of escorting Cornelius Bloody Fudge about Hogwarts and listening to his inane prattle about the State of Wizarding Education in Britain.

He entered his quarters with the single-minded goal of changing his robes for some a bit more suited to a meeting with the Minister of Magic. When he entered his bedroom, he was disgusted to find Bast beside the clothes hamper, rolling about with a dirty sock she had dragged from its depths.

"Stop that," he thundered at her, reaching for the misused footwear. Bast, deciding this would be a lovely game, snagged the sock with a claw and pulled it from his fingers. Light slowly dawned as he abandoned the sock and snatched a calendar from the top of his bureau.

Bugger.

In the rush of his hasty wedding and a prolonged honeymoon, he had not dosed Bast with the potion that suppressed her reproductive cycle in over a month. No wonder she was following him about, howling at the top of her voice, and assaulting his clothing any hint of male pheromone would do for a female cat in season.

"Master Snape?" a timid elfish voice squeaked from the sitting room.

Severus answered. "I am in the bedroom, Corky."

The Hogwarts house-elf stepped into the bedroom and bowed low. "The Minister is waiting for Master Snape in Professor Dumbledore's office, Sir," he explained. "The Minister is asking Corky how much longer Master Snape will be."

"Please advise the Minister that I will be with him directly, Corky," Severus replied shortly. He opened the wardrobe and snatched one of his newer sets of teaching robes from a hanger.

"Yes, Master Snape," Corky said, before leaving the room.

Severus put on the robes and glared down at Bast. "I'll deal with you later," he told her threateningly. Bast meowed at him provocatively, as if he were promising her a rare treat. With a muttered request that Merlin save him from committing murder this day, he stepped into the fireplace and Flooed to the Headmaster's office.

Hermione gave her hair one final pat in the bedroom mirror before hurrying down to the kitchen.

"Quirk, do you have the schedule of when to serve the appetizers, and each course of the dinner?" she asked anxiously, looking about the kitchen at the preparations for her dinner party.

"Yes, Mistress," he answered her patiently. "Quirk has everything he needs. All is well."

Crookshanks, still imprisoned in his carrier, spoke up in protest of this egregiously false statement.

Hermione knelt by the carrier. "I'm sorry, Crooks," she said penitently. "Will you be a good boy if I let you out?"

The cat gave her a flat stare from his yellow eyes.

"Of course you will," she answered herself. She reached out and lifted the latch, releasing her familiar. Crookshanks promptly butted the door open with his large head and streaked out of the room without a backward glance.

Hermione jumped up. "Oh no! Crookshanks!" She looked frantically at her wrist watch. "Quirk, I must go will you please find him and make sure he's okay?"

Quirk was a very well-trained house-elf. No hint of his annoyance showed on his face. "Yes, Mistress. Quirk will look after kitty."

With a grateful smile, Hermione rushed off to meet with her new employer.

Penny Clearwater stood at the gates of Hogwarts.

"I hope you didn't have to wait long!" Hermione cried, approaching Penny with a friendly smile.

"I just got here," Penny assured her, tucking one hand in Hermione's arm as they began the walk to the castle. "Is Professor Snape going to do the walk-through with us?"

Hermione made a wry face. "He was kind of in a snit when he left for work this morning, so I don't know..."

Penny looked alarmed. "I remember what he's like in a snit. Is that hard to deal with when you're married to him?"

Hermione giggled at the expression on Penny's face. "Well, so far we've managed to work out our differences without bloodshed."

Penny looked thoughtful for a moment. "You know, Hermione, he was appallingly scary when we were at school, but more than one Ravenclaw said within my hearing that they imagined Professor Snape to have a great deal of suppressed ... passion."

The flush in Hermione's cheeks answered the unasked question.

"I see," Healer Clearwater said with a snicker.

Hermione flashed a sideways grin. "Let's just say that there's not much need for suppression anymore."

"Well, I imagine it makes for brilliant shagging," Penny said, "but also for fearsome rows."

Hermione nodded emphatically. "That just about covers it."

They reached the castle doors and headed for the dungeons. "We'll just pop into his office before we go to the laboratory to see if he has time to walk through with us," Hermione said, leading the way.

Mindful of his instructions, Gilderoy Lockhart cast a final look of approval about the sitting room before he climbed up the stairs to await Madam Snape in the room at the top of the stairs. He entered the redecorated nursery, glancing carefully at his many improvements to make sure the destructive little house-elf hadn't been sneaking in to undo his work while he wasn't looking. Relieved to note that everything appeared to be in place, he sat down in the rocking chair to await the lady of the house. He might as well put the waiting time to good use surely no one could object if he answered some fan mail while he waited?

Quirk made another lap through the kitchen, chasing after Mistress's kitty. Why was kitty so vexed and upset? Quirk had done nothing to make kitty angry! Oh, Quirk wished he had asked Mistress's permission to use magic to control kitty. If he had to spend all of his time chasing kitty around the house, how would he be able to finish preparing the food for tonight!

Finding Severus' office to be empty, Hermione and Penny continued on to his private laboratory without looking for him elsewhere.

"He's undoubtedly busy with something," Hermione said, taking down the wards on the private laboratory. "This is his personal research facility, but he has agreed to share space with me probably to keep me working from home," she added with a smile.

In this moment, her conscience twinged. He had been so *good* to her, doing everything just as she wanted it done, from the wedding to the honeymoon. He had been living his life in this castle for as long as she had been alive, and he was changing everything for her. And she had been thoughtless of his feelings! Oh, she was sorry now, and wanted nothing so much as to throw her arms around him and thank him. She vowed to herself that she would do so at the very next opportunity that presented itself to her.

This resolution made, she brought her attention back to the task at hand. "The layout of the work stations is perfect for the type of research we have planned..."

Percy Weasley Apparated to the designated point in the Snapes' shrubbery and took a moment to make sure that his robes were hanging properly on him before starting up the walk to the entrance. As he approached the front door, he saw the discreetly placed sign at the edge of the drive, proclaiming the property name as Enchanté. A smirk crossed his face; if his younger brother, Ron, was to be believed, the Snapes had the Enchantment. What a quaint thing, then, to call their home! For a moment, he wondered if Penny had arrived yet. He still thought of her as Penny, even though she made him call her Healer Clearwater at the office. Honestly, the way she carried on, it seemed as if she were never going to forgive him for breaking up with her! He knew better, though; he was every bit as fascinating now as he had been when he was Head Boy at Hogwarts. Penny would not be able to hold out against his charm forever.

With these pleasant thoughts in his mind, he rang the bell at the Snapes' front door.

Quirk stopped in his tracks when he heard the front bell chime. A quick look at the clock told him that it was already six o'clock. He was behind schedule, with so much still to be done, and the guests already beginning to arrive! Casting anxiously about in his mind for the tenets of his training that applied to this situation, Quirk came to a decision. He would have to let kitty fend for himself, while Quirk attended to the guests and the food preparation. Surely one kitty could not cause too much trouble?

Gilderoy started in his chair. Had he been dozing? There were a few of his autographed photographs scattered across the rug. Perhaps he had drifted off. But what had wakened him? It was some kind of scratching noise...

He stood, his curiosity piqued, and crossed the floor to open the door.

Penny stood up from the stool she had settled on when she and Hermione began discussing the research project they had in mind. "We had best get to your house, Hermione. I'm planning to change into my party dress before we sit down to dinner." Penny held up her handbag, indicating that she had brought a change of clothing with her.

Hermione glanced at her wrist watch and jumped up with a small scream. "It's after six! Oh my goodness, Penny, I had no idea!"

Penny chuckled and led the way to the door. "We'd best get cracking then," she said before disappearing into the dungeon corridor.

Quirk opened the door to the young man with the flaming red hair and executed a deep bow.

"Welcome to Enchanté," he said, stepping aside and allowing the guest to enter.

"Am I the first to arrive?" the stranger inquired, looking into the sitting room.

"Sir is the first guest to arrive," Quirk agreed.

"Excellent," the man said. "Could you direct me to the gents' then?"

Quirk closed the door and directed the red haired man to the downstairs bathroom.

Gilderoy had scarcely gotten the door open before an orange streak flew past his legs into the room.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed, leaping back instinctively as Crookshanks shot under the white baby cot and stopped, glaring out at him with eerie yellow eyes.

"Shoo!" Gilderoy very unwisely said, advancing on the berserk feline and flapping his hands in an ineffectual manner.

Crookshanks answered with a hiss before flinging himself across the room to the cheerful yellow curtains and beginning to climb them with a curious lack of grace.

The reason for the lack became apparent when the curtains were ripped from the rings supporting them by the weight of the unfortunate Crookshanks.

In his agitation, Gilderoy actually clutched at his faultlessly arranged golden waves. "Noooo!" he shrieked, before freezing the cat in a Full Body Bind and levitating him out the door and down the stairs.

Honestly! This Snape house was not run in a very efficient manner! It was not at all what he was accustomed to, working in the homes of the best wizarding families in Britain! He had a good mind to let that old dragon, Madam Seraphina Snape, know just what he thought of her stupid nephew and his unaccountable bride. Fuming, he went to the bottom of the stairs, then glanced about for a spot where the cat's body could be hidden.

Hearing voices approaching the front door, he ducked into the dining room with the petrified cat and closed the door behind him.

Hermione flung the door to the house open and invited Penny inside. "I can't believe I lost track of the time like this!" she exclaimed, closing the door and looking around her. "Penny, my room is at your disposal! Just go upstairs and turn to your right; my room is the first one there. Please make yourself at home! I've got to go find Quirk!"

Penny chuckled to herself as Hermione fled toward the back of the house. Penny glanced into the very nicely decorated sitting room, but she didn't see Percy. Was the berk going to stand her up? It would be that *last* thing he ever did, she vowed to herself. She might as well go upstairs and make herself beautiful; if Percy did show up, it would much easier to torment him if she were looking particularly pretty.

She mounted the steps; to her left, a door was ajar, with an alluring golden glow coming from within. Forgetting that Hermione had said the bedroom would be to her right, she went to the door and pushed it open.

Oh, for the love of Merlin! It was a nursery! A completely decorated nursery, in warm shades of yellow, just waiting for a wee wizard baby. Penny went further into the room, trailing one hand along the lovely little white cot as she admired the books on the matching shelf. What a sly thing that Hermione was! How far along was she? Professor Snape certainly didn't waste any time, did he?

Feeling a slightly envious tug in the region of her heart, Penny backed out of the room. She must be discreet; Hermione would tell her when she was ready to speak of it. Thoughtfully, Penny went into the bedroom on the other side of the stairwell and set about changing her dress and touching up her hair.

Gilderoy cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself and peeked out into the foyer to make sure the coast was clear before abandoning the forgotten cat and sneaking back up the stairs. He had promised to meet Madam Snape in the nursery before he went home tonight, but it seemed as if she had forgotten all about him. Hadn't she just said something about going to look for that obnoxious house-elf? Really! He should just go up, fix the curtains, collect his things, and go home.

Quirk directed Percy into the sitting room and placed the requested tumbler of brandy in his hand before closing the sitting room door and bowing his way out. Percy sipped the brandy, approving the fine taste, as he strolled about the room, admiring the furnishings. Perhaps if he had a chance to drink a bit of brandy, he would be more relaxed and charming when Penny finally arrived.

On the mantelpiece, beneath the hanging mirror, he noticed what appeared to be a crystal decanter with a bug in it. As he reached out a hand to investigate the container, the beetle trapped within opened its wings and fluttered against its prison walls. Percy frowned. The Snapes had fine brandy, an attractive sitting room, but what in the world were they about, keeping a bug in crystal bottle over the fireplace where most people kept ornamental plates?

Shaking his head over the oddity of his hosts, he returned to the drinks tray and poured more brandy.

Severus dragged himself back into his rooms, exhaustion in every line of his body. Here was incontrovertible proof that spending one afternoon in the company of Cornelius Fudge was more harrowing than teaching Potions to first-year Hufflepuffs.

He was pulling the teaching robes off as he entered his bedroom, headed for the loo. The interminable tour of the campus had been followed by the intolerable drinking of cup after cup of tea while the Minister went on and on about any number of inconsequential things. He desperately needed the loo.

As he came out of the bathroom, buttoning his fly, his eye fell upon the clock. Six-twenty. SIX-TWENTY?

He might be a husband who was a bit miffed at his wife's inattention to him, but he was a very married man, for all that. He knew that his life was in jeopardy, late as he

was for his bride's summons to their first dinner party. Without a thought but getting home quickly, he grabbed his brief case from the floor and hurtled out the door.

Penny completed her toilette and went downstairs in search of her hostess. She found Hermione in the kitchen, feverishly going over her menu with the house-elf. Seating herself at the kitchen table, Penny helped herself to a carrot from the relish tray. Before she could take a bite, the doorbell chimed. Hermione looked at her watch again.

"Quirk, you stay here and work on dinner. I'll get the door." She turned and saw Penny. "Penny! You'll get your dress messy! Come with me to the sitting room; I think we both could use a glass of sherry!"

The two young women left the kitchen and went into the foyer, where Hermione opened the door.

"Remus! 'Dora!" she cried, pulling her friends into the entrance hall. "I'm so glad you're here! Severus is nowhere to be found and the wine still hasn't been brought up from the cellar."

Lupin politely shook hands with Penny and introduced her to Tonks before grinning at Hermione in response to her non-sequitur. "Never fear, Hermione, I'll go to the cellar. Where is Severus?"

Penny and Tonks moved to the sitting room door, chatting comfortably. Hermione looked worriedly at her former professor. "Didn't you see him today?" she asked. Lupin shook his head, and she continued, "I don't know where he is, Remus. We had a bit of a row this morning do you think he'll stay away?"

Lupin placed a comforting brotherly arm about her shoulders. "I spent the day in London with 'Dora today, so I wasn't at the castle. But, no, Hermione, I don't think he'll stay away. Don't fret. He'll be here."

Lupin gave Hermione a reassuring smile and she took him to the kitchen and showed him the cellar door. With the dinner menu in one hand, he went down to choose wines to serve with their meal. Hermione watched him descending the cellar steps until she felt a tugging at the hem of her robe. She turned to find Quirk peering up at her anxiously.

"Quirk hopes Mistress will not be angry," he said, "but Quirk was not able to keep kitty in the kitchen. Kitty would not let Quirk come near him."

Hermione looked desperately around the kitchen. "Where is he, Quirk?"

Quirk looked upset. "Quirk does not know, Mistress. Quirk had to answer the door, and to see to preparing dinner, and kitty would not be still. Quirk is ever so sorry, Mistress!" he ended on a wailing note.

Hermione patted his shoulder. "It's okay, Quirk. I know that Crookshanks can be difficult sometimes, and he was quite unhappy that I left him with my parents for so long. I'll sure he'll be fine." She moved towards the dining room. "I'll just look around for him a bit."

Penny opened the sitting room door and was startled to find Percy Weasley seated before the hearth. Tonks looked at him in surprise. "Percy!" she said. "Did Hermione *invite* you to dinner?"

Penny closed the sitting room door as Percy bustled up to her, all officious importance. "Good evening, ladies," he said, smiling as he approached them. "Penny, you look lovely!"

Penny stared at him until his eyes dropped uncomfortably and his hand came up to tug on the collar of his robes. "Erm, Healer Clearwater, I meant to say. And how nice to see you again, Tonks!"

Penny's lips twitched as Tonks stared Percy until he looked away. In self-defence, Percy went to the drinks tray and poured himself another tumbler of Severus' best brandy, then swallowed a large mouthful. It appeared that he would require a copious measure of liquid courage to make it through this dinner party.

Behaving as if he were not present, the two young women continued their private conversation, while Percy found a chair to inhabit.

"She was throwing up?" Penny asked.

"Yes, and she said she had been throwing up all morning," Tonks added after a moment's thought.

Penny leaned toward Tonks confidentially, lowering her voice so that not even Percy could hear her. "I was just upstairs freshening up there is a completely furnished nursery up there every single item is brand new..."

Severus Apparated directly into the foyer of his home and looked about him, desperately. There was no one in sight; perhaps he was not in too much trouble. He raced up the stairs, two at a time, and rushed into this bedroom, dropping his briefcase on the floor and unbuttoning his clothes as he headed for the bathroom.

The muffled "mrow" that he heard when he dropped the brief case on the bedroom floor froze him in his tracks. He turned horrified eyes to the bag which had toppled to one side, and from which an affronted Bast emerged with a look of reproach.

"What are you DOING in that bag?" he demanded, advancing on his familiar angrily.

Bast heard that tone of voice and did not linger to find out what was upsetting him. Her sense of smell informing her that she was now in entirely new territory, she set off like the proverbial bat out of hell, dashing from the room and down the stairs, looking for a hiding place.

Severus watched her go with a rising sense of frustration. Should he chase the uncatchable cat, or should he bathe and dress for the party he was hosting? What kind of trouble could Bast find, locked up in a perfectly safe house? He would see Quirk as soon as possible and ask him to watch out for her. For now, he had best make himself presentable.

Lupin emerged from the cellar with only a few cobwebs caught in his sandy hair, triumphantly bearing a basket filled with wine bottles. Hermione, fresh from having made a circuit of the dining room and Quirk's room without seeing Crookshanks, greeted him like a conquering hero and cast a spell to remove the cobwebs from his hair, while Quirk took the wine bottles and began to clean them.

"Let's go see what the others are doing," Hermione suggested, grabbing the appetizer tray from the table and leading Lupin towards the sitting room. "I'm sure you could use a drink, Remus."

He agreed with her, opening the door to let her pass into the room with the tray of snacks, before following her in and going to pour himself a tumbler of brandy.

Bast entered the kitchen at a run and froze at the sight of the house-elf, who was labouring to spread icing on a cake. Quirk looked at the small black cat in alarm what had happened to Mistress's big fluffy orange kitty? This kitty was small and smooth and black!

Quirk looked at the clock, then at kitty, then at the cake, then at the schedule Mistress had provided for him. He had to keep working on the dinner. Mistress said she would look out for the kitty. Hopefully, it would not be Quirk's fault if the big orange fluffy kitty became a small black smooth kitty. With a great deal of courage, Quirk turned his

back on the cat and continued with his task.

Crookshanks felt the sensation returning to his legs. From underneath the sideboard in the dining room, where the crazy man with the wand had shoved him with a foot after dropping him on the floor, he could see a crack of light through the door into the kitchen. Hermione had come into the room calling his name, but he could not have answered her, even if he wasn't already upset with her, because of the curse the crazy man had cast on him. He could move now, though, and he could also smell he sniffed the air one more time before slowly advancing on the door into the kitchen, which Hermione had left ajar. Unless he was dreaming, there was a female in the next room who was just dying to meet him.

Gilderoy repaired the damage done to the window treatment by that great hairy brute and stood back to survey the effect. With a tiny flick of his wand, he moved the right hand edge of the curtains up just a tad. There. Perfect.

He bent over and began to gather his scattered photographs, tucking them back into his bag and thinking of how easy it would be to sneak down the stairs and out the front door in his Disillusioned state. He was just about to stand and head for the door when a pair of well-polished black boots entered his line of sight. With a deep sense of foreboding, he let his eyes travel up the black trousers, on up the black coat, until his eyes came to rest on the face of the devil himself.

With a frightened little shudder, Gilderoy discreetly fainted.

Hermione watched her guests embark on their third servings of pre-dinner drinks before she took one last despairing look at her watch and rose from her seat with as much aplomb as she could manage.

"Let's move on into the dining room," she said to them, leading the way across the foyer. "I'm sure that Severus will be here any time now."

Crookshanks pressed his way through the doorway into the kitchen silently. The female he had scented was perched beneath the kitchen table, watching the movements of the house-elf. By way of announcement, Crookshanks hissed.

Bast jumped straight into the air when the other cat hissed at her; she pirouetted in mid-air and landed facing the great ugly monster, her back arched and her fur standing on end as she returned the challenging hiss.

Quirk froze when he heard the unmistakable sounds of a brewing cat-fight. He turned from the counter and saw the two cats facing off, backs arched and feral growls issuing from each throat. As he readied himself to immobilize them, the small black kitty skittered into the hallway, with the big orange kitty in hot pursuit. At the same moment, Mistress rang her little hand bell, signaling Quirk to serve the soup. Hoping against hope that the kitties would stay out of the dining room, Quirk obediently carried the soup to the table.

Severus stood, dumbstruck, inside the doorway of the unused room at the top of the stairs. He had entered this room only because of the strange noises coming from behind the closed door. Before his uncomprehending eyes, he saw the evidence of his wife's perfidy. No wonder she had been acting so oddly. How could she not TELL him? His eyes passed over the baby cot, the rocking chair, the bookshelves stocked with children's literature, the nursery-themed wall paper, and for a moment he sagged against the doorframe. A baby? *Their* baby? Primordial joy surged through him, followed by fierce consternation. Pulling himself straight again, he turned on his heel, his only thought to reach his wife.

"Hermione!" he bellowed and tore down the stairs.

Bast flew through the sitting room door as only a berserk cat can move. She jumped onto the sofa, moved quickly to a chair, bounced off the chair onto the back of the settee, sending cushions flying as she nearly lost her footing, then leapt like a panther onto the mantelpiece, sending knick knacks flying; an odd crystal flagon skittered to the edge of the mantel and stopped.

Crookshanks was hot on her heels, giving chase for all he was worth, bounding from the sofa to the chair to the settee where he was balked. Crookshanks knew very well that he could not make the leap onto the mantel; he was just too heavy. Instead, he jumped onto the floor directly beneath the other cat and stared at her with sinister yellow eyes.

From her lofty perch, Bast surveyed her victory with smug satisfaction. After staring defiantly at the ginger coloured ogre at her feet, she noticed movement in the clear bottle. Cocking her elegantly shaped triangular head to one side, she reached out with a coy paw and batted the crystal decanter infinitesimally closer to the edge of the mantel over the stone hearth.

When her husband's voice blared through the room, Hermione dropped her spoon with a clatter that splashed soup all over the tablecloth.

"Severus is home!" she said, giving her guests a smile before excusing herself and hurrying out into the foyer, closing the dining room door behind her.

His feet hit the foyer floor at the moment that she threw herself into his arms.

"Severus, Severus, I'm so sorry!" she said, hugging him as tightly as she could.

Severus took hold of her upper arm and held her away from him. "Hermione," he said sternly gesturing toward the top of the stairs with his free hand, "do you have something you wish to tell me?"

She looked up into his forbidding face and quailed a bit, casting about wildly in her mind for the cause of his anger. A premonition came to her.

"Perhaps...perhaps you've noticed a few changes around the house?" she suggested timidly.

"A few *changes*?" he repeated incredulously. She called being pregnant with his child a change around the house?

"Well, Gilderoy Lockhart did it," she explained helpfully.

His face went a shade paler and his eyes darkened from ebony to pitch. Through clenched teeth, he said, "Gilderoy Bleeding Lockhart did WHAT, exactly?"

At that moment, a strangled sound, quickly muffled, came from the stairway. Whirling, with his wand at the ready, Severus saw a tottering Gilderoy Lockhart weaving down the stairs. With an oath, he grabbed Lockhart by the front of his robes and jerked him down the last several steps, then thrust him brutally into the sitting room before pointing his wand and snarling, "*Expelliarmus*!"

Lockhart's wand shot into the air and Severus caught it effortlessly, his own wand now pointed at Lockhart's chest.

Lupin came barreling out of the dining room, his wand at the ready, with Tonks right behind him. When they saw the desperate ruffian Severus had pinned to the sitting room floor, Lupin pocketed his wand and took his fiancée by the arm. "I think Severus can handle this, love. Let's finish our soup."

Tonks allowed herself to be led away, though she was still craning her neck for a better look at the culprit before Lupin closed the dining room door.

"What are you doing in my house?" Severus asked quietly, his lips barely moving as he spoke to the wizard sprawled at his feet.

Hermione was feeling really frightened now. She walked up to her husband and placed a hand on his arm. "I only let him do it because of your Great Aunt Seraphina," she said.

Severus slowly turned his head and the full force of his piercing eyes to Hermione. "Do me the courtesy of explaining yourself," he snapped.

"I will, but please let Mr. Lockhart up," she replied with as much dignity as she could muster.

Lowering his wand, Severus glared at Lockhart and jerked his head toward the sofa. Lockhart gratefully scrambled up onto the couch, keeping an anxious eye on the devil with the wand.

Bravely, Hermione sat down on the settee across from Lockhart. "Please have a seat, Severus," she said.

Feeling the situation somehow getting away from him, Severus threw himself into one of the armchairs. With a sudden frown, he stroked his hand appreciatively along the grain of the leather. "This is exquisite," he murmured, distracted.

"Thank you," Gilderoy said, his grievances forgotten in a moment of professional pride.

The corner of Severus' mouth spasmed for a moment as understanding began to dawn upon him. Addressing Hermione, he said, "I take it my great aunt invited Lockhart to redecorate for us?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes. I thought...I thought you might not like it, so I was going to tell you after it was all completed."

One eyebrow quirked.

"I didn't know how to tell her no your Great Aunt Seraphina is ..."

"...scary," Lockhart breathed, just as Severus said, "...a force of nature."

Hermione nodded. "Yes. Both of those things."

Severus leaned towards his bride. "You haven't been forgetting to take your potion?"

Hermione turned innocent brown eyes on him. "No. Why?"

Severus closed his eyes and sagged in his chair. "Oh, the fully furnished nursery upstairs just made me wonder," he told her, fighting the laughing fit he felt coming on.

Hermione began to giggle. "Your great aunt insisted she said we'll need it sooner or later, so we might as well furnish it now."

Severus reached out a hand to her and she came into his lap, their captive audience all but forgotten. Wrapping one hand around the back of her neck, he looked deeply into her eyes. "She's right. We will need it sooner or later."

He was watching, with deepening interest, the spread of the flush from her throat to her cheeks, when a low, feral growl sounded behind him. He and Hermione turned in time to hear a snarling hiss and to see a blur leap over them, land on Lockhart, push off to the floor, and streak up the stairs in a rush of claws and cat fur.

At the same instant, they heard the sound of a glass smashing on the stone hearth.

"Oh no!" Hermione jumped up, followed by Severus, and both of them had their wands pointed at the precise spot where the shattered crystal flagon bloomed into Rita Skeeter.

"If it isn't the happy couple," Skeeter said snidely, crossing her arms and glaring at the Snapes.

Gilderoy peeked around Severus and saw the platinum haired reporter with her jeweled spectacles and her long red fingernails standing on the hearth. "My word!" he said, deeply impressed. "Why, you were the bug in the jar!"

Skeeter stared at Lockhart, her mouth dropping open. "Gilderoy Lockhart! It is you!"

Hermione and Severus exchanged looks as they watched this by-play.

Lockhart made a little bow to Skeeter, who actually simpered. "I'm afraid you have the advantage of me, dear lady," he said gallantly.

"This is Rita Skeeter, Mr. Lockhart," Hermione said. "She's a ... a journalist."

Lockhart pressed a kiss to Skeeter's hand. "I am honoured to meet you, madam. I have long admired witches in your profession."

Hermione was biting her lip, but Severus was looking quite thoughtful.

Skeeter was looking at Lockhart as if he were the *Playwitch* pinup, which wasn't far wrong, really; he *had* won the *Witch Weekly* Most Charming Smile Award, after all. Lockhart was preening himself under Skeeter's blatant admiration. This could be the answer to their bug problem.

"So, Miss Skeeter, what's it to be?" Severus said softly.

All three of his auditors looked at him questioningly.

"The time has come for decision making," he continued, his unrelenting stare fixed on Skeeter's face.

Skeeter blanched; this man was scary. "I don't know what you mean," she said, her shifty eyes seeking out an avenue of escape.

"Let me make myself plain," he said menacingly. "You threatened my wife, under Veritaserum and in writing. That is inexcusable." Skeeter was looking more panicked by the moment; Lockhart, on the other hand, had lost interest in the conversation. He was now admiring his reflection in the mirror over the fireplace and passing under review in his mind the myriad of qualities he possessed that would engender such admiration as Rita Skeeter's from all members of the fairer sex.

"I am not an unreasonable man, Miss Skeeter," Severus said gravely. "I will allow you to choose your own fate."

Skeeter looked momentarily hopeful. The expression on Snape's unyielding face sobered her immediately.

"Your choices are as follows, Miss Skeeter:

"You may turn yourself in to the Ministry of Magic officials currently dining in the next room and confess that you are an unregistered Animagus; I'm sure that your time in

Azkaban would be suitable to the crime."

Severus paused a moment to allow his words to sink into her tiny beetle brain. When he felt that she had processed the information, he continued.

"Or, you may transfigure yourself back into a beetle, at which point I will bind you in that form until your death."

Severus allowed the last word to roll off his tongue with relish; he wanted it to be the one word that Skeeter remembered from that particular option.

"Or, you can choose my personal favourite I can do the world an immense service by ending your pathetic excuse of a life right now."

As he spoke these words, his wand hand shifted position ever so slightly, so that the wand pointed directly at her heart. The smile on his face was terrible to see; in that instant, Hermione recognized in him the Death Eater he once had been.

For a moment she thought her courage would fail her, then her absolute faith in her husband reasserted itself, and she rallied, shifting her own wand in concert with his. When they each felt her energy join with his in the unity of their combined power, neither of them could deny the moment of shining rapture that passed between them.

Skeeter cowered from the joint threat standing before her; she was so distraught that she almost missed Snape's next words.

"Or, Miss Skeeter, you can accept a position in a magically binding contract as Gilderoy Lockhart's assistant and biographer. This may well be the best offer you will ever have in what remains of your so-called life."

The relief with which Skeeter greeted this last offer brought her to her knees in a swoon; even Lockhart was aware of her weakened state, and he solicitously helped her move to the sofa. He was chafing her hands and suggesting that Hermione pour out a bit of brandy for her to swallow when Skeeter pushed him away and said, "The last one, Snape. I'll take the last one."

Gilderoy was quite pleased to find out he was to have an assistant, as well as a biographer. He willingly shook Skeeter's hand as the Snapes used their wands to seal the binding contract. He then had his own wand returned to him by that scary devil-looking fellow, and Madam Snape, who bade them return on Monday afternoon for a meeting regarding the remaining work to be done on the house, escorted him and Skeeter from the house.

It was a giddy Hermione and an indulgent Severus who joined their guests for what was left of their dinner party. Too much wine was drunk and much laughter rang out over the table. When at last the door to Enchanté was closed behind their friends, the Snapes were very pleased with the results of their first foray into entertaining.

Severus and Hermione collapsed side by side on the newly recovered sofa and exchanged grins.

"Let's *not* do that again real soon, hmm?" Severus said, pulling his wife against his chest. Hermione murmured her agreement and cuddled up to him. In the quiet moments that followed, Crookshanks sauntered into the room and jumped onto the sofa, stepping into Hermione's lap before curling up like a furry ginger cushion. From the other side of the room, Bast approached, leaping lightly into Severus' lap and beginning to clean herself. Each of the cats behaved as if the other were not present.

Severus stared at Crookshanks, as Hermione stared at Bast.

"When did..."

"How..."

They gaped at one another, speechless.

Nervously, Quirk sidled into the room. "Quirk is apologizing to Master for interrupting," he said, bowing low. Without waiting for a response, Quirk continued, "Quirk is telling Master and Mistress that the kitties have been very, very bad."

Quirk stared at the floor, not daring to raise his eyes.

Severus held up one hand. "Quirk, do you have somewhere you can go?"

Quirk looked up with terror in his elf eyes. "Master is not giving Quirk CLOTHES!"

Severus interposed before the elf could work himself into hysterics. "No, Quirk, Master wants to spend the weekend alone with Mistress. Can you go somewhere, please?"

Quirk cocked his head to one side. "Master is not angry that the kitties make babies?"

Severus sighed. "Let us say that Master is not angry with Quirk because the, erm, kitties make babies."

Quirk nearly bounced with happiness. "Quirk can go away for the weekend, Master. Quirk will come back for Monday morning breakfast."

With a loud "pop," Quirk Disappeared.

Hermione wrinkled her nose at Severus. "Where are we going to send the cats?" she asked him, playfully.

"The cats are on their own," he replied, gently moving Bast off his lap and standing. Hermione followed suit with Crookshanks, and for a moment, they stood and watched their familiars staring in opposite directions as if they had never met.

"Let's go practice making babies," Severus suggested, taking her hand.

"But I don't *want* babies right now," Hermione objected, following him to the stairs.

Severus scooped her into his arms and gazed down into her eyes. "As Great Aunt Seraphina says, you *will* want babies, sooner or later and as your husband says, practice makes perfect."

A/N: The general hysteria of this story was suggested by my husband, who wondered out loud what would happen if ... and we brainstormed our way to this story, which grew and grew and grew. Hugs to MagicAlly, who answers inane questions such as, "What do you call a brief case?"

:::banging head on nearest hard surface:::

LariLee reminded me that in canon, Hermione put Skeeter in an unbreakable bottle so naturally, I had to give Gilderoy the job of mucking *that* up!

I just have to say it: My readers **rock**. God bless y'all, every one.