

Matrimony

by ladyofthemasque

An orphaned Hermione must marry quickly, or lose her inheritance.

Chapters 1-4

Chapter 1 of 3

An orphaned Hermione must marry quickly, or lose her inheritance.

Author's Notes: Not only was I afflicted with the plot-pitbull that is the ruddy (censored) epic, "For Someone Special"--which, at the time of this writing, was still chewing away on my right buttock--I suddenly discovered a plot-poodle nibbling on my left ankle. (I am a cat lover, not a dog lover. This was very disconcerting...)

...Anyway, in this little Alternate Universe, no witch or wizard can marry without first consulting a government-approved Geneamorological Agency to approve of and/or arrange the match, or risk permanent expulsion from the magical community. (Think witch yentas, magical matchmakers, etc..) A bit bizarre for the modern era, but then the canon wizarding world is backwards and old-fashioned in many ways...so why not in this one, too? Enjoy! ~Lotm

I.

Severus studied the letter in his hands, delivered by a barn-owl with unerring aim; it had dropped the letter into the center of his bowl of porridge before he had even realized he was among the first to receive delivery of the morning mail. The owl had swooped around and landed on the table in front of him, and was now eyeing his mug of coffee speculatively. Giving the bird a dark look to warn it off, he used the tine of his fork to slit the flap; the envelope was already mucky on the outside with bits of congealing oat and mushy wheat, so a little bit of scrambled egg wouldn't make that much more of a difference. Extracting the letter and postcard within the oatmeal-smear rectangle, he unfolded it, reading the letterhead and the message it contained.

Yenta's Livery Company

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Offices in London, Bath, Norfolk, Carlisle, and Leeds

"Your Best Match For Your Best Money, Guaranteed"

Greetings, Mr. Snape;

After an exhaustive Geneamorological search, our firm has come to the regretful conclusion that there are no compatible matches for you from among the pureblooded population within the British wizarding community.

You do have the option of requesting that we search among the halfbloods and Muggleborns of Great Britain, or expanding our search to Europe, Asia, Africa, or the Americas, if you wish to continue your search for a wife; be advised that searching for a Geneamorologically compatible wife beyond the western European community and the Commonwealth nations carries an additional international servicing fee. Please mark the appropriate boxes on the postcard provided, and return the postcard by owl

within seven days (postage prepaid, for the inconvenience) to retain our services with your original fee.

Yours truly,

Jessica Thornton-Ffalkes-Jones

Vice-President, Carlisle Office

His lips thinned even more than usual. Rummaging in his robes, he fished out a quill and an ink bottle, and debated the choices. Half-bloods, Muggleborns, or searching through the other continents. Acquiring a wife from a foreign country would be bothersome; not only would there be citizenship papers to get signed and squared away, she might want him to move away from the British Isles. Visiting another continent, especially if it was farther away than western Europe, could become prohibitively expensive. And if she came from a non-English speaking country, translation spells always gave him a headache after more than ten minutes' use, so that was not a comfortable idea to contemplate, either.

As for halfbloods and Muggleborns...well, Voldemort was safely dead, and Severus had seen the folly of the madman's purebloods-only message years ago. More and more of his Death Eaters had been forced to find brides and grooms out in the European wizarding community's pureblooded segment, thanks to that blasted matrimonial law. Severus was British, and proud of it. He marked the box for 'halfblood' on the postcard, then twiddled the quill as he thought for a few moments. Finally, he marked the 'Muggleborn' square, too. Hopefully that would give the Yenta Livery Company a broader selection to choose from, since purebloods were out of the question, now.

For the remaining boxes on the postcard, he marked 'maintain anonymity', since he was slightly infamous among the wizarding community as the sour, ugly Potions Master of Hogwarts...and very infamous as the Spy Who Helped Potter Kill That Serpentine Git. He also checked the box for 'civil ceremony' and 'both' for wizarding versus Muggle authority, since he wasn't inclined to pander to religious nonsense, and if it was a Muggleborn, the person might want a Muggle-legal marriage ceremony.

The next box he filled in was for 'fertility is very important', since the whole point of finally getting off his arse at the age of forty-four and seeking a wife through a licensed Geneamorphological Agency like the YLC was to beget a child or two to continue the family line, after all. And the box 'marriage immediately sought', since there were only five more days before the current lot of students were released back out into the world for summer break. If his impending, anonymous wife wanted a honeymoon vacation, the summer break would be the only reasonable time to take it.

Flicking the postcard between his mug and the beak of the owl, which had inched almost to within sipping range of the dark, bitter brew, Severus gave the bird a pointed look. Disgruntled, the barn owl took the stiff rectangle in its beak and flew off, leaving behind a feather that wafted onto his plate of toast. Equally disgruntled, the Potions Master wondered when the wizarding world would ever get around to a much less messy form of postal service.

Down at the Gryffindor Table, Hermione Granger wasn't disgruntled. She was dismayed. She, too, had received a letter from a barn owl, though this one, at least, had delivered hers onto her napkin. Its contents read:

Yenta's Livery Company

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Greetings, Miss Granger;

It is our regret to inform you that, after a thorough Geneamorphological testing of both candidates, contrasted and cross-referenced with your own profile, you are incompatible for marriage with Mr. Harry James Potter, and incompatible for marriage with Mr. Ronald Eugene Weasley, the two wizards whose names you submitted for matchmaking confirmation.

You do have the option of expanding your search to include the rest of the wizarding community of Great Britain. Please fill out the enclosed postcard (postage prepaid, for the inconvenience) as to which categories you would prefer we conduct our next search, and return it by owl within the next seven days, to retain our services with your original fee.

Yours truly,

Jessica Thornton-Ffalkes-Jones

Vice-President, Carlisle Office

"So, which of us is it?" Ron asked her, leaning around Harry, who was sitting at her side, the only one of the two close enough to read over her arm. They recognized the embossed seal on the back of the envelope, which Hermione had quickly hidden from the sight of the other students. She didn't want anyone else to know what she had to do.

"Neither, I'm afraid," Harry told him quietly, before turning back to her, concern in his green eyes. "'Mione...what are you going to do now?"

"Aside from maybe having a good cry?" she asked rhetorically under her breath, feeling tears already beginning to sting her eyes. "My bloody guardian is already beginning to sell off my parents' things. I've got no choice, if I want to get my hands on anything from my home, before the ugly old bat sells everything down to the foundations of the house. If it's not one of you two, I'll have to take whoever I can get."

Grimly, she dug a quill and an inkjar out of her bookbag, and began checking off boxes on the enclosed postcard, ignoring the owl drinking from her goblet of milk. She marked all three boxes for bloodline, 'pureblood', 'halfblood' and 'Muggleborn', then marked 'Great Britain' alone for location--the terms of her great-aunt's so-called 'trust' were quite specific. If she married a British citizen before her twenty-fifth birthday, she could gain instant control of her inheritance, which meant her trust-fund, her parents' home, all of their belongings, even their property. If she didn't, her great-aunt would continue to whittle that trust-fund down.

Great-Aunt Heloise Wilkinson had somehow managed to hide her many gambling debts from the courts that had appointed her as Hermione's guardian back at the age of fifteen, in the summer right after her fifth year. The summer that Voldemort had killed Hermione's parents. Heloise had immediately put all of the monies Hermione's parents had accumulated into a trust-fund, supposedly to accrue interest until Hermione's majority, but then had declared, to 'teach the girl the value of an honest wage', had convinced the Muggle courts to amend the trust-fund, keeping it out of Hermione's reach until her twenty-fifth birthday. The woman had then waited almost a year for the eyes of the officers of the courts to be satisfied with her good conduct, before starting to sell off things like the family car. Some of the money went into Hermione's trust-fund, yes...but not all of it.

Harry had converted some of his own wizarding funds into Muggle money to hire an investigator for Hermione, when her great-aunt had protested one too many times that there simply wasn't enough money in the trust fund to pay for new school clothes. They'd discovered her great-aunt's gambling debts, and the fact that over half of all the funds from the liquidated assets were going straight into her own pockets, the rest into the hands of her creditors, and virtually nothing into Hermione's trust account. By the time Hermione could fight for her rights in court and win free of the terms of the trust, most of her family possessions would be gone--from the investigator's report, fully a third of her family's heirlooms were already gone, pawned by that non-magical witch.

So, fulfilling the terms of the trust-fund had been Hermione's swiftest viable option. The very short list of people she could marry who were British citizens and males she could tolerate as husbands had just dropped to zero, though. She had no choice now but to marry anyone she could, and hope that the Agency she'd picked would be able

to find her someone compatible in temperament, and ungreedy in finances. So she checked the box for 'fertility unimportant'--so long as she stayed married for a full year after winning her inheritance, the law-courts wouldn't care if she got around to having children with that person or not, but then neither would they care if she did, which was why she hadn't marked the one for 'no offspring'--and she scratched a mark in the box for 'maintain anonymity', since she didn't want it spread around the school that she had to get married right out of Hogwarts.

The little square for 'civil ceremony' was checked next, since she wasn't about to promise solemnly before Heaven to love and honour a complete stranger for the rest of her life. And of course, she fully blacked-in the sub-box marked 'Muggle civil authority'. A hesitation, then she marked 'Ministry of Magic authority', too. Might as well cover both bases, since she didn't want the Yenta Company to think she was only interested in those who were only interested in a Muggle ceremony with no legal standing in the wizarding world; the last thing she wanted to do was cut down her number of viable options. She followed it with the one for 'marriage sought immediately', since that was the whole point of borrowing funds from Harry to pay for this horrid ordeal.

Catching the attention of the owl with its tan-feathered head all but lodged in her goblet, she handed it the postcard, and watched it launch itself into the air, winging its way out of the Great Hall. Taking her hopes for the future with it, whatever that future would turn out to be. Morose, she vanished the milk in her goblet with a cleaning charm, and poured herself some more from the pitcher.

"Hermione...are you going to be alright?" Harry asked her, touching her arm gently.

"No. But I'll have a good cry later, up in my dorm-room," she added, taking a deep breath to firm her emotional strength. "A pity I'm not a Dark Witch at heart, or I'd whip up a voodoo doll of Aunt Hell, and jab her a few thousand times..."

"If any of us were into the Dark Arts, I'd have whipped up a voodoo doll of Professor Snape for myself, and done far worse than jabbed it a few thousand times by now," Ron muttered. "I worked my arse off in his Advanced Potions class, and he gave me an 'Acceptable' grade! Bastard."

"He's simply got very high standards, Ron," Hermione defended absently. Neither boy had ever thought much of the Potions Master, always whinging about how tough he was as a teacher, but Hermione had thrived under the challenges the sour man had set for his students, just as she had thrived under Professor McGonagall's stringent standards for her Transfigurations students. "If you get an 'Outstanding' in his class, you know you're tops in the potion-brewing trade."

"Go ahead, gloat all you want, Miss 'Exemplary'! The only bloody one in the whole bloody graduating class," Ron muttered under his breath, reaching for another sausage.

"We won't know our N.E.W.T. scores until a week after we graduate," she chided him.

Ron snorted. "As if a bird as smart as you would get anything less, in any of your classes."

She was grateful for the distraction, but depression lurked underneath her thoughts, and her appetite was gone. After picking at her food for a few more minutes, she decided enough of the other students had escaped to allow her to do so as well, without comment. Pleading a headache to her two best friends, Hermione slipped away, retreating back up to her dorm-room for that promised cry.

II.

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Offices in London, Bath, Norfolk, Carlisle, and Leeds

"Your Best Match For Your Best Money, Guaranteed"

Greetings, Mr. Snape;

We are pleased to announce a match that meets your listed criteria, and your Geneamorphological profile to within 98% compatibility (+/- .5% probability variance). This individual is available immediately for matrimony; the next choice available rates at 81% compatibility (+/- .5%) and is available for matrimony within three months, and your third choice ranks at 75% (+/- .5%) and will be free to marry in two months. Please circle which choice of companion you would prefer, or circle the option to change your criteria and search further.

If you wish to review the available profiles before making your decision, please check the appropriate boxes; please also check the boxes on the enclosed postcard (postage prepaid, for your convenience) to indicate the dates, times, and locations you are available for the civil ceremony you and your most compatible partner have requested, and post it within seven days, to retain our services.

Yours truly,

Jessica Thornton-Falkes-Jones

Vice-President, Carlisle Office

Severus eyed the postcard, gauged the dates, and marked down every single day and hour past the hour of 9am Saturday, June 23rd, the date that the Hogwarts Express would come to take all the students away. Up until that very moment, he was required to remain on the school grounds, to keep order as the Head of Slytherin House, but once the lot of troublesome brats were packed off in the thestral-pulled coaches, he was free to embark on the adventure of marrying.

That ranking of 98% compatibility, combined with immediate availability, suited him. YLC was an expensive Agency to hire, but its accuracy in gauging compatibility was the highest in all of Great Britain. Circling that one, he shooed the owl away from his half-eaten sausage and sent the creature flying off with his postcard.

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Greetings, Miss Granger;

We are pleased to announce a match that meets your listed criteria, and your Geneamorphological profile to within 98% compatibility (+/- .5% probability variance). This individual is available immediately for matrimony; the next choice available rates at 87% (+/- .5%) compatibility and is available within two months. Your third choice ranks at 78% (+/- .5%) and will be free to marry immediately. Please circle which choice of companion you would prefer, or circle the option to change your criteria and search further.

If you wish to review the available profiles before making your decision, please check the appropriate boxes; please also check the boxes on the enclosed postcard (postage prepaid, for your convenience) to indicate the dates, times, and locations you are available for the civil ceremony you and your most compatible partner have requested, and post it within seven days, to retain our services.

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Hermione circled '98%', and marked every time and date listed after the Hogwarts Express arrived in London. She wanted herself married off as swiftly as possible--if she could rush right off to the ceremony before her great-aunt caught sight of her on the Muggle train platform, all the better! In fact, she took the liberty of marking 'URGENT' on the postcard in the margin of the time-and-date section, and underlined 'London' for location, along with the hour immediately following the arrival of the Express at Platform 9 3/4, and the date of June 23rd. With a compatibility rating of 98%, she didn't care who she was marrying, just so long as she could get married right away. Still, her fingers shook a little from the monumental decision she was making, as she handed the postcard to the owl, shooing it away from her plate.

In just four more days, she would be married. She made a mental note to sneak into Hogsmeade via the tunnel into the basement of Honeydukes in the next two days, to purchase a white outfit suitable for a civil marriage ceremony, yet not so fancy as to cause comment among her fellow students if she received word that she could get married the very hour after she got off the Express, nor tip off her great-aunt if she was caught at King's Cross station by the hated old woman.

In just four more days, she'd be leaving this place forever. The thought saddened her. She'd miss every one of her teachers. Well, maybe not Trelawney, the old fraud. But she'd miss Professor Dumbledore as the Headmaster who'd overseen the last seven years transition from childhood to adulthood, and the kindly Professor Flitwick who'd taught her many of the charms and jinxes she'd used to protect herself and her friends over the year. She'd definitely miss the strict Professor McGonagall whose high standards had made her positively thrive in Transfigurations, and even the brooding, impossible-to-please Professor Snape.

A quick sneak of a glance up at his hawk-nosed face showed him brooding over his coffee. Now, on the eve of leaving this place, Hermione could let herself admit how much she'd longed to hear one kind word of praise from his lips. And he'd mellowed a tiny bit, with the death of Voldemort just this last month; he'd stopped favouring Slytherin, and actually awarded a total of ten points--in tiny dollops, to some of the Gryffindors in his classes. Including two points to her for a particularly outstanding effort in his class just before the N.E.W.T. tests.

They were silly, ephemeral things, House-points, and they should've meant nothing, since two more measly points hardly mattered in the solid lead Gryffindor held over Slytherin after the defeat of the Dark Lord. But their granting had warmed her into a blush of pleasure worth a thousand points or more in any other class. Of all her teachers, he had been the greatest challenge to please, academically. It would almost be a disappointment to go out into the big, wide wizarding world with no one waiting on the other side of graduation to try and impress, as she'd tried to impress him and McGonagall through the years.

Now all she had to look forward to was hoping that this 98-percent compatible mate, selected by the mysterious magical discipline of Geneamorphology, was someone she could get along with for the year-plus it would take the Muggle courts to confirm that her marriage had lasted long enough to allow her to permanently retain control of her inheritance. She could sort of understand why Ron wasn't an ideal match for her; his ideal match would be someone eyebrow-deep into the worship of Quidditch, not eyebrow-deep into the worship of learning for learning's sake. Harry...well, maybe there was a solid reason why she couldn't marry him, either. A pity; she did like him, and she wasn't the least bit in awe of his status as the Boy Who Triumphed--maybe Ginny would be a good match for him. Hermione hoped so; he deserved someone who saw him as a human being, not a celebrity.

Sighing, she picked up her goblet and sipped pumpkin juice from it. Just a few more days, to financial freedom, and the nerve-wracking presence of a stranger in her life. Maybe the courage of being a Gryffindor would help her, but there was a part of her that wanted to cling to these old, stone walls, and the warmth and safety she had felt within their seemingly cold embrace.

III.

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Greetings, Mr. Snape;

Your suit of matrimony has been accepted by the other party; the date has been arranged for June 23rd, for the hour of 5pm, in the Muggle law office of Justiciar Penelope Browning, 224 1/2 Baker Street, London. Please mark and return the postcard provided (postage paid for your convenience) to accept this suit and register your Promise of Marriage. Should you choose to accept, you will be met at the office listed above by a representative of our firm, Mrs. Libby White, who will introduce you to your selected spouse-to-be.

Thank you for using Yenta's Livery Company; may you enjoy many years of wedded bliss, with such an unusually high compatibility rating!

Yours truly,

Jessica Thornton-Ffalkes-Jones

Vice-President, Carlisle Office

The sight of the letter and its postcard made Severus Snape break out in a sweat. Here it was, his suit of matrimony. The moment he signed that postcard, it was a Promise of Marriage. Defaulting on it would cause him a few legal problems.

He almost discarded the letter entirely. Almost. He was forty-bloody-four years old, and having admitted the truth to himself, knew that his loneliness would not go away. Not to mention he was tired of being horny with no way to alleviate the problem throughout the school year, save for administering to it himself. He hadn't dared risk a relationship with a woman while the Dark Lord had been alive and he had been a spy.

Now that the idiot was dead, Severus didn't want to waste any more time; he certainly wasn't getting any younger. So, firming his grip on the quill drawn from a pocket of his robe, he scratched his name on the line, and pushed the postcard into the beak of the lingering barn owl that had appeared and bombarded his breakfast for two mornings in a row, now. An impatient flick of his hand shooed the creature off, though the thought that his decision was now more or less irrevocable sat in his stomach like a leaden lump of porridge.

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Hermione bit her lower lip as she read and re-read those words, until it hurt so much she was surprised it wasn't bleeding. Harry and Ron, flanking her on either side, each slid an arm around her back, both comforting her with a sideways hug.

"You don't have to go through with it," Harry told her quietly. "I can convert more of my own inheritance; we can go to the Muggle courts with what that investigator discovered."

That firmed her resolve. "No, Harry," she declined, sighing in regret. "I can't let you waste any more of your own inheritance on me, and I cannot let Aunt Hell pawn off every last tangible memory I have of my parents. She'll do it, too, the moment she gets wind of a lawsuit against the trust arrangements. Even if the Muggle police throw her into jail...it *won't* get any of my mum's jewelry back, or my dad's model train collection, and Mum's paintings, and...

"I mean, it's not as if whoever it is they've picked out for me will be a total jerk," she added, trying to find the lighter side of her situation. "I've done some research, and it's a bit rare for any witch or wizard to end up with a compatibility rating higher than 90%. Which means 98% is almost unheard of with such a narrow field of candidates to search, by limiting my options to just Great Britain."

"I hope my Dad gets the Ministry of Magic job, now that the old git Fudge is retiring," Ron offered from her other side. "He's been wanting to abolish the Marriage Act for ages. Not that he's upset at being paired off with Mum, mind you--far from it--but this is the modern age, after all, and even the Muggles know it's too old-fashioned to expect men and women to have to get someone else's seal of approval before they marry."

"Yes, well, that'll take almost as long as a slog through the Muggle courts," she muttered wryly. Plucking her quill from her bag, she signed her name to the line, and handed it to the owl Harry was feeding a bit of cheese. "There," she sighed as the creature took off, delivering her agreement. "It's done. By five o'clock on Saturday...well, I won't be a free woman; I'll be a married woman...but I *will* be free of the greedy, covetous, wastrel clutches of old Aunt Hell."

"Hear, hear," Ron muttered, lifting his glass of pumpkin juice in a toast to that idea. Hermione lifted her goblet of milk, and Harry his goblet of juice, and they clinked the cut glass stemware together, mock-celebrating her decision. "If he's not to be me, or even Harry, here, then I hope he turns out to be at least half as handsome and nice as either of us, so he won't be a total toad to be around."

"Well, I hope he's smart enough to keep up with you," Harry offered from her other side before taking a sip, following Ron's lead. "If we're both honest, neither Ron nor I are quite as brilliant as you."

"Yeah--you're ruddy brilliant. And you deserve someone special," Ron agreed.

"So, what will you wish for, in your future mate?" Harry teased her mildly.

Hermione eyed her goblet, and stated her own fervent wish to the other two, since they'd covered her other two concerns already. "...I just hope he's great in the sack."

Both boys choked on their pumpkin juice. For the first time since the investigator's report had come in a month ago, Hermione threw back her head and laughed heartily. Enjoying their shock.

IV.

"Yoo-hoo! There you are, Hermione dearie!"

Hermione winced, as did Ron and Harry. The plump, purple-clad figure of Great-Aunt Heloise waved a kerchief at them from the far end of Platform 9. The woman often pretended to be cheery and kindly, but now that Hermione knew the truth, she loathed the very sight of her. Unfortunately, there wasn't a press of bodies thick enough to hide behind for a quick Apparation out of there.

Forced to close the distance, Hermione pulled the trolley of her trunk and Crookshank's cage towards her aunt, flanked by the supportive presence of her two best friends, Ginny following at their heels with her own trolley of things. Harry was going to the Burrow to stay for the summer, before looking for a place of his own to live, now that he was out from under the threat of Voldemort, vanquished permanently less than a month ago. The rest of the Weasleys were also waiting near Aunt Hell, as the trio had dubbed her once the investigator's report had come into their hands.

Reaching them, Hermione let Ron pass her trolley-load as well as his and Harry's over to Bill, including the cage with her cat, Crookshanks, and faced her aunt. If everything went well, she'd be able to retrieve her things from the Burrow in a very short while, a legally free-to-do-as-she-damned-well-pleased, if married, woman.

"Hello, Aunt Heloise. How have you been?" she managed to ask civilly enough.

"Oh, just wonderful! I have a very exciting summer planned for you, full of things to do and see right here in London! You'll be staying at my apartment, of course, since I've had your parents' home closed up for the time being, and it would be too much trouble to open it up when we could save money by you living here with me. I even have a job possibility lined up for you; the interview is for Monday morning, 9 o'clock sharp--"

"Actually, I have an interview of sorts for 5 o'clock this very afternoon," Hermione interjected quickly, seizing the opening gratefully.

Aunt Hell's eyebrows--drawn on her forehead, since her grey-white hair was slowly balding under her flower-wreathed straw hat--rose up towards the brim of the hat. "You do? ...What's the pay?"

"Quite a lot," Hermione returned with a smug little smile. She was thinking of her inheritance, but she knew very well her great-aunt was thinking more along the lines of an hourly wage, or a salary of some kind. "Now, if you don't mind, I really must get to the interview before we go anywhere else, because I don't want this opportunity to slip through my fingers."

"Of course, of course; a girl must look to her maintenance, and her future! I know you're far too independent a girl to want to just sit around, doing nothing all summer! Is it far?"

"Baker Street," Ron supplied helpfully, returning to her side. "Harry and I are coming along, too."

"Goodness," Aunt Hell muttered, eyeing the trio of friends uncertainly. "All three of you?"

"It's an opportunity we simply cannot miss," Harry told the old fraud, with the kind of fake smile he used to give his own aunt-in-law, the odious Marjorie Dursley, whenever

he had to pretend to behave around her, but didn't really care how sincere he appeared.

"...Right. Well, the more riding in the cab, the cheaper it'll be, shared out among the four of us," the aging woman blustered. "Come along, then."

"See you later, Mum, Dad! See you, Gin!" Ron called out to his parents and sister, and Hermione and Harry added their own waves in farewell to the red-haired clan.

It didn't take long for them to get a cab, though the cost of the distance made her aunt flinch. When they finally emerged at the indicated building, Great-Aunt Heloise got out of the car with a wide-eyed look for the far side of the street, distracted from her parsimonious paying of the fare. "...Oh, my goodness! I never realized it! This job offer you have--it's right across from 221-B Baker Street! Site of the famous Sherlock Holmes novels! Oh, I *must* go and see if the museum is open!"

"...Oh, god, *please* let it be open!" Hermione muttered fervently, not wasting a second once her rotund aunt waddled quickly towards the nearest marked crossing. Turning, she hurried up the steps of the building across the street, Harry and Ron hard at her heels. Mounting the stairs to the first floor as fast as her smart white skirt-suit and plain brown overcoat would allow, she opened the door of the Civil Law Office of Justiciar Penelope Browning, and all but flung herself into the reception room. The sight of a somewhat plump figure in purple rising from one of the seats lining the nearest wall scared her into flinching, until she realized the figure was far too thin and far too young to be her great-aunt.

"Are you Miss Granger?" the woman asked, lifting her chin in enquiry as she eyed Hermione and her two neatly dressed friends. Ron and Harry had snuck into Hogsmeade with her, to find something suitably dressy to wear for themselves; Hermione might not have any female friends she could trust enough with the secret shame of her financial state--Ron's family might be poor, but at least they weren't being fleeced by any relatives--but she did have them to stand as her witnesses, and to be, for lack of a better term, her bridesmen.

"Yes, yes, I am," Hermione managed, trying not to gasp for breath too obviously from her mad dash up the stairs. "You must be Mrs. White, from the YLC."

"That I am. Your groom is already in the justiciar's office, and I will--"

"--Good! Let's get this over with!" Hermione asserted, interrupting whatever else the woman had to say as she headed briskly for the inner door.

The justiciar's secretary gaped at her, as Hermione pushed open the door without a by-your-leave and strode briskly inside. A tall, lean, dark-haired figure stood with his back to her, facing the robed woman seated behind the polished cherry desk occupying the far side of the book-lined office, hands clasped lightly behind his back. There was no one else in the room, so it had to be her husband-to-be. From the back, he didn't look too bad--he was certainly not fat, which would've been a bit of a turn-off for her--but looks weren't her most important consideration. Time was. If that bloody museum was closed for the afternoon, her aunt could come bursting in at any moment, since she'd overheard the address Hermione had given to the driver.

"Here I am, so let's get the ceremony started!"

That head, with its shoulderlength fall of black hair, whipped around sharply. Nearly giving its owner whiplash, as the all-too-familiar face of Severus Snape stared wide-eyed down at her. Shocked, Hermione stared up at him, until a thump distracted her. Glancing quickly behind her, deathly afraid it was her great-aunt-from-hell, she realized it had merely been the sound of Ron hitting the carpeted floor in a dead faint. Harry was still standing, albeit gaping at their former Potions Master, mouth stammering in the attempt to say his name, but all that came out with each shock-panted breath was, "P...Pr...P...Pr..."

Strangely enough, it was their reaction--and the still-open inner door, which had a view of the front door--which prodded her out of her own shock. "--Oh, for godsake! I don't have time for this! Harry, snap out of it! Kick Ron awake, or something! You!" she snapped, whirling to face their academic nemesis. "Are you here to get married, or not?"

Severus blinked. Where the bloody hell had the polite, respectful Miss Granger who'd aced even his toughest tests of the last seven years gone? This white-suited, pink-blossomed virago certainly wasn't the calm, collected, proper Head Girl he'd seen at that final breakfast less than eight hours ago! "...You're here to get married, Miss Granger?"

"Do you two know each other already?" the voice of the yenta-witch called out from the doorway.

"It seems we do--"

"--Unfortunately, yes," Hermione agreed at the same time, glancing over her shoulder at Mrs. White. Ron was still on the floor, blocking the lilac-clad woman's progress through the doorway, while Harry was rubbing his sternum through his grey, Hogsmeade-tailored suit as though he were suffering a heart-spasm or something. Rolling her eyes, she stalked back to the doorway and kicked Ron with the point of one pink-clad toe. Not too hard--she did like him--but just enough to jolt him awake. "Get up, Ron! You're not getting out of being my witness *that* easily. Harry, stop wheezing. Right now I'd marry the Devil himself, even if I had to beat myself over the head a few dozen times to be stupid enough agree to do so. Marrying Severus Snape doesn't even rate a twitch, in comparison. Now stand up, stop ogling the poor man, and be my bloody witnesses!"

"Miss Granger, if you think I intend to marry you--"

She whirled on the man behind her, even as Harry managed to regain his wits enough to help the taller, gangly Ron to his feet. Her finger jabbed through the air between them. "--You signed that promisory, Professor Snape, and I'm going to bloody well hold you to it! Don't mess with me; I'm a desperate woman!"

He blinked and frowned in confusion. "Whatever are you babbling about, Miss Granger? Desperate from what?"

"Yoo-hoo! The museum was unfortunately closed for the day--is this job offer of yours for an assistant's position in this office?"

"*Shite!*" Ron slammed the interconnecting door shut and braced his back against it, forcing the disconcerted Mrs. White to snatch her fingers and herself out of the doorway before she could be harmed, leaving the YLC representative on the other side of the panel from the tableau in the office. His hazel brown eyes pleaded with Hermione's darker toffee ones. "Please, Hermione! Break your wand, and I'll break mine, too, and we'll go and live as ruddy Muggles--*don't* feel that you have to marry Professor Snape, for Merlin's sake!"

The pained look that rolled her eyes for a brief moment was worth of any that Severus himself had ever used. He watched her turn back to her friend, hands planting themselves on her white-tailored hips. *Hermione Granger*, as his 98% compatible bride-to-be? This was all very confusing. Maybe, just maybe, if he stayed silent and listened, he might make sense of the whole matter. Certainly the girl was doing enough talking on her own!

"Honestly, Ron! If the two of us couldn't go a single month without fighting with each other in school, what makes you think we'd last a single week as a married couple? You didn't even show up on the compatibility charts for me, and neither did Harry! You're my two best friends, and I'll love you both forever, but I need to get married, and I need to get married *now*, before the Great-Aunt from Hell bashes down that door! And now that I'm a full-blown witch, I find I'm *not* inclined to give up my magic and live as a ruddy Muggle for the rest of my life! Been there, done that, and I like my new life a lot better."

"Why does *he* want to get married, anyhow?" Harry asked her, lifting his chin at Severus with a dark, mistrustful look.

Hermione swung around again, giving her former Potions professor an enquiring look. He wouldn't have answered, if it weren't for that look...and the 98% compatibility rating the two of them purportedly had. Hating the colour flushing his cheeks, Severus folded his arms across his chest. "With the threat of Voldemort finally gone, I am free to pursue my life, and seek to start a family of my own. *Without* the fear that they could be tortured and used against me."

The nearly-forgotten justiciar sucked in a short, sharp breath at the Forbidden Name. The other four ignored it, quite used to the mention of the Dark Lord's name by now.

Severus eyed the petite, curly-haired woman.

"You know *my* reasons. What, exactly, are yours?"

"It was only one reason, not a plurality," she pointed out tartly, folding her own arms defensively. "And...you probably know that I lost my parents a few summers ago. But what most people don't know is that the Muggle government handed me off to my mother's aunt for guardianship. Including the management of my inheritance. But the government didn't know about my great-aunt's massive gambling problem, or the fact that she's now selling off everything of my parents' to settle her ever-mounting debts, and she won't let me touch a thing until I'm twenty-five. Which means I'll maybe have a rubber-band and a chewed-up pencil to my name, at the rate she's been selling things behind my back this last year."

"She locked up Hermione's money in a trust-fund, too," Harry offered grimly, as Ron stayed silent, still looking a little sick at the thought of his best friend and his most nightmarish teacher tying the proverbial knot. "She won't regain control of anything that should rightfully be hers. Unless she gets married, or turns twenty-five."

"There won't even be a toothpick left, by the time I'm twenty-five. I don't care about the money, so much as I care about losing all my mum and dad's things," Hermione finished tightly. And flinched as a familiar voice shrieked on the far side of the door, accompanied by the jolt of Ron's body as it shook with the force of a furious, pounding fist.

"--*Hermione Jane Granger! Don't you dare get married without my clearly expressed permission!*"

A zap of golden energy shot across the room. It came from the wand of the nearly-forgotten justiciar, Penelope Browning, and splashed over the doorknob at Ron's hip. The woman cleared her throat in the blissful quiet following the jolt of magic, though the door itself continued to jostle Ron in eerie silence. "...Are we conducting a marriage ceremony today, or not? I *do* have another appointment coming along in fifteen minutes."

Severus and Hermione stared at each other. Finally, the middle-aged man sighed, giving in to the mathematics of the situation. If Hermione bloody Granger was 98% compatible with him, Geneamorologically, then he wasn't likely to find anyone else in the world that would be her equal, as a matrimonial companion for him. The YLC's compatibility-gauging track-record was quite sound, given how long the core company had been in operation through the millenias. Turning slightly, he gestured at the justiciar. "...Shall we?"

"I think I'm going to be sick," Ron muttered, watching Hermione unfold her arms with a short nod.

"Just don't retch all over the wedding certificate when you sign it as a witness," Harry muttered, looking a little ill himself. "I'll reserve that one for myself."

"Quiet from the witnesses, if you please. Do the two of you stand before me of your own free consented, individual wills, to be wed to each other in the bonds of matrimony today?" enquired Justiciar Browning, eyeing the bride and the groom.

Sable, straight hair and chestnut, curly locks both nodded.

"Please state your agreement out loud for the record," the justiciar chided them.

"I'm here of my own free will," Hermione sighed.

"As am I," Severus agreed dryly.

"Excellent." Rising from her chair, the Justiciar picked up her manual, and began reading the marriage ceremony. Without the religious trappings, it was remarkably swift and straightforward.

"...I do," Hermione stated when the justiciar prompted her with that fateful question, and found herself a little dazed at the huge impact of those two tiny words. She'd just agreed to marry Severus Snape, the cruelest, meanest, sourest teacher in all of Hogwarts!

"...I do," Severus murmured when it was his turn. Equally disconcerted; he'd just agreed to marry a young, attractive, highly intelligent woman who used to be a bushy-haired know-it-all...who had just agreed of her own free will to marry *him*. When it came time for the exchange of rings, he was still a little disconcerted. As she offered her hand to him, he slid a heavy platinum ring onto her finger, chased with his monogram, SSS. Drawing his wand, he tapped it gently to resize the largish band. "With this ring...I thee wed."

Hermione stared at the ring unhappily. But not for the reason he was thinking. She looked up at him with a slight shrug. "--I'd have given you my dad's wedding ring, but...Aunt Hell hocked it sometime last year, and I don't know where it went."

"Aunt Hell?" he enquired.

"Short for Aunt Heloise," Harry supplied grimly from the sideline as the door continued to rattle. "But the nickname suits her all too well."

"--Do you mind? We're still in the middle of a marriage ceremony," Justiciar Browning pointed out. She levelled a light blue stare at all of them, and continued reciting from her manual, finally concluding "...By the power invested in me by Her Majesty's government, and the Ministry of Magic, under the eyes of the witnesses gathered here, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride as soon as you've signed the certificate. It's the bit of paper, here, that makes it all legal."

Hermione signed first, her looping signature filling out the line indicated. Severus took the pen from her hand, which made her fingers tremble at the touch of his warm, callused palm--he'd never really touched her, before, save for the moment that she'd accepted his ring--and signed his own line. Then gave her two best friends a pointed look. "...Well? Are you going to assist your best friend, or continue to stand there like a pair of slack-jawed dunderheads?"

Mouth a firm, grim line, Harry moved forward, separating the two of them as they stepped back to either side. A heavy sigh, and he signed the certificate, scratching his name under the Potions Master's spidery lines. "...Ron?"

"I'd just like to go on the record as saying this is a *bad* idea--and that I'll support you one hundred percent, if you ever want to sue the Yenta Livery Company for such a serious misjudgement in compatibility rating!"

Severus sneered wordlessly at the redhead, but since the blue-suited young man did cross to the desk and sign the paper as he muttered those words, the older wizard kept his urge to comment nastily to both young men unsaid. There, a wedding-present for his young bride. God and Merlin! That was something he'd have to get used to, Hermione Granger as his bloody wife... It all felt a bit unreal, actually. If he hadn't been moved to pity over her situation, he probably wouldn't have gone through with it.

"...*Xeroxicum*," the justiciar asserted as she poured a misty grey liquid over the certificate, and several copies popped one at a time into the air over the original, stacking up somewhat untidily. The black-robed woman started handing out the magica photocopies. "One to each of your witnesses, one for my own records...one for the Muggle government clerks to file, one for the Ministry's clerks to file...and the original for the two of you to keep, with a complimentary frame for hanging somewhere," she added, tapping the original and conjuring a simple, glass-plated, cherrywood frame around the certificate. "Congratulations. You are now Mr. and Mrs. Snape. You may kiss the bride, if you like."

"--Please, don't!" Ron Weasley quickly interjected, holding out his hand as he winced. "At least, not while I'm watching? I may agree that this is the fastest way to salvage your inheritance, but that's still going a bit too far just for the sake of keeping a few things, in my opinion."

"Try to keep your opinions to yourself, Mr. Weasley," Severus returned dryly. "If I want to kiss my wife, I will."

"...There goes *my* stomach," Harry muttered, looking away quickly.

"What's done is done," Hermione reminded all of them, including herself, briskly. "Get used to it. And...thanks for being here for me. I would've preferred it was one of you two, but it clearly wasn't meant to be." Hugging Harry as the closest, she moved on to Ron and embraced him, then stepped back and faced the door behind him, which was still jostling silently. "...Alright. I'm ready to face the non-magical little witch."

"Not quite. *We're* ready to face the harridan. Mr. Weasley, kindly open the door as soon as your stomach turns," Severus interjected, moving up beside the young Mrs. Snape. She gave him a startled look at his supportive words. "We might as well give your harridan aunt something to witness."

"Too late," the freckled wizard muttered resentfully, giving his former teacher a dark look.

Hermione sucked in a startled breath as her unexpected husband abruptly tucked one arm around her waist and swept her over that arm, bending her just enough that, when he stooped over her, the differences in their heights evened out. Which, given how short she was and how tall he was, left them braced at a very dramatic angle.

"Try to look like you're enjoying yourself, Miss..Mrs. Snape," he corrected himself, and captured her mouth with his. He half-swallowed her gasp of surprise as they kissed, amazed a little himself at the sweet flavour of her lips. He heard the door open with a burst of sound as the justiciar-witch's silencing charm was broken, but didn't really hear a word of the harridan in question stammering to a halt mid-tirade, upon being confronted by the sight of her great-niece half-dangling in a clinch with a stranger.

He heard his wife's--his wife's!--faint whimper of what sounded like enjoyment, the moment their lips parted from the first kiss; he heard it and pressed her closer for a second taste, lifting her body into his, rumpling the soft cotton of her nuptial outfit. He felt the twining of her arms around his shoulders, the looping of her wrists over the back of his neck, felt the threading of her fingers through his hair as she returned the kiss with equally increasing enthusiasm. Lust blossomed in his veins, drugging his unprepared, unsuspecting senses. Knowing the girl had a true passion for learning wasn't the same as knowing she had another kind of passion buried deep within her bookish exterior; it was a rather pleasant discovery.

With great reluctance, he finally ended the kiss, straightening the two of them. She clung to him, lifting herself almost off her toes in the need to keep the nibbling of their lips going for as long as possible, but finally their mouths parted. Eyes opened slowly, their toffee-and-licorice depths meeting, each a little dazed at the depth of the experience.

"Unhand my niece this instant, you--you--you--!"

Severus turned his head to give the woman a scathing set-down, and found himself confronted by an overgrown, straw-hatted grape. Whoever the Great-Aunt-from-Hell was, her face had purpled with apoplexy to an alarming degree, though it was a bit redder than the dress stretched over her too-plump frame. Bemused, he straightened the last few inches, deliberately towering over the older woman as he cradled Hermione close to his black-clad chest, enjoying the way she clung to him. "Considering I have just married her, madam, I am disinclined to 'unhand' my wife."

"--No! You cannot--I forbid it! As the girl's legal guardian--!" Great-Aunt Heloise spluttered.

"She's eighteen, more than old enough to wed whomever she pleases under the laws of Her Majesty's government," Mrs. White piped up from behind the flower-hatted grape before Hermione could point that out for herself. "Our matchmaking service checked very thoroughly for such things, I assure you."

"Ma...matchmaking service?" Aunt Hell stuttered.

Hermione smiled tightly. "Yes, and under those same laws, I now inherit control of everything. My trust fund, my family home...and all those items you've been pawning behind my back. I hereby cut you off from all of my funds, all of my possessions, and all of my property, effective immediately. On penalty of having you arrested for trespassing, and theft."

"--Witnessed!" Harry asserted, staunchly supporting her as her friend, however much his stomach must've churned to see the Potions Master snogging her so thoroughly.

"Ditto," Ron muttered.

"I'll have this marriage annulled!" Great-Aunt Heloise threatened, lifting a fist threateningly close to her niece's nose.

"Trust me, madam, that will be impossible to do, after tonight," Severus found himself returning confidently. And found his attention drawn to one side by a familiar thump. A glance at the floor showed the youngest Weasley male sprawled on the carpet, apparently passed out again. Nothing important, then.

Chapters 5-7

Chapter 2 of 3

Okay, now Hermione and Severus are married. Erm...what happens next? How does one adjust to such a major life-change as this? What does one do to make it through the transition-phase? (Other than, of course, to make lemonade out of life's unexpected lemons...)

V.

BANG!

Hermione unsquinted her eyes, peering around the cloth-draped livingroom of her dusty old home. Carefully she stepped away from the man who had Apparated at her side, and sighed in relief when he moved freely about as well, proving neither of them had been splinched during her attempt at dual Apparation. She'd been here before, but Severus hadn't, and the only way to get them here quickly enough was for her to attempt a double-Apparation.

There had been the start of a big row with her aunt back at the justiciar's office after Ron had fainted the second time, but Severus had surprised her--and earned puzzled, wary looks from Harry--by coming promptly to her verbal rescue, cutting the older woman to the quick with a few well-chosen, sarcastic sneers. With her great-aunt routed right out of the office, fuming at 'that odious man!', the two of them had been free to Apparate here, to secure her inheritance before her great-aunt could come and rob the place blind. Leaving Harry to rouse Ron and head back to the Burrow with the extraordinary news of Hermione's marriage...and the identity of her Geneamorphologically-chosen husband.

In the meantime, she had her parents' house to secure. Glancing around, she spotted a few things disconcertingly missing, a chair here, a table there, some knickknacks

from the mantel shelf...but not the painting hung over that mantel. "Thank god...!"

"What?" Severus enquired briefly, glancing around the place. From the modern style of the architecture, her family home looked like it was a fairly recent construction.

"The O'Keefe is still here. I thought for sure she'd have sold it since I got the investigator's report!"

"The what?" he asked, glancing over at her. She was staring at an overblown, colourful painting of a flower.

"The painting, here, over the mantel. It's an original Georgia O'Keefe, and worth thousands of pounds. It's got a security wire on it, and an anti-theft spell I put on it back in the summer after my fourth year, when we got it, but that's about it; Mum and Dad couldn't afford anything fancier, and I...well, I had other things on my mind, the summer they were killed. It was an inheritance from an American cousin."

"That is worth thousands of pounds?" he asked, staring at the colourful but otherwise boring blotches of paint.

"Yes. I know, it doesn't look like it, does it?" she mused with a small smile. It faded as she touched the mantel, and the slightly less dusty circles dotting its surface. "The Dresden shepherdess collection is gone, though. That was worth a few hundred quid... I've got to change the locks and ward the house against intrusion. Thank you again for being willing to come out here with me, right away."

"After having met your Aunt Hell--a very apt nickname for her, I must admit--it's the least I could do. Would you like some assistance in warding the place?"

Hermione was a little taken aback by the almost genial offer. "Er...certainly! As you like. I just...didn't expect the offer, really. Or...or your help with my aunt."

"We're married. The last I checked, the usual manner of conducting a marriage is presenting a unified front to the world, however things may be otherwise, under the surface."

She blushed. "Well...thank you."

He shrugged, but didn't say much else. Hermione crossed to the nearest window and tapped the frame with her wand, setting the first anti-entry warding. He moved to the next one over and tapped it with his own wand, copying her moves. They worked their way around the house, covering the ground floor, then the basement, then upstairs to the first floor, and finally the attic. It wasn't easy, crawling around in the crowded, hot space--thankfully Aunt Hell had apparently never heard of getting any of this stuff appraised at the Antiques Roadshow--and it was with relief that they both descended to the first floor, sweaty and dusty.

Severus found himself peering into the partially-open doorway of her bedroom, as she closed the attic door behind them. He'd warded her parents' room, but not this one, earlier. Shifting forward, he rested one hand against the doorframe, eyeing the racks of shelving lining the walls, the rows of books occupying them, and the stacks piled on the floor in front of them. Stacks that in some places were three rows deep. "Good god, woman...what did you do, hoard every single book to ever cross your hands?"

"Nearly," she agreed, shrugging. "I'm always reading something. It's like an addiction, with me. Fiction, non-fiction, you name it."

"I'm beginning to think the YLC wasn't quite so insane after all, pairing the two of us together. Your bedroom looks very much like my quarters, back at the school," he found himself confessing, glancing down at her. She looked up, blinking at him.

"You collect books?" Hermione asked, curious.

"I devour books," he corrected her. The wonder in her eyes stirred something inside of him. There was something else he wanted to devour, now, and that was her lips--she had a way of saying 'books' that had looked positively erotic, for a moment. He shook it off, muttering half to himself, "This is very disconcerting...you were one of my students, not ten hours before."

"Well, I'm *not* getting a divorce, just yet," she retorted tartly. "I can't even get an annulment for a solid year, if I'm to retain control of everything."

"Mm, yes. We do need to discuss that." Catching her wrist, Severus led her into her bedroom. She followed, a puzzled frown creasing her brow. Turning around, he seated himself on the edge of her bed, and tugged her closer. And closer still, until he sighed impatiently and pulled her firmly onto his lap. "I'm not going to bite you, Hermione...yet."

She eyed him nervously, sitting stiffly on his thighs, acutely aware of how dark and male he looked in her frilly-curtained bedroom, with its pink wallpaper--what little could be seen of it around the edges of the book-stuffed shelving--and pink-canopied four-poster. "Yet...?"

He wasn't quite sure how to start. Lifting a hand, he touched her cheek gently, cupping it in a soothing caress as she flinched slightly. Not afraid of him, exactly, but...almost innocently, and clearly uncertain of his intentions. Not that he was much more experienced than that, but he, at least, had a few more years under his robes. "Relax, Hermione; I didn't go to the trouble of agreeing to marrying you just to hurt you. However bastardish I might've been while you were my student."

She winced a little. "Erm...yes, about that... I might've charged ahead while I was under the pressure of my aunt's looming presence, but now that...well..."

He shifted his thumb, covering and stilling those soft, rose-coloured lips. "Shh. There's no hurry... I want you to know that I've never once thought of you as someone to kiss, before now."

"You, er...haven't?" she mumbled against the pad of his thumb.

Severus shook his head slightly, studying her. "No. I've always admired your brilliant intellect, a polished diamond among the dull, granite pebbles that I normally have to face in my classroom, but until this afternoon...you were my student. That was all there was. And yet...when we kissed..."

His thumb dragged down her lower lip, parting her mouth just a little. Leaning in close, Severus angled his head just enough to keep their noses from duelling, and lightly, slowly licked that bottom lip. Making her shiver with pleasure. Him, too, if he were absolutely honest. Slanting his head just a little bit more, he covered her mouth with his own, kissing her. A soft sigh escaped her, and her arms lifted up around his neck as she returned the pressure of his lips. Another lick parted her mouth, and with an indrawn breath from her and a sighing breath from him, their tongues tentatively met once again.

Her heart ached, and electricity tingled through her lower abdomen; Hermione could barely breathe, and the room was too warm, his kiss almost too hot, too intimate to bear. A portion of her mind kept trying to remind her she was sitting in her old bedroom, kissing the Potions Master of all people, but that portion shrank in size and importance the longer the kiss progressed. When he had started stroking his strong, gentle palms up and down her back, she didn't know, nor was she quite sure when she had started stroking his hair, which was incredibly soft and not nearly as greasy as she'd supposed, just very cool and silky as she ran her fingers over his scalp, sliding the strands between her fingers. But she was very aware of the moment he chose to slide one of those hands around to her ribs, and hyperaware of the moment he cupped her left breast through the cotton of her jacket, her blouse, and her bra.

Jerking back from his kiss with a gasp, she stared wide-eyed at him. She could feel the warmth of his hand searing through all three layers of her clothes. The intensity in his dark gaze was not an expression she was accustomed to seeing. Not quite like that, though she'd seen something somewhat similar when he'd been lecturing in that low, silky voice of his, fired with tightly contained enthusiasm that had always reminded her of a basement furnace, forgotten for the most part by the rest of the house but undeniably the source of all its energy.

He wasn't handsome--his nose was too beaky, his face too furrowed by his greater age, which was at least twice her own, and he needed to go out into the sun and get himself a tan, to do something with that yellowish-pale, dungeon-level cast to his skin--but he was undeniably passionate. She'd known that all along, from a scholastic point of view. Hermione just had no idea all that academic passion could be translated into sexual fervor. It was very disconcerting.

His hand slid off of her breast, making her flesh tingle. Cupping her cheek, he touched her bottom lip with his thumb, and dragged it down slightly. Parting her lips for another kiss, he claimed it with a dip of his head. She liked that part; she liked it a lot, and returned the favour. But when his hands slipped to her ribs again, she jerked back with a gasp, and an involuntary giggle.

"Oh, please, don't!"

Arching a brow, Severus studied his young wife, and flexed his fingers experimentally. She giggled again, and squirmed to try and remove his hands. Narrowing his eyes thoughtfully, he tickled her deliberately. She shrieked and grabbed for his wrists, trying to remove his hands.

"No, don't! I'm horridly ticklish!" She slapped at the backs of his fingers. He didn't remove them, but he did still them for a moment, making her hyperaware of his featherlight touch against her white-clad ribs.

"...Indeed?"

His speculative drawl, the arching of that black brow, alerted her to the danger now looming in her immediate future. She narrowed her eyes at him. "You wouldn't dare..."

"I am a Slytherin, Mrs. Snape. Dares do not motivate us...but vulnerabilities do." And without remorse, he started tickling and teasing her ribs and belly, making her shriek and laugh and squirm to try and get off his lap, away from his hands. He hooked her squirming curves firmly in place with one arm around her waist, while using his greater strength to dodge her shoving hands and keep up his ruthless attack with his other arm, making her writhe and laugh involuntarily hard in his embrace, until her voice rose to a shriek of giggling desperation.

"--Oh please! Oh please, please, stop--oh god, I've got to pee! No--please--really, I have to pee!"

Her voice rose in a desperate whinge. Deciding she'd been stimulated enough, Severus removed his fingers from her abdomen, wrapping one arm around her back to keep her close and placing the other hand on her jawline so he could pull her panting mouth close to his. Parting her lips with his thumb, he kissed her firmly, thoroughly. Marking his territory, and his rights, as her husband. He kissed her until her breathing slowed and she willingly returned it. He kissed her a little more, just because her mouth was that sweet, until she pulled back her head with a reluctant wince.

"I really do have to...go," she offered, blushing at the subject.

Wordlessly, he helped her to her feet, rising behind her as she turned to go. His hands, settling lightly on her shoulders, held her in place for a moment. Stopping her escape. When they slid down over her white-covered breasts to her waist in a deliberate caress, Hermione shivered, unsure if she should let herself enjoy the intimate touch of his hands that much. She felt even more unsure as, leaning against her and looking over her shoulder, he deftly flicked open each of the three cloth-covered buttons on her jacket.

Peeling the lapels of the tasteful white jacket back, Severus deliberately scraped the backs of his thumbnails over the crests of her breasts, stimulating the little nubs he could feel through the soft pink fabric of her blouse, and the bra cupping them underneath. Stooping a little as he slipped the garment off her arms, he murmured in her ear, "It's a little hot in here, don't you think? Go powder your nose...wife."

A proprietary pat on the curve of her backside made Hermione blink in shock, but it got her moving. She paused at the doorway, giving him an uncertain, puzzled look, then retreated to the bathroom next door. Her reflection in the mirror over the sink distracted her from her goal. Her hair was tousled from the touch of his hands, though when that had happened, she couldn't remember. Her cheeks were pink with what felt like a constant blush, and her lips a little rosier than usual, and a little puffy, too, from the pressure of his own. A glance down at her chest showed her nipples embarrassingly prominent, which only reminded her of what he'd done with his thumbnails at the last moment. And she couldn't help but hear, echoing over and over again in her head, how deep and sexy his voice had dropped on that last word. *Wife*.

Only now, looking into her own passion-shocked brown eyes, did Hermione begin to wonder what sort of price would be extracted in exchange for the right to claim her inheritance. And how much she could admit to herself that she just maybe, possibly, might actually like it...even as it unnerved the hell out of her.

Her. Mrs. Bloody Snape!

VI.

He had removed his frock-coat while she had been in the bathroom. Hermione stared at the back of her husband, the man who now had the right to be her lover as well--her very first lover--and wondered nervously what she was going to do. He was standing by a stack of books, perusing the pages of one of the paperbacks, apparently lost in thought. Padding over the carpet to him, she peered quizzically at the book, trying to see which one he was skimming.

...A romance novel? Startled by the choice, she looked up at him face. "Er...that's a romance novel."

Her remark was an overstatement of the obvious, but he let it pass. "I read everything I get my hands on, Hermione. Including the most luridly purple-prosed pornography ever to be thinly disguise as literature."

"--I'll have you know that Dara Joy happens to be a smashingly good author who excels as much at her sheer storytelling abilities as she does at her luridly purple prose!" Hermione retorted, grabbing for the book. "Stop reading my trashy novels! You're embarrassing me."

He clung to it, making sure to capture her attention. *If* I read your trashy novels, wife, I will know *exactly* how you hope to be seduced. I am nothing, if not a meticulous researcher."

That answer was unexpected. Leaving the paperback in his hands, she stared up at him, wide-eyed. Taking advantage of her stunned stare, Severus slipped around behind her, looping his arms around her shoulders. Holding the book at eye-level for her, he cracked the worn paperback open to one of the more well-perused spots, and skimmed the lines with his eyes, while he listened to her unsteady, rapid, shallow breathing.

"Hmm...I don't know what a 'prautau' is, and I doubt I could procure one, given that this is merely a work of fantasy fiction...though the position sounds intriguing. Perhaps we could seek the rental of a sturdy horse sometime, instead?" A glide of pages under his thumbs, and he caught the next section she had apparently read over and over again. "Here's something more interesting. A husband seducing a reluctant wife..." Bracing open the pages with the thumb and littlest finger of one hand, he skimmed his right forefinger down the lines, and tapped one of the paragraphs. "I think I could enjoy doing this little suggestion. Indeed, if those lower lips are as sweet-tasting as your upper ones, I think I could enjoy very much doing that for a couple hours at a time..."

A flick, and he turned the page, the sound of rasping paper only slightly louder than her unsteady, not quite whimpering pants. That quiet low voice of his, which had drawled in sneers and snarls for so many years, had an entirely different quality to it now. It was actually...sexy. Stimulatingly so. Hermione flushed as she bit her lower lip, wanting to hear more, and receiving it.

"Mm...intriguing premise for the position being proposed, with the wife pinned to the bed so dominantly, yet tenderly...being ravished from behind," he murmured into her curly, chestnut-coloured hair. "Would you care to try it personally, some time, rather than just fantasizing about it?"

Embarrassment flooded her. He clearly knew how to find all her favorite bits in the bloody book. "I-I don't..."

"Shh." Flicking the book shut, he reached out and tossed it gently onto the nearest stack. "I have gone more than nine months since my last encounter with a woman. More than nine months without touching even a miniscule fraction of the passion I can now feel buried in your kisses, my wife, waiting to be unearthed between us. You, I suspect, have gone your whole young life without even beginning to tap into the sensuality you are clearly capable of appreciating, according to such well-read bits of lurid, lascivious prose." His arms wrapped around her torso, one above her breasts, the other below them as he breathed softly into her ear. Deliberately seducing her with his

words. "Perhaps the YLC indeed knew that you are indeed capable of turning your vast love of learning into an equally overwhelming love of passion, with the same depth and strength that I myself can."

Hermione closed her eyes, unsettled even further by the thought of the long-dreaded Potions Master having such a high libido...and unnervingly titillated by the idea; the ambiguity flushed her cheeks.

"As we are now husband and wife, I see no obstacles, save for your maidenly shyness, to our mutual exploration of the matter. By the time I am done with you tonight, however," he murmured, his head ducked so low his lips were brushing the velvety curve of her ear, "there will be no shyness left anywhere within your delectable body."

Damn, the man's voice was bloody seductive when he set his mind to it! Head tilting back to rest against the muscles of his shoulder and chest, eyes closed to shut out the banal sight of her childhood bedroom, Hermione struggled for breath. Not because of the way he was gripping her body, but from the way his words were gripping her mind. She felt one of his arms shift, heard him whisper a word, and opened her eyes. He'd conjured a broad, tall cheval-mirror, Transfiguring it out of the stack of books in front of them.

She was confronted by the sight of herself in a white skirt, pink flats and a pale pink blouse, her ringlets falling over her shoulders and down her back to her waist in disarray, wrapped in the arm of a tall, wand-clutching, black-haired, strong-nosed man with a dark fall of shoulderlength locks, a high-collared white shirt, and black trousers and boots. He whispered another word, flicking that wand, and the buttons of her blouse started unfastening themselves.

"I, er, don't think..."

"Good. *Don't* think," he agreed, which he knew wasn't what she meant. He tucked his wand into his pocket again, and touched the flesh that was being bared below her throat, caressing it lightly, gently. "Feel. Try to look upon this as a venture into a new sort of research--the science of how your husband can make you shiver and sigh with pleasure. How I can make you gasp and moan with desire...how I can make you come undone in my arms, until all you can do is clutch at my flesh and scream my name...say my name, wife."

"S...Severus," she managed in a bare, shaky murmur, as he cupped one bra-clad breast, exposed when the tails of her blouse untucked themselves from her skirt.

"Hermione," he whispered into her ear, encouraging her as he gently kneaded the warm curve of flesh in his palm. "Again..."

The blouse dropped to the floor, as he shifted his other arm from under her breasts, caressing the bared upper planes of her belly. It was only then that she realized his own shirt had been unbuttoned, and was now easing down his arms, too, necessitating another shift in his embrace as the magic undressed him, too. "S...Severus...?"

"Shh. Hermione," he soothed, nuzzling her thick hair aside so that he could press a kiss to that tender little niche just below the lobe of her ear. He didn't want her panicked; he wanted her acknowledging who he was. Her husband, as well as her former Potions Master. He liked the sound of his given name on her lips, and encouraged her to repeat it, as the rasp of her skirt-zipper broke the silence of the summer-warmed room. "Again."

"Severus..." It was more breathy than stammered, this time.

Without the spells woven into his frock-coat to keep him comfortable whatever the temperature, sweat was beginning to bead on his skin in the close warmth of the summer-heated room. Extracting his wand before his pants could fall, Severus flicked it in the direction of the two windows, cracking open each with a bit of wordless magic. That allowed a breeze to flutter the gauzy curtains, and caress their bared skin. Her skirt hit the carpet, along with his trousers. A sway of his body urged them both to step back, as the Disrobing Charm unfastened his boots and removed her shoes, leaving them in their underwear, her tights, and his socks.

Those socks and tights were next, as Severus kissed the side of her neck, nibbling his way onto her shoulder. His hands caressed her stomach, her brassiere-supported breasts. He dipped a finger teasingly below the waistband of her plain white knickers, making her gasp and try to bite back a ticklish giggle. Trailing that fingertip over her sensitive skin as she snickered involuntarily, dipping it into the intriguing dimple of her navel, he distracted her from the magical unfastening of her equally plain bra. Severus determined with a brief bit of thought that it was within his budget to clothe her in scraps of silk and lace imported from France; her lush young figure certainly deserved such an accolade.

She gasped as the straps fell, clutching the soft fabric cups protectively to her flesh. Here she was, standing in front of a conjured mirror in her girlish, book-cluttered bedroom, almost entirely naked in the arms of...of...it was getting rather hard to breathe, despite the intermittent breeze freshening the air.

"Shh... Who am I?" Severus asked her gently, lifting his mouth from her shoulder as he raised his hands to cover the backs of hers. In the classroom, he had always spoken harshly to his students, but this wasn't his classroom, and this was definitely no longer one of his students.

"S...Severus S-Snape," she managed, clenching her thighs together as she felt the tickle of magic attempting to lower the waistband of her knickers, as well as tugging on the straps of her bra.

"And what am I?" Severus prompted her, meeting her uncertain gaze in the mirror. For such a normally brave Gryffindor, she was clearly out of her depth at the moment. She stared into his dark eyes through the reflection of the mirror, uncertain what to answer. Tugging her left hand free, Severus allowed her to press her forearm to her breast for protection, but lifted the signet ring on her finger into deliberate view. For such a normally brilliant young woman, she was acting a little bit slow, as well. This was not a moment for deducting House-points and assigning detentions, however, even if he still could. "What am I, to you?"

"My...h-husband..."

He kissed the top of her head in silent praise. "Again. Who am I?"

"S-Severus Snape."

"And what am I?"

"M-my husband."

"Again. Who and what am I?"

"Severus Snape...my...husband." Saying it over and over again was easing some of the panic tightly gripping her chest. It helped that, with each correct answer, he pressed a soft kiss to her hair, unnerving her in a different manner with the gentleness of his caress.

"Again."

"Severus Snape. My husband." There, she managed to say it without too much hesitation, or any embarrassing stammering.

"One more time," he coaxed her, his breath warm enough against her ear to send a shiver racing down her skin.

"Severus Snape, my husband." It was a bare whisper, but it was an unflinching one.

He cupped her jaw, twisting her head up to meet his, opened her mouth just so with a touch of his thumb, and kissed her. He kissed her until Hermione turned around in his arms, needing to feel more than just those lips and that crick in her neck. She let her bra drop, and ignored the slide of her knickers down her thighs, the fluttering of the soft knit fabric against the tops of her feet. Instead, she savored the strange, attractive, sweat-sticky slide of her limbs against his, the furry feel of his hair-dusted chest against her breasts, the stroking of their tongues and lips as they continued to kiss. Severus pulled her closer against his frame, urging their hips together, but she shielded her lower body away at the hard, warm, unnervingly unfamiliar feel of his jutting erection.

Impatient with her returning shyness, intending to have her learn this lesson, too, he ended their kiss and turned her around, making her face the mirror again. "...Who are you?"

"Hermione Grang--"

His finger pressed against her mouth, silencing her. "Wrong answer. Who are you?"

"H...Hermione...Snape..." Her cheeks flushed at the gaffe, then blushed even brighter as he slid that hand down over her breast, teasing the tip of it for a moment, before feathering it down over her stomach, making her giggle involuntarily. Splaying his fingers low on her belly, he deliberately pulled her back against him, nudging the small of her back with his erection.

"Again. Who are you?"

"H-Hermione Snape."

"And what are you?" he prompted her, slipping his hand a fraction lower, teasing the curl-dusted triangle at the base of her stomach.

"Your...your wife."

"Damn straight," he muttered against the side of her throat. He caught her earlobe in his teeth, gently tugging until it slipped free and she shivered, moaning softly in her throat. "Again--who are you?"

"H-Hermione Snape. Your...wife," she added without prompting.

"Again."

"Hermione Snape, your--oh! Your w-wife," Hermione stammered as his fingertips dipped low enough to probe the crease between her thighs.

"Who am I?" he demanded in a whisper-soft caress, gliding his fingers into her feminine folds. A groan escaped his throat as he discovered how hot and wet she was.

"Severus Snape--my husband!" she gasped, arching her head back against his shoulder as he stooped just that little bit more, just enough to brush against the nub of her pleasure.

"Yes, and you are Hermione Snape--*my wife!*"

A deliberate, circling press of his fingertips accompanied that growled declaration. She cried out at the stimulation, shuddering in his grip, caught up in the lightning-bright glory of her first orgasm at the hands of another person. Grateful for his support as her knees turned to marmalade with the strength of her climax, Hermione choked as he continued circling her flesh with his digits, manipulating it, stimulating her in an ongoing rush of pleasure. Only when she sagged limply against his chest, supported almost entirely by the arm wrapped under her breasts, did he remove his hand from her mound.

Lifting his dew-slick fingers, he displayed the viscous moisture to her dazed eyes for a moment, then raised them even higher. Deliberately, he met her gaze in the mirror as he sucked each finger into his mouth, letting her read the passion in his eyes, and how savoury he found her essence, licking every last smear from his skin. A faint whimper escaped her throat and one hand lifted weakly towards his head. He caught it in his, bringing her fingers down to her own flesh and deliberately coating them with the embarrassing evidence of her pleasure. Bring them back up to his lips, he suckled the musky, fragrant moisture from her own skin, too.

VII.

Her eyes fluttered shut, unable to bear the too-intimate, erotic image of the Potions Master--her husband!--laving her fingers with his tongue. Feeling the soft-rough texture of it swirling around and between her fingers didn't help matters; it made her think embarrassing thoughts of other places that tongue could lash her flesh. Hermione wondered for a wild, briefly inane moment why her knees were still capable of supporting her weight, given his ticklish ministrations.

Finally, he withdrew her hand from the vicinity of those too-talented lips, that bloody seductive tongue. Releasing his grip, he slid his damp fingers down her body, making her moan as the caress ignited anticipation in every nerve touched, but he didn't return his fingers to the apex of her thighs. Instead, he bent and scooped her legs up in his arm, making her eyes fly open and her arms quickly clutch at his shoulders.

Not since she had been young enough to pick out the pink wallpaper, canopy, and curtain-frills over a decade ago had someone lifted her in their arms this easily. Abruptly aware of how strong that lean, spare frame was, she stared up at him as he carried her over to her bed. He laid her on the center of the pink-covered mattress, then settled the length of his body against hers on the narrow bed. And frowned softly, reaching under her curls, removing the soft lump caught under her hair. She blushed as he pulled out her ageworn teddy, with its striped red-and-white shirt, black little trousers, black eyepatch and red kerchief.

Severus arched a brow at the old toy. He hadn't noticed it before, and of all the stuffed animals he would've imagined in place of pride on a young Hermione Granger's bed, it wouldn't have been a pirate teddy-bear. "Who is this?"

It took her an embarrassed moment to realize he'd said a polite, interested 'who', instead of a snickering, derisive 'what'. Hermione felt a rush of gratitude for the kindness behind the phrasing of the question, and a certain awkwardness. "Er...well...it's Porthos the Pirate. But I haven't, um...I haven't felt the need to cuddle a teddy in years," she informed him quickly, not wanting him to think she was still a little girl. "I haven't even been back here since last summer."

"Porthos the Pirate, as in *The Three Musketeers*?" he enquired, receiving a hesitant nod of confirmation. "Hm. Well. Some things not even famous pirates are meant to see, up close." Stretching his arm back, he gently dropped the bear face-down on her nightstand. "He can rest there, for now. I'm sure one of our children will come to love him as much as you ever did."

"--Ch-children?" she stammered, staring at him.

Her surprise disappointed him. "I told you, I sought matrimony so that I could start a family. That implies having children. It's not that much different from why you chose to marry; saving an inheritance also implies children, since they would be the next ones to receive that inheritance after you yourself are gone. Surely you considered the possibility that your compatible-mate would anticipate having and raising a family with you?"

"Well...no, not really. I was a lot more focused on getting Aunt Hell out of my life," she confessed. "I mean, I didn't discount the possibility, but it was...er...a remote thing. Something to think about in the future."

"Well, you'd bloody well better think about it now," he warned her, shifting close enough to press his erection against her hip and belly. His hand cupped her back, turning her firmly towards him. "Because I am about to make love to you, and I did not bring any contraceptive potions."

Hermione shivered at his resolute murmur. His hand slid up over her shoulder, cupped her cheek, and nudged her lower lip. Deliberately readying her for his incoming kiss. In a rush that was part arousal, part the need to hide her embarrassment and confusion, and a hefty part courage, Hermione pushed past his thumb, kissing him first. He stilled for a moment, surprised, then encouraged her with a stroke of his hand down to her breast, and a stroke of his tongue past her lips.

Kneading her flesh, he kissed her back for a few more moments, then dipped his head, plumping her nipple between two of his splayed fingers. A flick of his tongue against the teased, rosy peak made her gasp. A shift of his hand, and he sucked the whole of her areola into his lips, greedily but gently, his intent to pleasure, not hurt. Her hand touched his arm, his shoulder, feathered its way into his hair, cupping his head and encouraging him to do more.

Urging her wordlessly onto her back, Severus occupied himself for a while with the worship of her young, firm breasts. But as she caressed the parts of him that she could reach, he did the same to her, and that meant his hand eventually found its way back between her thighs, his fingers delving through her slick folds. Memory of her prior, incredible pleasure clashed and meshed with the delicious shivers he was sending through her veins. Whimpering, she parted her knees, silently demanding more. Obliging, he kissed his way down her ticklish stomach, though the awkwardly narrow size of her bed forced him almost all the way off of it, angling to one side to accommodate his frame.

At the last moment, awareness of what he was about to do filtered through her pleasure-hazed consciousness. Eyes widening, Hermione drew in a breath, ready to protest at the sheer intimacy, but he parted her folds with his fingers, and lapped at their hidden depths...and her uncertain protest escaped as a shout of shocked pleasure instead. "--Severus! Oh, god!"

He didn't stop, despite the peak and decline of her orgasm. Even if her taste hadn't been liquid ambrosia, he wouldn't have stopped licking her soft, hot, wet folds. Not when she cried out again and shuddered, arching her hips up into his mouth, letting him know that, nervous or not, she clearly loved what he was doing to her. He had hesitated in doing this with other women in the past, for all that he found it enjoyable those few times he had tried. Those women had usually been of a somewhat loose nature--usually the kind who didn't care that he wasn't the handsomest man in the world, so long as his Sickles were handsome enough. But his wife was too young to be so physically jaded, and clearly too innocent in her demeanor and her responses.

And simply too delicious. He laved and nipped, savoring her musky dew as she writhed under him, devouring her as thoroughly as any book that was ever cradled in his hands. Ensuring she crested yet another peak of pleasure, and another, before easing a finger into her depths. She gasped at the unfamiliar invasion, but he didn't stop licking the little sentinel of her pleasure overlooking the opening being plundered with gentle, slow strokes. She winced a little, a twitch of all her muscles, as he eased a second finger in beside the first, stretching her flesh. Severus soothed her with another climax, easing his way inside, pressing in as far as those two fingers could go. The knowledge of how tight she was around just two of his fingers reminded him of how hard he was, of how tight she would be when sheathing his shaft.

Easing his fingers back and forth, he licked her to the trembling, whimpering verge of yet another climax...and withdrew his hands and lips. Crawling back up over her body, he saluted the peak of each breast, then her mouth, letting her taste herself on his lips. To his astonishment, she growled and pushed him over, nudging him onto his side next to her. And not only onto his side, but onto his back, where she took remarkably dominant control of their next kiss.

Hermione was on fire. All these years of respecting her professor, all these years of secretly admiring how tough and strict his standards were, something that had appealed deeply to her scholarly little heart...all these years of watching those lips lecture, deride and sneer...and only now did she get to find out that he could do such marvelous, wonderful, beyond-pleasurable things with his mouth? If this was a research project into mutually exploring their sensuality, Hermione was bound and determined, enthused by all those ruddy orgasms, to earn some serious extra-credit now.

There wasn't much in the way of shyness left in her, anymore. Having the dreaded, feared Potions Master groaning hungrily deep in his throat, hands stroking her thighs tenderly, gripping them lustfully as he buried that beak-nosed face of his in her quim, was an undeniably effective method for banishing any lingering embarrassment. And she was a Gryffindor alumni, a House renowned for the courage of its members. With that courage to guide her now, she kissed her way somewhat awkwardly down his chest, not quite sure how to make her own ministrations as polished as his had been, but determined to return every shudderingly good favour.

There was only so much about sex and sexual techniques that one could learn from a book, after all, which had formed a tangible portion of her uncertainty, earlier. But from the way he groaned and clutched at her curls, from the way his breath hissed through his teeth when she licked his nipple, swirling her tongue around the warm, soft oval of flesh, she figured she was doing alright. Hermione certainly liked the texture of his nipples, both of them with their tiny, lentil-sized nipples, Knut-sized areolas, and the circling ring of black chest-hairs guarding each one.

When she experimentally caught the tip of one very gently between her teeth, he grunted, hissing her name and tightening his fingers almost painfully in her hair. Startled, she lifted her head, unsure if she'd hurt him. And rapidly found herself on her back as he flipped her over, placing her roughly centered on the bed, and firmly slotted his hips between her thighs.

He captured her mouth in a deep, savouring kiss before she could do more than draw breath to question him--and felt her breath catch in her throat as he rubbed himself against her. Hot, hard, foreignly male, explicitly intimate, his shaft rubbed between her still-damp folds. A shift of position to get one arm down between their bodies, and he gripped himself, probing gently with the tip of his manhood until he was seated in the right spot. A shift of his hand, and he circled and pressed his thumb on her clitoris, making her gasp as pleasure came rushing back to her loins. Pleasure, and pressure.

He pressed slowly into her, the stretching pain of his invasion competing with the shuddering thrill of his thumb, until the head of his prick was firmly lodged within her too-tight flesh. Both of them were now breathing heavily, her from the aching, stinging, burning sensation, and him from the urge to thrust hard and fast, and damned with the consequences to her virginity. Resting his forehead against hers, Severus struggled against the barbaric need to claim her fiercely, roughly, until he could trust his voice enough to speak normally. Almost normally.

"...You do realize this is going to hurt, the first time. And maybe one or two times afterward," he added in an almost conversational tone. He wasn't exactly a small man; there were some things that did, indeed, correspond in their proportions, and the size of his nose and the length of his fingers were both very good indicators.

"It's bloody well hurting now," Hermione informed him through her teeth, her rough tone conveying her discomfort verbally. Her nails, digging into his back, conveyed her discomfort physically to him.

Severus winced as those unexpected talons flinched a little deeper into his skin, threatening to pierce his hide. "I'm *trying* to not hurt you--"

"Just get it over with!" she ordered him. "Then we can get back to doing the good stuff, again."

Eyeing her, he gauged her level of sincerity, then snorted. "...I see you haven't lost one whit of your Gryffindor courage, even though you've now graduated."

"So where's your Slytherin ambition?" Hermione challenged him back, lifting her chin slightly. "Or do the alumni of your own House typically fail to complete whatever they've started?"

Both of his brows rose at that. Hooking a hand under her knee, he lifted it up over his hip, then did the same on the other side. "Are you challenging me?"

Her heels thumped into his backside. "I'm telling you to ruddy well get moving!"

Still, he hesitated. "...We do this, and you will be irrevocably married to me, Hermione," he warned her softly, seriously. "What I claim, *keep*."

That made her hesitate. He watched her eyes narrow, could almost see the whirring of thoughts in her head, but her expression was shuttered. Without actively using Legilimency against her, there was no way to tell precisely what she was thinking.

"...I've always admired your intellect, Severus," she finally murmured, surprising him with her introspection. "I've also admired your sardonic wit. You were a true challenge, to wring even the tiniest drop of praise from your lips over the years. But that was when you were my teacher. Now you are my husband...and I expect you to be *very* vocal in your praise of me. No more of this 'I'm Slytherin and you're Gryffindor' rivalry bullshit--you got that?"

He stared at her, blinking. A frown creased his brow. "Are you trying to lay down the law, in this marriage?"

Her jaw tilted up just a little bit more. "Yes, I do believe I am. Do you have a problem with that?"

"With the fact that you're inherently bossy? Or the fact that you're trying to take control of our relationship?"

"Either."

"If you weren't so bossy and courageous, I'd eat you alive and spit out the bones, my dear," he drawled with barely a moment's thought. "I am not a shy, retiring man, and I do believe the YLC knew that singular fact, when they selected you for me. As for who will be in control...I do believe I will look forward to our many arguments on that point, in the years to come."

Before she could retort, he captured her mouth and thrust firmly from the hips, piercing her virginity as he swallowed the pained, wincing shriek accompanying its loss. Her fingers dug ruthlessly into the lean muscles of his back, bruising as well as no doubt bloodying his flesh from the depth of her fingernails, but it was only fair, given his own harsh rending of hers. Shifting partway out, he thrust in a second, deeper time as she grimaced and whimpered, then did it a third time before coming to a rest. Not just for her sake, now that her maidenhead was torn, but for his own. The squeezing, tight pressure of her womanhood threatened to make him lose self-control, and he really, really needed to hold both of them still long enough for her body to recover and relax from the pain of his invasion.

It hurt. It hurt it hurt it hurt. But the kiss that had started out smothering her screams now eased the grimace from her lips. His mouth nuzzled and nipped at hers, his teeth lightly scraping over her lower lip, nudging it down as surely as his thumb could, and the comparison of that simple little act to her earlier pleasure banished some of the lingering agony down in her loins.

He claimed her mouth once again as she sighed, slowly relaxing around him; the thrusting of his tongue was gentler and much more bearable than what he'd done below, so she returned it touch for touch, eyes still shut from that breaching. She could only blame herself, too; there might've been a gentler way to do it, but she'd gone and challenged him to just 'get it over with', and he had certainly done that. At least it didn't hurt nearly as much anymore, though some of the stinging still lingered.

Severus ended their kiss with a last, almost sipping taste of her passion-swollen lips. Most of the tension had eased from her body, but not all of it. Still, there was one more obstacle to demolish. She'd accepted him as her husband when standing naked in front of a mirror with him, and had accepted her wifely right to return each of his fervent caresses, but he knew it was a different sort of intellectual demand, to visually accept him, the sour, homely-faced Potions professor when he was invading her flesh as intimately as this.

"Open your eyes, my dear."

Blinking them open, Hermione looked up into his face. It was still a little disconcerting, seeing him so close to her, yet not with the same expression he wore whenever he had snarled into her face for some class-borne infraction. No, his expression was almost tender. "Yes?"

"Who am I?" he asked her.

"Severus Snape, my husband," she replied promptly, having learnt his little lesson quite well, thanks to his seduction of her in front of that mirror.

The quickness of her admittance eased some of the tension in his chest. It also reminded him of her know-it-all tone, whenever he'd finally deigned to call on her for an answer in class. He let his approval glow in his gaze, though only the slightest smile hovered at the edge of his lips. "And you are...?"

"Hermione Snape, your wife," she stated just as promptly as before. And surprised herself with the realization that her insides tingled pleasantly from the admission. It was disconcerting to realize she had actual, proprietary feelings about those two simple words, *husband* and *wife*, but Hermione decided it was disconcerting in the same way that having the Potions Master's face buried in her crotch was disconcerting. Deliciously so. Courage rising inside her chest, she added tartly, "A wife, I might add, who is now dying to know what it's like to c-climax during intercourse."

She blushed as she stammered on the intimately blunt words, but the heat in her face was nothing to the redding flush of his own those words invoked. He stared down at her, dark eyes wide, their expression oddly vulnerable as well as wondering. Marvelling. This time when he dipped his dark head for a kiss, it stayed gentle and tender only long enough for her to return it firmly.

A sigh escaped from him as she increased her enthusiasm under the tasting of his lips. Gathering her close, he flexed his hips slowly, gently as together they deepened the kiss. It still stung a little, but the friction wasn't bad. No, it wasn't bad at all. Closer to marvelous, really, as he increased the depth and the pace. Bloody marvelous, in fact...

Fire seared up his limbs and crawled down his spine. Gritting his teeth, Severus lowered his face to the curve of her shoulder, breathing hard with the need to keep thrusting strongly for her pleasure, and yet somehow avoid his own. And then--blessed!--her nails clenched more deeply than ever, piercing his flesh yet again as she pressed her head back with a keening, shuddering cry, and he was finally free to break his bloody self-control and pound into her as roughly as his previously tightly-reined needs demanded, grunting with each rapid, enflamed, demanding stroke.

She felt his climax following close to the heels of her own, heard his ragged gasp of her name, felt his flesh pulsing, warm and wet, within the depths of her own. Her womb clenched, actually clenched deep inside her belly, at the thought of Severus Snape's seed flooding her body. A thought that should've been insane seared through her body; wracked with pleasure as she was, Hermione bit her lower lip against the prickle of tears in her eyes. Less than two hours ago, it *would've* been utterly insane to think it, to change her mind about whether or not this sort of thing was important to her--it was important to him, though it hadn't been to her--but not here. Not now, not writhing in the throes of sexual ecstasy. Not while wrapped in her husband's fervent embrace as he kissed her shoulder, her throat, her chin, her lips...

Their pleasure took some time to subside, but it did fade into a limp sort of lethargy. Sweat dried on their skin as the late afternoon sunlight poured through the gauzy material covering the western of the two windows, and the curtains of the eastern one fluttered inward on a slight breeze. Severus knew he had to be heavy, collapsed on top of her as he was, with his face buried in the curls next to her head and his diminishing shaft still buried in her tender flesh, but he was disinclined to move just yet. All those sweet curves, which were now his to explore in perpetuity, made a marvelously feminine mattress underneath his torso. The scent of her hair--some sort of herbal, flowery potion--was entrancing to breathe, combined as it was with the heady, musky scent of sex. The languid caress of her hands on his back and his sides let him know subtly that she wasn't in a hurry to have him move yet, either.

Someone's stomach rumbled, announcing its hunger. Reluctantly, Severus lifted his head, bracing his weight on an elbow. The movement slipped him out of her body, but he'd be able to return to its warm embrace soon enough. Looking down at his young wife, he frowned at the sight of faint, damp tracks on the sides of her face, and the equally faint redness rimming her eyes. Guilt--an uncomfortable, unwelcome feeling--twisted inside of his chest. Freeing his other hand, Severus wiped gently at the lingering moisture. "I'm...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you cry..."

Hermione sniffed and quickly shook her head. "I didn't cry. Well, notcry-cry. I was...I was just overwhelmed, that's all. It was just really beautiful." The glow that was kindled in his eyes at her embarrassed admission warmed her almost as much as it did him. Hermione stared up at her husband, her lover, and found herself admitting the first thing that came into her lethargy-addled, passion-muddled head. "God, you're handsome when you're happy..."

That made him blink and frown down at her. "Mrs. Snape, your jest is *not* amusing. I know very well what I am, and I am *not* handsome!"

She frowned in turn at him. "If I want to think of you as handsome, I bloody *will*! And you'll take it and *like* it, too! It's a wife's prerogative, after all, to think her husband is handsome as sin...even when he's being an *idiot*."

He drew in a sharp breath to retort at the impertinence of her words--and let it out on a rueful laugh, undone by the curly-haired young woman lying intimately under him. Impulsively, he brushed her lips with his as she gave his smiling expression a disconcerted look. "Whereas I shall think of *you* as incredibly beautiful, as a husband's prerogative...even when you're being a shrewish termegant. Agreed?"

Some of her irritation melted away. Shifting her hand, she reached up to touch his face, and froze, staring at the reddish-brown smear on her fingertips. Both of them froze, then Hermione shoved him off of her, scrabbling to sit up so that she could peer down at the multiple, crescent-shaped cuts and bruises on his back, horror widening her eyes. "--Dear god! What have I done to your back? God, Severus, I'm so sorry!"

"Shh, it doesn't hurt that much," he soothed her, twisting and sitting up as well. His mouth twisted as well, in an amused smile; a glance at the coverlet under them showed proof of her own wounds, making both of them blush. "I shed no less blood than you did, my dear wife; it is only fitting. Should you care to mark me again like that in the

future...somehow, I doubt I will mind, given what we will be doing."

She blushed at that, ducking her gaze in self-consciousness. Lifting her chin with a finger, he looked into her toffee-brown eyes. His finger trailed across the heat of one cheek in a whisper-soft caress.

"No more shyness, my wife. It will not be allowed."

"I can't help blushing!" she muttered defensively, and received a kiss on her lips for her protest. "It's an involuntary, capillary-based response!"

"Blushes are allowable," he conceded, drawing back. "But no ducking your chin, and no looking away from my gaze. You should take pride at how thoroughly both of us enjoyed this little interlude. I know I do, at hearing you scream my name in the throes of your rapture, and knowing it was because of what I did so well to you."

Her cheeks burned again, as she retorted, "No more than you did mine, during your own pleasure!"

That earned her another kiss. Letting it deepen for a few moments, Severus laid back down on the bed. Tapping his chest with a finger, he drew her attention to his flesh. "...Now, I believe you were kissing me somewhere around here, before I interrupted your research of my anatomy?"

Distinctly pink-faced, she summoned her courage with a deep breath, and lowered her mouth to his lightly furred, masculine chest.

Chapter 8-Epilogue

Chapter 3 of 3

Severus and Hermione face the others, and their reactions, to their marriage.

VIII.

The homely, comfortable yard of the Burrow was lit by several colourful globes, magical lanterns that cast a rainbow effect on the party taking place in the warm twilight, when Severus and Hermione Apparated onto the garden path. Instantly, Severus was uncomfortable, seeing so many members of the Order laughing and chatting around the pair of tables covered in half-eaten platters of food, and the chairs scattered around in conversational groups. This wasn't just a graduation party for Ron Weasley and his two best friends, but an apparently impromptu celebration of the end of Voldemort's reign of terror. Well, maybe not so impromptu; just because *he* hadn't received an invitation didn't automatically mean others hadn't. The other members of the Order of the Phoenix had been his colleagues for a long time, and there was a certain level of respect for that, but aside from maybe the Headmaster, none of them had ever bothered to turn him into a friend.

They had, however, turned Hermione into their friend. Or maybe she had turned them into hers; god knew the young woman was engaging, charming, and naturally friendly. He envied the cheerful greeting called out to her by Minerva McGonagall, and the friendly hand lifted by Remus Lupin, the first two to notice their arrival. That hand faltered at the sight of him, but then he expected little else from the last of the four Gryffindors to plague his school-years. Mindful of how uncomfortable his presence would make the others at this gathering, he touched his wife discreetly at the small of her back.

A dip of his head and he murmured for her ears alone, "...I'll leave you here, to enjoy the party. I'll come back for you in a couple hours, or longer, if you'd like."

She frowned up over her shoulder at him. "Don't be ridiculous, Severus! You're staying for the party, too."

"Hermione, most of these people don't *like* me," he pointed out bluntly in an undertone as Ginny Weasley yelled a greeting and came bounding their way, strawberry-red hair flying over her shoulders. She slowed a little as she recognized the dark-clad figure behind her friend's white-clad body, but her faltering smile recovered. Harry followed close behind, his expression a bit more grim.

"Er...hello, Professor! Hi, Hermione! Where've you been all this time?" the youngest, freckled Weasley demanded. "The party an started an hour ago!"

"--Getting her house and things sorted out of storage," Harry interjected quickly, giving the Potions Master a dark look. He was clearly suspicious of their long absence. Rightfully so, though he didn't yet know what the two of them had been doing for the last few hours.

"There was something else, wasn't there?" Ginny pressed. "I thought I heard you saying something about a job interview to that horrid aunt of yours?"

"Yes, well, it didn't turn out quite the way any of us had anticipated," asserted the Boy Who Annoyed Severus, taking Hermione by the elbow and guiding her towards the tables. "There's plenty of food left."

"Yeah. Tonks may be a klutz in the kitchen--as well as nearly everywhere else--but she had a ton of really tasty family recipes that she shared with Molly," Ginny agreed.

"Good. I'm starving."

The youngest Weasley almost tripped on the path. Hermione collided with Harry, as he stopped and glanced back sharply at the tall, dark man behind them, the one who had spoken. Severus gave him a small, tight smile. It was one thing for himself to decide whether or not he should stay; it was another thing for the Potter prat to try and exclude him. Especially from the company of his wife.

"Er...you're staying, then?" Ginny asked him with a weak, polite smile.

"Of course, he is! I invited him," Hermione asserted, glancing back at her husband. A tug shook Harry's hand from her elbow, and a step back removed her from the younger man's side. Bringing her firmly close to the tall, lean, hook-nosed man. Eyeing her husband, looking forboding and brooding in his black frock-coat and black trousers, she made up her mind. "...Well? Don't just stand there!" The back of her hand hit him in the stomach. "Take off your coat, and make yourself comfortable! The Weasleys don't exactly stand on formality, you know."

Ginny and Harry weren't the only ones at the party who blinked in shock, as Severus winced and rubbed his wool-covered belly. No one *one*--had ever dared to thump the Potions Master in the stomach before, let alone address him so casually while doing so. Still, it was almost worth enduring her little attack to see the unsettled expressions on the faces of the men and women in the garden, bewildered expressions that continued when he reached up and began unbuttoning his coat, complying readily with her less-than-quiet demand. Removing the jacket, he took her own as she removed it as well, the white cotton a sharp contrast to the dark wool in his hands, and pressed them into Potter's stunned hands. "Put those somewhere safe, will you?"

It was, quite possibly, the politest command he'd ever given the young man. Sliding his hand possessively to the back of his wife's waist, Severus guided her forward, towards the food-laden tables and the wide-eyed celebrants still gaping at them. Maybe this would be amusing after all.

Or maybe not; a large, bushy-bearded figure rose from a seat made out of an overturned barrel as they approached the tables, and used his greater height and mass in trying to give Severus an intimidating, thoroughly displeased look. "Ere now," Rubeus Hagrid asserted gruffly. "Wot've ye got yer hand on Miss Granger for, P'rfeessor Snape? She's a nice girl, an' ye'll treat 'er as such, 'r answer t' me!"

He drew in a breath to speak, but the woman at his side beat him to it, filling the silence following the half-giant's declaration. "Of course, he will, Hagrid! He's been treating me *very* nicely!"

Severus fervently hoped the coloured lights hovering overhead masked the heat rising in his face, but doubted it.

"--Since *when*?" demanded George Weasley--or maybe it was Fred, they were so damned alike--with a freckled scowl of disbelief.

"Since we got married, this afternoon!" she retorted firmly, leaning back against the man standing right behind her.

That caused an immediate uproar. Even Severus winced at that open, bald statement. He winced again as Molly Weasley started shrieking at him from one side and Remus Lupin lambasted him from the other. Arthur Weasley shook his fist, Moody growled and rolled his blue-spinning eye, and Minerva McGonagall clutched at her chest. Tonks and Mundungus both had dropped their jaws as far as humanly possible, Ron and Harry were flinching, the other Weasley children were stammering and protesting, Hagrid was roaring, and Albus Dumbledore...well, the Headmaster was laughing, and laughing hard enough that he had to take his spectacles off so he could wipe at his wrinkled, watering blue eyes with a rumpled kerchief, but then the old wizard had always been more than a bit dotty whenever a situation was less than deadly serious. Despite the death-threats the Weasley twins were now shouting at him, Severus knew this moment didn't quite qualify.

But strangely enough, despite the hurricane of outrage and disbelief swirling noisily around them, Severus felt as though he stood in a sea of calm. All because Hermione was leaning against him. Taking a stand against her many friends, and visually stating her rightful place firmly at his side. Or rather, between him and her friends. Tucking his arms around her from behind, he tucked the top of her curly brown head under his chin. When she lifted her hands to his arms, covering them and tilting her head slightly, he dipped his head and rested his cheek against her temple, closing his eyes against the sight of the blustering, outraged half-giant and his equally furious friends.

The furor died down at that unabashed display of tenderness, dipping into a stunned quiet. Only the Headmaster's chuckling still echoed through the lantern-lit clearing. Molly Weasley rounded him, as Severus opened his eyes again to cautious slits.

"What are you laughing at? This is a disaster, not a jest!" the redheaded matron of the Burrow snapped.

"--I would hardly call a compatibility rating of 98% *adisaster*," Hermione stated coldly, silencing the older woman. "Not when you've said many times that your own was 'a comfortable, cozy 83%'."

Only once before had she been even half this angry at the normally very nice Mrs. Weasley, and that was back when the woman had been so cold and unfriendly to her that time back in her fourth year, when the older woman had thought Hermione was panting after both Harry and Viktor Krum at the same time while ignoring her youngest son. She felt her husband's arms tighten slightly around her, and knew it was in thanks for her staunch defense of their new status.

"We both applied anonymously for marriage," Severus spoke for her, knowing the others were listening as he explained the situation to his Order colleague, "and while I'll admit it was a shock to come face-to-face with one of my former students in the justiciar's office just hours after her final departure from the school, that high of a compatibility rating is extremely rare, and not something a smart wizard or witch would dare ignore."

"As neither Severus nor I are fools," Hermione added lightly, if with a slight frown for the way most of the people around them flinched at the pairing of their names, "we decided to go through with the marriage."

"Well, you can just *un*-go through with it," Arthur Weasley ordered her, flipping his hand at her in emphasis. "Whatever disreputable Agency you used clearly made a grievous mistake! He's at least twice your age, for starters!"

"I'd hardly call the Yenta's Livery Company disreputable," she retorted, snuggling a little more firmly into Severus' chest. "It's the oldest Geneamorphological Agency in the country, and openly acknowledged as the best; if they say we're 98% compatible, then we *are* ninety-bloody-eight percent compatible! And before any of you say another word, if you continue to make Severus unwelcome here--a man, I remind you, who has served the Order loyally for years, saved Harry's life on innumerable occasions, and who should've had your friendship, your trust, and your respect for all his hard work, despite the way he's had to pretend all this time to have an awful personality, just to allay Voldemort's suspicions--then I am not welcome, either. *Since we're clearly so much alike.*"

Her last six words cut through the warm, lantern-lit night like a frost-edged knife. It certainly made everyone think, as they blinked and looked at each other, visually seeking out each other's opinions of the matter. A tentative voice broke the silence, as Molly Weasley said with a weak smile, "Well...nobody's going to ask you...going to ask *either* of you to leave, dearie. It's just...it's just been a bit of a *shock*, that's all."

"A ruddy *huge* bit of a shock," her redheaded husband muttered audibly, and grunted as his wife elbowed him in the ribs.

"--Behave, Arthur," she muttered audibly, and managed a slightly more convincing smile. "Well! We'll just have to turn this into *triple* celebration, won't we? The three of you graduating, the fall of the Dark Lord...and, er, your wedding-supper."

"Hang on, just a minute," Minerva McGonagall asserted. "How do we know they really are married? And for that matter, how do we know they didn't know and plan this while she was still his student?"

Severus stiffened, eyes narrowing in suspicion as he looked over at her. Was the old, bespectacled cat trying to get him fired from his job? To his surprise, a voice answered her enquiry. Glumly, but honestly.

"We witnessed it," Harry told her, raising his hand, his scarred face pinched with a dour look. "Believe me, Hermione *had*o idea who the YLC had picked out for her, until this afternoon when we arrived in London. Neither did *he*."

"--We?" Molly asked him sharply, shooting her youngest son a suspicious look. She knew *very* well how many of them had gone off with Hermione's great-aunt, earlier that afternoon. "Who, exactly, is 'we'?"

Ron raised his own hand sheepishly, as the others all looked at him. "I witnessed it, too."

"...If you don't count the bits where he fainted," Severus muttered *sotto voce*, for his wife's ears alone. He was gratified to hear her struggle to suppress a snort of laughter, as Molly rounded on her son, drew in sharp breath to blast him, then gritted her teeth into a smile and merely said,

"That's very nice of you to tell us about it...*finally*. But we'll have a little discussion about *that* later."

Ron blanched.

Molly turned her smile back to Hermione and Severus, this time with a little more warmth than the toothy tightness she had given her youngest male offspring. "...Come, now; eat, both of you! There's still plenty left to go around! Where have you been, by the way? And when, exactly, did you get married, today?"

"About five fifteen in the justiciar's office, and then we were at my family home afterwards, checking over a few things," Hermione replied calmly. Hoping fervently that the coloured lights hovering overhead hid some of her blush. At least the intervening hours had done quite a lot to banish the urge to look shyly at the ground, which would've definitely given their earlier activities away.

"I'd like to know *why* you got married," Remus Lupin muttered, giving Severus a hard look.

Severus felt Hermione stiffening under his touch. From her careful phrasing, he figured she didn't want anyone but him and her two best friends to know about her horrid aunt; she clearly wasn't the sort of relative one wanted to talk about, if it could be helped. "For the same reason why anyone wishes to pursue matrimony: to start a family. Now that Voldemort is finally dead, a wife and children of my own cannot be held hostage to his madness...and Hermione wishes to replace the family she's lost with a new one of her own. We are both more than happy to oblige each other, in that respect."

The greying werewolf eyed him, blinked, and shook his head. "...*really* didn't need that image in my head."

"Then you shouldn't have bloody well asked." *Thump*. Severus winced at the elbow digging into his lower ribs. His young wife had clearly studied Mrs. Weasley's technique over the past several years, to be so unerringly accurate, and so swift. Apparently, she wanted him to be more polite towards the bugger. He debated leaving his words stand as stated, versus what she could do with that elbow later, if she was still displeased with him. "...Sorry, that should have been, 'You need not concern yourself with such unseemly details, Lupin'. Is that more polite, my dear?"

"It'll do, for now," she returned serenely, and stepped out of the circle of his arms, heading for the food-laden tables. He let her go, only to have Dumbledore amble up to him and clap him companionably on the back.

"Congratulations, Severus!--Sorry, did I hurt you?" he asked solicitously as Severus grunted audibly in pain, wincing from the older wizards' unwitting attack on the bruises and nail-cuts dotting his hide.

"It's nothing," he grunted. "My back is just a little bruised, at the moment."

"--What, does your back hurt?" Fred--or George--Weasley asked in a mock-hearty voice, smacking him on the other side, making the Potions Master grunt again. "...Oh, sorry!"

"Yeah, sorry!" George--or Fred--added, whacking him from behind, eliciting another tight sound of pain. "...Sorry that we weren't the ones to beat you up," he added in a low growl. "Who got *that* ruddy honor?"

"My wife, actually." The pain they had inflicted was worth their puzzled frowns. Severus, deciding he was going to enjoy this damned, torturous party one way or another, added blandly, "It turns out she doesn't know her own strength...when in the throes of ecstasy."

Both twins stumbled back, eyes widening. Dumbledore started laughing again, the batty old wizard...and Ron fainted. Again. Something squeaked and squirmed out from under his crumpled body, a potato-headed little garden gnome. His wife's cat, Crookshanks, came darting out of the shadows from under the picnic table with a rraowrring hiss, and the gnome squeaked and ran for the fenceline. The stout orange tabby stopped chasing it after a few yards, then padded smugly over to Severus and rubbed up against his trouser-leg...right before stalking off again in the fickle manner of all felines. Leaving a smear of orange-and-white fur on the stark black wool, just as the Potions Master stooped to pet the beast and make friends with it, for his wife's sake.

...Well, *some* of the evening would be entertaining. Some of it would clearly just be annoying.

IX.

A distant banging roused Hermione from sleep. The view of the chamber around her was disorienting, when she pried open her eyes. Nothing was familiar, save for the stacks of books. Lots and lots of books. Most of them, however, were not paperbacks; at least, in the stacks she could see under the glow of the high, slanted, cylindrical window-embasement. The banging continued in the distance, a flurry of cracking blows, a pause, another set of sharp, staccato knocks, a pause...

Ah, yes. Severus' bedchamber. Down at the dungeon-level of the castle. A cramped little suite of rooms that was going to be utterly inadequate for both his book-collection and hers. She yawned as she sat up, remembering mentioning it to her husband last night out at the Burrow, who had in turn brought up the subject with the Headmaster, who had promised to look into getting them a bigger suite. Dumbledore had teased her in turn about trying to start a second library at the school, and continued snickering through half the night over the pairing of his Potions Master with the school's brightest alumni in a hundred years.

She also remembered the two of them--her and Severus--discussing where to retire for the night, either her parents' home, which had no electricity at the moment, or here to the dungeons, and the peace and quiet of an almost unoccupied school. Her husband didn't live anywhere else, actually; it had been determined too dangerous to live beyond the protective wardings that surrounded Hogwarts, early on in his time as a spy for the Order. There had been something in that discussion about picking a honeymoon destination today, but it had been tabled in favor of starting the honeymoon bit early by christening his bed, much as they'd christened hers. That had ended the night in a long, torrid bout of 'research', as he'd slyly called it.

Research that had left him dead to the world, this morning; certainly the only way she could tell her husband was even still alive was from the way his back rose and subsided slightly with each steady breath, and the slight ruffling of Crookshank's fur, curled up as the cat was in the gap between their two pillows, inches from his nose. Dead to the world, both of them, despite the annoying thumping on that distant door. Casting around, Hermione looked for something to wear, but she hadn't even opened her trunk last night after cramming it into a book-cluttered corner, let alone taken out a set of pajamas or a dressing gown.

Spotting his shirt, she slid out of the bed and tossed it over her head, padding barefoot out of the bedroom. It wasn't much, but it did cover her practically to the knees...and all the way to the tips of her fingers, as the sleeves. Pushing those up, she picked her way through the clutter in the front room. There wasn't much to the suite, just a bathroom, bedroom and sitting-room, the latter two of which were crowded with books, papers, and scrolls, plus bottles, caskets, boxes and packets of potions ingredients.

They definitely would need bigger quarters.

Padding up to the door, Hermione hesitated, then called out, "...Who is it?"

"It's Minerva McGonagall. Please open the door, Hermione."

Uncomfortable with her lack of attire--she was short enough that the hem of his shirt fell to the tops of her knees, but she wasn't wearing a stitch otherwise--Hermione grasped the door knob and cracked the door open a tiny, cautious bit. The stern Transfigurations Mistress stood on the far side of the door, one hand braced on her cane, which she had apparently been using to pound on the door from the sharpness of the knocking. The other hand now rested atop it, a small packet of letters clutched in her grip.

"Er...yes, Professor?"

"Minerva, please. You're no longer my student, after all. I wish to discuss something with you. May I come in?"

"Erm...I'm not really dressed for company, at the moment, Minerva," Hermione hedged. "And Severus is still asleep, if you wanted to talk to him."

The older woman's mouth twitched. She looked like she was censoring a few thoughts, before finally saying, "Well, I sincerely doubt you have anything about you that I haven't seen on myself, at a younger age...and though this does concern him, too, you can simply relay it to him once he rises."

She debated that for a moment, then nodded. Hermione didn't think Severus let anyone into his quarters very often, but she ~~was~~ his wife. Cramped and temporary though

they now were, these were her quarters, too. Opening the door, she stepped back, letting the Transfigurations Mistress inside. The dark-haired, aging witch handed her the packet of letters, then found a perch on a seat at the table next to the stout iron stove used to heat the chamber in the wintertime.

"Your mail," Minerva informed her, as Hermione flicked through the letters, curious to know what sort of mail her husband received. "I thought I'd bring it down, since neither of you were at breakfast this morning. Er...not that many of our fellow staffmembers bother to rise so early on the morning after sending our students packing, at the end of the school year..."

"Thank you; that was very kind of you--oh my!" Hermione dropped the other letters onto the table, staring at the last one in her hand. "It's addressed to me!"

"Of course it's addressed to you," her former teacher stated dryly. "Four letters to Severus, and one to you. They were all dropped at his place at the head table; apparently the post-owls have already learnt you're now staying here."

"No, not that--it's addressed to me, as Mrs. Hermione Snape!" she corrected her former Head of House. Prising the wax seal from the back, she opened it--and squealed in surprise. "--Oh my god! I've been accepted to apprentice to the Unspeakables!! Oh my god, oh my god! I *never* thought I'd get in! I mean, I applied and everything, and I've always had the high grades for it but they don't take just anyone, and even then, their judging criteria is sometimes all over the place--I've got to tell Severus!"

She whirled to race for the bedroom, but Minerva cleared her throat sharply. "--If you don't mind, Hermione, I'd like to say what I came down here to say *before* you go jumping all over that man in the other room. An image I don't particularly care to contemplate, this early in the morning."

Hermione checked herself. She didn't have to be obedient to the other woman's commands, having graduated, but she did respect the woman. And it would be rude to abandon a guest to go snog her husband, even if this was still part of their honeymoon. "Er...yes?"

Minerva hesitated, then drew in a deep breath and revealed what she had to say. "I've just found out--through Albus--that the others are planning on paying for you and Severus to take the tests again."

"...Come again?" asked the younger witch, confused.

"The Geneamorphological tests, for compatibility. Charlie apparently started it last night, passing 'round one of Molly's flour-tins to take up a collection for the retesting fees after the two of you departed." Her mouth compressed into a tight line for a moment. "I do not approve of their actions. Last night, I saw Severus smiling--genuinely smiling--more frequently in two hours than I've seen him smiling in two whole years. And he made more effort to be polite while he was at the Burrow last night than I can recall him bothering with in the past *five* years... I think you'll be a good influence on him."

A sleepy, quiet, deep voice replied before Hermione could. "Thank you, Minerva. Your approval means a lot to me."

Both women looked over at the doorway of the bedroom. Minerva flushed, blinked, and looked quickly away, while Hermione devoured the sight of her husband clad in a knee-length dressing gown, his sparsely, darkly-furred chest bared almost to the navel in a narrow vee where he hadn't pulled the material fully closed. If the older woman hadn't been in the room, Hermione wouldn't have stayed carefully where she stood. She'd have leapt all over him with an embarrassing *lack* of shyness.

The Transfigurations Mistress looked anywhere but at her half-naked colleague. "Well. You have my warning, and my opinion on the matter. And your morning mail... I'll bid you good-day, then. Shall we be expecting you at the head table for lunch?"

"I was thinking we might be honeymooning in Rome by then. Or in Athens," Severus drawled. "Or back in bed."

The older woman's cheeks flushed again. "Well, I'll just leave the two of you to, er, discuss that, then."

Hermione let her out, shutting the door behind the stately witch. Turning her back to the panel, she gave her husband a dirty look, albeit tempered by a smile. "...You have a wicked sense of humor, Professor Snape--teasing the poor woman so horridly!"

"You have an equally perverse mind, entertaining a former teacher while clad only in my shirt, Mrs. Snape," retorted the man in the doorway opposite her. "I could thank her for the warning, but I doubt it will change anything. I am quite content with my top Geneamorphological choice...and I would make no other, if I had to choose again. Even if it meant living as a ruddy Muggle."

Hermione flew at him, giving him barely enough time to open his own arms and welcome her embrace. Face pressed to the warm vee of skin, she whispered, "I think I'm falling in love with you..."

"Good." Severus smiled wryly at her as she looked up sharply at him. "I think I might be in love with you, too."

"Why didn't I see how right you were for me?" Hermione asked, frowning up at him. "You were right there in front of me, for seven bloody years. I mean *always* respected and admired you, but I never once thought...I mean, you were my *teacher*. Not a potential lover, let alone husband-material."

"I suspect that's why the Yenta's Livery Company has been so successful for so long. They do say love is blind," he reminded her with a slight shrug. "Sometimes it takes an outsider to see something that would otherwise be overlooked or missed."

She contemplated that for a few moments, then slid her hand inside his robe, pressing her hand over the warmth of his muscles, and the beating of his heart. "I know something I'm missing, right now..."

"What?"

"A kiss."

"Mm, quite." Bending his head, he brushed his lips over hers, then pulled back slightly. "By the way, congratulations on apprenticing to the Unspeakables. We'll have to talk to the Headmaster about fixing up a Floo connection with the Ministry of Magic, so you can commute. *After* our honeymoon. Where would you like to go, anyway?"

"Well, I need to go through the house...and I'd like to live there with you in the summers, if that's alright," she offered hesitantly.

"Only if we enlarge that ruddy narrow bed. And change the curtains and coverlet to anything but pink," he added, wrinkling his nose in masculine distaste.

"We can renovate my parents' room, and leave that one for any little girls that might come along," she dismissed, circling her fingertips around the soft skin of the nipple she located.

Severus looked down at her sharply. "Any little girls...?"

"Well, you did say I should think about starting a family with you...and I've given it some thought, since yesterday afternoon."

"And?"

"Well, you don't have any contraceptive potions lurking around in the covers of your bed, do you?" she teased.

"My bed? Our bed, wife. Say it," he ordered her.

"Our bed," she repeated dutifully.

He kissed her. "Again."

"Our bed."

Another kiss, and another command, "Again."

"Only if you take me to it, and...and do to me what you read in that trashy romance novel," Hermione bargained, blushing but meeting his gaze firmly. No shyness left at all, with that suggestion.

"I still don't know what a 'prautau' is," he reminded her dryly. "Nor where to hire a stout horse that's capable of carrying two riders as a substitute."

"No, the other one. Where you pin me face-down to the bed, and, erm...ravish me from behind..."

Dark eyes gleaming, Severus swept her off her feet and slammed the bedroom door shut with his heel as he strode inside the book-cluttered chamber. Just in case any other well-meaning busybodies thought to pay the newlyweds a visit today.

EPILOGUE.

Yenta's Livery Company

Est. 416 B.C.

Offices in London, Bath, Norfolk, Carlisle, and Leeds

"Your Best Match For Your Best Money, Guaranteed"

Greetings, Mr. Snape;

We would like to apologize for the delay in responding with the results of your requested re-evaluation of compatibility in the case of Hermione Jane Granger-Snape. Having received the altered test results, and being unable to believe our eyes, we re-tested several more times to verify those results, to reduce all possibility for clerical error. You are now rated at a compatibility level of 99% (+/- .2% probability variance) with your wife. This extreme level of compatibility being highly unusual, the President of Yenta's has authorized me to give you a full refund of both testing prices.

May your marriage be blessed with unending love, great happiness, a long, fulfilling, healthy life, and many, many progeny!

Yours truly,

Jessica Thornton-Ffalkes-Jones

Vice-President, Carlisle Office

Enclosed: Gringott's Refund Voucher

Severus glanced up from his letter. His wife's, he knew, would read the same; they had gathered at the Burrow to open and read their letters in the face of all their so-called friends. But she didn't look very pleased at what she had read. She didn't look the slightest bit happy--in fact, she looked rather like she was going to be sick. "...Are you alright, love?"

"I knew it!" Ron hissed, fists clenched on his lap as he read. "She's just now realizing she's made a horrible mistake, marrying you--"

Hermione's curls flew as she shook her head swiftly, emphatically. Her whole body stilled for a wide-eyed second, before she lunged off the aging couch, nearly tripping over Tonks, who had settled for sitting on the floor, given how many of the Burrow's chairs had been claimed and occupied by the purple-haired woman's elders. Alarmed, Severus rose and followed her, watching her stumble straight to the sink and lean over it, retching up the remnants of her breakfast. Quickly gathering up her hair to keep it out of her way, Severus wondered if it was something she had eaten. But he couldn't remember her having more than a few bites of toast, and a few mouthfuls of tea, in fact; waiting for the results to come back had put her off her breakfast each morning of late, waiting for those ruddy barn owls to return.

"--*Watcher!*" Tonks' voice exclaimed from the sitting room, Hermione's hastily abandoned letter clutched in her green-nailed hands. "Their compatibility's gone up by a whole ruddy percent!"

There was a bit of a scrum in the living room, as the others scrambled to get their hands on Hermione's and Severus's letters, the latter also left behind in his concern for his wife. She wasn't retching anymore, though she was drooping over the sink. Turning on the faucet, he cleared the drain, then cupped a palmful for her to sip and rinse her mouth.

"...Are you alright, love?" he asked softly, as soon as she had swished and spat.

She nodded her head shakily, straightening and leaning back against his chest. "I think I will be."

"Hermione, dear, are you alright?" Molly called out from the other room, unable to come any closer because of the tangle of bodies in her way. "--Alastor, move that ruddy wooden leg of yours before I trip over it! The poor girl's ill! She might need medical help!"

"I, ah, won't need medical help, Molly," Hermione called back, regaining some of her strength.

"You won't?" Severus asked her, arching a brow.

She shook her head, dropping her voice to speak just loud enough for his ears. "It's the same reason why our compatibility went up a whole point. I think."

"And that would be...?"

"I changed one of my answers. From 'fertility unimportant'...to 'fertility important'."

Severus stared down at her in shock, feeling the blood draining from his face. "You're...?"

She nodded.

"You're...?" he repeated again, unable to quite wrap his mind around that concept just yet. "*Already?*"

She shrugged, and nodded again. "I think so."

"You think what, dearie?" Molly Weasley asked her, finally making it into the kitchen as the noise in the other room died down.

"I, er, think I'm pregnant."

Hermione's voice silenced the last babbles of conversation from the Weasleys and Order members in the other room. A moment later, something *thumped* to the wooden floor. Both Hermione and Severus frowned.

"Oh, ruddy hell--has Ron gone and fainted, again?" Hermione called out impatiently; he was sitting beyond her view, so she couldn't see for herself.

"...Er, no," the unseen redhead in question replied. "But Harry did!"

(The End)