

Geneamorology

by septentrion

Severus is leading a quiet life after the war, until a decree by Scrimgeour makes it imperative for him to get married... very soon.

The Turnrobe

Chapter 1 of 17

Severus is leading a quiet life after the war, until a decree by Scrimgeour makes it imperative for him to get married... very soon.

Disclaimer: everything you recognise belongs to Jo Rowling.

Thanks to my beta Dacian Goddess for her efficient help in translating my story from French to English.

"Good evening, Wormtail. It's not customary to send a letter so late in the day."

The rat jumps and wriggles. One would nearly believe he's on the verge of wetting himself. I've been dreaming of getting rid of him for a long time. Maybe I'll be able to do it now and with the Dark Lord's blessing, no less. I snatch out of his hand the parchment he still hasn't had the time to tie to the owl's leg.

"Mister Potter,

Today's password to enter the Dark Lord's place of residence is 'Animagus.'

Your friend."

The rat is a snitch! I wonder whom he hasn't betrayed yet. And how long has he been leaking information to the enemy? I need to question him without delay, if the contents of the message are any indication.

He's afraid, as he should be, for I won't have an ounce of pity.

"Crucio!"

I can see the ex-Marauder writhing in pain on the floor. I keep the curse on him long enough to weaken his resistance, which shouldn't be long; he's such a coward.

"Since when have you been passing information to Potter? What did you tell him?"

He's braver than I thought. His eyes weakly defy me.

"Crucio!"

No time to dither. This time, I keep the curse on him for a bit more time. I regret to see that he's curled in a foetal position; I wanted to aim at his balls. I settle for his knees instead.

"Will you speak?"

And he speaks. He's given Potter information about where the Dark Lord had hidden some very precious objects to him; he's warned Potter about Death Eaters' attacks, which explains why we never managed to get a hold of Shacklebolt. It's time to finish him off.

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

No more rat. Still one Marauder to go. But before I can rejoice in the fact, I must warn the Dark Lord about Wormtail's treason and about the probable attack tonight. What's that noise? Shit, they're already there! It seems they weren't deterred by not knowing the password after all. Better safe than sorry...I disillusion myself before flinging myself into the fray: there are some duellers of very good calibre within Dumbledore's fan club.

I assess the situation: I've got several cuts on my arms and legs, my robe has had it, a hex has created a monk's tonsure on the side of my skull, and my left hand is shaking. I don't dare imagine how I would be if I could be seen. That old harpy McGonagall is responsible for my current state. She couldn't see whence she was being attacked because she'd lost her spectacles; that was my luck. This allowed me to have the upper hand on her. I even treated myself with the luxury of treading on her dead body before facing my next opponent.

I glance around me and notice that I am very near to the centre of the operations: three meters from me, Harry Potter faces the Dark Lord, who is hopping up and down in Nagini's blood. "*Reducto!*" screamed the snotty-nosed boy, and under my dumbfounded eyes, my master is reduced to ashes ... and doesn't come back. I know he is no Phoenix, but did he not assure us that he couldn't die? Did he lie to us? Or would Potter be more intelligent than I credited him for? Anyway, victory is switching sides, and so am I. Without an ounce of remorse, I've become a turncoat, er, turnrobe. It's not as if I'm very fond of everyone in my former side. At last, I will be able to give the three Lestranges what for. I only regret not having the time to cast a bit of *Cruciatius* on Bellatrix.

All of a sudden, I fall on the floor, as stiff as a ramrod. I think the green light has given away my position, and the *Petrificus Totalus* that followed has cancelled the effects of the Disillusionment Spell, for I am recognised. Hexes, jinxes and insults fly towards my body, now lying reluctantly on the cool floor. However, somebody I don't know blocks them effortlessly. This somebody appears in my field of vision; he's Shacklebolt! I've never been so glad to have failed in his capture.

"Severus Snape, you are under arrest for belonging to an illegal organisation known as the 'Death Eaters' and for the murder of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore."

I fear this last small detail will be my ruin. I'll have to find an idea to get off, no bawdy pun intended. I'll probably have time to think of something when I wait in Azkaban for my trial.

I've had them! I've pulled a fast one on them all! All I had to do was to take credit for Wormtail's activities, and I've been acquitted. I've even managed to make them buy that Dumbledore had orchestrated his death with me. Really, the Wizengamot's members must be senile. But let's see how things proceeded.

Two days after my being captured, and one and a half day after I imagined my plan, I was tried. The Minister of Magic, Scrimgeour, was in charge of the hearing...though he seemed a bit deaf to me. He was proudly sitting upright on the bench in front of me. His hands were free and were holding his wand while I was chained to the prisoner's chair. At least it was warmer than in Azkaban.

"Severus Snape," he thundered, "you've been brought in front of the Council of Magical Law to be tried for your membership to a proscribed organisation known as the 'Death Eaters' and for the murder of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot."

"I cannot deny that I have been a Death Eater, but if you have read the file about my trial in 1981, you should very well know that Dumbledore himself refuted the fact that I was still one of them."

"You lied to him, and he believed you."

"Do you really think Dumbledore was that naïve?"

There, I've hit a weak spot. How to justify the old codger's trust in me without ridiculing him? Nevertheless, Scrimgeour quickly regains his composure.

"Then, enlighten us about the whys of Dumbledore's trust in you."

"I was spying on the Death Eaters and on the Dark Lord for him. The information I provided him, then Potter, with was crucial."

That was the moment when Wormtail's treason became beneficial. Since he was dead, I could just as well pass myself off as Potter's informant.

"Crucial enough to kill an old man?"

I openly sniggered at his question.

"You forget that Dumbledore was a very powerful wizard, the only one the Dark Lord had ever feared. But I didn't have much choice. Narcissa Malfoy tricked me into making an Unbreakable Vow to protect her son, Draco. She added a last minute clause to it, stipulating that I had to carry out her son's mission if he seemed to be failing.

"You probably already know that said mission was to kill Dumbledore; and you know what happens when one doesn't respect a promise made under an Unbreakable Vow. I had told Dumbledore about the risks that I had taken to keep my cover with the Death Eaters. He thought the information I had access to was more important than his life. He ordered me to live 'whatever the cost'. Those were his very words."

Turmoil seized the courtroom. Insults and spit were directed at me, and the Aurors had a very hard time bringing order and quiet back. At least, when the silence was back, Potter was called to testify. He confirmed that he could never have overcome the Dark Lord without the information he'd received after Dumbledore's death. His exact words were, "Voldemort would probably have imposed his power on the Wizarding world if not for our anonymous informant. We all owe him our lives." I had a hard time keeping a straight face.

"Pray, tell us which information exactly you passed to Mister Potter, Snape," a witch seated two ranks behind the Minister asked me point-blank.

I recited everything Pettigrew had confessed. Each time, Potter nodded his approval. Step by step, the expression of hatred and scorn on his face was replaced by astonishment (the gaping fish look didn't suit him at all), then by admiration. That was too much. To be admired by Potter! Do you know what the moronic boy said at the end?

"I sincerely feel sorry for everything you had to endure to help me. I'm grateful to you for the sacrifices you've made for the common good." Some emotional witches even shed some tears in sympathy. They oozed with sentimentality, as if their brain had been addled by too much sugar. I felt disgusted.

The verdict was as following:

1/I was tricked by Narcissa Malfoy. Under the pretence of asking for protection for her son Draco, she had me swear an Unbreakable Vow to carry out the deed, should he fail in his task.

2/If I didn't obey the Unbreakable Vow, I would have died, and the Order would have lost their only spy in the Dark Lord's Inner Circle. Dumbledore had insisted that that was unthinkable...one would think that my nose is so long because I've uttered so many lies, but I can assure you that I am not related to Pinocchio in any way.

3/Dumbledore's death, which he himself had ordered, had been the means to make sure I could go on to feed Harry Potter with the information that had led to Lord Voldemort's demise.

Conclusion: I was pardoned. If Dumbledore had ordered me to kill him, like they were all convinced, this wasn't a murder anymore, but a suicide with assistance. I was not quite acquitted, for I was heavily fined for having been a Death Eater. I have twelve months to pay this debt, or I will see the seaside resort in the North Sea again. All my savings will be spent acquitting it, but I am free. I'll think of my economic survival later.

Actually, my economic survival has become a problem very quickly. The fines that were imposed on me were superior to my savings. True, I had lived a few months without salary after handing in my Killing Curse-signed resignation from my teaching position, and so I found myself somewhat impoverished. I had the luck of a devil in this matter. Had I believed in God, I would have thought that my...split...soul would head directly toward hell in the afterlife. I was offered a job even before I sent out a single resume.

That was a good thing because I still don't know how one writes a resume. To be taken on as a Death Eater was rather straightforward; the Dark Lord gave you a try-out...usually, it consisted of casting a Killing Curse on a random Muggle...and if you succeeded in your task, you were recruited. As for my job in Hogwarts, one could say that I was hired through my connections.

All of this just to say that on a beautiful rainy August morning, the Weasley twins knocked at my door to offer me the position of head of the research and development laboratory of their company, WWW (Weasley's Wizard Wheezes). They wanted someone who could help them meet their customers' requests. And as I was to be the only one working in this laboratory, I didn't see why I couldn't be its head.

I took some precautions, however. I requested that the contract was magical. I asked for some particular clauses to be put in it: they wouldn't insult me, or cast spells on me, or worse, use me as their human guinea pig for my own creations at any time of night or day. They must have really needed me because they signed everything without batting an eyelash. I suspect they'd been influenced by the ambient sentimentality as well. I've had to cast bug-repellant and journalist-repelling spells all around my home for months. They wanted to know "how does one feel when one has to kill one's best friend?" Obviously, they didn't pay a whit of attention to anything I had said. After all, I never said that Dumbledore was my best friend, did I?

The Yenta Livery Company

Chapter 2 of 17

Severus unwittingly spies a conversation.

Disclaimer: see first chapter.

Many thanks to my beta Dacian Goddess for her time.

Eighteen months. I've already been in my new life for eighteen months. I brew potions and create artefacts against the Dark Arts for the Weasley twins. Honestly, things could have gone worse. All I miss is a new Dark Lord, but one needs time to reach that goal. Maybe I'll be dead before the next one arises. Right, I needn't dwell on depressing thoughts.

I've more or less followed the changes in the Wizarding world, but nothing worth of notice seems to have been happening. I've heard that Potter and his two sidekicks, Granger and Weasley, went back to Hogwarts to fulfil their education after my trial and that they all passed their NEWTs. Much good may it do them!

Right after Hogwarts, Potter was enrolled by the Aurors, Weasley became a pen-pusher in the Ministry, and Granger got into ... politics. I owe one of my best laughs to Miss Know-It-All. On New Year's Day, she launched SPEW, the Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare: a trade union for house-elves! The event was covered by that rag, *The Quibbler*. She was on the front page, showing a very toothy smile—not that her teeth are her best feature—flanked by the only two free house-elves in the world, one of them being too drunk to stand without support. It seems she's made my employers laugh too. I heard George Weasley say that Granger had her eyes on St Rita's sinecure—you know, the patron of seemingly impossible causes and situations—and that she wanted to have as many statues as the saint. This didn't prevent that clown Scrimgeour to be reelected. I don't care; I don't have the right to vote.

Well, everything was nearly for the best when Weasley and Weasley announced their engagement party with the Patil twins on Monday, February 14th, at the Burrow. They added that the whole staff was invited since the shop would be closed for the day. I understood from their faces that the "invitation" was more of an order. I've really come to believe that they'd have left me alone, given that they'd rather see me far from their beloved family, if not for the fact that they know me well enough to understand that was what I wanted. Perhaps if I had shown a bit more enthusiasm...

"Oh, Severus, it's so nice of you to join us!"

"Please, Molly, I would not have missed this for anything in the world."

The matron smiles at me widely; obviously, she's missed the sarcasm in my voice. Well, if I could bear the old lunatic and his yellow sweets for more than fifteen years, I can certainly bear an evening at the Burrow. I need my salary after all. I would never admit it aloud, but working in the Weasleys' laboratory isn't a chore. I only regret the power they wield over me.

"Mister Snape, we're so pleased to see you here!"

I cast a very dark look at Fred Weasley.

"Such a jovial chap," George Weasley adds from behind me. He claps me on the back.

They always do this to me! I hate this as much as I hated Dumbledore's silly Christmas crackers, which must explain why they carry on acting like children; they like to bother me. I mumble some congratulations to my employers and try to slip away. Bad luck, Potter is in my way!

"Hello, sir."

His smile is warm; he's still grateful for the help I never provided him with. I take it upon myself to hide my hatred; I want to get out of here alive.

"Potter."

And I go on my way, though I have to take a detour in the kitchen to avoid Lupin and his pink-haired girlfriend before I can rush up the staircase. If anyone asks, I can always say I'm looking for the loo. I sneak into a bedroom with the idea of getting comfortable on the bed and reading *Potions Today* when I hear the staircase creak. I only have time to dive under the bed before the door is opened and two people come in. Shit! I'm stuck in this dust nest, spying in spite of myself on Granger and Weasley—Ron. The Weasleys are so numerous that one always has to be specific.

They sit on the bed. I can hear sucking noises, and I fervently hope they will stop there. I must have been heard: the noises stop.

"Hermione, you're really beautiful in this dress."

Why do they feel the need to be sentimental in this family? A dress is just a dress. It isn't the dress that makes the beauty of a woman.

"What about without the dress?"

But she's provoking him!

"Don't tempt me, Hermione. I didn't lead you here for this, even though I wouldn't have any objections against a bit of action."

I am sure that Weasley has wiggled his eyebrows in a suggestive mimic when he said this. I know it is not possible, but I swear I could hear them.

"All right. What did you want to tell me?"

I'm sure I've heard Weasley blush as well.

"Well ... So ... We've known each other for a long time, you and me ... We've been together for more than two years ... and ..."

When will he get to the point?

"I'd like to be with you for the rest of my life."

The bed creaks. I guess Granger has thrown herself at Weasley. Besides, the sucking noises have resumed.

"Oh, yes, Ron," Granger manages to say between two tonsillectomies.

"The only thing is, before we make things official, we have to take the Yenta Livery Company tests."

"The matrimony agency?"

Matrimonial agency? If only she knew.

"No, Hermione, the YLC is more than that. It's the company that created Geneamorology. You know what Geneamorology is?"

"Of course, Ron. Geneamorology is the study of matchmaking, psychology, romance and genealogy. It's used to determine the compatibility of two persons for marriage. But there's no obligation to take Geneamorological tests to get married."

Ah, Miss Know-It-All isn't dead!

"You're right. But, you know, there are a lot of advantages for those who use their services, like tax deductions or a quota of jobs at the Ministry. That's how my father got hired there. You also know that every married couple in the Wizarding world has taken their tests. It's such a tradition!"

That's why there are more and more unmarried couples, Weasley; but it seems this little fact has escaped your notice.

"Besides, my parents will never accept that I marry someone who hadn't taken the tests of the YLC first. Even for you, Hermione."

The chit of a girl sighs noisily.

"All right, I'll take the tests; but I only do it for you."

"We can do it tomorrow, if you'd like to."

Silence; she's thinking.

"All right," she concedes.

Some more sucking noises and at last, the lovebirds get out of the bedroom. I leave my hide hole, cast a few Distracting Charms on the door and read my periodical.

I descend back to Hell. I have to make an appearance, or else I'll never hear the end of it. Blast, Lupin! We shake hands, he with warmth, I with reluctance.

"Severus, how are you?"

Argh, his smile is too broad. Since when have we been chummy?

"As well as possible, given the circumstances."

"Yes, I understand. To have Dumbledore's death on your shoulders, to play the Death Eater part, all of this must still be wearing down on you."

Obviously, he didn't catch that I am alluding to the present company and not to feelings I never felt. However, I take advantage of his uneasiness.

"Excuse me, Lupin."

He nods; he's all comprehension.

I spot the drinks and I help myself with a very generous amount of Firewhisly. I glance at the assembly. Argh! All Gryffindors, with the exception of the WWW salesman who is politely listening to Mad-Eye Moody's sermon about "constant vigilance." This one was a Hufflepuff. I notice Granger and Weasley exchanging sweet nothings in a corner. It's time for me to leave. I take care to say goodbye to my employers and to their parents before I go out and Apparate to Spinner's End.

Tests

Chapter 3 of 17

Hermione and Ron take the tests at the YLC.

Disclaimer : see first chapter.

Dacian Goddess, my gracious beta, has given me her input for this chapter.

I feel very nervous. Today, Ron and I are going to the Yenta Livery Company to take the Geneamorphological tests. Then, we'll announce to the world that we'll get married. It isn't surprising that I haven't slept well; I hardly managed to swallow a cup of coffee this morning, and I feel I'll have trouble swallowing the light salad that I have prepared for lunch as well.

I wonder where we're going to live. Ron still lives at his parents', and my studio flat is too small for the both of us. It's too true that I don't have the means to do better. SPEW takes a lot of my time and doesn't bring in any money. Besides, no one wants to employ someone who could give ideas to their house-elves. I live on the small grant my parents give me each month and on some independent works: a bit of freelance work for the *Daily Prophet*, a few potions for my friends and relatives, Arithmantic calculations for Fred and George's creations, etc.

Ron doesn't earn that much money either, but he can always get a promotion, provided he learns how to control his impulsivity. That should be easier with age. I can picture us in ten years, in a modest yet comfortable cottage in the country; our two children would play outside while I would be preparing a meeting for equality of magical creatures and Ron would be at work. Hmm ... who would cook?

One o'clock already! I shove the rest of my salad in the fridge, realise I haven't written a line of the statement to the press that I have promised *Radio Magica*, and slip on some decent clothes before I go out.

At two o'clock sharp, I'm in the entry hall of the YLC. I know Ron will be late; he's infamous for that. Thinking of this habit of his makes me smile tenderly, and I take a seat in one of the armchairs of the waiting room. I bury myself in a book about Transfiguring furniture; one never knows, I may need the knowledge in the future.

Ron arrives at a quarter past two, red-faced and breathless.

"Am ... sorry ... last minute ... report ... for my boss ..."

I laugh.

"No problem, Ron. Catch your breath, and let's go and take those tests."

Hand in hand, we head for the receptionist, who informs us that the test lasts around an hour and that a quarter of an hour is enough to read the results. We sign the contract quickly and pay the fee. I've emptied my bank account for this: one hundred and fifty Galleons. We both look like we're impatient to be done with it.

The receptionist leads us into a small room and gives us questionnaires in the form of punch cards, like the ones used in a barrel organ.

"All you need to do is answer the questions by perforating the card near the chosen answer, and then seal the questionnaire when you're finished by affixing your wand signature at the dedicated space while saying, 'This is the truth.' Your cards will then be put into this instrument." She points to a machine which is a true imitation of a barrel organ. "You'll be included in our customers' database, and we'll be able to tell you what your compatibility rate is."

I grab the first card and the device with a sharp point beside it and tackle the first question. Ron does the same.

The questions are about various subjects and are as exhaustive as a survey on household consumption.

When are you available for marriage? Now. You never know what could happen.

Would you rather marry a British citizen? Yes. I don't want to deal with cultural differences. I already had a hard time going through the differences between the Muggle and the wizarding world.

Do you want children? Yes.

How many? Two.

Would you rather marry a:

- pure-blood,

- half-blood,

- Muggle-born,

- You don't care?

What kind of a question is this?

Is the astrological sign of your spouse important? Of course not; I'm no Lavender Brown.

Pfff, I'd never thought that answering questions could be that exhausting. Some make me blush (*Are you a virgin?*), others outrage me (*How many house-elves do you want?*), or downright embarrass me (*What is your current income?*). At last, I raise my head and notice that Ron is done too. I fetch the receptionist, who puts our cards in the barrel organ at once...I really don't know the name of this machine, I've never heard of something like that. I wring my hands out of anxiety while beads of sweat appear at Ron's temple. We swallow in unison.

After the longest quarter of an hour of my life, a red card comes out of the machine. Ron turns pale; he seems to understand what this colour entails. The receptionist frowns while reading the result.

"Mister Weasley and Miss Granger, it seems that your compatibility rate is twenty per cent only. I strongly advise you against embarking into matrimony together. Our studies prove that couples with a rate lower than forty per cent have a ninety-five per cent chance of ending in divorce. However, we can search through our database for more compatible spouses for the both of you."

Her words slowly pierce the astonishment that has taken hold of me until I understand what she's said. Ron and I, not compatible? Impossible, I don't believe it! At last, my mouth agrees to express my incredulity.

"There must be a mistake. Put our cards back into..."

She becomes starchy and declares haughtily, "Our tests are very reliable. We have hundreds of pages of testimonies and studies that prove it."

In spite of his devastated expression, Ron nods. I, for one, don't concede defeat that easily.

"We don't have to listen to their fine words, Ron. We can get married all the same."

He turns even paler with my words; he looks deathly. I know what I'm speaking of; I've survived the war. The receptionist resumes, "The provisions made by the law for the couples tested by the Yenta Livery Company are only for those with a compatibility rate higher than forty per cent, you know."

Ron seems to emerge from his stupor.

"My parents will never agree for me to marry someone under forty per cent!"

I can hear a choked sob in his voice. Is he telling me that he won't even try to sway his parents' mind? He turns his head away. He has tears in his eyes, and suddenly, I understand. Ron comes from a pure-blood family, who only knows the wizarding world and its traditions. Though very open-minded, they'll always be very reluctant to welcome a daughter-in-law who would have a compatibility rate lower than forty per cent with their son. This is looked down upon in the wizarding world, even though the Muggle influence begins to attack its most archaic customs. Ron is afraid he would have to choose between his family and me. I wasn't offered that choice: joining the wizarding world has driven me apart from my parents definitively; but he... he has to face this choice alone. I can't make the decision for him.

The receptionist coughs slightly to catch our attention. It reminds me that I had hardly read the contract before I took the test.

"May I have a look at the contract that I've signed?"

"Of course, Miss."

While she goes and gets the contract, I glance at Ron. His head is bowed, his face is hidden by his hands.

"Ron, what's going to happen now?"

He raises his reddened, tearful eyes.

"Hermione..."

His voice is broken. He hugs me tightly without warning. Instinctively, I know this is a gesture of good-bye. I force myself to speak.

"You don't have to choose, Ron. I'll still be your friend. Perhaps we shouldn't see each other for a while so that we have time to see the situation clearly?"

He nods against my ear. The receptionist finds us in this position when she goes back.

"Here is your contract, Miss."

I extricate myself from Ron's arms, sniffing, and take the parchment from the woman's hands. I've signed a magical contract. Not to yield to its stipulations is akin to booking a six month stay at Azkaban. I can't afford it. I need my credibility for SPEW. I realise that I can marry only a person tested by the YLC, whatever our compatibility rate is; that I'm bound to that company until my wedding; that I have to answer to its requests. Translation: if a customer decides to meet me with a view to pursue me in matrimony, I have to answer his request and meet that man. My only freedom is that I don't have to marry any of my suitors.

I have a thought for the single life that lies ahead of me, for my future with Ron lost to a percentage, for my life that I have to rebuild. Tonight, I'll get drunk, alone, in my studio flat.

(1) 150 Galleons = 1087.5 euros, or 750 Pounds, or 1099.5 US Dollars.

Scrimgeour's Decree

Chapter 4 of 17

How Severus came to be in "want" of a wife.

Disclaimer: see first chapter

Reread by Dacian Goddess.

The younger Weasley boy came to hang around in the shop at the end of the afternoon. He wandered among the different sections, handling the products and looking at them with vacant eyes. Well, that's what I've heard from my employers, for in my laboratory, I can only see the sky through the Velux window. That's what the Ministry pays its staff for, while I'm slaving to finish the modified Web-footed Potion, which is supposed to turn the drinker's hands into webbed ones for half an hour. Weasley and Weasley plan to slip it into cookies.

It seems that the Weasley matriarch managed to worm the whole story out of her son yesterday. He took the test of the YLC with Granger, and they came out with a compatibility rate of only twenty percent. Honestly, one does not need the YLC to draw the same conclusion. Even McGonagall—God rest her soul—had already made the same claims in the staff room while she was still alive and I a teacher. Had I known about it yesterday, I would have come down from my laboratory to taunt Weasley a bit; angry red becomes him very much. Well, let's turn our attention back to the new order: to create a nail varnish that can change colours at will.

I choke when I read the *Daily Prophet* spread on my kitchen table and the Ministry parchment lying next to the rag. I cannot believe Scrimgeour has done this. I am convinced that he wants to deprive me of my livelihood. The main title is "Scrimgeour's Latest anti-Death Eater Decree". The parchment informs me of my fate.

"Mister Snape,

According to Decree 00/25 of February 19th, 2000, you, as well as any other person associated with Lord Voldemort, will be forbidden to have access to the following substances:

-Boomslang skin,

-Acromantula venom,

-Powdered horn of bicorn,

-Aconite,

-Sneezewort,

-Wormhood.

The exceptions granted by the Ministry are as follow:

-Health. You will have to submit a medical certificate from St Mungo's to the Aurors Headquarters. The certificate will specify which substances are necessary for your treatment.

-To be suffering from a particular condition, especially if you are a werewolf. You will provide any useful documentary evidence (Certificate of registration to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, for example) which will specify which substance(s) are necessary in the case of said particular condition.

-To be responsible for a family. You will provide a certificate by your employer that you need to be in contact with the substances mentioned above for your work, and any proof that your income is indeed necessary for the well-being of your family (bank statements, family members' payslips, etc.) to the Aurors Headquarters.

Yours sincerely,

Dolores Umbridge, Under-Secretary for the Department of Law Enforcement."

I doubt the Healers at St Mungo's would issue me a false medical certificate; I don't suffer from a particular condition—I'm certainly not a werewolf—and I am not responsible for a family. Among the three possible solutions to my quandary, getting married with a jobless woman is the simplest, but in forty days only? Is my job worth the loss of my freedom?

I had to tell my employers about my problem. I expect them to have a good laugh at my expense; they don't.

"Damn it!" George Weasley exclaims. "We can't let this happen. You're necessary to our plan for development."

Now, that's information that I could use against them later on—if I have a future. They tell me to get back to work while they think about a solution. I should have been wary of a Weasley solution.

George Weasley gives me a parchment at the end of the afternoon; it is an appointment to take the Yenta Livery Company Tests the day after tomorrow, during my working hours, which means it is an order of my bosses, but also that they will pay for it.

"Have you gone off your rocker? What makes you think that I value this job enough to get married to keep it?"

"Come on, Snape! We're not deceived!"

A mischievous glint lightens his eyes; it's so Malfoy-esque that I shiver.

"You very well know, as we do, that nobody is willing to hire a former Death Eater, whatever absolution he might have got. What will you do when you're unemployed? Besides, we propose you a raise: ten percent to help you cope with the added expense a spouse will cause."

I make a show of thinking about it when, actually, I have already come to that conclusion by myself. And the pay raise is a nice surprise. Let's see where I can take them.

"Thirty percent."

"Fifteen percent."

"Twenty percent."

"Granted!"

He beams at me.

"You'll invite us for the wedding, won't you?"

I cast him a dark look—is he laughing at me?—and go back home.

"Good afternoon, sir," the Yenta Livery Company's receptionist welcomes me in a syrupy voice, the one people use when they have recognised me and try to cajole me in not torturing or menacing them.

I give her the parchment with the appointment and remain silent.

"If you will follow me, Mister Snape."

I find myself in a small room which houses the famous Geneamorphological machine that makes the YLC's reputation; it looks very much like a barrel organ. She gives me the tests, briefly explains to me how to complete them, and leaves me alone.

I feel like I'm exposing myself. Some questions are very personal, so much so that I've never answered them in my heart of hearts. I have never wanted to know if I loved my parents. Luckily, there is a box for "I don't know." And what gives them the right to ask me if I suffer from sexually transmitted diseases, if I enjoy threesomes, or if I earn my partners' praise? The worst part is I, like all customers, had to sign a magical contract to ensure I have answered the questions with sincerity. I go along with it or I go back to Azkaban; I have never faced such a dilemma. I finally opt for sincerity. I tell myself that the only one to read the answers will be the machine anyway.

After an hour in hell, I wait for the result. What if nobody is compatible enough with me? I would not be surprised. What could I do to block that idiot Decree? Didn't I prove my innocence?

"The result is ready, Mister Snape."

The receptionist's voice brings me back into the here and now. I haven't even noticed that I am standing. It seems that I have spent the waiting time pacing. The receptionist has enough good sense not to smile. I can see the green board that she is holding, and she guesses my untold question.

"Thirty-eight witches have more than forty percent compatibility with you, Mister Snape. Three of them have more than seventy percent. Do you want to meet some of them?"

"What can you tell me about the three highest scores?"

If I have to tie the knot, I'd rather the string be made of silk.

"The highest score is ninety percent. She's immediately available for matrimony—"

I interrupt her. Ninety percent is an unequalled rate as far as I know, and an available witch is exactly what I need.

"I want to meet her."

She opens her eyes wide.

"Certainly, sir. We do have lounges at our disposal for such meetings so that our customers can get acquainted on neutral ground."

"Send her an owl. I want to meet her tomorrow evening."

"Maybe it'd be best to wait one more day," she countered. "You know, a witch always needs time to get ready before she meets a suitor."

Come to think of it, a wizard also needs time. If I have to convince a woman to marry me before the first of April, I would do well to research how one courts a woman. It should not be that different from service with the Dark Lord, but there is no harm in being sure.

"Very well. The day after tomorrow, in one of your lounges, at seven p.m."

The Rendezvous

Chapter 5 of 17

The "Severus charm" in all its splendour.

Disclaimer: see first chapter

Thanks so much to Dacian Goddess for the rereading

Warning: Hermione is going through a bout of depression; she might not act like herself for a couple of chapters.

Well, there's a lot of mail this morning! The *Daily Prophet*, *The Quibbler*, Ron's answer to my birthday card...I'm not going to break off all contacts with him; I promised I would remain his friend...and a big envelope from the... YLC. I hate the YLC!

"Miss Granger,

We are pleased to inform you that one of our customers was found to have a ninety percent compatibility rate with you. He wishes to meet with you in one of our private lounges tomorrow evening at seven p.m.

Yours truly,

Graziella Girando,

Counsellor in meetings with a matrimonial purpose."

They hardly left me a week to recover from the sabotage of my life they're responsible for, and they're already trying to do it again. I don't have a way out of it. I've signed that damned contract. To postpone the rendezvous won't be of use. I complete the reply-coupon as it should be. I even confirm that I will be present. Then I go to bed; I find I cry better in bed.

I haven't been able to do anything useful with my day, today like yesterday, since I've received the summoning (I can't decently speak of invitation) to go to the YLC. I have enough saved money for a promotional insert for S.P.E.W. in the *Prophet*, but I can't concentrate on the text I'm supposed to write nor on finding an attractive slogan. Every single one of my thoughts brings me back to tonight's event. I already know that I will reject this suitor. Ninety percent? Why would I care for their ninety percent when Ron dwells in my heart? However, I have worked like mad not to have him dwell in my conscious thoughts as well. It hurts too much to think of him. We should be happy,

planning our beautiful future together, discussing the colour of our cottage's drapes, training in baby making. Instead of this, because of a stupid Nineteenth Century tradition, we've been separated. Yes, I hurt. I take sleeping drugs every evening. I work fifteen hours every day to prevent me from thinking. And that miserable "Company" orders me to meet a candidate for marriage when I still haven't overcome the loss of the one I really wanted.

It's time to get ready. I choose the less fitting dress in my wardrobe; I look like I've donned a potato sack. I don't know whatever shred of courtesy holds me back from choosing the robe I wear when I brew potions; maybe it's because of all the maroon stains that draw a belt around my hips. I take my purse, reach the nearby alleyway that I use as an Apparition point, and arrive at the YLC.

The receptionist leads me to one of their private lounges, where my pretentious suitor is already waiting for me. I get into the room, and there I see something that has me out of my depressive state for the first time in a week: Severus Snape holding a bouquet of red roses in his hand.

The die is cast. I'm going to meet my fiancée tonight. It is true that the woman is not yet officially my fiancée, but that is only a detail. I should be able to fool her thanks to my talents for acting and to the right props: a ring (retrieved from the left hand of my mother's corpse years ago) and a bouquet of red roses. I wear my best robe, or I should say the newest one, for all my robes are made according to the same model. I am all set; the only thing I'm missing is the lady.

What if she were truly ugly? No, it would not do to count my chickens before they are hatched. If she is that unbearable to look at, I will simply tell her that I am not interested. I might not be an Apollo myself, but that is no reason to marry a plain Jane. How would I be supposed to fulfil my husbandly duties if that was the case? If I am going to enter into matrimony, I may as well take advantage of one of the benefits that come with the status. When I think of it, to have a woman to warm my bed is probably the only benefit to the status. In my case, it is the only available way to keep my job too. Ah, the clock chimes seven p.m. The door opens; she is right on time. That is at least one quality. She comes into the room and... Were I a flibbertigibbet, I would have fainted on the spot. Granger, a suitable match for me?

I have to pinch myself; I rub my eyes without any discretion: Snape is looking for a wife? He's even made an effort. I can see that his robe is new...its black colour isn't bleached or faded...his hair doesn't look as greasy as I remember it, and he holds a bouquet of red roses. I am traumatised. All of this, the absurdity of the situation, the tiredness, the stress and despair, catch up with me, and I burst out laughing like a hysteric. Besides, I feel hysterical. I laugh, and I can't stop myself, even though my belly and my cheeks hurt. He doesn't seem to appreciate it.

Is this a joke? I am going to lodge a complaint with the Company. Granger, my ninety percent match? If I did not have that sword of Damocles hanging over my head, I would walk out on her, I tell you. Moreover, she has the gall to laugh at me; she isn't decent enough to try and feign feeling faint. On the other hand, I could make the most of her breaking-off with the younger Weasley. A despairing woman is always in need of comfort, which I am ready to offer until she signs the official papers stating that she is my wife. Besides, the Ministry would not dare to attack me personally if I am married to one of Potter's best friends, a war heroine, as long as her campaign for the freedom of house-elves does not go anywhere near success. That's the idea! I am going to play the part of the remorseful Death Eater who is persecuted because of his past, and she will probably accept me without any questions. Now, she is calming down; time to tackle the woman, er, problem at hand.

"Good evening, Miss Granger. I will not pretend that it wasn't a surprise to see you cross the doorstep, but I would not say it is a bad surprise."

She looks at me, astonished. Yes, Miss, I can do politeness, even gallantry when it is required.

"Good evening, Snape." She crosses her arms in front of her breasts. "Spare me your nice speech. You have hinted more than enough in the past at how much you 'appreciated' me. Anyway, I'll save you time: it's 'no'. I don't want to get married, and even less with you."

I see. I will have to show how persuasive I can be.

"Maybe you could at least listen to me out of courtesy?"

"You... you are serious?"

"If I weren't serious, I would have left the room without even speaking to you while you were mocking me. But I am willing to place the blame for your reaction on the surprise."

"I'm serious, too, and it's still 'no'. Good-bye."

Is she going out? I only just have the time to put myself between her and the door. As a result, she moves back. I take the opportunity to move towards her, and before she can begin to escape again, I shove the bouquet into her hands and lead her by the elbow to one of the armchairs that dress the room. She is too stunned to react. We are both seated now. A tray with two glasses and a carafe full with an amber liquid appear on the coffee table between us. I pour some of the liquid into the glasses and sniff it: Firewhisky. Blessed be the YLC! The alcohol ought to help with my plan.

"Are you going to listen to me now, Miss Granger?"

I take care to hide how irritated I am in the face of her stubbornness and keep to a polite tone.

She drops the bouquet and sinks into the armchair; she nonetheless accepts the glass I offer her.

"Go on! I don't care, anyway. That won't change my decision. At least, it'll entertain me and provide me with anecdotes to tell in society."

I see red at her declaration. She keeps on mocking me, and I'd like nothing more than to demonstrate to her the proper use of the Cruciatus Curse. Yet, I must not forget my aim: to come out of this room engaged.

"I'm going to explain to you why I am in search of a companion and what I expect from her. Then, you will freely decide if my offer suits you."

"You forget something, Snape," she interrupts me. "What do you intend to offer to your companion?"

"If you let me speak, maybe you'll hear it!"

She nods and sips her Firewhisky.

"I will not go back over what I have done during the two wars against the Dark Lord..."

"Voldemort, his name was Voldemort."

She could manage to make me regret Azkaban, if she persists.

"Please, do not interrupt me! As I said, you know what I did to help the Order of the Phoenix, the sacrifice Dumbledore asked of me by killing him (this is by far the biggest lie of all my life), how I have helped Potter to bring down the Dark Lord. I had to commit illegal acts to perform my act as a spy. For all of this, I have paid...in Galleons...my debt to the wizarding world. I have found a job (She sniggers. She probably knows that I didn't have to ask for it.) that allows me to have a decent life, like an ordinary wizard. I only wish the same as anybody else: to live a peaceful life, to have a house, a job and a spouse. Maybe even children one day. I do have a house and a job, but I am stigmatised because of my past. I am rejected by everyone because of it. They all conveniently forget all the good that has come of my misdeeds. I have decided to use the YLC services to find a companion with their method. I have a better chance to find someone with whom I can build my future (even during my trial, I don't remember to having lied this much). Do you think it normal that I not be granted the sweetness of life because of my past?"

I use the good old trick of a salesman to ask a question the customer can only answer by 'yes'.

She is still sipping her Firewhisky. She finishes it, a meditative expression on her face. Is she going to answer? She sets her empty glass on the tray, and I hasten to pour another shot in it. At last she speaks. If someone had been told one day that I would be happy to hear her speak, I would have cast them a curse that would have sent them to St Mungo's.

"I understand your point of view, but it's still no. I don't want to get married."

"What about the ninety percent compatibility rate? Does this not mean anything to you?"

"Nothing at all. This company lives on charlatanism."

I feel like sentimental arguments will not be enough to convince her. I carry on, betting on the Firewhisky, and I try logical arguments.

"Do tell me, Granger: if I am not mistaken, you have a NEWT in Arithmancy, don't you?"

"Absolutely. I got an 'O'."

There a glint of pride in her eyes; this is the weapon that I need.

"Can you tell me if Arithmantic calculations are reliable?"

"Absolutely, to 97,785 %!"

"Do you know the YLC goes by Arithmantic equations to establish the compatibility rate between two persons?"

Her eyes widen. She did not know. She must have been too distracted by the end of her beautiful dreams to research the YLC methods and counter-attack. I have won! I resume my explanation just to drive the point home.

"The machine in which our questionnaires are inserted is actually a calculating machine. It produces equations from two persons' answers. The more equations that can be solved, the higher the compatibility rate between the two is."

"But... it's impossible to calculate feelings. That was proved by Archibald Livewire in 1798."

"Marriage is not only about feelings, but also about compatibility between tastes, interests, values, genetics, etc. of the concerned people. The presence of feelings will not prevent a marriage from heading for a fall, whereas the YLC calculations have proven their efficiency by the high stability rate of their customers' matrimonies."

That said, if my mother had used them, I would probably not exist.

"Do you know that the Muggles who want to marry a wizard or a witch can take the YLC tests? This institution is not a den of pure-blood snobs who would try to preserve at any cost the purity of their family's blood."

She swallows some more Firewhisky in a futile attempt at hiding her ignorance. Thanks, Weasley, for being a slave to the wizarding world's traditions! Miss Know-It-All didn't have time to do her homework, so occupied she was by feeling sorry for herself. She deserves a third helping of Firewhisky, which I of course serve her immediately.

"What must I do? I..."

Instead of answering, she swallows another generous gulp.

"Me too, I wanted... the saaaaaame thing that ev-veryone wants, at least in my priiiivate liiife," she stammers and slurs her words.

Good. The alcohol is loosening her tongue.

"A huusband, childreeeen... Not too many, only two."

She suits the action to the word and holds out her hand in my direction, three fingers sticking out prominently.

"This is exactly what I wish for, Miss Granger (I don't want any children, but right now, I need to convince her). You see, the YLC probably wasn't mistaken about us."

She shakes her head in a last attempt at denial, but I can read defeat in her eyes. I toast her silently and drink to her surrender. She accompanies me and gulps down a little more Firewhisky. She sways a bit on her seat. I need to make her sign before she falls into an alcoholic coma. I stand and fetch two parchments on a secretaire; they are two copies of an engagement contract between us. As soon as she has signed them, she is magically committed, and she will have to marry me or go to prison. I sign them with the quill left there for that purpose. Then, I go back to her, put the parchments down in front of her and the quill into her right hand. She is too drunk to protest. I guide her hand to the parchment, but I cannot do more. She must sign by herself for the contract to be valid. If things do not happen that way, the magic will not catch.

"Hermione," I say in a soft voice, "sign those parchments. You'll see; it will be for the better."

Spilled Potion Has A Bitter Taste

Chapter 6 of 17

What it is customary to call "the morning after."

Disclaimer: see first chapter

Many thanks to Dacian Goddess for rereading this.

Oh, my head! My head hurts! And why do I feel like my bed's moving? I sigh inwardly. I can't spend my day in bed. I open my eyes. Thank God, the curtains are pulled down. I don't think I'd be able to bear light this morning. First, I slowly reach a sitting position. I wait for the bedroom to stabilize, then turn on my side and put my feet on the

floor. I wait again for the furniture to stop moving (that's stupid, the furniture isn't supposed to move, but with magic, you never know). At last, I stand. I can even walk! And run to the toilet where I vomit bile while the Firewhisky remains in my blood system.

I remember now. I drank several glasses of Firewhisky yesterday evening together with Severus Snape. Not a good sign, then. I probably did something that I will regret. I couldn't have been in my normal state if I let myself become tipsy in Snape's presence. Even when I'm sober, I don't trust him. He may have helped us win the war, but I can't find anything else in his favour. He's as disagreeable as always, and he gives me goose flesh.

Here I come into my kitchen. My stomach won't allow me to swallow anything else than coffee, so I set out to prepare some for myself. I vaguely remember a parchment bearing the YLC heading. A strong apprehension invades me; I have the feeling that a cataclysmic catastrophe is about to occur. Feverishly, I hunt for the parchment through my things and find it in my robe pocket. I read it.

I, the undersigned, Hermione Jane Granger, sound in body and mind, am committed to marrying Severus Romulus Snape before April 1st 2000. I confirm that I have read the penalties that will be imposed upon me should I fail to fulfil my commitment.

Hermione Granger.

No, no, I didn't do that! It's not true! The bastard! He took advantage of my intoxication to get me to sign his fucking promise of marriage! Argh! My cup of coffee has just met the wall, and the coffee pot as well. I won't leave it at that. I swallow some aspirin, I wash my face, and I wage war on Severus Snape.

It's a bit past ten a.m. this Saturday morning as I stride into the Ministry of Magic. I have my wand checked at the reception, and then I head to the Department of Magical Equipment Control. The people there should be able to tell me if my parchment is a real magical contract. The corridors are empty...it's the week-end...and my footsteps ring out strangely in the empty building. I find the office I'm looking for and enter to meet the employee who is on duty.

"Hello, sir."

"Hello, Miss. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I'd like to know... How does one know if a parchment is a magical contract? And how to withdraw from one if you've already signed it?"

"It's very simple, Miss. A magical contract can't be destroyed by magic, nor by fire or any other means. This department also has at its disposal an identification spell for such contracts. The contracting parties are bound, except if they have a mutual agreement to break it. If that is the case, they must meet around the parchment and destroy it together. If only one party wants to withdraw from the contract, they have to lodge an appeal by the Aurors' Office. But these proceedings might last a very long time and are by no means suspending."

I take the damned promise of marriage and hold it out to the employee.

"Would you mind using this spell on this parchment, please?"

"I'm sorry," he answers, looking embarrassed, "but the two persons who know the spell don't work on week-ends. Come back on Monday, and I'm sure one of them will be delighted to help you."

"And if I try to destroy it now? If it's a real magical contract, there's no risk, is there?"

"No. Well, not most of the time. It sometimes happens that the parchments used for this kind of commitment bear so many spells to enforce their protection that even the slightest voluntarily made scratch can have disagreeable consequences, such as the word 'perjurer' etched on the forehead. Do you feel well, Miss? You look pale."

I guess so. I've felt my blood drain from my face at his words. I try to make a good face, though.

"What if the parchment is signed under duress or by some one who isn't really conscious of what they're doing?"

"If that is the case, the magic won't protect the parchment, and the signatories aren't bound."

"Thank you. That's what I wanted to know. Good bye and have a good week-end."

I must find Snape. There's a good probability that the contract isn't valid. I was intoxicated when I signed it, but in doubt, I'd rather convince him to destroy it together with me. He doesn't work on week-ends, I heard the twins make remarks about it. Nevertheless, they must know where he lives. A visit to WWW is called for.

Fred and George first look astonished when I arrive, but they quickly look embarrassed. Their faces take a bright red shade. It's obvious that they don't know how to behave with the almost ex-fiancée of their brother.

"Hello, Fred. Hello, George."

"Hello, Hermione. It's kind of you to come and see us."

"Actually, I wanted to ask you something."

Their uneasy faces show that they believe I'm going to ask something about Ron. I carry on. "Put your minds at rest. This is not related to Ron."

They relax immediately.

"I'd like to brew some potion for dreamless sleep because.... Well, you understand."

They nod vigorously, and I don't doubt that they hope to prevent me from speaking more about the matter. Besides, my hangover should give me a very convincing face.

"I don't have asphodel anymore. The Apothecary doesn't have any more either. I don't know who else to ask. I don't dare go to the Burrow, Harry is away on duty, Hogwarts is far, and then I thought that Snape must have some, I mean, some asphodel or potion. Is he here today?"

I've spoken very quickly. I cross my fingers in the hope that they will swallow my feeble excuse. It seems to work.

"I understand," one of them says. "But Snape doesn't work on week-ends and has taken to double-locking the cupboard with the ingredients..."

"...since we've helped ourselves with what belongs to us, after all, to make a special order of Canary Creams for a birthday," the other finishes.

"Perhaps you could tell me where he lives. I really need the potion. I can't go on like that. Really, I can't wait until Monday." I can't believe how whiney I sound.

They seem impressed by the extent of my despair. I suspect they feel a bit guilty for not disapproving of their brother's decision.

"We're willing to tell you where he lives. You must be at the end of the end of your rope if you plan to visit him in his lair. But we know for sure that he's had a romantic date yesterday evening. Maybe he won't be in the mood for guests today."

Now, it's my turn to gape. They know! Oh, my God, they know! One of them resumes the conversation (I'm incapable to differentiate them from each other this morning. A side-effect of my hangover?).

"I know; you're not the only one who can't believe that old Snape can convince a woman to go on a date with him. But that's a case of life or death for Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. You see, Scrimgeour's last decree, the one which forbids to all people associated with Voldemort to handle specific Potions ingredients, endangers our business. With that law, Snape wouldn't be allowed to touch some Potions ingredients that are essential for the products he creates for us. The only way we could think of to keep him in the company is for him to have an unemployed wife to support. We need him to get that authorization to keep working for us. We've already written a certificate vouching for our needing him."

Once more, I offer them a full view of my caries. *To be granted the sweetness of life*, he'd said. And I'm the Queen of England. He only wanted to save his payslip, and I fell into the trap like a bloody stupid naïve young girl. I hope he's paid well, for this subterfuge will cost him a lot.

"I understand, but could you please give me his address now?"

"All right, all right. It's in Spinner's End, near Manchester."

One of them writes the Apparition coordinates. I say good-bye to them rather hastily and Apparate on a dirty river's bank.

It takes me an hour to find his dilapidated house among even more dilapidated houses. I think it perfectly reflects his personality. I knock at his door; I hear some noise on the other side. He opens it a crack, then completely when he notices who is calling on him.

"Hermione, what a pleasant surprise. Come in and make yourself at home. It will soon be your home, after all. What do you want to see me for?"

I squint at him, a sure sign that I'm very displeased. I don't like his smirk nor the way he speaks to me. I come into the house, but I remain standing in what looks like a mix between a lounge and a library.

"It's Miss Granger to you, Mister Snape."

"We are in the twenty-first century, Hermione. It is custom nowadays to call one's fiancée by her first name."

"Precisely. I don't think you and I are affianced."

"Oh, but you are wrong. You signed a promise of marriage. Actually, your visit is most convenient. You fainted before I could give this to you."

He grabs my left hand and slips an old but nice-looking ring on my ring finger. I wrench my hand from his grip: I can't stand him touching me. Argh, I can't take the ring off. It's one of those antiquated objects made in antique times when men owned their wives the same way they owned their cattle: he is the only one who can take it off. I hate his mocking eyes. I hate him, period. All of a sudden, what he's just said rings a bell.

"If I fainted, how did I go back home?"

"As you had signed the promise of marriage, the YLC receptionist accepted to give me your address. I Apparated there with you and put you to bed."

I was in my pyjamas when I got up...

"You rummaged through my cupboards! You... you... changed my clothes."

"I was not going to let you sleep in your robes. Besides, there is nothing I will not see after we are married."

I manage to sit down on a clapped-out armchair before my legs ridicule me by going wobbly. I'm so shocked that I have a hard time breathing.

"Stupid girl! I used magic to put your pyjamas on. That does not change the fact that I will see everything you have to offer after our wedding," he adds maliciously.

"You'll see nothing because there's a fair chance that our contract is invalid. I was intoxicated when I signed it. I've come here to ask you to destroy it with me. If you refuse, I'll go to the Ministry on Monday, and I'll prove that this contract has no legal validity whatsoever."

Ah, Mister Snape is wide-eyed at that; he's afraid. However, he pulls himself together.

"It is true that you were drunk, yet nobody forced you to sign. You were by no means under duress."

"You practically held my hand while I was signing, and you have the gall to tell me I didn't sign under duress! Besides, you lied to me. You only want to keep your job. Marriage doesn't interest you."

"Which is why it's a very good reason for us to get married."

I don't understand his reasoning.

"Think, Hermione. Do you want to get married?"

"You very well know that I don't."

"Neither do I. I don't chase after marriage. That's one thing we have in common. I am certain that we will feel pressed not to be in the way of each other more than strictly necessary. And I happen to know that your income is, how to put it, meagre. If I get married, the Weasleys promised to bring my salary to three hundred and sixty Galleons per month AND I will receive a commission on sales of the products that I have created. You will be able to have everything you need without resorting to asking for help here and there."

Three hundred and sixty Galleons? A commission on sales? Did I hear clearly? I hardly live on seventy Galleons a month! He's trying to buy me!

"I am not a mercenary or a whore. I don't marry for money. You're using very vile arguments to convince me, Mister Snape. I'm not surprised: you're a vile person. If I were you, I'd begin to look for another fiancée, a real one, for it won't be me. It'll be my pleasure to give you your ring back on Monday. Good bye."

He doesn't even try to detain me when I leave.

Author's notes

(1) 350 Galleons = 2610 Euros

(2) 70 Galleons = 507,5 Euros

The Cat Is Out Of The Bag

Chapter 7 of 17

Hermione tries to get rid of that damned contract.

Disclaimer: see first chapter

Chapter reread by my precious beta, Dacian Goddess

What a horrible week-end! I wonder what is worse: being separated from Ron or being the target of Severus Snape's matrimonial project. I tried to take his ring off several times. I've tried soap and lubricating Potions to make it glide along my finger easily. I've tried to break the spell that holds it in place. Nothing did the trick. I've decided to let it go for now and to research marriage and magical contracts in the wizarding world.

Being a Muggle-born has been a disadvantage to me when it comes to the most ordinary aspects of the wizarding world. Why hadn't I researched marriage until now? I know the answer to my question: I thought that things happened like in the Muggle world. Well, not exactly. I've found out that marriage is in itself a magical contract. Who says magical contract says penalty (translation: Azkaban) for the one who breaks it unilaterally without observing the procedures. Like any magical contract, it can only be dissolved by consent of both parties or by the Wizengamot if only one of the spouses wishes to divorce. In this case, divorce is possible only in case of adultery, violence from one spouse against the other, sterility, non-consummation of the wedding, etc. In short, getting a divorce is not that difficult from a legal point of view. Where the shoe pinches is the precarious social situation of the divorcees. Illicit studies show that divorcees never reach important positions or easily lose the job they had once they separated from their spouse. However, I'm reassured by the increasing number of non-married couples. I feel hopeful that this disapproval from another age will fade with time. Now I know what to expect if I don't marry Snape...or if I do marry him. Besides, I have a plan:

1/I prove that the promise of marriage isn't valid: end of my torment.

2/The promise of marriage turns out to be valid: I marry Snape, then I drive him to be violent toward me, or to be unfaithful, or I'll find an idea, and I ask for a divorce. My fight for S.P.E.W. shouldn't suffer much from my status as a divorcee.

3/If point two doesn't work, I'm deep in it.

I should have guessed that Miss Granger...no, Hermione...would find the flaw in my plan. I'm pretty sure the contract is valid, but if it isn't, what will I do? I can point out that she's wearing my ring, a Prince family heirloom. I think I have read somewhere that wearing a magical betrothal ring is akin to a promise of marriage. However, this argument might not be foolproof; she only needs to produce her memory of the moment when I put it on her finger in a Pensieve, and it will be clear to everyone that I didn't leave her much of a choice. If the Ministry declares that the contract is not valid, I will have no other alternative than to resume my search for a wife. It would be very annoying; I am already accustomed to the idea of having Hermione as my fiancée. She doesn't have a regular income...at least for now...which would make her dependant on me and perhaps a little more docile...no, that would be a dream. She doesn't give me the impression of being a complete idiot, she has the status of war heroine, and she will want to avoid me as much as possible in our everyday interaction. She's physically acceptable, which is another point in her favour, in spite of her too visible teeth and tousled hair. Really, it would be my best interest if she were obliged to marry me.

Monday morning. It's still early, but I haven't slept sleep well anyway. I arrive at the Ministry at the same hour that the employees start working. The receptionist has barely finished examining my wand that my impatience pushes me to run down the corridors to the Department of Magical Equipment Control. The Ministry workers are just arriving at their office when I dash into the place, puffing and panting, red-faced, hair flying in every direction. I don't leave them time enough to drink a coffee.

"Good morning, sir. I need to know if a parchment is a magical contract. Can someone help me?"

They look at me, taken aback, annoyed that I interrupt their daily routine with work to do as soon as they arrive. They take upon themselves quickly though.

"Of course, Miss," one of them says to me. "Follow me, please."

He takes me to a small office overflowing with shelves and cupboards full of documents.

"Please, have a seat."

Once we're installed, I give him my parchment. He draws his wand out and begins a series of movements above the document while mumbling incomprehensible words. A weak red glow emanates from the contract. I hold my breath.

"This is a real magical contract, Miss. The red colour proves it. Granted, it's a bit pale, but undeniably red. Maybe you were out of sorts when you signed it?"

"I was..."

I stop before I admit that I was drunk.

"Does this mean that the magic considered me lucid enough not to sign, had I wanted not to?"

"Quite, Miss. There's no doubt about it. If you've signed this contract, you're bound by it."

I bury my face into my hands so that I have time to breathe deeply two or three times and to swallow the lump in my throat, then I raise my head.

"Thank you, sir. Have a good day."

"Goodbye, Miss, and a good day to you too."

I go straight back home. I'm not going to get very far in my work on my promotional insert today. I sit down in my colour-faded, hand-me-down sofa and cry. I cry for what seems to be hours. I think of everything I've lived through so far: the discovery that I was a witch; Hogwarts; my friendship with Harry and Ron; my relationship with Ron; the YLC; and now, the wedding that's awaiting me. I had a bright future in front of me; "the most brilliant witch of her age," people said relentlessly. Where am I today? In a lousy studio flat in a modest...and Muggle...area, leading a political fight for a cause that interests only two house-elves and myself, crying for a lost love and earning less money than a hermit in a desert. I feel pathetic. I think of killing myself or of becoming a Muggle. Deep down, I know that I won't do any of these things, but I toy with the idea. I imagine the most efficient or harebrained ways to commit suicide, or what I would do if I'd split my wand in two and renounce my status as a witch. My sleep-deprived body finally betrays me and I fall asleep among all these not so innocent fantasies.

Monday morning. I arrive at work at WWW. I hardly have time to put a foot into the shop that the twins are upon me.

"Well? Is it done? Is it signed?"

I sigh openly.

"Yes, the applicant has signed a promise of marriage, but some details remain to be settled."

"Who is she? When will we be able to meet her?"

"You will know in due course. For now, I do have work to do, so a good day to you."

I walk out on them and lock myself in my laboratory. However, I have the greatest difficulty in concentrating on the pink rabbit cream, which is supposed to have similar effects as the canary cream and change those who would eat it into giant pink rabbits. Unerringly, my thoughts go back to Hermione and her will to ruin our betrothal. I am persuaded that she went to the Ministry at dawn, after a sleepless night, and stood and waited in front of the door of the Department of Magical Equipment Control long before the first employee arrived. As far as I know the Ministry's habits, I'd say the employees begin their work day at the same time as I. I only have to wait. The more time flows without me seeing her, the more chances I have to get married since she won't have obtained what she wanted.

An hour later, I'm so distracted that I've nearly stained my robe with pink colouring agent.

Two hours later, I've burnt the bottom of a cauldron because I had forgotten to extinguish the fire beneath it.

Three hours later, the content of the cauldron has exploded. I had to clean up the mess and explain to Weasley and Weasley that everything was fine.

Four hours later, I no longer even try to pretend that I don't care and pace in the fifteen square metres of my laboratory.

I can't eat my lunch. I wait the whole afternoon for her to come, a triumphant expression on her face, and to shake the torn parchment under my eyes...or to light a symbolic stake right in the middle of Diagon Alley. But no, nothing; no news. At five p.m., I come out of my laboratory, a triumphant smile on my lips. Of course, this fact hasn't escaped Fred Weasley, whom I've unfortunately met in the back of the shop.

"So, Snape, everything's all right for you, it seems?"

I feel so satisfied that I answer him.

"Absolutely."

"Is your lady friend the reason for your cheerfulness?"

"One could say so. You won't lose your head of laboratory after all."

"She must be very special. Not that many people can get a smile out of you."

I cannot resist. I anticipate with pleasure the shock he'll receive when he finds out that the girl his brother's in love with but has let go will land in the bed of a man he absolutely detests but whom he needs most.

"Indeed. The YLC had me meet a young lady whose compatibility rate with me is ninety percent."

The carp look suits him. He whistles.

"Ninety percent! I'd never have believed that... I understand why you wouldn't let her slip through your fingers."

"I must admit that I had never considered that young person that way. I now see her in a completely new light."

"She's someone you already knew?"

I gaze at my nails with falsely disinterested eyes. I gave up on taking innocent airs long ago; nobody would believe them.

"Absolutely. I think that you know her as well. However, unlike a certain Weasley, I am able to discern the pearl that Miss Granger is."

"Miss Gr...? Hermione! You're going to marry Hermione! You old pervert! You're old enough to be her father! Besides, she isn't in love with you."

"You forget, Mister Weasley, that this wedding...yours and your brother's idea, by the way...is not the result of love, but is the condition for the future development of your company, and that the one she is in 'love' with chose to move away from her."

He goes white, red, green; the rainbow parades on his face. If it was not so contrary to my image, I would burst out laughing. Finally, his voice comes back to him.

"What did you do to her? Did you force her?"

"Miss Granger has signed a promise of marriage in due form. You know that the promissories signed through the YLC's action are magical contracts, which means that her will could not have been violated."

He can't think of something to answer. I go past him, walk a little, then turn my head to the side to watch him over my shoulder.

"I forgot. The wedding will take place on Saturday, March 18th at ten a.m. at the Ministry. You and your brother are invited of course."

Summit Negotiations

Chapter 8 of 17

Severus and Hermione practice the (not so subtle) art of negotiation.

Disclaimer: see first chapter.

Many, many thanks to my beta, Dacian Goddess, who helped me make this chapter better.

I hope I have not counted my chickens before they are hatched by announcing my wedding with Hermione. There's only one way to be sure of it: to pay her a visit. I Apparate in front of her door and enter her flat without knocking. A simple *Alohomora* is enough to open the door. She hasn't added further defences; it's as if she has forgotten that I already came here on Friday evening. I find her asleep on the sofa; her neck will be stiff when she wakes up. There's a pile of books on the coffee table in front of her. I can't help but smirk: books on marriage, wizarding customs, contracts and "new couples." You're doing your homework too late, Hermione! That's enough nonsense; it's time to wake her up. I point my wand at her. She starts and is outraged to see me.

"You! What are you doing here? How did you come in?"

"Hello, Hermione. I wanted to visit my fiancée, and I came in through the door."

"I'm not your fiancée!"

"Then, would you care to explain why you didn't come and let me know earlier today? Did you forget to go to the Ministry?"

She blushes and looks away. She's sitting and I'm standing. I savour this power I wield over her. At last, she looks at me, but her eyes don't reflect defeat... yet.

"No, I didn't forget," she hisses through gritted teeth. "The contract is valid. But you can still change your mind."

"Don't count on it. Now that the matter of our betrothal is settled, I insist that you call me Severus."

Of course, I have in mind her "friends" expression when they note the familiarity between us.

"I refuse!"

This time I grab her wrists and draw her up against me. I can see fear on her face.

"How will you explain that you have signed that promise of marriage? You very well know that those documents cannot be fooled: you signed willingly. Would you want everybody to believe that Hermione Granger willingly signed a promise of marriage but tried to back-pedal afterwards? Hum, I wonder how it would make you look...you, the scourge of oppression upon the weak, who reluctantly weds a repentant Death Eater. You would confirm by your acts your refusal of a second chance for those who have made a mistake in their past."

I let my eyes drift toward her breast, which nearly brushes my chest. I will probably take great pleasure in exploring it when she is my wife. When I look at her face again, I can see that my words have reached their mark: she's biting her lower lip.

"Besides, *Hermione*"...I take malicious pleasure in insisting on her first name..."our wedding will take place on March 18th at the Ministry. I took the liberty of inviting my employers. Of course, you can invite whomever you want to, *without* restriction."

"Your... employers?"

Her voice has become disagreeably strident. Then she carries on in a more acceptable tone.

"Fred and George know? But then, it means that the Weasleys... and Harry..."

She's groping for words as she bites her lower lip with renewed vigour, and superb tears, as beautiful and round as raindrops, slide down her cheeks.

"I don't see where the problem is. One day or another, people will know."

"You... you could have asked me about the date! I could have had a S.P.E.W. meeting that day!"

"We'll get married in the morning. You'll be able to have all the meetings in the world in the evening, after the consummation of our wedding is complete."

She doesn't like my allusion to that event at all. Too bad; the event has to happen.

"I'm not very fond of special occasions. We'll have a simple, civil ceremony before we get back home. You should make arrangements to give your flat back. My house is better than this dump."

She looks rebellious.

"I receive friends sometimes, Harry for example, and Dobby and Winky to organize things for S.P.E.W. *I will* go on receiving who I want in my home."

I had wondered when she would start to quibble.

"You can receive your... acquaintances in the lounge, provided they don't go into the other rooms so that we don't have to meet."

"I'll have to introduce you to my parents. They will attend the ceremony of course."

"If they must."

"I don't have any money for a gown. I know, I know, we don't want a fancy ceremony, but I don't have a gown worthy of the occasion."

Her voice expresses the sarcasm lacking in her words. Her attempts to disgust me from her by using all these ridiculous requests entertain me. Clearly, she doesn't remember who she's dealing with. I pull a Gringotts parchment out of my pocket and sign an allowance for a two hundred Galleon withdrawal from my account. Her eyes seem willing to bulge out at that.

"This should cover the expense for our wedding. If you need more to move out, you only need to ask."

She protests, and her spit lands at her feet...and mine.

"But... but... I am not a kept woman! I can manage by myself very well!"

"Then, who's paying for your flat?"

She blushes. Anger and shame vie for the front place on the stage that is her emotions. I've hit the mark. Someone, Potter or her family, is helping her.

"I could find a job easily if I wanted to! I got excellent results with my NEWTs."

"And when was that?"

"Last June. It's just, I didn't have time to look for a job."

"That is of no matter. I earn enough for the both of us. You won't have to work if you don't want to."

She will have found a job in less than two months if her rebellious pout is any indication. This way, I will be able to keep my Galleons for myself and buy on the black market those expensive books so unjustly forbidden by the Ministry.

"Perhaps. Right now, since we're going to live together, we could establish some ground rules?"

Some what rules? Her unctuous voice suggests that I won't like what she is going to say.

"Would you care to elaborate what you mean by 'ground rules'?" I ask cautiously.

"I won't mix my books with yours; I want a room for myself that I can use as an office, provided with a telephone and electricity for my computer. We'll share the household chores such as housework, cooking, etc. fairly. You won't try to get me to stop my activities with S.P.E.W., and we'll sleep in separate bedrooms."

"I can convert the second bedroom into an office where you'll be able to put your books. My father was a Muggle, and so the whole house is equipped with electricity. Having the telephone set up won't be any trouble at all. We'll discuss the chores later. However, we will not sleep in separate bedrooms. On the one hand, the marriage has to be consummated to be valid. On the other hand, I have no intention to live as a eunuch while married."

The idea seems to make her a bit nauseous.

"That would be rape!" she retorts.

"I don't think so, my dear. I can be extremely persuasive, you know."

I acquired quite a lot of experience with women after I'd killed Dumbledore; that gesture had made me very popular with the female supporters of the Dark Lord. I am sure that I can bend her to my will when it comes to bedroom matters. But I can see that she's taking a hold of herself.

"I insist on establishing a marriage contract in which we'll write how our living together will be organized. And it will be a magical contract!"

Well, well, well, the know-it-all has at least learnt something useful: never trust others blindly.

"This condition is acceptable. I'll tell my lawyer about it and inform you of the date for the appointment."

I went back home a bit upset; Hermione Granger showed herself more hard-headed than I had expected her to be. Admittedly, she isn't that difficult to manipulate. However, I fear that, with time, she may become a bit too cunning. It's too late to go back on the promise of marriage that I too have signed. My only hope is that those ninety percent carry a real meaning.

At least I managed to write my article for S.P.E.W. yesterday, and I found a slogan. It will be *Freedom Concerns All*. I've sent both of them to the *Daily Prophet* and to *The Quibbler*, and now, all I have to do is to watch out for its publication. I've thought about my situation a lot as well, and with a clearer mind. I think I'm coming to terms with it; well, coming to terms with it is a bit much actually, but I can't do nothing but feel sorry for myself. I don't like what has happened to me, that much is true. However, I've decided to make as much of it as possible. I'll stick to my plan: to drive Snape to divorce. It looks like he's decided to "consummate" our wedding, but I do have other means at my disposal: sterility, adultery (even if I'm the one to commit it), and violence are among them. I give myself one year to succeed.

Also, I'm going to take care of what he's put a painful finger on: my unemployment. No political activism can hide my status. I'm going to remedy the situation. It's out of the question that I remain at my husband's mercy when it comes to money.

Last but not least: I must take care of the delicate file "How to tell one's parents and friends about my nuptials to come?" My parents first, before Saturday...before we meet Severus's lawyer.

"Hello, Dad!"

My father eyes me with confusion, and then moves away from the door to let me in. I must admit that I've put a lot of enthusiasm in my greeting. With me, that shows that I am nervous.

"Hello, Hermione. Come in, my dear."

My mother hugs me tightly, and *her* enthusiasm is genuine.

"Hermione! What a good surprise!"

We sit and share a cup of tea in the comfortable and bourgeois lounge of my parents' house.

"So, my dear, what brings you here?"

I sigh deeply before I launch into a lengthy explanation about the YLC, the tests with Ron, our breaking-off. I cry a lot, use three packets of tissues and take comfort from them like when I was a little girl. It's good to confide in someone.

I nonetheless take a great care to embellish what happened next.

"The YLC then proposed for me to meet one of their customers, whose tests showed a very high compatibility rate between us. I was rather reluctant, but the contract I'd signed imposed me to meet him. We talked several times since that first meeting, and he's convinced me to sign a promise of marriage with him."

"Be careful not to get married out of spite," my mother admonishes me with kindness.

"No, Mum, I'm not doing it out of spite. He isn't the man I'm in love with, but he's intelligent and he makes a very good living."

Their shocked expressions inform me that I've just made a blunder. I must make up for it straight away.

"I'm not marrying him for his money. Anyway, I intend to work and be self-sufficient. But, you see, wizarding customs are a bit different from the Muggle ones. It's not unusual to meet arranged couples."

"But that's medieval," my father exclaims.

"No, Dad, it's just... different. It is my world now, and I have every intention to respect its customs."

They still look justifiably sceptical. I gloss over the fact Severus Snape tricked me into marriage, that I could have lived as a couple with any other wizard without being

married, and I totally conceal that I intend to get divorced next year. I'm confident that I'll find an excuse until then, or I'll shift the blame onto Snape.

"I suppose our opinion doesn't count," my father sighs. "You'll need to introduce your... I suppose I can say fiancé, to us."

"I suppose, given that we're getting married on March 18th."

"Splendid. We have an entire year to prepare everything."

My mother is already planning the booking of a hall, the buying of dresses and bouquets, the sending of dozens of invitations, etc.

"Er, no, Mum, not in a year. We're getting married on March 18th next, in two weeks, at the Ministry for Magic. I'd like you to be there."

That will make two persons to support me in the room.

"Why being so hasty? Would you be pregnant?"

I can't help but think that my mother has an abrupt way of putting things.

"No. Why would you think that? But my 'fiancé' (the word burns my mouth) didn't want to wait. He's a bit older than me, you see, and... he'd like to settle down as quickly as possible."

My explanation rings hollow to me. My parents managed not to look too upset.

"I suppose we'll have to contend ourselves with marriage announcements to the family. None of them know that you're a witch, and with a wedding taking place at the Ministry..."

My mother is interrupted by my father.

"What's our son-in-law-to-be's name?"

I can feel the catastrophe coming.

"Severus Snape."

They scowl. It's only a matter of minutes before their memory provides them with the right data. My mother is the first to react.

"Didn't you have a teacher at Hogwarts whose name was Snape?"

I nod. This seems to trigger my father's memory.

"That one who killed the Headmaster two years ago, isn't he?"

"He's been acquitted. It seems he did it at the Headmaster's orders."

My parents' eyes widen. Really, that wizarding world has strange values.

"Is he related to your Snape?"

Be brave, Hermione. You faced Voldemort, damn it!

"They're the same."

"What?" they shout in unison. "You're going to marry a murderer?"

"He's been pardoned!"

We confront one another with deathly stares, but my parents already know that they've lost. They always lose when it comes to the wizarding world.

"If you think that you'll be happy with him, we won't hold it against you, Hermione. You'll always be welcome in our home, whatever happens. We love you too much, your father and I, to do things another way."

I take comfort from them like a little girl for the second time in two hours.

I arrive at the lawyer's early so that I could explain the situation to him before my fiancée arrives. She is right on time as usual. Mr Minutes settle us around a table in a small room adjacent to his office and we start the negotiations.

"Miss Granger, mister Snape, what clauses would you like to put into your marriage contract?"

"I want it to stipulate the basic rules of our common life," Hermione states firmly.

"Very well. Would you like to deal with your possessions and incomes in it as well?"

"Yes."

This time, I am the one to answer.

This part is easy to negotiate. Very soon, it appears that we share the same point of view on the subject. None of us wants to share their books; I don't want to share my Potions laboratory, and she doesn't want to share her computer. Each of us will contribute to the household expenses in proportion with our own income. The sharing out of the chores (She insists on it being in our wedding contract. "I won't be your own personal house-elf," she says.) is more difficult to manage than an international treaty about flying carpets, but we come to a satisfying agreement after two hours. And lastly, we promise not to interfere in the other's choice of career and professional life. Mr Minutes is a very gifted negotiator. Without him, we'd have been at it the whole week-end. When we leave the office, it's already the middle of the afternoon, and Diagon Alley is swarming with people.

Reactions

Chapter 9 of 17

How everyone takes the news.

Disclaimer: see first chapter

This chapter has been reread by my marvelous beta, Dacian Goddess.

When we leave Mr. Minutes's office, we're already in the middle of the afternoon, and Diagon Alley is swarming with people. I was going to propose that each of us go their own way...no need to be burdened with the other's presence...when we run into Molly and Arthur Weasley. Their arms are loaded with parcels, which informs me of their reason for being in London today. Uneasy smiles appear on their faces.

"Hermione! What a nice surprise! Hello, Severus! Fred and George told us the good news. Congratulations!"

Molly Weasley's greetings lack sincerity. Obviously, my intended shares the opinion, for she answers rather stiffly, "Hello, Mr and Mrs Weasley. Thank you for your congratulations."

It is very pleasurable to witness their uneasiness, and in order to increase it, I smirk. Arthur carries on the conversation in a tone that sounds a bit forced. "We're so sorry that you're not compatible with Ron, but know that you'll always be welcome at our home, Hermione." He adds, as if he'd just noticed that he's made a blunder, which is the case, "And you too, Severus, it goes without saying."

I slide a "protective" arm over Hermione's shoulders and bring her near me. Strangely, she does nothing to escape my embrace. I wonder what it means.

"Thank you, Arthur."

Of course, I have no intention to positively answer such a vague invitation, but Hermione feels obliged to add, "By the way, it's a stroke of good luck that we met you today. I was going to send you and the rest of your family an invitation for our wedding. It'll be on March 18th at ten a.m. at the Ministry. It'd please us if you were to attend it."

What about our agreement for a small ceremony? If all the Weasleys show their faces that day, we'll need no less than Westminster Abbey to accommodate the guests. However, the greenish complexion that takes possession of Arthur and Molly's skin is worth the inconvenience.

"It's very nice of you, Hermione, to think of us," Molly manages to articulate. "We'll be there, but I can't vouch for the others."

"No problem. That said, Severus and I still have things to do. Good bye."

She grabs my arm and drags me away. When we're at a reasonable distance, I turn to her.

"Do tell, Hermione, what made you invite the Weasley clique?"

Her face, as red as a brazen fire, expresses pain and anger, with a touch of hate.

"They're all hypocrites," she spits, her voice laced with venom that would have made a viper proud. "They were so glad that Ron and I were together. We were such a 'lovely couple'. Their approval was just hot air. They all bowed to moronic tests. They let their lives be dictated by statistics! That's insane. Let them come and see the result of their revered statistics!"

Even after I've fooled the wizarding world and convinced people that I was on the good side (meaning the winning one), I've remained unpopular. She wants the Weasleys to see what they've missed by not taking her into their family so they'd feel remorse for having left her at the mercy of predators like me. I must admit that I'm impressed by the amplitude of her rancour and the subtlety of her retaliation. Nothing could be worse for those Dumbledore worshippers. I kiss her on her cheek before I Apparate back home. I've hardly started to walk towards my house when I hear the characteristic noise of someone Apparating behind me.

"Severus, wait!"

What does she want?

"We must visit my parents," she says, panting.

I'm glad that my back is turned to her, for my eyes have taken the shape of flying saucepans. She carries on, "What if we went tomorrow afternoon? The sooner it's done, the sooner this chore will be behind us."

I sigh theatrically while turning to look at her.

"Agreed. I'll fetch you at three p.m. Now, good bye. A potion's waiting for me."

"Ah, er, very well. See you tomorrow."

And she literally disappears from my sight. At last.

My article was published yesterday and already people have reacted to it. If I'm to believe the three Howlers in my mail this morning, my opposition to slavery doesn't have unanimous support in the wizarding community. It doesn't matter; Rome wasn't built in one day after all.

I called my parents to inform them of our afternoon visit. I really have a bad feeling about this. Well, the die is cast. I take my "fiancé's" arm...I have a hard time getting accustomed to the word...and I Apparate the both of us in the garden of my parents' suburban house, where I grew up. We come into the house through the back door and find my mother in the kitchen.

"Hermione, my dear! How are you?"

She kisses me warmly enough and then turns to Severus.

"You must be Severus?"

"Yes, Madam."

"Nice to meet you."

He eyes disdainfully the hand that she extends in his direction and slowly, reluctantly, half-heartedly grabs it before he draws his own hand back quickly. The movement didn't escape my mother's notice, nor my father's, who has just joined us. He sizes Severus Snape up, from head to toe, like a customer at a slave market. He notes his black hair, shiny with sebum, his corpse-like complexion, and holds his black, spark-less eyes. Disapproval can be read on his face, but he says nothing about it.

"Severus Snape?"

Said Severus Snape doesn't even move an eyebrow. I imagine he didn't like the way my father looked at him. I wonder why he didn't draw his wand. He probably hasn't the fondest memories of Azkaban.

"Himself."

"Let's go into the lounge."

We all follow my father and settle into the armchairs. My parents remain on their guard. I can understand them. They know that my intended has killed in cold blood in the past. I decide to speak, to alleviate the tension somewhat.

"Dad, Mum, as I already told you, our wedding will take place on March 18th, at the Ministry of Magic. We... I would like you to be present."

"Of course, my dear. Nothing in the world could prevent us from attending," my mother answers.

"I'll take care of the necessary authorisations so that you'll be able to enter the Ministry building. Do you think you could send individual announcements to the family?"

My mother nods and then proposes us tea. We all accept in the hope it will make this moment less awkward. Of course it doesn't work, and after a few platitudes..."How shall we dress?" or "You'll let us know your new address."...we leave at last. Our stay only lasts half an hour. Severus leaves me as suddenly as yesterday, without even kissing me on my cheek.

I meticulously wash my hand as soon as I get back home. I really made a great effort by stepping foot in a house inhabited by Muggles. It was frankly nauseating. How did such people, such petit bourgeois people, manage to produce a witch? This is beyond my understanding.

I carry on with my life after that. At most I tidy the house up a little and make room for Hermione's things in the cupboards. I want to make sure that she understands that I am the one to choose where she puts her things. I also transform a room into an office, as per our contract.

She writes to me in the course of the week to inform me that she's invited most members of the Order of the Phoenix and...horror...Potter. I am persuaded that this is part of her plan to make me abandon the idea of marrying her, but I've lived through worse things, so her attempts do not deter me in the slightest. Besides, the bans had been published on Wednesday. As early as Thursday, the news made the front page of the *Prophet*. Admittedly, it was only a line referring to an inside page, but it was enough to get my doorstep flooded with mail and to be plagued with interview requests.

The articles published by *Witch Weekly* and the *Daily Prophet* on the subject were pathetic. They used every known cliché to speak of our situation: how love has saved the bitter heart of the ex-Death Eater; redemption for the one who had to kill his best friend; the Gryffindor princess who succumbs to the mysterious charms of the dangerous, tender-hearted man (the one who has written this crap had enough sense to publish it anonymously); our ninety percent compatibility rate at the YLC tests. I Flooed Hermione about it, and we agreed not to answer and to carry on our lives as if nothing was different.

My employers are delighted: their shop hasn't emptied since those articles made the newspapers. Souls in quest of romanticism, who want nothing less than a signed photograph of the dark-eyed hero, leave with Canary Creams, Daydream Charms, or a trinket they've been assured my hands had been on. I am impatient for the marriage to take place and to be over with this farce.

After an infernal week during which I had to navigate through the Howlers sent to the "whore who sleeps with Voldemort's servants" (that was the general idea of such "letters"), agitated young girls who wanted me to give them tips about how to gain the attention of a noble and romantic hero and reporters more interested in my love life than in my opinions, I open my door for Harry Potter on this Sunday afternoon. He hasn't said he was coming, but I don't mind. I'm so glad to see him.

"Harry! What a nice surprise. Come in."

"How are you? I've received your invitation for the next Saturday, and I wanted to make sure that you were well."

"That's nice of you, Harry."

He updates me on what he's done since we last met, and I make tea for us.

"I also wanted to tell you that I'm sorry about what happened with Ron. He's so miserable since you took the tests...."

My answer is scathing.

"He didn't have to submit to the result."

Harry raises his hands in a calming gesture.

"I know, Hermione. Ginny and I took the test as well. Our compatibility rate is seventy percent. I can't imagine what it'd have been like if the result had come out negative. Come to speak of it, I wanted to invite you to our engagement party on June 18th. It's a Saturday."

I sigh inwardly. I know that Harry doesn't want to hurt me, but to be reminded of the failure of my sentimental life while his is a success...that's too much.

"I won't come alone, you know."

"Ah, oh, yes, of course, your... husband... can come too. I wanted you to know that I'll be at your wedding. Nothing in the world could make me miss my best friend's wedding, even if she's marrying someone as disagreeable as Snape. At least, he's an honourable man."

"Thank you, Harry."

His words have me leaning towards leniency with him until he adds, "Is it true that you made ninety percent with Snape? I thought it was a rumour, but the twins said that Snape said it, too."

I sigh, noisily this time.

"It's real."

"What do you find in him?"

Harry is a whisker away from being tossed out of my flat.

"Nothing. He took the tests; his name came out, he wanted to meet me, and he convinced me to accept his proposal. As I can't get everything that I want, I settled for what was available."

"But, surely, you could have found somebody else?"

"Would *you* have been able to find someone else if things hadn't worked with Ginny?" I yell at him. I can feel my cheeks blushing and tears invading my eyes. I don't want him to know that Snape got me because I can't hold my alcohol. No, nobody will know.

"I accepted Severus Snape's proposal because he's a repentant Death Eater; that should make my future actions for the rights of magical beings credible. I accepted because he's employed and won't sponge off me; because he doesn't want to be in my presence more than strictly necessary, and I happen to think that it suits me. Are these reasons enough to convince you or should I find other ones?"

I can see that Harry is ashamed of his reaction. I can't really blame him for doubting my decision; except for the fact that he helped us win the war, Severus is nothing to him. He isn't likeable.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I... I should have guessed..."

I smile wanly at him.

"It's all right, Harry. We're not going to have a fall out because of Severus, are we?"

He gazes at me for a long while, then nods and smiles back at me.

"You're right, Hermione. You're always the voice of reason. Well, what can I get you as a wedding gift?"

"First things first. Would you accept to stand for me?"

"Of course, Hermione, I'll stand for you. I'll always be there for you. You're my friend."

My morale soars at his words.

"Then, could you get me a job through one of your admirers?"

"You want to work? What about S.P.E.W.?"

"I'll always find time for it, but I need to be financially independent. I don't want Severus to have means to put me under pressure."

"That's twice already that you call him Severus," he teases me kindly.

"Harry! You wouldn't want me to call my future husband 'sir'?"

And like that, we're relaxed. We share a frank and friendly laugh, like when we were at Hogwarts. Harry leaves me a short time later, but not without promising to try and get me an interview with a potential employer.

D-Day, H-Hour, G-Point

Chapter 10 of 17

The wedding day and night, er, afternoon.

Disclaimer: see first chapter.

My beta rocks! Thanks, Dacian Goddess!

Who could believe that my minuscule flat contained that many things? I consider the question while I contemplate the stack of cardboard boxes lying in front of me. And what about the furniture? I love magic; it can make everything smaller and lighter with a wave of a wand. I spent all of Thursday commuting between my future-ex-flat and Spinner's End, the keys to which Severus sent me by owl yesterday. I'd have liked to have finished before five p.m., but I wasn't that lucky; I had too many things to move. *He* comes back home at five thirty, just as I've put my computer in the room that is destined to be my office.

"Good day, Hermione. I'm glad to see you already feel at home."

"Think nothing of it, Severus. After all, this will be my home."

He only nods while a light smile hovers on his lips.

"I gave my new address to all my acquaintances. Don't be surprised if, one day, my aunt Maddie knocks at the door. She's used to visit people without warning."

His smirk tells me that he understands my tactic and that he won't let me get off the hook that easily.

"I don't see a problem with that. Your family will be mine as well in less than two days. I'll show her the Snape definition of the word 'hospitality'."

Stealthily, he comes and stands between me and my way out. I can't let him corner me.

"This is all very good, but it's time for me to go back home. I've been very busy all day, and now, I'm exhausted."

I try to get round him, but he takes advantage of my manoeuvre to catch my forearm and draw me to him.

"Is this a way to say 'good-bye' to one's fiancé?"

I feel like someone who witnesses an accident and who stays rooted on the spot, not being able to react; I can see his face coming near mine, and before I can think, his lips cover mine. His other hand grips my other arm, and I can't move anymore.

His kiss is light, made of small strokes, and lasting. If I didn't know it was Snape kissing me, I would have qualified it as "tender". Little by little, in spite of myself, I relax. He can feel it and takes advantage of it by encircling me with his arms. One of his hands slides to the nape of my neck to hold my head in place while the other takes possession of the small of my back. He kisses me harder, with more insistence, and his tongue joins his lips in their assault on my mouth. Taken aback by the sensations that he creates in me with his kiss and with the little, barely perceptible circles his hands draw on my body, I let myself go against him and open my mouth completely. My hands grip his waist, my tongue welcomes his, and before long, I moan. He withdraws from my embrace at that moment and looks me up and down; he is smugness incarnate. He's just proven to me that I'll be powerless to prevent the consummation of our wedding. I'm appalled by this revelation upon myself, and I flee. I can hear him shouting at my retreating back, "Good night, Hermione, and sweet dreams."

What a week! The Weasley twins seem to have given me more work than usual. I suspect them to be trying to punish me for taking pure and sweet Hermione as a spouse. It's their brother's fault; it was he who let her go. I've retaliated by asking them to be my best men, which they couldn't refuse; it would have been too rude, and I asked them in front of three customers. That should prevent them from playing a dirty trick on me. It wouldn't do for their public image if they were to ruin a wedding where they were best men.

My fiancée...I use the word as much as possible, for soon, I will have to say "my wife", and that word doesn't have the same ring of freedom...asked me for money for a little reception after the wedding. I hope she does not intend to organise a feast; I won't stand the company of cretins for a long time. I send her what she asks, but I remind her in my letter back to her that she wouldn't want to be the cause for several accidents. Actually, I don't want to go back to Azkaban and to its guardians just because my self-control will have slipped. I can be charitable on occasion: there's no use in giving those nice workers in the North Sea more work than they already have.

I chose our rings at the beginning of the week. I didn't have the opportunity to show them to Hermione when she came by yesterday, but I've given her food for thoughts. Come to think of it, she didn't tell me who would stand for her. I'll find out tomorrow. There's no need to mull over it until then.

D-Day, H-Hour minus a half hour. I am in the Hall of Ceremony at the Ministry, already settled at my place. The only other person present is the employee of the registry office, but he's engrossed in last minute verifications and other preparations. I've taken a book to kill time while waiting for the wedding party to arrive, but in the end, I'd rather observe the accommodations. To my own satisfaction, I notice that there aren't any bouquets, garlands or embellishments. This isn't a wedding for love; there's absolutely no need to do too much. The chairs are arranged as they should be, behind those destined for the bride and groom. I can hear noise coming from the corridor. The first guests are arriving.

Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks enter the hall. They nearly turn around when they see me alone, but decide against it and take place somewhere on the bride's side of the room. They shouldn't have worried. I was decided to ignore them if they afforded me the same courtesy.

A short time after, a whole load of Weasleys arrives. Two red and one dark heads leave the lot behind them. Fred and George Weasley take a seat directly behind me. The dark head...it belongs to Potter...takes place behind Hermione's chair. I should have guessed. Strangely, I'm not affected that she's chosen him to stand with her. Anyway, I will make sure that she limits her interactions with him to the minimum in the future. I spare a glance for the other Weasleys. They all look alike, but I can tell my promised's ex-boyfriend is missing. A pity; I would have liked to twist the knife in his wound so much.

At last, Hagrid and Hermione's parents arrive at the same time. The Grangers goggle at the half-giant nervously, which makes me smile; the bloke wouldn't hurt a fly. They finally sit down.

The atmosphere is charged with the hostility emanating from the guests and with their frustration at not being able to act upon said hostility. I feel like laughing, but I doubt that all these people would share my sense of humour.

At last, Hermione comes in. She has chosen to come to me alone. I don't know if her gesture denotes distrust or autonomy, or both. Why is she so difficult? I change my mind as soon as I notice the disapprobation taking hold of the faces in the Weasley clan, especially on Molly's face. My mind is very flexible, isn't it?

The ceremony itself is short, barely lasting twenty minutes. We exchange our vows of fidelity, love, mutual care, etc. I hardly listen, to be honest. I utter the expected words in-between thinking about a variant of Polyjuice, which should allow transforming only one body part of the drinker. The face, for example, or the hands, or another part. It'd be very profitable, and now that I earn a commission of the sales....

"And now, Mister Snape, you can kiss Mrs Snape!"

"Madam Granger! I intend to keep my maiden name."

My sweet bride's voice brings me back to reality. My parents-in-law swell with conceit at their daughter's feminist expression, and the assembly agrees wholeheartedly with her. Hypocrites!

"I don't have an objection to that," I add.

Our living together will be difficult enough without debating about last names. After all, it doesn't count that much. Only power is important.

The feeling of hostility against me grows and reaches an alarming level. I won't let them get the better of me, and I'm determined to show them the kiss of the century. Hermione's complexion swings from disgusted-green to desiring-red. It's up to me to make sure that the desiring-red wins. I draw her gently toward me and take her into my arms before she can step back. She looks mesmerised, unmoving, with her eyes staring at my mouth. I take possession of her lips. I don't need to incite her to open her mouth and soon, our tongues caress each other. It's not a gentle kiss, but... hmm... I put an end to the kiss of the century before I am responsible for my own public embarrassment. Ah, desiring-red has won, and her eyes have darkened. The extorted kiss of Thursday evening has not been in vain.

I turn my head and watch her guests. They all sport a becoming redness on their faces, but in their case, it's caused by anger and astonishment, except for Fred Weasley. He's probably thinking that he should have taken the YLC tests and tried his luck with Hermione. Too late; she's my wife now. I take her arm and lead her to the buffet I noticed at the back of the hall upon arriving. I'm relieved to see that she didn't go for the grand scale, just some Champagne and three trays of buns. A few waves of her wand and the bottles are opened; they pour their contents into the flutes. For the rest, the guests can help themselves. However, I must undergo fake congratulations. Potter hands Hermione an envelope. "You know what it is," he says to her. I'll get the truth of the matter later. Conversations are awkward and sparse, and most of them are about the weather or the perfect way the ceremony went. Less than a half hour later, there's only my wife and I left.

"It's time to go home, Hermione."

She's apprehensive and fiddles with the fabric of her dress.

"Calm yourself, please. You have no reason to fear."

My voice is soft, seductive. She lets me see her fear. She gives me power over her. That's the best aphrodisiac.

We leave the Ministry and Apparate directly into Spinner's End. I avoid the awkward moment when no one knows what to say or where to look by proposing that I prepare a light lunch. Her eyes widen and her mouth forms a surprised "O", which satisfies me greatly. She hasn't understood yet that this kind of gesture is part of my manipulation. As long as that cursed decree isn't revoked, I need a wife in my life. My goal is to make the idea of staying with me very appealing to her until I don't need her anymore.

"It was very good. I didn't know that you could cook, at least, not that well," she mumbles.

"What did you believe? Do *you* know how to cook?"

She blushes.

"A little."

"You mean you know how to open a tin and warm its contents."

Her embarrassment is the only answer that I need.

"Come. It's time now. I need to go out at the end of the afternoon, so let's put that out of the way now."

"Put what out of the way?" she screeches.

My eyes sweep her body from head to toe without haste to get the message across. She seems ready to flee, and I feel justified to grab her wrist and drag her to our bedroom upstairs. I throw a few comforting words at her above my shoulder.

"It's said that the first time is the more difficult."

"I'm not a virgin!" she protests indignantly.

"I'm not speaking of that particular first time, but of our first time together."

We arrive in the bedroom as I'm saying that sentence. I close the door with a spell of my own invention, one that isn't in the book Potter put his hands on...nor in any other book, by the way.

I don't waste time and kiss her immediately. I hope that the way she reacted to our two precedent kisses overrules any other reaction and makes her cooperative.

I must believe that I'll never understand women. My own wife is giving me a hard time. Instead of relaxing and appreciating the present time, she struggles against me in a very interesting manner if my anatomy is any indication.

I can't let her go; it'd be admitting defeat. I can only tighten my embrace. I'm so enthusiastic in my task that Hermione ends up being stuck between the door and my body. She's still trying to push me away, but with less and less conviction. I move my lips away from hers barely the length of a breath.

"Relax, Hermione. Why not trying to enjoy what's going to happen between us instead of resisting?"

Rage dances in her eyes. She clearly has no intention to appreciate. It's time to bring out the heavy artillery. I slide a leg between hers so that my thigh presses against her crotch as far as her sheath dress permits it, and I rub sensually against her body, covering her neck...especially on the sides...with kisses and licking her. My hands slide along her arms, which offers the double advantage of controlling them while giving her gooseflesh. I don't know how long this very agreeable, little game has lasted, but finally, she undulates her body in answer to the movements of mine. I haven't bedded a woman since the Dark Lord fell. I didn't know how much I've missed it. I raise my head and kiss her full mouth. She returns my kiss with so much enthusiasm that I forget to keep my hands on her arms to snake them around her and pin her more intimately against me. I can feel the fabric of her dress stretching, ready to rip at the seams, but neither she nor I care about it. Lust has taken over us, and she accompanies me without resistance to the bed. We're both breathless.

"Undress," I murmur, my voice hoarse with desire.

I withdraw so that she has room to accede to my request. However, the loss of contact clears her mind somewhat, and her face looks mutinous.

"Now, or I'll do it myself."

That seems to convince her. She opens the buttons of her dress, which are subtly hidden by magic, and finds herself in her underwear in front of me. She hasn't bothered to make an effort: plain, white cotton knickers and bra. Whatever, she won't keep them on for long.

"What about you? I won't go further before you're in your underwear too," she says.

What? This is my home; who is she to give me orders under my roof? Oh, yes, it's her home too now. She should show respect nonetheless. That said, nothing interesting will happen if I keep all my layers on my back. So I take off my wizarding robe to find myself in just my black cotton briefs. One of my past mistresses once told me that I was sexier with black briefs.

"Now, take off the rest."

"Only if you take off the rest at the same time."

If I didn't have to live with her, I would have cursed her already. I comply nevertheless. My erection feels better when confronted with freedom and points at my wife's belly directly. At last, there's no doubting what my intentions are.

"Where were we?"

This was of course a rhetorical question. I take her in my arms again, and this time, there aren't any clothes between us. The effect is electric and immediate. Before we know it, we're lying on the bed, devouring the other's mouth, our legs intertwined in a very exciting manner. I can feel her dampness spreading on my thigh while the seminal fluid that escapes my penis finds refuge in her pubic hair. I won't last long, so I push her on her back, and without ceasing to kiss her, I penetrate her. She isn't quite totally ready. This little problem is resolved with a few thrusts. Quickly, I find the perfect spot, the one that has her moan louder, that has her hands pinch my back, my buttocks, the nape of my neck with a force I didn't know she had. In short, I've found her G-spot during our first coupling...this is a good stroke for my male ego...and I exploit the discovery to the maximum, or at least until my body controls my mind and strives for its pleasure. When I finish, I stay inside of her to see what her reaction is. She sports a satisfied look, but the way I scrutinize her reminds her of what's just happened. She squints. There's no need to be an accomplished Legilimens to know her thoughts.

"If you wished to use sex to make me as docile as a doggie, you can go hang yourself."

Less than a quarter of an hour later, I was leaving the house.

Everyday Life

Chapter 11 of 17

Adjusting to married life.

Disclaimer: see first chapter.

Chapter reread by Dacian Goddess.

I'd thought Severus wouldn't be the kind of man to whisper sweet nothings into my ear after lov... sex, as Ron used to do (don't think of Ron, don't think of Ron), but I had never imagined that he would be gone less than a quarter of an hour after. That said, I hadn't expected to feel any pleasure, either. To think that it took Ron and me seven attempts before I could find some satisfaction in the act (don't think of Ron, don't think of Ron); but we were both virgins at the time. That won't do. I can't let myself go and dwell in the past. I now have a husband whom I want to get rid of legally, and I want to develop S.P.E.W. I don't have comfortable clothes, settle down at my desk and get ready to prepare a schedule to organise my activities in the months to come the way I did in the good old times of OWLs and NEWTs.

The first thing to do though is to open the envelope Harry gave me earlier. My eyes widen without me knowing it as I read its content. This is an invitation for an interview at the Law Department of the Nimbus Racing Broom Company on March 27th in the morning! They have a vacant position as legal assistant, which consists...according to the job's description...in researching in books and parchments for facts and affairs already tried, to help the lawyer of the company build their cases against the more and more numerous complaints from the customers. I remember having read something to that effect in the *Prophet*. People buy a broom to fly, and when they fall, they shift the blame onto the manufacturer. I've already done these kinds of things for Buckbeak's defense in my third year. The case was lost, but not because I had done a bad job of it. I trust I will get the job.

Now, my anti-marriage plan. I can't use the non-consummation clause to ask for a divorce. I still have adultery, sterility and marital assault at my disposal. What can I do? After a bit of thinking, I have a plan.

1/Adultery: after all the upheaval following the announcement of the romantic hero's wedding, it shouldn't be too difficult to put some naïve young woman under that big nose of his. If I'm lucky, he won't resist her, and I'll be there to catch him in flagrante delicto.

2/Variant: I am the one to commit adultery and to be caught in flagrante delicto. That would get me a tarnished reputation, thus fewer suitors to repel. However, there's a risk I'm not too willing to take: Severus's anger. And he could still refuse to divorce, claiming to forgive me and make himself out to be a magnanimous man. This solution would only be a near last resort.

3/Sterility: I'm on the pill, a Muggle contraceptive. Nobody knows it, and I must make sure that it remains so. Maybe I should research if there's a potion or a spell that causes sterility.

4/Marital assault: I could provoke Severus so that he would assault me. Yet I don't want to suffer from Dark Spells that only he would know and that even the Aurors couldn't detect. Solution rejected.

Synthesis: my two best chances to succeed in getting a divorce without suffering are adultery committed by Severus and sterility.

This brainstorming has exhausted me. I prepare a light meal for myself and get to the "marital" bed with a good book. At least it, unlike my husband, is giving me company.

I want to sleep! What's making such a racket? I'll complain to the landlord; the neighbours shouldn't make so much noise on a Sunday morning. I turn around in my bed, and instead of an empty space, I meet with a warm body.... Everything comes back to me in a rush: the wedding, the sex and Severus, who hadn't come back yet when I went to bed. I can see, and especially hear, that he came back while I was asleep. He snores so loudly that he could move the rafters! I will have to insist that he takes a spoon of *Silent Sleep* potion every night.

Since sleep is forbidden to me now, I get up. I notice when I look at my husband that he's wrapped himself up snugly in the blankets like a larva (now, this is a term that suits him) in a cocoon. I must be cautious lest he monopolises all the bedding. Well, if he doesn't want us to sleep in separate rooms, he'll have to reform his habits, whether they're conscious or not.

After breakfast, I shut myself away in my office. Just in time, it seems, for I hear noise in the bedroom. I let Severus attend to his business and write a letter to Harry. I confirm that I'll go to the interview at Nimbus, and I thank him profusely. I assure him that I'm well and that I intend to organise a S.P.E.W. meeting on the summer solstice, on June 21st. Would he agree to make an appearance to support the cause?

Around noon, I get down to the kitchen, where I find Severus preparing our meal, in accordance with our marriage contract. The washing-up is for me.

"Hello, Hermione. You did well not to wait for me yesterday evening. My outing lasted more than I expected."

"No problem. Remember that our marriage is for convenience. You don't have to account for your actions to me."

"Indeed, but I thought that a bit of civility between us would make our life easier."

You mostly want to make sure that I won't have any reason to complain to anybody, which could give me a reason to divorce! I think.

"By the way, I have an interview for a job at Nimbus on March 27th. It's for a legal assistant position."

"Ah? I'm surprised that they would propose a job to a beginner."

I'm not going to tell him that Harry made me a favour.

"I suppose they appreciate my NEWTs results."

He doesn't answer. He is...how to put it?...lost in his thoughts. I consider that there's nothing more to say on the subject and concentrate on my plate.

"It's Potter, isn't it?"

I jump when he speaks and eye him questioningly.

"What? Why do you speak of Harry?"

"Did Potter secure that interview for you?"

His eyes glint with malice.

"You didn't dazzle them with your brilliance, but rather with your personal relationship with the Chosen One."

Oh, that was very low.

"I don't think they would propose me an interview if I didn't have the skills required, whether I'm friends with Harry or not."

He smiles like a shark on the brink of crushing its prey between its teeth.

"It'll be cheaper for them to hire you than to pay Potter to advertise them! By the way, what salary do they propose?"

I can't help it. I know I should avoid such an attitude with Severus, but I can't help it; I'm on the defensive.

"That will be tackled during the interview."

He doesn't even hide his jubilation.

"I'd be curious to know your worth."

"Probably more than you think."

Well done, Hermione. You managed to land yourself in an impossible situation. Not only do I have to get the job, but I also have to get decent pay if I don't want to lose face with Severus.

I put on an expression that I hope expresses certainty.

Once the meal and the washing up are done, each of us gets back to their personal spaces: Severus in his laboratory and I in my office. I spend my time reading and thinking of my job interview. I take a bath before going down to eat, and then I go to bed with a good book, as is my habit. This time, Severus comes soon after me, and he too has a book. Around the same hour, we feel like sleeping and put out the lights.

Actually, this Sunday has set the tone of our first week of common life. We've met only at meals and at bedtime. There has been friction between us, the, "There's too much butter in the pasta" or "You're too noisy when you turn the pages of your book" kind; nothing cataclysmic then.

I managed to meet Dobby and Winky without ensuing trouble while Severus was at work so that we could speak about the June meeting. We agreed that it'd give a boost to our movement if Harry were present. I'm still waiting for his answer about it.

Thursday evening, we slept together once more. I could have gone without, but Severus managed to make the sex agreeable. I couldn't help but ask him why he was so careful that I felt satisfaction from it. He answered me that "giving pleasure is a form of power". Why did I think that he perhaps had, in the very well hidden depths of his psyche, an ounce of compassion and goodness?

I'd like for this week to be the archetype of our relationship, but every good thing has an end. It began when I had to ask Severus for money. I don't have a sickle left, and I can't go to the interview in any of the outfits that fill my wardrobe.

Being married isn't as disagreeable as I feared. Of course, I have to share my space, but we make it a point of honour to avoid each other as much as possible. Yet, I must admit that it's not that difficult to fall asleep with another person in one's bed. Actually, it's incredible how much it warms the bedding and induces sleep rapidly. She, on the other hand, accuses me of snoring very loudly. As if! Because I have been awakened by my own snoring on occasion doesn't mean that I have troubles with my upper respiratory system, whatever she says, but only to be left alone do I take a spoon of *Silent Sleep* potion before going to bed.

Monday morning, even before going to WWW, I visit the Auror Headquarters to leave my employers' certificate stating that my being employed by them was essential for the development of their company and my marriage certificate. They don't comment. They don't ask that I produce any other parchment (my employers' name is synonym to war hero), but I have hardly turned my back that I hear them murmur to each other.

"Snape married Harry Potter's best friend! It wasn't only a rumour."

"He's probably bewitched her."

"Or do you think he could have served her a potion without her knowing? It's his specialty after all."

"Yeah. Like the Dark Arts."

I leave before I hear more. The only potion I served her was amber, had more than fifty degrees and I didn't need to trick her to drink it.

Once at work, I meet indifferent expressions at best, hostile ones at worse.

"How is Hermione?" one of the twins asks me from the counter in a defiant voice meaning: if you hurt her, you'll be dealing with me.

I use my most unctuous voice to answer him.

"She's very well, Mr. Weasley. It's very kind of you to inquire about her health now. I suppose she would have preferred you to ask when your brother chose to give up on her."

They have a weird habit in that family of blushing by the ears first when they're angry or embarrassed. Wisely, he elects to shut up and to turn tail to the stockroom. I head for my laboratory and stay there until the end of the day.

The rest of the week doesn't see any notable incident, only the hitches of common life. We offer the perfect picture of domestic life, up to when she asks money for new robes when I'm still under the effect of post-coital bliss.

Discovering the Working Life

Chapter 12 of 17

Hermione gets the job.

Disclaimer: see first chapter.

As usual, Dacian Goddess has made this chapter edible.

In less than two hours, I will be subjected to my first job interview. I feel a bit nervous, I think. Severus accuses me of having prevented him from sleeping, my breakfast has remained untouched on the kitchen table (had I tried to eat it, it would be back on the table anyway by now), and I'm already ready. I'm currently pacing the ridiculously small lounge of this house. Were I sure to stay married with Severus, I would try and convince him to move out.

To keep my mind busy and away from the interview ... and given the fact that I'm unable to concentrate on anything right now, even if it were an Arithmancy treatise ... I recall the purchases made with Tonks on Saturday afternoon. I would have liked to have gone with Ginny, but I don't want to go anywhere near a Weasley for now. An outing with Tonks had been a good idea: we had a lot of fun. Thanks to her talents as a Metamorphmagus, she had adopted a look resembling Severus as much as possible and had tried on black robes, looking me up and down and telling me in a menacing tone, "Miss Granger, twenty points from Gryffindor for needing so much time to choose a robe." Then she had turned tail while trying to make her robes billow like Severus does. He must have patented his robe move, because honestly, I've never seen anyone doing it in such an impressive manner as his.

I got back home with five new robes and three new pairs of shoes. There's nothing like shopping to lift a girl's morale.

Nimbus Racing Broom Company is displayed in big letters on the building, but the Muggles can only see an old dilapidated warehouse. A broadly smiling receptionist directs me to Caesar Frenchbean, the personnel manager. He's waiting for me, seated in a comfortable, black-leathered armchair. His impressive belly keeps him distant from the glossy surface of the massive desk in front of him. He's with a stern-looking woman who reminds me of McGonagall, Guinevere Greeding. She's the Head of the Legal Department.

"Good morning, Miss Granger. Sit down, please," he says pleasantly.

I sit down in the armchair that he points out to me, which matches his own. Then the questions burst, and they remind me somehow of the YLC questionnaire. Of course, there are the classic questions like, "Tell me about yourself," or, "What are your strong points and weak points?" along with unexpected questions like, "Do you speak Mermish?" (What's that to do with broomsticks?), or, "Do you have your driver's license?"

I answer as honestly as possible. When they ask me, "Do you love your husband?" I answer, "The YLC tests showed we have a ninety percent compatibility rate." They're impressed, and I don't have to give a real answer. However, I'm not sure the question was relevant to the job position. At the end of the interview, they inform me that I'm hired at Nimbus as of April third with a one hundred and fifty Galleon salary per month. I could kiss them.

Hermione seems particularly cheerful tonight.

Indeed, my wife is all smiles and jumps up and down while I hang my cloak at the coat rack. Her eyes shine, her cheeks have a pinkish hue and her lips are red thanks to her worrying them with her teeth. My imagination provides me with ways to occupy those lips and those... no, not the teeth. Of course, she speaks before I can build a more elaborate fantasy.

"Severus, I have good news, er, well, good news for me."

I let her go on.

"I've landed the assistant position at Nimbus!"

She doesn't say it, but it's crystal clear that she relishes the idea of not depending on me financially anymore. She doesn't realise that I relish the idea as well, but I won't tell her that; she would resign just to annoy me, so I take a tight-lipped air to answer her.

"I see. Don't believe, however, that your new, miserable independence will spare you your marital duties."

"Miserable independence? I will earn one hundred and fifty Galleons a month, which is more than correct for a first job," she retorts to me in an indignant manner, her cheeks blushing.

"Ah, but such good news should be celebrated."

My growing erection tries to nod its assent in spite of the briefs that cover it. I grab my wife's arm, and while she perseveres in verbally demonstrating to me how she is an independent and modern woman, I drag her to our bedroom. There, I kiss her (at last, silence); I stroke her; I undress her. I make her incoherent, unable to form a sentence, with my mouth, my tongue, my fingers. After her climax, I point out to her that it's her turn to give me pleasure, which she does well. Those red lips around my cock, those small hands on my balls... she only needs a mere handful of minutes to undo my austerity. Perhaps this marriage brings more to me than I thought.

"Severus, I forgot to tell you something. Actually, I ought to have told you for a while, but I never thought of it at the right time."

Oh, no, she's going to ruin last night's beneficial effects as early as breakfast. Yet I motion for her to continue.

"We're invited to Harry's and Ginny's engagement party on June 18th at the Burrow."

She's done it! She's spoiled my week. Maybe I still have a chance to get out of it.

"I have no doubt that you're invited. However, I doubt that the invitation would include me."

"No, you're well and truly invited. You're my husband after all. Besides, that's too good an opportunity to show that my convictions about giving second chances to people aren't just hot air."

She forgets that I've already used my third chance, perhaps even my fourth. After a while, one ceases to count that kind of thing. And her idea to use the event to get a message across to the community is interesting.

"Do you think that Scrimgeour will be there?"

"Probably, yes. It's traditional that the Ministry's employees send an invitation to the Minister for the important events in their lives. Usually, he asks his secretary to send a card, but for Harry, he'll probably come in person."

Perfect. That idiot tried to throw me in jail to increase his popularity (never mind whether I deserved it or not), then published a decree that nearly deprived me of my livelihood. To see the Death Eater, whose trial made his popularity rate decrease by fifteen percent, associate closely with the favourite important person of the wizarding world should twist the knife in the wound. And what is more, I'll be able to taunt all those yes-men of the Order of the Phoenix with my new-found conjugal life. I don't need much to be happy.

This is another Monday morning that sees me nervous and awake way before the dawn. I'm so excited at the idea of going to work. I pace again in the house, to the extent that Severus casts a Silencing Spell and a *Petrificus Totalus* in order to, I quote, "be allowed to have his breakfast in peace." He frees me just in time for me to arrive at eight o'clock sharp at Nimbus with an empty stomach. I shudder at the idea that I could have been late while I've been up since five a.m.

Guinevere Greeding is there to greet me and to introduce me to the lawyers I will assist.

"Here are Achilles Acidoton and Hyacinth Houret, the two lawyers of the firm."

"Nice to meet you."

I shake hands with the two men, one of whom is as fair and pale as the other is dark and black.

"Miranda, you couldn't have come at a better time. Let me introduce you to your new co-worker, Hermione Granger. Ms Granger, here is Miranda Malony, the other legal assistant."

"Nice to meet you," we answer together.

Mrs Greeding leaves me with Miranda, who takes me to a small room where two desks face each other. Bookshelves groaning under the weight of volumes and parchments decorate the walls, but spare the little window at the back of the office. While she guides me through the building, I observe her. Her teeth are perfect, and she doesn't fear to exhibit them in a perpetual smile. She's tall, and her figure is generous where it's supposed to be and nowhere else. I decide to keep an eye on her. Who knows if I'm not going to find a mistress for Severus at my very first attempt?

"I never imagined that people could be that irresponsible," I exclaimed in the middle of the morning on my third day at work.

Miranda stares at me, a question in her eyes. I only need that encouragement to say more.

"Really! That wizard was chased by the Royal Air Force while he was flying over London on his broom, and he takes us to court because our brooms don't have Spells against detection by Muggle radars. Everyone does know that flying over big cities is for the Aurors and certain important people only!"

She sniggers.

"You still haven't seen everything. The other day, we had to defend the company against a man who accused us of misleading advertising. The man weighs thirty one and a half stones, and he complained because his broom wouldn't fly. He was pretending that he only weighed one twenty three and a half stones, and the Nimbus 2001's label stipulated that it could transport up to three hundred and fifty pounds. We had him weighed by a consultant, but then, he lodged a complaint against the consultant on the pretext that the consultant's wand was damaged and couldn't have given the correct weight."

I shake my head, smiling, and pore again over an old book and my parchment. My colleague really is good company, and I appreciate her a lot. She has a fondness for sentimental novels in which the hero, dark and tragic, saves the heroine from a disastrous fate. Besides, she didn't hide her admiration for Severus as soon as she knew that we were married.

"It must have been terrible, to have to kill one's mentor. Poor man, he must feel so guilty."

Come to think of it, he doesn't really have a guilty attitude. For a reason I can't fathom, my mind is reluctant to analyse that observation. Maybe Severus has simply found a way to leave the bad moments of his life behind him to better meet the future. I shrug inwardly and concentrate on the traffic rules for brooms over London.

Failure Of Plan A

Chapter 13 of 17

Sin isn't always attractive. At least, that's Severus's opinion.

Disclaimer: see first chapter.

Chapter reread by Dacian Goddess. My very own goddess of beta-reading.

My better half only needs to speak of the devil...meaning Potter...and voilà! Here he comes. The twins were both in my laboratory...which they incidentally possess ...this Friday evening to hear my weekly report about my work when he entered the place.

"Sir?" a voice quavering with excitement utters from the doorway. "You have visitors."

My eyes cast a purely psychological *Avada Kedavra* on Julian, the Hufflepuff salesman who has just interrupted me. I must have lost my efficiency if he has dared to do so. The idiot jumps up and down and beams as if he's seen... Potter. I make out the Boy Who Lived's silhouette, and that of the youngest Weasley right behind him.

"Thank you, Julian. You can go back to the shop," Fred answers him, or the man who has been called Fred since the beginning of the meeting. "Harry, to what do we owe the pleasure of your visiting? Come in!"

Which he does, hand in hand with the red-headed girl. Hands shakings, hugs, cries of every kind punctuate the reunion. One would think that they haven't seen each other for ages. Then comes the moment when they can no longer ignore my existence.

"Hello, Professor," Potter says to me with uncertainty, without too much hostility though. "How are you?"

I raise an eyebrow. Is Potter inquiring about my well-being? I need to consult the forecast tonight; a drastic change of weather is probably in the making. Well, in these times of Potter-mania, I'd best shake the hand he holds out to me.

"Good evening, Potter."

I won't say more. I give a slight nod to Miss Weasley without adding a word. She reciprocates the gesture with a touch of apprehension in her eyes. Potter speaks again.

"Did Hermione tell you that you're both invited to our engagement party on June eighteenth?"

"Indeed she told me."

"Good. I count on your being there."

"All the more because it will piss Scrimgeour off!" George adds.

I've never known that an engagement party could be used for that many purposes beside the matrimonial ones. And as the Friday evening report turns into the rendition of Potter's exploits, I take my leave without further ado.

The days pass, all identical. Being married isn't as annoying as I'd feared it to be. Hermione is not as intrusive as the other Gryffindors I've known; her conversation is interesting (I try to extort from her information about the patented spells of Nimbus); the sex is satisfying (and I have enough experience with other women to compare); my income is near extravagant, and I keep telling to myself that all of this is too good to last.

"Severus?"

"Yes?"

"I've invited my colleague Miranda Malony to come home tomorrow afternoon. We must finish preparing a file for Monday, and we weren't able to do it today because Miranda was too tired. We only need an hour or two."

"As long as you don't bother me with your idle chatter."

I can already imagine the office gossips fluttering the lounge.

"Not a problem, Severus. We'll leave my office only for tea."

The next day is upon us quickly, and I find myself shaking hands with Hermione's colleague. Her name had rung a bell when I first heard it, but now that I meet her, I remember her. She was a Slytherin, one who had been under my care years ago. And how to forget such a well-proportioned figure endowed with a functioning brain? My wife looks like a teenager compared to her. They slip away upstairs and come back two hours later. They're grinning, but without losing themselves in moronic sniggers women and Gryffindors are usually fond of.

"Will you join us for tea, Severus?"

As I had been reading in the lounge, it would be rude to decline. I nod slightly to show my assent. Then Hermione invites her colleague to take a seat on our brand new, leather living-room suite (since I've been augmented, I don't see why I should go on getting back-aches while reading on threadbare armchairs) and slips into the kitchen to prepare some tea. Hermione's colleague casts admiring looks at me, the kind to which Potter is more accustomed than I. As I am the host, it falls to me to keep the conversation going.

"So, Miss Malony, you've decided to make a career in law?"

Her eyes lighten.

"Yes, Professor. It's a fascinating profession, and it leads us to face so many different situations."

Her face becomes lively in a charming way when she speaks of her job. Before I realise it, a quarter of an hour has passed. Since when are fifteen minutes needed to prepare tea and unpack some biscuits? Even Hermione is supposed to be able to do it without burning the bottom of the tea pot. However, it leaves me some tête-à-tête time with a lovely woman who doesn't look at me with disgust, but rather with admiration. When my wife comes back with the tray, a part of me whispers that I might have been hasty in binding myself to Hermione. Until Miranda (less than a quarter of an hour was enough for us to be on a first name basis) opens her mouth, not to sip her tea or nibble at some biscuit, but to utter the stupidest sentence of the day. "You make such a lovely couple, both of you. One would believe that you're the opposite in everything, but this opposition is perhaps what makes you close."

I retract my thought about her functioning brain. I prefer Hermione's measured conversation. At least, she realises that we're not a lovely couple. There's a good reason why there aren't a lot of mirrors in this house. Hermione seems to be as mortified as I am, though I have an undefined feeling it isn't for the same reason as me. Between the both of us, we manage to make sure that Miranda Malony drinks two cups of tea and is out of our home in less than twenty minutes.

The door is hardly closed that I turn to Hermione.

"Hermione, if you must force me to share any kind of beverage with your friends under my roof, the least you could do is make sure they can hold an intelligent conversation!"

Irony flashes into her eyes.

"Yet, I was under the impression that you were getting along quite well when I came back into the lounge."

"I was merely keeping myself informed about what one of my Slytherins was doing with her life."

"Nothing more?"

Her questions and innuendos intrigue me. I scrutinize her face in the hope that I'd be able to read a clue there. I'm tempted to use Legilimency, but she would detect my intrusion, and I'd rather peace reigned in our household. It's strange; I have the feeling that she's both jealous of Miranda and disappointed that nothing happened between us. The answer is obvious, as clear as Veritasum in the daylight.

"Would you have preferred that I ask for her address, or that I invite her for dinner, preferably during an evening when you're not here?"

She blushes, keeps silent and averts her eyes. This is the confirmation which I needed. I insist, as I adopt a face as menacing as possible.

"You would have preferred that, wouldn't you? And you'd have been there to catch me in a compromising situation. You would have been able to ask for a divorce. Alas, my dear, I'm a very faithful man."

Of course, I'm faithful to myself first and foremost. As for her, she's shaking, but doesn't step back. Then I decide to take her off guard. I don't want her to know what to do with me. I smile.

"It was a good idea, though. However, don't forget that I am more experienced than you when it comes to manipulating people."

She crosses her arms and, a resolute expression on her face, she tells me, "Don't forget that I'm a quick learner."

In a billowing of her robe that I would have been proud of, she turns on her heel and gets back upstairs. It's true that she's a quick learner.

Damn! It didn't work. He will be careful from now on; I can't expect to catch him with another woman... or man. Does he even like men? I don't think so, but one never knows. Anyway, Miranda was a bit cold towards me the next Monday at work. She figured out that we'd pushed her towards the door. It took her days to be herself again, charming and smiling at me. I can only hope that it isn't a façade.

I've been married for nearly two months. I must admit things aren't as horrible as I'd feared. He shows interest in my work and asks questions about my day when I go back home in the evening. I'm conscious that his questions probably hide not very altruistic purposes, but it's good to rant to somebody after a long day of dealing with human stupidity. He always finds the appropriate mockery, or the fault we've missed in our reasoning. I can't help but think that Ron would never have been able to offer me something like that; not out of lack of love, but simply because he wouldn't be able to listen to me speaking about tedious things like case law, and I feel guilty to be thinking like that.

The fact remains that my motivation to go back to the desired condition of being single doesn't lessen. I'm going to use plan B: sterility. It will be a bit long: we must remain married and childless for five years to hopefully get a divorce. However, given the state of my affairs right now, I have faith that those five years will be bearable. It's a good plan. Besides, I can learn a lot about "manipulating people" in five years. This is a very useful ability to have, if I want to make real progress in improving the elves' condition. Speaking of it, it's time that I visit Harry. I need him for the June twenty-first meeting, and we've agreed to meet at his flat in... thirty minutes.

Manipulations

Chapter 14 of 17

Beginner's guide to the many uses of an engagement party. That, and a bit of "quality time" for our happily married couple.

Disclaimer: see first chapter.

Thanks a lot to Dacian Goddess for her help with this chapter.

I didn't expect Harry's flat to be this populated on this Saturday afternoon. True, he's often gone for his job, and every single day off he has is monopolised by his friends, in this case Ginny, Ron, Arthur and Molly.

"Hello," I greet them. I probably sound awkward.

They answer me in an equally awkward manner with vague smiles and embarrassed eyes.

This situation is horrible. If I wasn't in desperate need of Harry's help, I would probably have found an excuse to flee. Come to think of it... if I don't learn how to face this kind of situation, how could I hope to improve the house-elves' condition? It's time I start my training in manipulation. I paste an unctuous smile on my lips and take a seat between Molly and Ron. Arthur sits on Molly's other side while Ginny sits on a smaller sofa which forms a ninety-degree angle with the bigger one. The seat near her is obviously Harry's, who's gone into the kitchen to prepare tea.

"So, Ginny," I say casually, turning to her, "how are the preparations for the engagement party going?"

She seems surprised to see me speaking so naturally without looking embarrassed. She answers me, however. "Very well. We have a good idea of what we'll eat, and we've found nearly all the chairs we need. But, in fact, Mum's taking care of nearly everything."

Then, I turn my attention to Molly, but not without casting a surreptitious look at Ron. He's more rigid than a bandaged mummy: he's looking fixedly in front of him, his jaw is cramped and his fists are clenched. He's obviously on the verge of exploding... or imploding. It's difficult to tell. Severus must influence me more than I imagined, for my first thought is, *He had it coming.*

"Molly... I can call you Molly, can't I? It'd be so weird if Severus would call you Molly and not I."

She's so astonished that she can only nod. The couch vibrates slightly. I deduce that Arthur has reacted to my request as well.

"I suppose you don't have a moment to catch your breath, what with that huge party to prepare. Between Arthur's co-workers, Order members, your family... they are so many mouths to feed."

Her raising seven Weasleys shows, though, and she regroups quickly.

"Not that much. I'm accustomed to doing things like that, and if I'm not mistaken, you benefit from them."

Her voice exudes hypocrisy. Gone are the warm looks she used to bestow on me when she considered me her future daughter-in-law. She isn't far from accusing me of being the cause of her son's malaise, just for alleviating her own conscience. What about my malaise? Does it count for nothing?

Harry comes back with the tea, which saves the lot of us from the stiff silence in the room. He serves everyone and takes his seat near Ginny, an arm nonchalantly draped

over his fiancée's shoulders.

"So, Hermione, how are things at Nimbus?"

Of course, I had written Harry to inform him that I was hired. The sputtering noises coming from Arthur and Molly tell me this was news that hadn't gone around the Weasley mill yet. Ginny seems to be in the know, and Ron keeps his rigid posture, except for some small muscles that twitch here and there.

"Very well, Harry. It's a very interesting job. I've never thought I would say this, but I'm interested in brooms now."

"You're testing brooms at Nimbus?"

I turn to the other side to answer Arthur.

"No. I don't even see a single broom the whole day. However, I read a lot about them. It's helpful in my job as a legal assistant."

From that moment on, the conversation runs smoothly for a quarter of an hour. Brooms are like cars for Muggles: they're a safe conversation topic. When said conversation starts to wane and the teapot to empty, I say to myself that it's time to go to the point of my visit.

"By the way, do you know that I'm organising a S.P.E.W. meeting on June 21st?"

My interlocutors' eyes become suddenly expressionless. Each wonders how to avoid what I'm going to ask.

"Well, no," Harry bravely answers me.

"I've already booked a hall on Diagon Alley, and I've drawn up a list of people I'd like to invite. I think Dobby would be very pleased if you'd come, Harry."

I've got him. Dobby has saved Harry several times; he can't refuse anything of the elf.

"Ah, without a doubt, if I'm not on duty that day."

I adopt a wounded expression, or at least I try. I must have succeeded, for he answers, "All right, Hermione. I will be there."

He must have reminisced our fourth year at Hogwarts when I had pestered the boys so much that they bought badges so that I would leave them in peace. He probably fears that I might ruin his engagement party. Quite rightly.

When I think back on that afternoon, I feel some understanding for Severus. It was so funny to bring Harry to consent to participate in the S.P.E.W. meeting. As for Ron, I hope he'll be full of muscle spasms tomorrow as a reward for remaining so straight and avoiding my eyes at any cost. I hope he'll feel as bad as I did when I felt him near me while I couldn't touch him, kiss him... There's no need to twist the knife in the wound. My present is named Severus, and my future is called single status, thanks to Ron and his submission to the YLC's verdict.

The good thing about that meeting is that I've got back in touch with Ginny. I could feel the warmth of our friendship being reborn. Oh, it won't be like before. I can't forget that she, too, submits to traditions of another age, but I can't live like a hermit all my life. What's more, if I want to change the way things are, I have to associate with people like her, so why not begin with someone who isn't too disagreeable? A thorough shopping session with Tonks and Ginny at the end of the month should put me on track. We even agreed, Ginny and I, to keep Molly away. She would force Ginny to buy a very chaste dress for her engagement party while she wanted something a tipsy Harry could remove easily.

In the end, when I don't think of Ron, life isn't that bad.

I hope that Hermione will be able to content herself with an omelette and buttered bread tonight. I lost all notion of time in the pages of *Unknown and Untold Secrets of the Black Masses of the 17th Century* that I tried to read while I was alone at home. There's no need to give my wife a way to blackmail me by flaunting a Dark Arts book around her. As a result, I nearly forgot to prepare dinner. Ah, I can hear her coming back. She needs exactly ten minutes to put down her purse, use the loo, wash her hands and sit down at the table, right in front of her freshly served plate. I'm really beginning to know her habits well.

"Good evening, Hermione. Did you have a good day?"

A broad smile plays across her lips, and her traits are rather serene tonight.

"I did. I saw Harry and Ginny, as well as Arthur, Molly and Ron."

I'd be curious to know how this charming reunion went and how seeing her ex-fiancé could have put her in such a cheerful mood. Did they decide to renew their relationship? If she imagines that sleeping with another man would drive me to ask for a divorce, she is gravely mistaken. I don't give a damn about what she does during the day. Yet, it would annoy me to no end to be ridiculed by an adulterous wife. Hmmm, there were some interesting curses in that book I was reading this afternoon; curses that make sure that your spouse is faithful. Well, I need to put my mind back on track and to carry on the current conversation.

"I thought that your relationship with those people was, I would say, cold."

"It's true, except for Harry. *He* has remained my friend. Well, I've made up with Ginny too. Arthur and Molly still don't know what to do with me, though I'm persuaded that Molly was tempted to blame me entirely for Ron's misfortune. As for Ron, he didn't say a word and was stiff as a board all the while I was at Harry's. He still isn't able to look me in the face."

I thought that hypocrisy was my specialty, but trust a Weasley female to evict me from my first place.

A shade of sadness tinges Hermione's voice as she verbally assesses the situation. Honestly, if Weasley doesn't want to fight to keep her, he doesn't deserve her. She shouldn't forget that.

"What an interesting company to keep on a Saturday afternoon. Would you have masochistic tendencies?"

Her expression is falsely shocked.

"Me? On the contrary, it was funny to see them all shifting in their seats, fearing a nasty comment from me, knowing that they'd have earned it."

Now, that's an interesting trait that I discover in my "sweetheart". I smirk between two mouthfuls of omelette.

"My dear, such malice in you? I can't believe what I'm hearing."

She sniggers and nearly spits out what's in her mouth. She launches into a tirade punctuated with movements of her fork.

"It's not like that. I've realised that I need them...and people like them...for my cause. By the way, I've convinced Harry to take part in the S.P.E.W. meeting next month. It's in my best interest to be friendly with them, at least partly. Before I forget, there's a possibility that Dobby or Winky could come by without notice from time to time to

organise the meeting. You will be nice to them, won't you? It's also possible that Achilles (my astonished expression must have caught her attention)...you know, Achilles Acidoton? I'm his assistant...comes by once or twice. We're currently working on an important case, which will be submitted to the Wizengamot in June. We're not sure of managing to complete the file during our working time."

That's much inconvenience she's promising me. I feel that I've earned some compensation in exchange for my cooperation. Yes, that's it. You're not going to sleep early tonight, my dear.

We're reading together, or rather at the same time, in bed, as usual; except that today I put my book on my bedside table a little earlier than usual.

"Put your book away, Hermione," I say in a soft voice.

She's surprised, looks at me, and understands quickly what my intentions are.

What is it with his interrupting me? Damn! He wants some sex. And what about my book? At least I can count on him to give me pleasure. I sigh with exaggeration and put down my book.

"I know that I'm disturbing you, Hermione, but think of all the times I will be disturbed by your... acquaintances.

The bastard! That's why he was so conciliatory toward me earlier when I told him about the possible unannounced visits by Dobby and Winky. Oh, but he's already taken his ridiculous grey nightshirt off. Even my grandfather didn't wear such atrocities. I should buy him pyjamas, if only to see his face when I give them to him.

If only she would stop wearing those ridiculous flannel pyjamas, which are so difficult to take off! It'd make my life easier. At last, we're both naked. My sex is already stiff just by recalling its previous forays into my wife's so hot and feminine body, a body that moulds itself so perfectly with mine.

Who's interested in the condition of a man's teeth when said man kisses so well? His tongue against mine makes me forget that I have a brain while his hands on my back and my buttocks draw mysterious paths that have me shivering. Our entwined bodies rub against each other, and soon, a moan of pleasure escapes my lips.

How much I like when she moans, when she lets me know that, against her will, I have power over her. I feel like I could ask anything of her in these moments and that she would grant it to me. Ah, her fingers scratch my nipples. It never fails to make me impatient. I turn her on her back to... Crack!

Oh, no! Crookshanks has dropped a phial once more. Yet I've told Severus not to leave his phials on the sink after he's washed them.

"I'm going to put my cat out," I say apologetically.

Severus lets me go, a promise of what's waiting for me upon my return in his eyes. I don a dressing gown and go downstairs. While crossing the lounge on my way to the kitchen, I catch sight of the last issue of Potions Today on the coffee table, still opened at the page of an article on the possibility of using a Transfigured cauldron to brew a potion. That debate must be more ancient than Merlin himself, but it still keeps the wizarding world interested. I read the first lines of the article, just to have an idea about its content. I even stay standing so that I won't be tempted to read it until the end.

What is she doing? She's been gone for ten minutes. I don't hear a sound. Did that stupid animal hurt her?

I don't have a choice; I have to go downstairs. As it is, my erection is downstairs as well. With my nightshirt back on me and my wand in hand, I reach the bottom of the staircase, looking at Hermione reading my magazine. She dumped me for a magazine! I see red. A wand movement and the magazine is back in its place on the coffee table. She starts and takes on a fearful expression in the face of the anger that can probably be seen on my face.

Oh, oh. He doesn't wish me well.

"Have you been here for a long time?"

"You left me ten minutes ago. Am I such a poor lover that a magazine can make you forget what we were doing?"

I have gone beyond the point of no return; I have left him in the middle of a sexual encounter.

"No, it's not like that; not at all. But, you see, there was that article..."

"Silence! You come back to bed immediately."

"But... my cat..."

I explode.

"You may think that a magazine is more important than your cat, but I dare hope that you consider your husband even more important."

She comes to me, even though her manner screams her desire to find herself as far from here as possible.

He catches me by my wrist as soon as I am within his range and drags me to the bedroom. Hmmm, it reminds me of our first time together. He literally rips my dressing gown off me before he throws me on the bed. He waves his wand and I feel my wrists being bound to the bed head. He takes his nightshirt off and comes near the bed.

"I am sorry, Mrs Snape," he says so very insincerely, "but it seems that I don't have any other means to make you appreciate the conjugal bed tonight."

She makes a pretty picture like that, bound to my bed in a position that enhances her vulnerability. My erection springs back to life at this sight.

He has a hard-on by seeing me at his mercy! I wriggle a bit, but there's nothing I can do; I'm too well attached. He masturbates and looks at me greedily. At last, he kneels at the edge of the bed and starts to caress my whole body, slowly, not leaving out any inch of my skin. He turns me around...without detaching me, though. It's impossible to resist. In less than a quarter of an hour, my body has surrendered to his attentions.

She has at last submitted. I will be able to put my mouth on her from now on. First a kiss on her mouth, then my lips, my teeth and my tongue go and instil their magic into her skin. I'm intoxicated by the salty taste of her sweat, and, if I may say so, her breasts are carefully laved. I go on my way until her crotch where I savour her dampness. I nibble at her clitoris and her nether lips before I kiss her sex as I would her mouth. Within less than two minutes, Hermione cries out her pleasure.

Why is he so gifted? All right, I don't have that much pleasure each time. I can say that I could sometimes do without sex, but tonight, he has surpassed himself. I've just experienced one of the most violent orgasms of my life. Why does this happen when I'm in a weak position? And ooooooh, he penetrates me. I'd like so much that he untied me. Ah, I feel I'm losing any ability I might have to think coherently.

It's so good to be inside her. She didn't even realise that teasing her like I did only increases my desire to be here at last. I think I can untie her now. At once, her hands fly to my back and my buttocks; I will bear the marks of her claws, but I don't care. I make sure to reach her G-point each time I push into her. She cries and cries so much that her voice goes hoarse. What a beautiful tribute to my performance! I can feel her orgasm, even more violent than the previous one, if her expression is any indication.

Mine, too, is coming, and it's more and more pressing, and it's here. For the first time in years, I shout while ejaculating.

Peace Never Lasts

Chapter 15 of 17

The engagement party and Scrimgeour's bombshell.

Disclaimer: see first chapter.

Thanks so much to Dacian Goddess for her time and her patience.

Shopping with Ginny and Tonks should be reimbursed by the social security. We have so much fun making Ginny try on more and more titillating dresses. Tonks doesn't have scruples about wearing plunging necklines and skin-tight sheath dresses either, but then it'd be a shame for her to wear potato sacks with that body of hers (must be the advantage of Auror training). Both of them convince me to get something nice as well, and I come out of the shop with a brand new dress, a bit sexier than what I'm accustomed to. Besides, it's said that curves are favoured again, even though I have doubts about it. Anyway, I feel like a new woman after the crazy week I've had at work. Severus didn't help with his advances, and I had to turn him down three times this week. What do you want, I wasn't in the mood to fool around. But let's not think of that right now.

I'm really glad to be reconciled with Ginny. She now works at Gringotts where she holds the same job as her brother: curse breaker. At least she doesn't resent my marrying Snape. "Who could say something against a married couple who've had a ninety percent rate?" were her very words. And one never knows, I could have the need for a friendly acquaintance at the wizarding bank one day.

The next day is a Sunday. I shut myself away in my office for nearly the whole day with Dobby and Winky to prepare slogans, posters, speeches, etc. for the meeting. What a tedious afternoon! Nevertheless, I realise something: Dobby and Winky are much more ingenious than they seem to be. Their ideas often reveal themselves to be excellent, if sometimes a bit eccentric, like their suggestion to leave mouse traps at the reception for the elves who would feel guilty about attending the meeting and who would want to punish themselves. I understand something else as well, something even more important: not only do the elves have the right to be free, but they must learn how to be free. This can be done only by practicing freedom, even if they fail several times before they succeed; a bit like a child who learns how to walk and falls down several times before being able to stand without a prop. Therefore, I must quit S.P.E.W., at least formally, and let the elves take care of it. I can always stay as the movement's godmother, its counsellor. House-elves leading a freedom organisation! That could shake the obsolete foundations of the wizarding world.

Once the elves are gone, I leave my office with the intent to brew myself a tea and to make some snacks. I've barely set a foot on the landing than Severus stands in front of me and thrusts a phial of essential oils under my nose. And to say that he so easily reproaches others for their lack of subtlety.

"I thought you might be in need of relaxation after all that time you've spent with those two whining creatures. What about a massage?" he says silkily.

"Dobby and Winky aren't whining creatures," I protest.

Being a wizard doesn't authorise him to gratuitously belittle the other magical creatures! However caught in my indignation I am, I perceive Severus's proposal for help. Hmm... If there's one thing that I know, it's that Severus Snape never does anything in the best interest of his neighbour...as far as he considers the others as his neighbours...if he doesn't find his own interest in it. I also imagine that he won't let me refuse him a fourth time this week. Besides, my back muscles are a bit stiff.

"All right. But you'll cease to denigrate my friends."

He casts a mocking smile at me and then drags me to our bedroom. This is the day when I find out that I'm starting to play Severus rather well: when he asks that I massage him in turn, I make him apathetic, voiceless, and nearly tender. Let's say that with any other man, I would have spoken of tenderness. I'd rather speak of going soft when it comes to my husband. The man can't resist a few well-placed strokes on his spine, so much so that he leaves the dominant position to me when we make love, and I have to do all the work. However, I must admit that this interlude has relaxed me greatly. Thinking of the heavy programme that's ahead of me in the coming days, I think I'm going to use Severus's talents a bit more. If I must have a husband, I might as well put him to good use.

The next two weeks were more intense and stressful than revising for my exams at Hogwarts. Thank heaven, Molly didn't ask me for help in preparing Ginny and Harry's engagement party. I needed time to confirm the booking of the hall for the meeting, to order the posters, programmes, flyers, petits fours, drinks, etc. I've also planned a press conference for June fourteenth, all the while putting the finishing touches to my first important case at Nimbus. It must be ready for June fifteenth, for it is about a trial that will take place on June nineteenth. Ah, yes, I'm supposed to sleep as well.

Here comes the moment to go to the Burrow. I take a few minutes to contemplate the last two weeks. I think I can be satisfied. I managed a timely return of my case to Mr Acidoton, and he complimented me abundantly on the quality of my work. To my further satisfaction, everything's ready for the meeting. Even Rita Skeeter couldn't spoil my press conference in spite of her attempts at bringing up questions about my marriage rather than about the changes I'm trying to introduce into society. Now, it's time for a bit of fun.

Let's make it clear that the sole and only reason why I'm attending this farce of an engagement party is to annoy as many persons as possible...I'm killing several birds with one stone. What other reason would I have to enter that... building which defies every law of nature and magic? Even Hermione and I look better, and that's saying something. It's true that she's wearing a dress that hugs her feminine forms rather tightly and shows...too well, to my mind...the curves that are mine, er, hers. Contrary to me, my spouse isn't built like a plank, and that's all the better.

The tables and the chairs are settled outside. I sigh. Don't they know that we are in Great Britain, and the nights here are not hot, whatever the moment of the year? Potter and Miss Weasley come to meet us while we're approaching a group of people. Miss Weasley's dress is positively obscene. I am surprised that Molly has let her wear it, and I thank the gods that Hermione has more sense than that when it comes to dressing.

"Hermione!" they exclaim. "We're so happy to see you."

They're a breath away from bumping into each other to be the first to greet her. I notice they don't express their satisfaction at seeing me. To know that they'd like me to be elsewhere is worth being subjected to this abominable party.

"Me too. I'm happy to be here."

Hermione is radiant and hugs them back briefly before taking my arm again, as fitting with the conventions. Potter frowns at the gesture...he obviously doesn't like it...but wisely abstains from commenting. Instead, he looks at me.

"Good evening, sir. Welcome at the Burrow for my engagement party. The Minister hasn't arrived yet, but I'll count on you to keep him company."

He has the nerve to add a smirk to his proposition. I'm willing to annoy the Minister with my presence tonight, which doesn't mean that I'm willing to bear his company more than a moment. It wouldn't do to give him a good reason to send me back to Azkaban by hexing him after two minutes of conversation only.

"Are you that brave, Potter, that you don't even fear for your engagement to be spoiled by a duel?"

He laughs!

"Come on, sir. Scrimgeour may have been an Auror, but he's no match for you in a duel, whether it's a verbal or wand duel."

"I'm absolutely impervious to flattery, Potter. Save your idiotic remarks for yourself in future."

My tone is slightly menacing, which Hermione has noticed, for she squeezes my arm lightly to prevent me from stepping out of bounds. As I'm keen on keeping Azkaban in its status as a bad memory not to be revisited, I hold back.

"Perhaps it'd be better if you didn't neglect your other guests, Potter."

"Certainly, sir," he answers, looking satisfied for having irritated me. Then, he turns around and joins Lupin and Tonks. Miss Weasley follows him, but she casts inquisitive eyes at me first, as if she was wondering why I didn't hex her future spouse. Hermione sighs while we slowly head towards Arthur and Molly.

"Had I known that you'd be ready to hex people within thirty seconds to your arrival, I'd have preferred that you stayed at home. We could have come up with an excuse for your not showing here."

"On the contrary. I think I will enjoy myself tonight."

"By the way, what is it with that story about keeping company to Scrimgeour?"

I succinctly tell her what happened the day Potter came to my laboratory with Miss Weasley, and George Weasley's suggestion to taunt Scrimgeour with my being here.

"Good evening, Severus. Good evening, Hermione."

Arthur Weasley greets us. Molly has moved away to chat with the not-so-new-anymore wife of her eldest son and left her husband alone to take care of us. A glass of wine, a few petit fours and even fewer platitudes, and he leaves us. We're all alone in the middle of the throng that's invading the garden. Hermione smiles at me apologetically and goes to speak with Tonks, who's been left by Lupin in favour of... transforming. It's the last day of the full moon today. I bet Potter didn't even think to watch the calendar before he set the date for this "small" party. I wonder if I could slip away into a corner unnoticed and read, all the more since Hagrid has just arrived. In spite of the (fake) revelations of my trial, he's still holding a grudge against me for killing Dumbledore. When he looks at me, his body language screams his hatred for me for whoever is willing to listen to it. Knowing how strong the half-giant is, I choose to retreat.

Two hours later, I'm seriously thinking of going back home. I'm sitting at the table between Hermione and Fleur Weasley; Charlie Weasley and Nymphadora Tonks are in front of me. I've had more than enough of the debate about the freedom of living as a couple without depending on the YLC (which is the choice of the werewolf and the Metamorphmagus), or whether Geneamorphology is reliable, or if there's an advantage to having one's windows facing south rather than west, or if certain Muggle techniques for hanging bookshelves against walls are better than the wizarding ones. The twins choose that moment to announce, using the *Sonorus* Spell, that it's time to gather to one side of the garden to admire the fireworks they've prepared for this occasion.

The ebb and flow of the participants brings me near Rufus Scrimgeour, who arrived after the starter had been served.

"Minister," is the only greeting he'll get from me.

"Snake," he answers neutrally.

Wildfire Whiz-Bangs, specially created for the occasion, illuminate the sky, and for a while, the noise of the rockets fills my ears. Then, nonchalantly, without turning to me, his eyes still riveted to the profusion of colour of the fireworks, Scrimgeour starts speaking to me.

"Arthur told me your wife has found a job, Snape?"

Where is he going?

"True."

"In view of the nature of her job, I suppose that she earns enough for the both of you."

I don't answer; I'm too busy thinking about the implications of what he's saying to me.

"Do you know that an income scale was included in the Decree 00/25 of February nineteenth, 2000? The former Death Eaters who have been authorised to work with the substances cited in the Decree for Family Responsibility must prove each December that their family's resources don't exceed four hundred Galleons for a childless couple. Be careful, Mr. Snape; you could find yourself unemployed come January. Unless, of course, your family were to expand."

I am speechless. I will have to open a bank account in Switzerland, but the only income I'll be able to transfer there without risking too much would be the commission on sales. The salaries can't be transferred abroad discreetly. I'm not keen on Hermione leaving her job, either. Heaven only knows what she could come up with if she were forced to idleness. My mind comes to the only logical conclusion: to expand my family is the solution. Besides, that twit Scrimgeour...who thought he was taunting me...has just given me time to make sure that Hermione will be pregnant for more than three months at the end of December. There's another advantage to the situation: Hermione will not be able to invoke infertility as a cause for divorce. Besides, I'll entrust her with the care of the child.

For now, I take the time to check Scrimgeour's statements as soon as we go back home, even if it's one a.m. I reread attentively the documents I have about that damned decree. That devil was right: I could only keep my current job if I have a child. That, or by asking the twins to lower my salary....

As early as Monday night, I'll put my plan into motion. I know she will come back late from work because of the trial. She'll be tired and edgy. I will propose her a full body massage to relax her (she can't resist that kind of offer), and I'll make essential oils enhanced with fertility potion soak into her skin. Then, I'll make love to her and, to ensure my plan will succeed, my sex will be coated with that same potion. No contraceptive means will be able to prevent conception; that's why I always saw to it that Bellatrix never found the recipe. I'll think later, if ever, about paternity.

Acceptance

Chapter 16 of 17

Severus will get his wish, but he'll have to take it off turned tables.

Disclaimer: see first chapter

I cannot thank enough my beta, Dacian Goddess, for her very valuable help.

Everything happened as foreseen: Hermione came back from her first trial as a legal assistant stiffer than a hanged man's rope and couldn't resist the temptation of a full body massage, which contributed to making her amenable to my advances. Knowing that I'm going to impregnate her tonight influences me in spite of myself: I move gently inside of her, attentive to her responses; my hands are affectionate; my mouth annexes hers and doesn't leave it until it becomes necessary to verbally (or relatively verbally) express our mutual and simultaneous pleasure. Luckily, she's so tired that she falls asleep right after our copulation. She doesn't even take the time to cast a questioning look at me about my unusual behaviour. It's better that way, for it would have led me to wonder about things which are better left off to rest in the limbos of my conscience.

According to Mr Acidoton, the trial went well. He congratulated me the next day (the assistants don't go to court with the lawyers) for the excellent file I had prepared for him. He said it had been easy to find the information he needed. For once, Severus's affectionate mood came at the right time, for I really needed relaxing that Monday evening.

We're now Wednesday evening, and I'm about to open the door of the hall where one of the most important events in the history of S.P.E.W. will take place. Harry and Ginny are on the platform at the end of the hall; Dobby and Winky are with me to greet the participants; the tables and chairs are ready, as are the flyers. I turn the handle, push the door open and look at... nothing. There isn't anybody at the door! I am stunned, astounded. I would have thought that there'd be at least one participant. I pull myself together when I see two figures coming toward me, but I'm quickly disappointed: they're journalists. I feel liking closing the door in their faces. Suddenly, I can feel something brushing against the hem of my robe. I cast my eyes down: about ten house-elves are sliding into the hall by getting around my body as I'm standing in the doorway. I am so relieved. I now know that everything will be all right.

Of course, I should have guessed that the journalists would be more interested in hero Harry Potter's life than in the house-elves' rights, who are magical beings with equal dignity to wizards, and who were enslaved by wizarding society. However, their status as slaves didn't prevent those house-elves attending the meeting from joining the Society, especially after they heard that a witch would step down and let them be in charge. Even the journalists forgot to ask Harry and Ginny about the colour of their engagement cake when they heard me declare that Dobby and Winky would lead the movement. I even made the front page, though it was only a small insert in the left corner at the bottom.

I've been paying close attention to Hermione lately. I haven't noticed the usual signs that her period has started: no depression or exaggerated aggressiveness during two to three days, and no used pads in the bathroom rubbish bin. On the other hand, her breasts have swelled, she looks tired and, above all, she hardly eats at breakfast. She also seems to be nervous whenever I am in her vicinity. She looks at me more than usual while chewing her lower lip: a sure sign that she has something to tell me, but doesn't know how to go about it without provoking an explosion. I long to end this torture and to provoke a conversation between us, but she's too crafty; she could guess what my game was. I resign myself to waiting for her to announce her pregnancy to me. It happens, at last, one Sunday morning in August, at the breakfast table.

"Severus."

"Yes."

I have the feeling that, at last, she's going to speak to me. As it is, she can't keep hiding her condition from me for a very long time.

"I, ah, have something to tell you. But first, promise me not to shout or get angry."

I use my actor's skills and adopt an expression both intrigued and irritated.

"Go on, speak!"

"I... I didn't do it on purpose, I promise. I don't know how it's happened. Well, yes, I know how, but yet, I took every precaution, and I suppose you did too, and it shouldn't have happened. Ah, how to say..."

"Precisely. Say what you want to say and cease beating around the bush."

She blushes, embarrassed, and casts her eyes down.

"I'm pregnant," she mumbles behind the screen of her hair.

It's time to put my acting skills to use; I'm sure I would win one of those Oscars, were I a Muggle. I yell with fake anger, "What? You're what?"

It's good to see her start out of fright like when she was a Hogwarts first-year.

"I'm pregnant," she repeats in a small voice.

I narrow my eyes.

"How long?" I ask coldly.

"Around two months. But I still have one month to get an abortion," she adds hurriedly. "I only wanted to speak to you before I did it. I don't think you want children, but I thought it was only fair that I told you about it."

Cold sweat runs down my back. I wonder what has prevented her from aborting secretly.

"You do know that, by telling me about your pregnancy, you are preventing yourself from gaining a divorce? Even if you abort, you could not plead sterility anymore."

She bites her lip with renewed vigour. Suddenly, she seems to come to a resolution and looks at me defiantly.

"As it is, before granting a divorce for sterility, the law requires that the spouses take fertility tests. The Healers would have noticed that I'd been pregnant once, which proves the couple's fertility."

That's why she speaks to me about it! Because whatever happens, divorce for sterility is a moot option for her. Somehow, it makes having a child useless. I don't know why, but I don't like that idea. I've been imagining her with a rounded belly for two months, and here she is, considering abortion.

"What do you think of this child? Do you want it?"

She turns her head and looks out of the window.

"I don't know. At the beginning, I was sure not to want it. I went to St Mungo's to ask for an abortion appointment. There, I met with a Healer and a Psychohealer. They explained to me that I would never be able to divorce for sterility. Then, they brought to my attention to the irrevocability of such a decision. But I have my career. I've just found a job. How will I cope with a child? But what if I abort and regret it afterward? I think I've seen enough death. Can I kill a not-yet-completely-human being and not dream about it in the years to come? And what about you? What do you think?"

Tears escape her eyes, and she sniffles while talking to me...probably the effect of her unbalanced hormones. I have no answer for her questions, except for the one about my will to keep that child.

"You are aware that there are people whose profession consists in taking care of children? And that we have the means to employ such a person?"

There's a double advantage to this proposition: I'll see Hermione with a rounded belly, and I won't have to be involved in the daily care of the child. Besides, when given the choice, Hermione always makes the right one, provided she is presented with the right arguments. I am right once more.

"I can envisage keeping it, but on one condition: you'll get involved, if only a little, in its education. Might I remind you that you've been a very enthusiastic participant in its conception?"

Ah...I was nearly right.

"Honestly, can you imagine me changing nappies?"

She fixes me with her red and swollen eyes, her face sporting an indignant and belligerent expression.

"It isn't worse than manipulating dragon shit to 'improve' Fred and George's Dungbombs!"

She isn't wrong. Quick! I need a good repartee.

"I refuse to change nappies, to bottle-feed or to sing ridiculous lullabies for a child!"

"If you don't take care of your child, I'll lodge a complaint for negligence against you at the Aurors' Office."

Oh-oh. If she does that, she could get a divorce to protect the child. It's time for a concession. I support my comments with my forefinger pointing at her.

"All right. I accept to take care of him...or her...but only to teach him...or her...useful things like reading or writing or Potions, or to check if he or she has learned his or her lessons. But I won't partake in the physical side of care, and don't put it into your mind that I am suddenly going to transform into a cuddler. Recruiting a nanny will also befall to you."

She smiles at me.

"I'm not asking for more, Severus. There's nothing worse for a child than feeling ignored or hated by his parents. Look where that kind of situation had led Voldemort. So, I'm going to keep it. I'm very lucky to have understanding superiors at Nimbus, and the kind of work that I do won't make it necessary for me to stop working for a long time. Besides, with the help of a nanny, I'll be able to cope."

I can't see anything wrong with what the Dark Lord had made of his life, but I keep that thought to myself.

"Well. Now that we've reached an agreement, there's no need to talk about it anymore. I'm going to my laboratory now. I'll see you later."

At last, the day will be normal, without any distraction other than my Potions.

Epilogue

Chapter 17 of 17

In which we move a bit forward in time and see how Severus and Hermione's life together settles down.

Disclaimer: see first chapter.

The very existence of this chapter is due to my beta, Dacian Goddess, who convinced me of its necessity. I must thank you for the very valuable help with the adventure this story has been.

What a night! I'm really getting too big for these kind of things. And to think that I still have three more months of this. There's an advantage, though: when I intervened between Ron and Severus, they both ceased hostilities at once after they shot a worried glance at my belly. Those two nearly ruined the New Year's Eve party at Harry's. Ron can't hold his Firewhisky, and he felt the need to express his rancour for our aborted engagement yesterday evening. He even went so far as to accuse Severus of having paid the YLC to get me (if this were true, why didn't *he* try to do the same and fiddle our results?), of raping me regularly, of getting me pregnant to keep his job. These accusations are perfectly ridiculous, except for the last one. It took me some time to puzzle it out, but I was so determined to prove to my superiors that I could produce high-quality work in spite of my condition that I'd hardly paid attention to anything that wasn't related to my job, until the *Prophet* published in September the income scale of Decree 00/25 for the year to come. By then it was too late: I couldn't use the information for anything. I already loved this child more than myself, and I had extorted from Severus a promise to be involved in its education.

My parents were most surprised to be grandparents already, but they got accustomed to the idea quite quickly.

"You've just found a job, Hermione! This could hinder your career," my mother exclaimed.

Less than two hours later, it became, "Have you already thought about a first name? When will you buy furniture for the nursery? I ab-so-lu-te-ly must go with you. Oh, I can't believe I'm going to be a grandmother! I'm so impatient for it to be born."

My friends' reaction was, to sum it up, "What? Already? Tell me, are you happy? Yes? Then, that's the main thing."

The only difference was in the person's sincerity. Hagrid was ready to spoil mother and child in his own way; Arthur and Molly clearly thought they could have been the grandparents if things had happened differently; Remus and Tonks reacted as if I were under the Imperius Curse; Harry was delighted to be the godfather; and all wondered—without daring ask aloud—how I could sleep with the greasy bastard, however much of a hero he might be. I was very tempted to tell them all that I didn't care if his face was ugly or not when it was between my legs, and that he knew how to use his anatomy in such a way that I forgot all about its imperfections. And at least, he didn't treat me as if I were made of porcelain.

No, not again! It's the third time this night that Sabine has woken up! Admittedly, Hermione gets up, but it doesn't prevent me from waking up each time. The Weasley twins have already teased me several times since the beginning of the week about my fatigued expression. "Not that it makes you uglier," they added. If they do it only one more time, I swear that I'll use them to test the recipe of that undetectable potion that makes people blind, and which I found in that Lucrezia Borgia manuscript I bought last week on the black market.

I haven't slept an entire night since Hermione entered her seventh month of pregnancy. I hadn't imagined how much of a nuisance a pregnant woman could be for her family circle: she spends all her time in the loo, always complains that she has to walk like a penguin, can't do her half of the housework because of her prominent belly, sleeps badly and therefore prevents her spouse from sleeping, and I could go on and on. I was very much relieved when the time came for her to give birth, thinking that all those inconveniences would cease. I didn't attend the birth itself. I had no need to hear my wife bay at the moon for hours. A one-hour visit each day she was at the hospital was more than enough. Alas! I only had a five-day respite, the five days Hermione spent in the maternity ward.

Hermione and Sabine (I have to call her Sabine: the first time I called her "the Child," Hermione hexed me) have been with me for two months now. Two. Long. Months. I'm positively drained. I thought that sleeping with one eye open to avoid being the victim of a jealous Death Eater was an ordeal; I've revised my opinion since then. A baby is worse than a potential murderer. I've found, at my own expense, a new form of torture.

Besides, her mother has already taken me at my word and asked me to talk to our daughter; as if a baby could understand a word of what I say. I at least have the hope that she will soon be able to sustain an intelligent conversation. She's my daughter, after all; she should have an IQ above average. What's more, if I handle the situation carefully, I should be able to make her into a real pest for Potter, the Weasleys and her teachers when she is at Hogwarts. I can very well endure a few uncomfortable months just for that.

Severus and I should celebrate our five-year anniversary today. We didn't marry for love, but I've found a sort of peace in this union. He lets me lead my career as I intend to and doesn't moan for hours when I need to spend a few days away from home to meet with dissatisfied Nimbus customers anywhere in the world. On these occasions, he just leaves the children, Sabine and Julia, with my parents until I return.

He isn't chattier or more open than he was at the beginning of our marriage. However, after I observed him a bit, I learned to know him. And if I don't get what I want with arguments or simply by asking, there's always blackmail. It's been so easy since I found the hiding place for his Dark Arts books. That's how I got the second child and a move into a bigger house. I always wanted two children; I didn't want my child to grow up alone like I did. Since I had my first child so early in my life, I thought I might as well get the second one in the wake of the first one. That's a "problem" that won't arise again and disrupt my career, and with a full-time nanny, I can devote my daytime to my job without fearing for them.

I look out of the window to see my daughters playing in the garden. Severus Apparates near them; he's coming back from one of his visits to his mysterious acquaintances. The girls interrupt their games in time to greet their father and resume them while he heads for the house. A feeling of peace takes hold of me at the sight of this domestic, ordinary scene.

I can't believe that I've been married for five years and that I have two children. I'm still working for the Weasley twins, whom I've convinced not to declare all my earnings. It's out of the question that I have a third child just to keep my job. The two I already have take up enough of my time as it is, even though they're calm and attentive children, very anxious to learn, contrary to the dunderheads I tried to educate as a teacher. In short, they're my daughters.

As for my wife, I'm convinced that the ninety percent that served to justify our wedding wasn't a lie. I won't say we're madly in love with each other, but I'm satisfied with our agreement. She doesn't interfere in my life, and I don't interfere in hers—not more than necessary anyway, and especially at night in our bed. We argue reasonably often and make up as reasonably. I never thought a woman could let her husband have his own space. Every woman I've known has been more on the overbearing side, but not Hermione. Even my daughters know when not to bother me. I could very nearly use the word "bliss" to describe my life.