

Stricken, Smitten, And Afflicted

by zambonigirl

Marriage Challenge Fic.

One

Chapter 1 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

Zambonigirl goes for the Snape/Hermione Marriage Challenge.

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Snape had heard about the law before it ever became concrete. The speculation had long been present that Pureblood marriages created more Squibs than was normal, but only after Voldemort's demise had the numbers been so staggering. The Mudbloods, once looked down upon and despised, now looked to be the salvation of the Wizard World. Mudbloods and Halfbloods would be married to Purebloods, and the Ministry of Magic would play matchmaker. He had snorted a little while reading The Daily Prophet that morning, the thought that any respectable pureblood family would have anything to do with a Mudblood was more absurd than Remus Lupin's scraggly mustache. [1]

However, it was something he had read, been amused by, and then forgot. He had been confident that it would never come to fruition.

Had he known how wrong he was, he would have paid far more attention. Unfortunately for him, he hadn't.

And now here he was, staring incredulously at a long roll of parchment, containing within a survey. The survey was to be filled out and returned to the Ministry of Magic by midnight on Hallowe'en.

Snape rubbed his eyes soundly, and then looked at the letter that had accompanied the scroll afresh. He had read it twice already, but he was sure that a third perusal would show something new that he had missed before. A loophole. A way out. Something. Anything.

Nothing.

There was nothing within to keep him from filling out this form and sending it to the ministry.

So now he was faced with two options. Fill out the form and send it in like a good little inbred pureblood, or completely ignore it and be sent to Azkaban for three years.

On one hand, he would be imprisoned in the most horrifying living situation he could think of. On the other hand, he'd be safe in Azkaban, away from an annoying wife.

He shuddered as he thought about the word "wife". Not that it was anyone's fault but his own that he had lived on his own for so long, away from his family and any prospects. But he never looked at it as exactly a fault, but more of a life choice. He knew that he was in no way husband material, and he was equally confident that there was not a woman alive who would willingly be saddled to him. He doubted even more that a woman existed that he would be willing to live with from now until the hereafter.

Heaving a great sigh, he pushed the scroll aside to ignore until absolutely necessary. He still had three weeks to consider it.

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Hermione Granger looked at the scroll before her as though she could produce an *Incendio* spell with her eyes.

Of course, she couldn't. Still, it was tempting.

She wasn't sure what bothered her the most, the fact that Mudbloods, once looked down upon as the lowest scum on earth, were now looked up to as the saviours of the Wizard race, or the fact that the Purebloods seemed to be rather sanguine about the entire thing. She couldn't help but think that there was something off about the entire idea.

Still, she was a Muggle, and she was a witch. If she wanted to see the magical world survive, she would have to do this. Such knowledge did not make her duty any easier, she reflected.

With a sudden flare of annoyance, she threw her quill down on the table and sat back in her chair, scowling at the scroll. At the moment, it was the source of all her troubles.

"None of us want to do this, Hermione," Ginny said quietly. At seventeen, Ginny was over the Age Of Consent for Britain. She wouldn't be married until after she was eighteen, but the Ministry would be looking for a fiancée for her all the same.

"I know, Ginny. The whole thing is just so absurd!" Hermione leaned on the table and put her head in her hands until a thought struck her. Then she looked up and studied the faces of Neville Ron and Ginny. They were diligently filling out the form. Only Harry seemed to be disturbed by this.

"Why are you three so willing to comply with this stupid law?" Hermione asked them, annoyance sharp in her voice.

The three she was addressing gave her a quizzical look, and only Harry spoke at first. "That's right. You guys are acting like this is...I don't know...normal."

"Don't they have arranged marriages in the Muggle world?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, in other countries. Not in England," Hermione answered. "We haven't done that for over a century." [2]

It wasn't entirely true, but "over a century" sounded better than "decades".

Neville shrugged her statement off. "It's different for pureblood families. You know?"

Hermione digested his words for a few seconds. "So, your parents..."

Neville nodded. "Mum's parents had a meeting with Dad's parents, and they all agreed. She had other offers as well. So did Dad. In the end, they got to decide, but their choices were still brought to them by their parents."

She then turned to Ginny, who seemed to be finding her survey a lot more interesting by the second. Hermione frowned, and then kicked her.

"Ow! What'd you do that for?"

"What about your parents?"

Ron gave a laugh. "What Neville said, only their marriage was contractual, not arranged." {3}

Hermione felt shocked. She always felt that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had been madly in love. She said this to the brother and sister who were sitting across from her.

"Of course they're in love," Ginny said with a roll of her eyes. "Just because it's a contract, that doesn't mean that it has to be an unhappy one."

Harry looked from Ginny to Hermione, then spoke quietly, "But there's no chance that you'll be paired with Draco Malfoy."

Hermione shuddered. How Harry could feel that coming from her was a mystery, but it had been a fear in the back of her mind ever since she read the law in *The Daily Prophet* over a month ago, before school began.

Ron put his hand over hers in a gentle but friendly touch. "They'd never put the ferret together with you," he assured her. "And if they did, you know I'd come to your rescue."

Hermione smiled at Ron gratefully. Once their foolish adolescent crush had ceased, a true friendship had blossomed between the two of them, and she no longer found him so tiresome. They also didn't fight nearly half as much.

"I would, too," Neville promised.

Hermione smiled at them both, then tackled the survey with her usual zeal, asking for opinions from her friends on some of the tougher questions.

"Do I like to instigate new activities?" she asked at one point, causing laughter among the others at the table.

"Yeah, that's really you," Harry said.

"Not!" Ron put in before laughing hysterically.

Hermione noted that it would have been a lot funnier had he not been chewing a chocolate frog when he opened his mouth. Ginny rolled her eyes at him.

"I set ambitious goals for myself and work hard to achieve them," Harry said next, drawing more chuckles, especially from Hermione.

"As long as there's someone behind you, kicking your butt the entire way, yes. That's you."

"Harry likes a carrot dangled in front of him as much as any jackass," Ginny supplied.

By the time Seamus, Pavarti, and Lavender joined them, they were laughing about every question.

"Why do they want to know how I walk?" Lavender asked, exasperated.

"It's to determine whether you can do so while chewing gum or not," Hermione giggled. "If you can't, then you'll have to marry a Slythie."

Lavender grimaced and Pavarti giggled, then started to tease her friend about entering into a relationship with Crabbe.

"Lavender Crabbe!" she exclaimed. "Then you can have children, a boy named Softshell and a girl named Dungeness!" {4}

Lavender rolled her eyes at the stupid joke, but they had been laughing so hard that even a poor attempt like that drew hearty chuckles from the ever-growing table. By the time some of the fifth years joined them, Hermione was actually looking forward to the list she'd be getting back from the ministry, with her potential candidates listed on it. Then they could all sit around again, eating junk food and laughing over their proposed marriages.

But like many things, the surveys were forgotten as the school year went into full swing, and thoughts of engagements turned to the more pertinent thoughts of tests and new spells and, as always, the dreaded potions class. In fact, the only time they thought about the surveys was when someone said offhandedly, "I hope the Ministry doesn't put me together with that gawp", or, "D'you reckon McGonagall had to fill out a survey as well?".

It wasn't until after the Christmas holidays that the students of Hogwarts began to think about their surveys again. January the first, a list was sent to every witch and wizard over the age of sixteen and under the age of forty.

That was when the chaos truly began.

TBC

AN:

{1} I like Lupin. I truly do. The mustache? Not so much.

{2} This actually isn't accurate at all, but I think that Hermione is a bit of a visionary.

{3} I actually have some Indian friends who went into arranged marriages like this...one was a contract, the other was a choice from several different men.

{4} I almost put in a joke from A Mighty Wind about "the House of Crabbe", but I decided not to. It was hard.

two

Chapter 2 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

When Snape received his list, he quickly threw it to the side of his desk with a group of missives from various others that he did not care to read. The entire idea was still the most absurd thing he had ever heard, and he silently cursed his parents for not bringing him into the world two years earlier. Then he would be too old for this ridiculous farce.

He found, however, that he could not ignore the list for long. Only a week after he received it, his father came to the castle to take tea with him. Snape automatically knew what he wanted. Too long had Tetricus [1] Snape railed his son for shunning marriage. He would see his son married with children before the age of forty if it killed him. Snape knew this. He silently wondered if his father wasn't behind the marriage law as a way to finally get his wayward son hooked up with a woman.

"Hello, Severus," the older man said, shaking his son's hand as though he were a loose acquaintance rather than his only son.

"Father," Snape greeted, pressing his hand against his father's without ceremony. "Come in, please. The house elves have fixed us a fine tea, just the way you like it."

Tetricus patted his stomach as he looked down at the table laden with fruits, jellies, scones, biscuits, sandwiches, and a nice cake. Not to mention tea with cream and sugar waiting at the ready.

"Ah, alas, I cannot eat anything so extravagant, Son. My tastes have run more toward the simple of late and I find that anything other than dry toast and a little marmalade at tea gives me indigestion."

Snape rolled his eyes. He had anticipated such a turn of his father's appetite and rang the bell for the elves immediately. The table changed in almost a moment, leaving the tea things, but turning the heavy meal to a lighter fare.

"Much better," Tetricus decided, seating himself in Snape's usual chair.

Snape quietly took the other chair and did not touch anything as he was not hungry to begin with. Instead, he watched his father eat daintily and take small sips of tea until he felt that the older man would drive him mad.

"Look, I know why you came here," Snape finally said, "And I don't care whose name is on that list, you are not soliciting any of them for me."

"Confound it, Severus!" Tetricus bellowed, his mood turning apparently sour from being called out by his son. "I am the head of this family! I make the decisions!"

"I am of age and I make my decisions," Snape countered. "You will not solicit on my behalf."

"I will do what is best for our family and our line. You cannot stop me, you are not allowed! You know the laws!"

"They are archaic! You can hardly expect me to respect a law that allows a father to make decisions for every member of his family until that father is dead!"

Tetricus stood and towered over his son's seated frame. He looked every bit as horrible as Snape remembered from the times when the man would reprimand him for being foolish or naughty as a child. When he behaved this way, Snape knew that there was no reasoning with the man.

Besides, Tetricus was right. Severus must do what the head of the Snape family said, and too long had he managed to curtail his father's obsession for getting heirs out of him. Too many times had he said no. It was time buck up and ensure that the family name lived on.

"Where is the list?" Tetricus demanded.

Snape had no choice but to hand it over.

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Hermione had used great self-restraint in order to keep from ripping open her list the minute she got it during the morning mail. Instead, she did as she promised and waited until she was safe in the Gryffindor Common Room with her other friends. The seventh years felt far more apprehensive than the fifth and sixth years, and rightfully so. Should anyone solicit one of the girls, or a father solicit on behalf of his son, they were honor bound to comply within the limitations of the law.

Of course, one was not compelled to give a favorable answer to any one person, as far as they could tell, but the Ministry had added a paragraph to the original agreement denoting sovereignty to their decisions made on behalf of any participant. Hermione was quite sure that she did not like her fate to be decided at the discretion of the Ministry, but she saw little choice in the matter.

"Who's going to open first?" Ginny asked, staring at her parchment as though it would leap out and bite her at any moment.

"I'll go first," Harry said bravely. Hermione could have killed him for that. Instead, she sat still while he opened his roll, reading the names from the top, where the most compatible candidates were, to the bottom, which were of course, the least compatible.

"Luna Lovegood?" Neville asked dejectedly when Harry read her name so close to the top, but still under Ginny's.

"I guess so," Harry answered. "Well, I like her all right I suppose...but we all have plenty of time!"

"Of course we do," Hermione agreed.

She tried to not notice the looks that the purebloods exchanged, and she tried to not think about the fact that most of the married wizarding couples she knew seemed to have been married within two years of finishing Hogwarts.

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"Here you are, Severus, the first name on your list."

Snape took the list with an exasperated look that turned to shock when he read the first name. Was everyone going insane?

"Father, she is one of my students."

Tetricus shrugged the comment away. "She wouldn't be when you marry. You would wait until after she graduates." He turned away, still studying the list and said absently, "As though I'd have you marry a girl not yet finished with her education."

"Even after she's finished, Father, I cannot consent to such a marriage. It would be improper, and anyone who heard about it would conjecture that our relationship started improperly when I was still teaching her. It would be a bad match all around-think of the honor of our family!"

That, he was sure, was what did it.

"Well, I suppose we can't have others thinking wrongly about your marriage. Very well, let us weigh your other options."

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Hermione opened her roll of parchment with fear. Thinking about opening such a life-changing piece of paper while one is telling jokes to ones friends compared to actually opening it and reading what ones choices are were, to Hermione, two very different things. No one was laughing and no one was joking. These choices were taken very seriously and weighed for merit.

This was real.

Her eyes immediately went to the last name on the list and, not to her surprise, it was Goyle. She made her way up from there, only recognizing one or two names along the way until her eyes continued up towards the top of the list. She saw Ron and Draco after him and her stomach clenched to think that Ron rated lower than Malfoy. She suddenly wondered if Malfoy had cheated on his answers. After that, there were more names that she didn't recognize, and a few she did as Death Eaters whom she had fought against during the wars, until she got to the first name at the top. And her heart stopped beating for a few moments.

"Well?" Harry asked.

Hermione tore her eyes away from the scroll to look at her friend. "Ron's on the list," she said with forced happiness. "As is Neville and a few other friends. I doubt that the Death Eaters listed would want anything to do with me, or the sons of the Death Eaters. After all, I was fighting them. And besides, like you said, we still have plenty of time. I doubt that anyone will make us offers before the end of school."

"I doubt it as well," Ginny said, breaking the seal on her parchment. "Oh look, Harry. Here's your name."

Hermione turned away as Harry leaned over to examine Ginny's list, and her eyes fell once again to the first name on the list.

Severus Snape

Severus is an alum of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and is currently their resident Potions Master. Severus has written three books entitled Potions and Their Function, a textbook, Standard Medical Potions, an informative book for those in the healing industry, and Protection Potions and their Uses, which was used in the latest wars. In his spare time, Severus enjoys inventing new potions, reading, and taking long walks.

Hermione almost started laughing hysterically at the absurdity of it all.

TBC

AN: [1] Tetricus-Latin for harsh, gloomy, severe. Pretty much the same thing Severus means. I toyed with the idea of naming him Severitas, Severus being an offshoot of that name, but I restrained myself.

Three

Chapter 3 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

I'm updating this a lot this weekend, but that's only because I've been lazy and agorophobic this weekend. As the week goes on, the updates will probably come less and

less, though I'm rather excited that I seem to be several chapters ahead of posting. Thanks to the reviewers, especially the ones with concret advice. And to allay any fears, when Hermione refers to herself as a Mudblood, it is in sarcasm and slight bitterness.

Two months after receiving his list, Severus Snape found himself hiding out in his personal chambers, forcing himself to breathe normally. At first, his telling his father that he could not date a particular girl because she had been or currently was, one of his students was an inspired argument. However, as the weeks went on, his father caught onto the idea behind it.

"You've been teaching here at Hogwarts for over sixteen years, Severus," Tetricus had bellowed to his son. "Naturally most of the eligible girls have at one point been in one of your classes! How can they not have been?"

There was no hope for it. He would have to begin to date. And his father's choice, for some odd reason, was Hermione Granger.

"She got perfect O's on her O.W.L.s!" Tetricus had said. "So did you! Your children would be both powerful and intelligent!"

"Father, has the thought not occurred to you that after watching Hermione Granger grow from an awkward preteen to an equally awkward post adolescent, it would indeed be quite difficult for me to look at her in any light other than as a student? She is in my classes every day, under my control, her will subject to my bidding! It would be impossible for me!"

"Ah, but you know her only as your student, as you say," Tetricus argued, his tone intimating that he was saying something rather wise. "You do not know her as anything else. That is your downfall! She is in your class every day, advanced potions, and doing well you say! That is something to begin with. Why have you not spent your time with her more wisely? This is your problem, my son, for you look at the world as though it is all a scientific experiment. It's time to see the human being beneath!"

"I refuse to fraternize with my students on such an unethical level, one that would open me and Hogwarts to undesirable scrutiny! Where is your sense of honor?"

Tetricus had given Snape a very telling sneer, and suddenly Snape knew he had played directly into his father's plans.

"Then you will meet those others that I chose, and I will remember to keep away from those who have so recently been your students."

Snape had no choice but to consent.

And now here he was, ducked into his pantry, trying to catch his breath after his date had just tried to paw him in a most unbecoming manner. To make matters worse, she was a student he had remembered from four years ago, and at the time he had suspected a crush on her part. The whole business had made him quite uncomfortable, and here he was, remembering the helpless feeling that he could do nothing other than continue to deduct points from her house in hopes that her feelings of attraction would turn to those of hate.

And it didn't help that his mind suddenly latched onto the thought that Hermione would never conduct herself in such a way. Why he thought that, he didn't know, but it was a little unsettling.

"Severus? Where have you gone to?" his date, a girl named Mary Carter asked, entering the small kitchen area.

"Just in here, finding a bottle of wine," Snape said, grabbing a bottle quickly. He would soon have her out of his hair.

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"Did you hear that a Muggleborn asked Pavarti to marry him?" Ginny asked Hermione, running to catch up to her as she made her way to the common room.

"No, I didn't!" Hermione said, slowing slightly. "What will she do?"

Ginny shrugged. "That's up to her, but I thought it was odd. After all, I haven't heard of anyone else getting a proposal."

Hermione gave a smug smile. "Well, then you know less than I do, but let's go inside first."

Hermione and Ginny crawled through the hole behind the portrait, walked through the common room, and up to Ginny's dormitory.

"What do you know?" Ginny asked as they crawled onto her bed and shut the curtains.

"Millicent Bulstrode has received an offer from Garret Parker, a Ravenclaw who graduated two years ago."

"Did she accept?"

Hermione shrugged. "I heard Draco and Pansy discussing it. They're quite put out about the entire law, as you know, and are reportedly working on a way around it."

"Whom did you hear that from?" Ginny asked, her eyes shining with eagerness.

"Well, it's not certain, of course, but Harry and I heard Crabbe and Goyle talking about how Draco and Pansy have read the law and all of the old laws still apply, so that Pansy's father could force Draco's hand if she's found in a compromised position because of him."

"Do you think it'll work?"

"Of course I do. It's Malfoy, after all. The thought of marrying a "Mudblood" is probably a scene from one of his deepest nightmares, seconded only by the one where his hair gets mussed up by a sudden gust of wind."

Ginny gave a chuckle. "All right, my turn. Snape has a date tonight, she's with him now, and if Ron is right, as he usually is in these situations, then this is not the first instance. And, Colin Creevey said that he ran into a man who he thought was Professor Snape and was worried that he was about to deduct points, but it turned out to be Snape's father."

Hermione looked away thoughtfully. She couldn't forget that Snape, her professor, had been the first person on her list, and the lists were sorted according to compatibility. She'd only told Ginny about that, and it was during Christmas break, when they had shared a room at the Burrow. Ginny had given a little giggle at that, but then shrugged and said, "You're both very intelligent and like the same things. On paper, I'm sure you look good together."

"Yes," Hermione had answered. "Too bad we can't stand each other."

Bringing herself back to the present, Hermione turned to Ginny. "Would his father be the one soliciting for him, or would he do it himself?"

"His father is the head of the family," Ginny answered. "He would be the one to bring offers on behalf of his son. I wonder what he's like, though! Colin was too frightened to stay where he was to find out, especially when he saw Snape coming. He said that Snape looked angry, but...well, that signifies little."

Hermione could only agree.

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"I am very displeased with your choices, Father," Snape said as he sat down to a family dinner one Sunday afternoon, a week after his unfortunate date with Mary Carter.

"I have agreed to go along with this farce, but the least you could do is pair me off with someone who has at least an iota of intelligence."

Tetricus smiled kindly at his son and passed a plate of potatoes to his wife. "I have given you the option of gracing me with your opinion, but you refuse. It would go a lot easier if you would only take some initiative in your future."

Snape sat back in his chair, thoroughly displeased with the way the conversation was headed. "I have told you that I will not justify this ridiculous law with my participation."

"Severus, Tetricus," Snape's mother said firmly, "I will not have the two of you fighting at our dinner table. Especially not over this subject, which has been bandied about for the past six months at least!"

Thalia, one of Snape's younger sisters, leaned over to him and touched his arm. "The more you fight him, the worse it will be, you know this," she whispered.

Snape only nodded in return. He knew it would be worse for him if he did not relent, but he could not help himself. He was stubborn to a fault, and though he knew it was not one of his better qualities, he refused to change it.

"I will give up for now, but only for my love for you. Were it anyone else, I would refuse."

Thalia gave him a dark look, mirth hidden badly behind her eyes before turning her attention back to the table. She was five years younger than him, and one of his dearest friends. Pasithea, who was five years Thalia's junior, was not such a favorite as her demeanor was silly and her conversation frivolous, but he still loved her dearly. Both of his sisters were married, but only Pasithea had children. Thalia had never spoken on the subject, but Snape presumed it was a sore one, and stayed away, curtailing his father before he could bring it up in his presence.

However, with the new law, Tetricus was renewed in his zeal that the Snape line should continue, and when he was not discussing his son's refusal to marry, he would turn to the subject of his eldest daughters' apparent barrenness. Only Snape's mother could curtail Tetricus from that discussion. And she seemed to be doing so now.

"Forgive me, Iona, for the love I have for my children. I only wish to see them happy!"

"Then why do you make them so unhappy with all of this talk?"

Snape could remember hearing his parents fighting when he was a young child, and it always frightened him. He was always worried that his father would do something mean to his mother. As an adult, he knew that the fear was irrational, but as a child he did not understand. His parents fought to communicate. It was a flawed communication, but this was how they did it. His father was harsh and tough, his mother softer and easier. They always met in the middle, no matter how much they injured those around them.

"When Thalia is ready to have children, she will."

Snape put his fork and knife down and set his napkin next to his plate. "Thank you, Mother, for inviting me here. Thank you Father for making my time most enjoyable, but I must beg to return to Hogwarts where it's quiet."

Tetricus and Iona turned to their son with looks of shock.

"We haven't even gotten past the main course yet!" Iona protested.

"See here, boy, I have more plans for you!" Tetricus argued.

"Loren and I must leave as well," Thalia said, standing with her husband. "Really, it was nice to have visited. We must do this again soon."

Tetricus and Iona were about to protest further, but too soon did their children Apparate away from them.

"That was a close shave," Loren, Thalia's husband, commented when they were safe in his living room.

"We're going to hear about this tomorrow, you know," Thalia said as she lit a few lamps with her wand. "Me from mother, and you from Father."

"We can't all be perfect like Pasithea," Snape answered with a little bitterness, but towards his parents, not his sister.

"Yes, well, for penance, she will have to put up with Mother and Father for the remainder of the evening. Severus, will you stay for some refreshment?" Thalia asked, looking around for a bottle of wine.

"I could, but I must go back to Hogwarts at some point, and your wine has the uncanny ability to make me wish to stay with you forever."

Thalia shrugged. "I have good taste. Well, if you cannot be persuaded, then I will kiss you goodbye."

Snape gave a rare smile as he pulled his sister close and allowed her to press her lips to his cheek.

"You may always come and see me at Hogwarts, any time you need," Snape said earnestly while cupping her cheeks in his hands. "You are always welcome and may discuss anything with me, as you always have."

Thalia smiled back at her brother and gave his hands a squeeze as he released her face. "Thank you. And I do miss you whilst you are gone from me."

"And I you. Good bye, Loren."

"Severus, have a nice evening," Loren said, gripping Snape's hand before the older man stepped into the Floo.

When the world stopped spinning, Snape realized that he landed in the wrong fireplace. Instead of showing up in the Potions Office, he ended up in the Library.

"Professor Snape!" A voice said as he stepped out of the fireplace. He knew that voice.

"Miss Granger, this is a library," he said, coming close to where she was sitting. "I must ask you to remember to keep your voice down, or I will be forced to deduct points."

Hermione frowned at her professor, then she seemed to shrug and go back to the rather large book she was reading. Snape couldn't help but note the title, as he had read this book many times himself. "The Alchemists Guide To Modern Medicine" was one of his favorite reference books.

He turned and left before he commented on it.

TBC

AN: Thalia and Pasithea, Snape's sisters, are both named after two of the Three Graces. Many of the Pureblood characters are named after Latin terms, Severus Narcissa and Lucius being only three examples. Then there's Regulus and Sirius as well...dark families. It seemed to be a pattern, so I followed suit.

Four

Chapter 4 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

My friend Hope always accuses me of having more than one story in all of my stories. I actually think that I have several different plotlines woven into a main plot. Whatever your take on it is, I promise you that everything I write has something to do with the main plot, and this chapter is no exception.

On a bright Saturday, a week after Professor Snape startled her in the library, Hermione found herself without company as her friends were practicing for an upcoming quidditch game against Slytherin. She had every intention at the beginning of the day to watch them whilst studying, but as they left for the pitch, she excused herself, the realization that her N.E.W.T.s were only a few months away, and she was determined to get perfect O's once again. Healing, an art that was intriguing to her, had become more so after her sixth year when she was privileged to watch the witches and wizards who were skilled in this art go from body to body, and bring people back from the brink of death with what seemed like little attention. She was not sure if she wanted to be a full healer, but the prospect was intriguing, compounded by an offer for her to apprentice at St. Mungos the following year, providing her grades were adequate.

She had gone to the library and stayed there for several hours, reading up on Alchemy, Herbology and Potions though she had memorized most of the books within her first four years. It was still nice to refresh her memory, and one never knew what new thing they could find in a book that they had read numerous times already.

Her hunger got the better of her eventually, though, and she made her way back towards the Great Hall, several books in her arms. She knew that she should have stopped in the Gryffindor common room to drop the books off, but she was late and worried that lunch would be cleared away before she got there if she didn't hurry. Her fear grew as she approached the Great Hall and saw it practically deserted. Still, she was hurrying there in hopes that she would not be too late.

She was hurrying too fast, however, and ran directly into an unsuspecting person, dropping her books and some papers at the same time.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Hermione cried as she bent over and gathered the books together, shoving her loose notes inside of one as she straightened. "I didn't see you standing there."

Hermione then looked up at the person she had run into and was shocked speechless for a few moments. It was a woman, tall and thin, with long black hair of a lanky texture that Hermione recognized immediately. Her eyes then took in the woman's long, rather hooked nose and thin lips, set in a scowl.

"You should watch where you're going. Then there will be no need to apologize."

Hermione gulped and nodded at the female version of her Potions Professor who stood before her now.

"May I help you with anything?" Hermione asked lamely, trying to decide the best course of action.

The woman sneered at her. "What is your name?"

"Hermione Granger," Hermione answered automatically. Then she almost shrank back as the woman took hold of her chin with one long, pale hand and seemed to study her face.

"Indeed? Well, I have heard much of you but did not have a face to go with the name. I am Thalia DeWinter, sister of Professor Snape. You are rather pretty."

Hermione gulped and took an involuntary step backwards as Thalia let go of her chin. "Thank you. You are very pretty as well."

"I am nothing of the sort," Thalia answered simply.

Hermione was about to protest, as she did find Thalia's irregular features, great height and pale skin rather attractive, but she was interrupted by her Potions Master himself entering the foyer, stalking quickly to his sister's side, taking her arm with a hand as long and beautiful as his sisters'.

"Miss Granger," he nodded in greeting.

Hermione was about to answer when the two tall figures turned abruptly and left her standing there stupidly, their long legs walking quickly to the entrance to the dungeons. Hermione watched curiously as Snape wrapped his arm around his sister in a tender gesture and kissed her cheek before disappearing into the shadows.

The entire encounter took so long that Hermione decided to go back to the common room in her tower and drop off her books before making her way down to the entrance of the kitchen in order to beg a late lunch from the ever-compliant house elves. Even after she had eaten and met up with her friends, though, she could not shake the feeling that Snape's sister had been scrutinizing her for defect, and somehow, she had passed the inspection. She wasn't sure what it was about the woman's proud look that made her think that she had been accepted favorably, but the feeling was with her all the same.

Eventually, she excused herself from her friends and made her way back to the library, a new question seizing her brain. Snape had a sister who was married. Did he have any other family? Was DeWinter a pureblood name? She had studied the Black Family Tree on numerous occasions, and had seen how her friends were related to many of the Pureblood families, but after showing how the Black family was connected to the other families, the lineage record would stop, as though all that was important in the world were the Blacks. And knowing what Hermione did of Sirius Black and his "mother", it was entirely probable that this was how they felt.

Grabbing a large book off the library shelf, Hermione sat down in the farthest corner that she could find, not wanting anyone to see what she was about. The book was called "The Illustrious Genealogy of Pureblood Wizards and Witches of Great Britain". It was a title as pompous as it was long, and the book was even longer. It was one of those magical books that updated itself as families updated themselves, and Hermione knew that she would be able to find out all she needed to know about her Potions Professor and his line.

She was just beginning to read about Snape's other sister, married to a man named Ian Jones, a pureblood, and their three children, Ian, Thomas and Mary. The names sounded rather plain compared to a name like Persethea, but Hermione, having a rather complicated name herself, could understand Pasithea's decision to name her children thusly.

"Miss Granger."

Hermione froze. She had been so wrapped up in her research that she had not heard Snape's approach, and though she knew it was too late, she slammed the book shut in hopes that he wouldn't be able to see which page she was studying.

"Professor Snape. Good to see you again, sir," she said with a smile, standing and holding the book to her chest as she did so.

The corners of Snape's mouth curled ever so slightly as he removed the book from her clutch and sent it back to its proper place with a wave of his wand. Hermione gulped and stood there stupidly, trying to think of an excuse.

"Miss Granger, I wonder if you would accompany me to the dungeons? I have something to speak to you about."

Hermione could not think of an excuse not to, especially under his penetrating gaze, so she nodded a quick yes and followed in the wake of his billowing black robes as he stalked back to his office. Once at the doorway, he paused to allow her to catch up to him, and then opened the door for her, ushering her inside as though he were afraid that someone would see them.

Once Hermione was seated across from his desk, her curiosity fully piqued, Snape sat himself across from her and examined the nail on one of his long fingers. Hermione raised her eyebrows expectantly.

"Miss Granger, you realize that you are not the only person afflicted by this ridiculous marriage law. Everyone in our world must do what they can to ensure the survival of our kind."

Hermione nodded at him,

"My father has looked upon this law as an opportunity to marry off his only son to ensure that our line will continue."

Hermione balked a little, a million questions springing to her mind. She did not ask any of them, however, as her teacher did not seem annoyed with her for once. She wanted to keep it that way.

"My father has read the law and has decided to exert his power as head of my family in order to procure his son a wife."

A thought suddenly came to Hermione, and she gasped slightly then said, "Oh, of course! How foolish of me to not have thought it!"

Snape made a scoffing noise that sounded like the word "indeed", then turned his full attention to her. "Thought what? Do share your revelation, Miss Granger."

Hermione ignored his sarcastic tone. "Well, I had not thought about it in this light, Professor. I have been thinking all along how it is unfair that I should be subject to the will of the Ministry in this law, and must have a husband as soon as any eligible offer is settled, but I had not thought about the converse side of the equation. Of course, any Muggleblood and Halfblood man must also be subject to the Ministry and their heads of family as well as Pureblood men being subject to the head of their family. I just..." she faltered a bit when she met his gaze.

"Well, the head of my family has been thrusting girl after girl towards me in hopes that an attraction might form. None has so far, and I have exhausted all eligible choices."

Hermione lifted her eyebrows ever so slightly.

"All except one, that is."

Hermione was slowly beginning to understand. She thought about how Thalia had looked her over so completely and mentioned that she had heard of her before. She had called her pretty.

"So...your father wants you to see me?"

Snape looked decidedly uncomfortable. "He actually wants me to marry you and has from the beginning. You are, of course, not ignorant at this point to my sister's perusal of you. My father has only looked at you academically, and he likes your marks. Perfect O's are not entirely rare, but rare enough to make him view you in a golden light."

Hermione took several moments to think about all that had been said so far, weighing her response before speaking. "Professor, I do not need to ask how you view me, for I know already how loathsome you find this situation, but if your father makes an offer for me and the Ministry finds it favorable, then they will accept on my behalf, acting as head of my family since my father is a Muggle. My hand will be forced, and we will marry."

Hermione suddenly felt very faint at the thought. After a long pause to collect her thoughts, she went on. "Professor, you were at the very top of my list. If your father makes an offer, then it is almost certain that the Ministry will accept."

"You could persuade them in another direction."

Hermione gave a chuckle. "What other direction? If no one else asks for my hand..."

Snape rubbed his hands over his eyes as though to clear his mind. "This entire conversation is madness."

Hermione had to agree. "Surely your father would not make an offer for me whilst I am still your student?"

"So far, I have managed to persuade him of the impropriety of me being offered to a current student, but there can be no telling what he will do now that I have gone through every girl on my list."

Hermione could not suppress a laugh. Snape glared at her as she covered her mouth to try and make herself stop.

"I'm sorry, Professor. Really, I didn't mean it..."

Snape stood and went to the door. "Good evening, Miss Granger. I'll see you tomorrow in class."

Hermione suddenly felt very silly and ashamed of herself. "I'm sorry," she said again, more contrite. "Really, and I won't tell anyone about this."

"I said good evening." He was still standing at the door.

Hermione only nodded and walked to the frame of the door. "Good evening, Professor." As she walked away, she afforded herself one curious look back, but Snape had already shut himself in his office.

Now she was left to wonder about the entire conversation, and the almost-civility that her professor had shown her. Not to mention the way that his sister had studied her and seemed to approve of her.

Would she really be forced to marry Snape?

~*~*~*~

Snape had several hours of free time over the next few days to think of his conversation with Hermione Granger. She did not know that she had been at the top of his list as well, but he found it almost revolutionary that they had both been first with each other. The loudmouth know-it-all his perfect match? The thought was a little disturbing. Check that, more than just a little disturbing. And his father was determined to get her for him. And in Snape's refusal to play the game, he had instead played into his father's hands and through process of elimination, he had only Hermione Granger left on his list of candidates.

Snape sighed and sat back in his chair, looking over the essays on his desk. He had graded Hermione's first, and the only fault he could find was that she had put too much information in it.

She annoyed him, plain and simple. Well, he had to admit that she did not so much now as she did her first few years. After the fifth year, when he was forced to be in her presence for long periods of time due to the war, she began to annoy him less. But she was still his student, and still twenty years his junior.

A knock at his door drew him from his reverie, and he opened it sharply, the hour far too late for a student to be out of bed.

Standing at the door was Millicent Bulstrode, a very frightened look on her face. "Professor, you must come quick! There is something the matter with Pansy!" she seemed very close to tears.

Snape nodded and followed Millicent to the girl's dormitory, muttering the password so that the Wards would not turn the staircase into a long slide. His long legs took him to Pansy's bedside in a matter of seconds, and he knew in an instant that Pansy was not merely sick, but seemed to be having a miscarriage. She was laying in a fetal position, hugging herself tightly and crying, blood pooling around her.

"Quickly, go to the floo and get Madam Pomfrey," Snape ordered Millicent. As she obeyed, Snape turned back to Pansy and put his hand on her forehead, feverish from the pain she was in. "Dear Merlin, Pansy, what have you been about?" he asked more to himself than her. He did not need to ask who she had been with, he only said, "I will inform Mr. Malfoy as soon as you are safe."

Pansy nodded and reached out to grip his hand. "Please don't tell my parents," she begged.

Snape was about to answer her when Poppy Pomfrey stepped through the floo and assessed the situation.

"We need to get her to the medical wing now," she told Snape.

Snape nodded and was about to conjure a stretcher when he realized that it would never fit in the fireplace. Swiftly, he wrapped Pansy in her blankets and lifted her up, stepping into the floo that way. Madam Pomfrey threw in floo powder, and he said, "The medical wing" as green smoke billowed around his legs.

When he arrived only a few moments later, he immediately deposited his student on a bed, Madam Pomfrey right behind him.

"I have a potion for the pain and another to ward off infection," she said to Snape. "But I have nothing to stop what is happening."

Pansy began to cry harder at this.

"Now now, dear," Madam Pomfrey said as she sat beside Pansy and offered her a cup of one of the potions. "This will help the pain...there you go."

Snape's evening turned into the following morning, and after only a few hours' sleep in an uncomfortable chair, he was forced to face Pansy's father and explain to him how his daughter could have gotten pregnant at the top wizarding school in Europe.

"Mr. Parkinson, I can assure you that all of the professors here keep a very keen eye on your children, but we cannot be held accountable for their indiscretions!"

Then Lucius Malfoy showed up. He had been displeased with Snape ever since it had come out how Snape had not been on Voldemort's side at all, but rather a spy, and all the recompense that Lucius had been forced to pay out after the war was over was, in his mind, all Snape's fault.

"What is this all about, Severus?" Lucius asked angrily. "What else goes on in front of that gargantuan nose of yours that you are unaware of? Or perhaps you have a hard time seeing past it."

Snape gave Lucius a dark look. "It is not my job to teach your child the *Infecundus* charm, Lucius."

Lucius gave a snort of disgust.

Snape then looked over at Draco who was seated as far away from all the other participants as he could get. Snape noted that he was giving Pansy a rather disgusted look, as though he were angry with her for some reason.

"Anything you'd care to add to this conversation, Malfoy?" Snape asked the boy, angered at his coldness.

"Yes," Mr. Parkinson said with venom in his voice. "After all, this is at least half your fault."

"It's not my fault that your daughter can't even have a baby like a real mother would," Draco answered.

Mrs. Parkinson stood up at this and began to walk over to Draco, the urge to slap him almost audible in the way her hands clenched. Snape managed to grab her and stop her, pinning her arms to her side.

"He's not worth it," he whispered to her.

Mrs. Parkinson then turned to Snape and looked him over. "No, but you are."

She slapped him so fast that he barely had time to dodge her, and she ended up making contact with the side of his nose instead of his cheek. Undeterred, she went after him again, but this time he was ready and managed to stand back, grabbing at her arms again.

"Everyone calm down!" Dumbledore bellowed. "This situation is most unfortunate, and everyone present has my most sincere apologies. But the fact still stands that while it is a regrettable event, the only fault that I feel responsible for is that of ignorance. Naturally, had we known that Mr. Malfoy and Miss Parkinson were involved in this manner, we would have put a stop to it immediately."

Mr. Parkinson looked at Snape coldly as he wrapped his arms around his wife. "I'll have your job for this, Snape," he spat. "And you," he said to Malfoy, "if your son ever so much as touches my daughter again."

"If your daughter even looks at my son, I'll hex you into oblivion!" Lucius answered quickly.

"I'd love to see you try!" Mr. Parkinson had his wand out in a flash.

"Oh, I'll enjoy this," Lucius answered, brandishing his own wand.

How Dumbledore ever managed to get the parents and children sorted out was beyond Snape. He was tempted to simply immobilize all of them and throw them out the windows. In the end, however, the parents left, still fighting amongst themselves. Pansy was still in her bed, crying softly. Draco had fled at some point during the fighting, and Snape decided that he was thoroughly disgusted with the boy. Pansy had finally admitted that her pregnancy had stemmed from a plan of hers and Draco's to marry each other despite the fact that the law stated that Purebloods were no longer allowed to marry each other. Her father had stalwartly answered that the last person she would ever marry would be Draco Malfoy.

The whole incident could have been easily over and done with in Snape's mind had it not proved to be so pivotal to his future. For one thing, Mr. Parkinson's insistence that Snape step down as Potions Master finally made its way through the Ministry of Magic, and an actual inquiry was put out by the Education Department. Snape agreed to step down at the completion of the year and decided, perhaps more sanguinely than normal, that it was a problem that ended for the best in that respect. He was angry still with Mr. Parkinson for his part in the situation and tried his hardest to not pass that anger along to Pansy. She was suffering enough from rumors and the meanness of Draco Malfoy and his friends.

The other consequence of all that happened was that Lucius Malfoy decided that since his son had indeed attempted to marry Pansy Parkinson in a rather underhanded way, that he should take matters into his own hands and prove to the Ministry that his family would never do anything that deceitful, and consequentially, put out several requests to the young women on his sons' list. Even this action would normally not have effected Snape in any material way, had not one of the young women on Draco's list been Hermione Granger.

In fact, it seemed as though Lucius saw the same benefits to his son being married to Hermione that Tetricus Snape saw.

Never backing down from a challenge, both Tetricus and Lucius sought Hermione fervently for their sons, and the battle for her hand began.

AN: Infecundus-Latin for sterile or sterility. I don't think that a wizard or witch would use anything as clumsy as modern birth control, so they must take potions or have charms to use. That's just my take

Five

Chapter 5 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

For the entire month following Thalia DeWinter's visit to Hogwarts, Hermione found herself with little time to think on the tall woman, her mind being more vigorously engaged by pre-N.E.W.T testing and studying, not to mention the rumors flying around. The first rumor appeared to be true, that Malfoy and Parkinson had managed to do what they were planning, only to be thwarted by nature. Hermione wondered at first if it was a lie, but it was rather apparent that the other Slytherins suddenly began to treat her more meanly than they treated even the Hufflepuffs. Her heart touched by Pansy's plight, Hermione made an effort to be nice to her, though she found the girl to be insufferable.

Her plan to make friends was ruined by Pansy herself, who told Hermione "The last thing I need is pity from a filthy Mudblood like you!" one afternoon when Hermione asked her to study with her group. After that, she decided to let Pansy on her own as it was obvious that the girl would not change.

The second rumor was that Professor Snape had been asked to step down as Potions Master at the end of the year. Hermione was particularly concerned about that, especially after her conversation with him about his pending proposal. She wondered if Snape's father would still make an offer if his son had no viable means of income. Then she thought about Snape's family, and surmised that they were rich enough to support Snape and any family he may acquire without him working.

And at night, when she should have been resting because those eight hours seemed to be the only ones where she didn't have her nose in a book, she continued having a variation of the same dream over and over again. A pair of piercing black eyes would look down a long nose at her, studying her for defect. And though all she could see in the dream was the face, Hermione always had the feeling that she was naked in it, and the person studying her was looking even deeper than her skin, making sure that there was no fault to be found. The variation was that sometimes it was Snape himself looking her over. And sometimes, in her dream, he would kiss her to assure her that she was perfect to him.

The dreams disturbed Hermione, and she felt that she could not talk about them with anyone, not even Ginny. It affected her time in Potions Class as well, as she would find herself flustered easily by Snape, something that had never happened to her before. What was worse was that he seemed to know that he made her nervous, and purposely paid almost all of his attention to her. It was a situation that was advantageous to Harry and Neville, but Hermione could hardly concentrate at all when Snape would stand behind her, his chest so close to her back that she could feel his body heat. Even more disconcerting was the day that he leaned close to her ear and whispered, "A Healer will need steadier hands than that, Miss Granger."

His warm breath against her ear almost made her drop her ingredients in all at once rather than slowly as the potion recipe called for. How she had managed to keep her composure was unknown to her, but the same night, she had her most disturbing dream of all. It had begun like the others, black eyes staring down a long nose at her, calculating her body, weighing her mind, seeing all of her imperfections and justifying them. Then, with careful calculation, he drew closer, the warmth of his body caressing hers in a tangible way that made her move even closer to him, her face lifting as his hands settled at her waist, his lips meeting hers.

Hermione had awoken confused that night, amazed at how well her body played tricks on her to make her think that Snape was really caressing her that way. She could even still feel his body on hers as though the entire scene had really happened. She could even remember how his hands had felt against her skin, and his lips against hers.

The following night, she had taken a sleeping draught to keep the dreams away. It worked, but she knew it was both foolish and dangerous to take a potion to sleep every night. The only other answer was to block her dreams, but she did not know how to go about doing that.

She eventually decided that to ask for help would be the most logical step, so she stayed behind at the end of Transfiguration in order to talk to Professor McGonagall. The older witch seemed quite happy that Hermione had decided to stay after and ushered her into her office, pulling two soft chairs together for a more informal chat.

"I was going to ask you to stay after class, Miss Granger, for a few reasons, but before I begin, I would like you to tell me what is troubling you. And don't try to hide it from me, for I have been able to see for the past several weeks that you are not up to your usual standards. Not that it's affected your grades, mind."

Hermione nodded. "I've been having odd dreams," she answered enigmatically. "I was hoping that you would be able to tell me a good way to keep from dreaming at night."

McGonagall leaned forward, her face etched with concern. "I admit that you have looked incredibly tired. I wrote it off to you studying too much."

"No, my studies are not affecting my sleeping. After Third Year, I promised myself that I'd never let that happen again."

"May I ask what the dreams are about?"

Hermione met McGonagall's eyes, then quickly averted her gaze. "The dreams are inconsequential, Professor. It is the affect that they have on me that I worry about. If I cannot sleep more than just a few hours a night, you will never be rid of me! I'll fail the N.E.W.T. exams and spend the rest of my life trying to complete my Seventh Year at Hogwarts!"

McGonagall began to laugh lightly, and Hermone turned back to her with a scowl on her face.

"Oh, forgive me, Miss Granger, but that is one of the most absurd things I have ever heard! Firstly, you will not fail any part of the N.E.W.T. exams. You are too bright and have far too much natural talent to fail. Secondly, I will help you find a way to sleep without dreams, I promise. And thirdly, your dreams are not inconsequential. No

indeed, dreams, especially the kind that can keep you awake, are always meaningful. I will respect your need to keep them secret, but I assure you that I will not judge you for what your mind desires while you sleep."

Hermione blushed deeply. "It's this stupid marriage law," she began. And then, slowly, the entire story came out, even the parts about Snape. True to her word, Professor McGonagall only listened sympathetically and did not berate Hermione for her improper feelings.

"And so I took a sleeping draught two nights ago just to get some peace," Hermione finished. "That's why I'm here, I don't want to have to do that every night."

"Miss Granger, you realize that you are not the first student to develop feelings for her teacher, do you not?"

Hermione nodded.

"However, I believe that your circumstance is unique, particularly due to the reason why I asked you to stay after. The Ministry has asked me to act as your liaison here, Miss Granger. You have begun to receive marriage proposals now that the end of the year is near, and I'm sure that after you take your N.E.W.T.s more will come through. But these two... there is no way around it, Tetricus Snape has petitioned you on behalf of his son, as has Lucius Malfoy."

Hermione gasped. "Lucius? Draco Malfoy?"

McGonagall held up her hand to silence Hermione. "I know, Miss Granger, but you must think clearly on this."

"Professor, I would marry Professor Snape today if it meant I would never have to see Draco Malfoy again my entire life." She met the older woman's eyes defiantly.

McGonagall only nodded. "Very well. I respect that opinion. That leaves Professor Snape."

Hermione gulped. "Must I...must I make a decision soon? Can't I have time to think about it? Or wait for other offers?"

"You may indeed. However, once you graduate, you will be pressed by the Ministry to make a decision, and as I will no longer be your Head of House, you will have to deal with the Ministry directly. I can assure you, Miss Granger, that they can be quite persuasive in these matters."

"So...I..." Hermione faltered a bit. "I suppose I should get to know Professor Snape better then."

Professor McGonagall set down the letter she had been reading over and gave Hermione her full attention. "Miss Granger, you have already informed me that Professor Snape is at the top of your list. I promise you, however, that were someone closer to you, someone you liked better, to make an offer for you, you could chose that person over the Professor."

Hermione looked down at her shoes, noticing how scuffed they were. "Harry and Ron are going to train to become Aurors. I wish to become a Healer. It is doubtful that either of them would ever make an offer to me, anyway. And Harry would be ineligible. Ron's brothers... are nice...but they are not for me. I know no other purebloods than the Slytherines I am in school with, and I can assure you that I do not like them one bit. Professor Snape and I have been thrust together over the past few years, what with the war and all. Perhaps all I feel for him is a schoolgirl's infatuation, but I owe him and the Ministry, and those of my kind, the courtesy of at least trying to find out."

McGonagall took Hermione's hand in her own and gave her a rare smile. "You are showing wisdom beyond your years, Miss Granger, as always. I am quite proud." She then let go and handed Hermione the letter that the Ministry had sent her. "I am sure you will want to read this. It will explain a little more what my position is. I will write to the Ministry today and inform them that you will have a planned outing with Professor Snape. Chaperoned, of course."

Hermione looked at her teacher, shocked. "Chaperoned? Do you really think that we would..."

"You'll be late for dinner if you don't go now, Miss Granger. Good evening."

Hermione stood and gathered her things, questions weighing her mind. Harry and Ron were waiting for her in the Common Room, and she could almost hear Ron's stomach growling.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked. "What did McGonagall want?"

"Yeah, we've been worried about you," Ron added.

Hermione suddenly felt very alone. She wasn't sure if she could talk to her friends about this. As they walked toward the Great Hall, she decided to tell them part of the truth.

"Two pureblood families have petitioned for my hand in marriage," Hermione answered, her voice sounding slightly hollow.

"Bloody hell," Ron exclaimed. "Hermione, that's serious!"

"Serious?" Harry asked, confused. "How so? She doesn't have to say yes right away to the first man who comes along, does she?"

Ron turned to his two friends. "Ginny and I have come to the conclusion that Muggles wait a long time to marry each other. Haven't either of you noticed that most married wizards and witches were married young?"

"We were hoping it was coincidence," Hermione said with a forced smile.

"Well it's not. You have school at the beginning of your life, then you marry and have children and make enough money to keep you wealthy. Then you get to spend your leisure time with your husband and any grandchildren you have. That's how it goes. Wizards and witches live upwards of a hundred and fifty years. You might be able to keep a fiancée while you have your apprenticeship, but it's seriously easier to be married. Ask my dad, the benefits are amazing, and the ministry will take care of you, despite what Malfoy always says."

Hermione felt positively angry at the mention of the name Malfoy. "Malfoy! As though I'd pay attention to anything he has to say!" She turned from her friends and began to stalk away angrily, but Harry caught hold of her arm and halted her passage.

"Hermione, what's the matter?"

Hermione briefly flirted with the idea of lying to him, but she had never done that before. "McGonagall...she's going to be my liaison while I'm still in school, and she told me that Malfoy's father sent in a petition for me on behalf of Draco."

Ron made a face. "You don't have to accept, you know. Just because someone asks..."

"It's different for you, though, Ron," Harry said. "You don't have the Ministry after you to get married, you just have your father. He's the head of your family and a wizard, and he's probably being pressured about your older brothers, leaving you out of his mind a little. Lupin has taken over my care since Sirius died, and he's my liaison. He sent me an owl yesterday morning, telling me that the Ministry is putting pressure on him to have me petition at least one girl by the end of the month."

"You haven't said anything about that!" Ron said in an accusatory tone.

"We've been studying whenever we're together, haven't we?" Harry answered back, equally aggravated.

"You two, don't go on fighting," Hermione said, placing her hand on Ron's shoulder. "Look, this entire situation is out of control. Maybe it's good that we haven't been talking about it."

Ron and Harry both looked a little guilty, and Ron wrapped his arm around Hermione's waist.

"I think we all needed to talk," Ron decided.

Hermione smiled and hugged him, throwing her arms around his neck and practically jumping on him. Harry joined in by resting his chin on her shoulder and wrapping his arms around both of his friends, as much as he could. Ron then began to teeter, and Hermione's eyes flew open as she realized what the boys were about to do.

"Look out below!" Harry yelled as he pushed against her back, and the trio fell to the floor with a 'thud', Ron taking the brunt of the fall, Harry's weight pushing Hermione against Ron's rather sharp ribcage and knocked her breath out briefly.

"What lovely, soft ground I've fallen onto," Harry commented as he snuggled even closer to his friend.

"Get off of me!" Hermione demanded, reigning in her giggles. This was something the boys hadn't done to her since their fifth year.

"It keeps wriggling, though," Ron noted, rolling so that Hermione was trapped between Harry and himself.

"Let me up or I'll hex you into oblivion."

"Did you hear that, Ron? It's like the ground is talking."

Hermione was about to spit out a retort when a silky voice said, "What is going on here? Why aren't you three at dinner?"

Hermione was suddenly aware of how improper it looked to be rolling on the floor with her two friends, especially with her robe caught underneath both her and Harry, and her skirt hiked up past her thighs. She was sure that Snape could catch a peek at her panties from the position she was in.

Harry seemed to be aware of it as well, as he let go of her hand, which he had been holding presumably to keep her from going for her wand, rather quickly and, to Hermione's even greater embarrassment, pulled the hem of her skirt down before jumping up from the floor.

"Sorry, Professor. We were just trying to cheer Hermione up."

He reached down to help her off the floor, but Snape pushed him out of the way and grabbed Hermione's arm in a vice-hard grip and pulled her upright.

"Does Miss Granger often threaten to hex you into oblivion when she is happy?"

Hermione could swear that Snape's voice sounded different for some reason, but what reason she did not know.

"It's a game we've played since first year," Ron tied to explain lamely as he heaved himself off the floor. "Hermione always threatens us when we do that to her."

Snape had yet to let go of her arm, and she found herself actually moving closer to him.

"Perhaps she does not find it as fun as you do then. Regardless, ten points each from Gryffindor for attempting to smother your classmate to death. Now go to dinner. Miss Granger, I need a word with you."

Hermione watched helplessly as Ron and Harry made their way down the stairs, both stealing glances back at her every few moments, as though Snape would harm her in some way. He still hadn't let go of her, though.

"This way, Miss Granger," he said quietly, tugging her arm gently until they were in the shadows.

"Professor," Hermione began before he could say anything, "I want you to know that what you saw was very innocent. They're just my friends, and they were trying to cheer me up."

"Then you've received word of my father's petition?"

Hermione gave him a confused look. "Well, yes, but that wasn't why I needed to be cheered up. I also got one from Malfoy."

Snape raised an eyebrow at her. "And this is how they cheer you up?"

Hermione wished desperately that she could read his mind at this moment. "I know it wasn't very dignified..."

"Indeed not." Then, to Hermione's great surprise, Snape let go of her arm and took her chin in his hand instead, searching her face. She held her breath. Dear Merlin, it was just like her dream! He began to move towards her slowly, and soon she felt his breath on her face. "You've been behaving oddly in Potions class lately. Why is that?"

"I-I don't know, sir." She had to will herself to take a breath.

Snape continued to study her for what seemed like hours, and then as quickly as he had appeared, he seemed to disappear, leaving her alone in a corner of the hallway, the shadows covering her confusion.

~*~*~*~

Why Snape had decided to go looking for Hermione was beyond him, but he wanted to warn her that his father had made a petition for her hand. He had not expected to find his father's choice match rolling on the floor with two boys, her skirt hiked up so high that he could see her pink panties and the outline of her butt cheeks. When Potter pulled her skirt down for her, it seemed to Snape to be an intimate gesture, something that only a lover would do, not just a friend.

But she had insisted that they were just friends, and as he pulled her face up to meet his, to look for confirmation of that in her eyes, he saw it to be true. He also saw desire there, and he was taken in by it. Hermione Granger's innocence was compelling, and for a moment, he almost found himself drawn into whatever spell she seemed to be able to weave around him. He could feel it whenever he stood next to her in class; her body seemed to be crying out to him.

Thankfully, he was the older and wiser one in this match, and he would be able to control himself and her if it came to it.

Still, as he left her, he felt compelled to look back at her, to see if she was looking at him. He didn't, though. He just continued to walk to the Great Hall, unaware of whether she followed him or not.

He stalked into the Great Hall and made his way directly to the head table, taking his seat next to McGonagall.

"Where is Miss Granger?" the older woman asked suspiciously. Snape wondered how she knew that he had been talking with her, but her place at the Gryffindor table was conspicuously vacant, and Harry and Ron were giving Snape accusatory looks.

"She and I had a short chat. I thought she was behind me."

"Well you were apparently wrong. What did you two speak of?"

Snape raised his eyebrow at her. "I did not injure her, Minerva."

"Severus, do not play games with me."

"My father sent a petition to the Ministry of Magic on my behalf for Miss Granger. I merely wished to speak with her about it."

McGonagall gave a brief and not-too-detailed account of her own conversation with Hermione. Snape did not like the sound of dating a student, but the situation was unique given the current law. Besides, after one meeting, Hermione would probably decide to send a refusal to the Ministry.

"I suppose I'll look for a safe place for us to meet once or twice," Snape conceded to McGonagall. "There's a Hogsmeade trip coming up soon. I'm sure there's someplace private we can go."

McGonagall gave Snape an incredulous look. "As if I'd trust you to make the arrangements. Really, Severus, leave the romance to me."

Snape felt suddenly shocked. "Romance! Good god, woman, what are you on about? She's my student."

"She's also a woman now, and ready to graduate at the top of her class. You can't tell me that you haven't noticed her transformation."

Snape looked over to where Hermione was now sitting, her hair falling down over her shoulders, hiding her face from him.

"I've seen it so often in so many students that the mystery has all been taken away from me."

As though she could sense his eyes on her, Hermione turned her head and gave him a quizzical look before turning back to the person sitting across from her. Snape gulped audibly.

"Severus? Did you hear me?"

Snape turned to McGonagall. "Very well, you make the preparations. Just tell me when and where."

Suddenly not hungry, Snape stood from the table and retreated to the blessed quiet darkness of his chambers in the dungeon.

TBC

Six

Chapter 6 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

Hermione tried desperately to not stare at her food. She was sure that there was something witty and intelligent that she could say to make Snape not only smile, but begin to talk to her. So far, he had asked her how she was, what she liked to eat, and if her food was prepared correctly. Other than that, he hadn't spoken.

Professor McGonagall sat close by at another table, a "gentleman caller" sitting across from her. They were speaking easily and laughing now and then. Hermione felt quite jealous.

"Professor..."

"Miss Granger, as it is painfully apparent that we will be spending an inordinate amount of time together from now on, perhaps we should forget the pretense of formality."

Hermione felt scandalized. "I can't call you by your first name!"

Well, at least she finally said something that made him smile. Too bad the smile was sardonic and challenging.

"Miss Granger..."

"You may as well call me Hermione if you wish me to refer to you as Severus."

He was no longer smiling now. "Very well. Hermione."

She sighed. "All right. Severus. Your father wrote to me."

"Really? How lovely. Welcoming you to the family already, I presume." His voice was sarcastic and biting as his hand reached out and took hold of the wine goblet in front of him, bringing it to his lips. Hermione could only assume that he wished to become inebriated.

"He was rather welcoming, now that you mention it. He seems quite determined."

Snape shrugged and placed the goblet back on the table. "My father always gets what he wants."

Hermione felt horrible on the inside, but she refused to show it. This conversation was not going the way she wanted it to at all. She wanted him to talk to her, to make a true effort to get to know her, and behave as though he weren't condescending to be with her.

"I have some say in the matter."

Snape snorted. "Hermione, you saw very well first-hand how Lucius Malfoy bought his way through the Ministry of Magic. Do not think he is the only wizard with connections. My family is old and wealthy and quite powerful. It is not so much a question of if we will marry, but rather when."

Hermione suddenly did not feel very well, and she certainly wasn't hungry. She knew that Snape was right, if a wizard was determined, he could make his case, and where argument left off, money always stepped in. It was a corrupt system, but it was the system.

"Then I suppose I'm sorry," she told him at last.

"Sorry? Why? What have you done?"

Hermione dared herself to look at Snape's face. He was staring at her intently.

"I don't know...I'm sorry that you will be forced to marry me."

Snape gave a noncommittal shrug. "There is no need to apologize. It is done, and I have resigned myself."

Hermione could feel herself flushing from anger. "Resigned?" she repeated a little louder than she meant to.

She could have slapped the confused look he gave her off his face. "Yes. Resigned. Content. Sanguine. Whichever word fits best, that is how I feel."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, her anger growing more with every word he said. "I know very well the message you are trying to convey, Severus," she said with venom in her voice. "And I am so deliriously happy that you have considered your own happiness in this match and have not in any way consulted my feelings in this matter. I am not resigned, not content, and most certainly not sanguine. Lord, I don't even know what I'm doing here!"

She threw her napkin at her food and rested her face on her hand. Slowly, the sound of chuckling brought her head upward, and she was soon staring at Snape irritably, wondering what was so funny.

"My dear Severus, won't you please enlighten me as to what you find so humorous?"

He raised an eyebrow at her sarcastic tone. "Well, my dear Hermione, since you asked, I will tell you. I am laughing at you. I have often heard of your temper from others, but have never experienced the pleasure of you unleashing it on me. I must say that you are quite lovely when you are angry, as the saying goes. And don't even think about slapping me!"

His hand closed over her wrist faster than she could think, and she only looked down at it.

"I'm not Draco Malfoy, Hermione. I won't run away if you threaten me."

"I'm not threatening you," she answered, trying to pull her wrist away from his grip. His fingers felt as though they were made out of steel.

He did not let go of her, but he did loosen his grip and pulled her arm so that she had to bring herself closer to him if she didn't want her arm yanked out of the socket.

"Hermione, I think that you and I need to come to an understanding. We will be married as soon as my father wants us to be. We will have children. With any luck, we will live happily ever after as you women are so wont to do. Once you resign yourself to this fact, you will soon find that you have grown almost content in that knowledge. The more you think on it, you may find yourself growing sanguine, or, I daresay, even happy in it."

Hermione looked down at his hand, still gripping her wrist gently, then up to his face. "But what about love and passion? I do not want to be merely content for the rest of my life, and I know that I cannot resign myself in only one day."

The corners of Snape's mouth twitched. "Love and passion can be managed, Miss Granger, or as we shall say now, My Dear Hermione. Despite what you have heard, there is no such thing as love at first sight, and passion is so often put in the same category as lust. True love and true passion are possible, even in a contracted marriage."

"This is madness. You do not even want to be married to me! How can you even hope for passion when I know very well that you despise me."

"And yet you agreed to this meeting because of your deep abiding love for me and your wish to be my wife? Come now, my dear Hermione, do you tell me that you have been harboring feelings of passion for me?"

Hermione felt her cheeks flush and began to struggle against his grip once more. "Let me go!" She tried to use her other hand to pry his off of her wrist, but his other hand lashed out and grabbed it as well.

"Come, come, my dear Hermione, do tell me about it. We are not to have any secrets from each other now."

"Why don't you go get yourself blown up in a potion accident!"

Hermione's eyes grew wide as Snape's expression changed from mildly amused to dangerous.

Snape narrowed his eyes at Hermione. As of yet, he had managed to get through their rather tedious conversation without resorting to insulting her in any way, and she had just turned the tables on him, lashing out in a most childish way.

"Perhaps I have been wrong to think so highly of you all these years," he said quietly, studying her face.

"We both know you hate me," she spat back.

"You have the uncanny ability to annoy the life out of me, yes. But that does not breed hate. A teacher cannot hate his best student, she makes him look too good to his superiors."

He knew that his words hurt her. Cold and impersonal, he had given her what she most feared. Indifference. He knew that she could not bear the thought that he did not feel either hot or cold about her, the thought that she did not matter to him in any way. Hermione was a passionate girl, she felt extremes about everything, and she wanted the same courtesy from others.

He watched as her face almost melted, her emotions going from fiery anger to supreme sadness, and then to a semblance of control.

"Is that not the answer you wished to hear?" he goaded. "You hope that I will be apathetic towards you to give you reason to hate me."

Hermione's eyes flashed at him. "I do not! How impudent of you to suggest such a thing!"

"Impudent!" Snape echoed with a raise of his eyebrows. "My dear Hermione, you do not know impudence until a young girl walks into your class and very happily explains your lessons to all of the other children present."

Hermione quailed a bit at his words, but soon came back full force. "Don't call me that!"

"Call you what?"

"Don't call me your dear. I am not your dear; we have already established that you are merely resigned to our impending situation. That does not make me dear. If anything, it makes me despised."

Snape wanted to laugh. At least she didn't mix words. "Hermione, I must chide you for the first time ever for not listening to me. I said that at first I was resigned, then I grew content. Now I am sanguine. I hope to be happy soon. You are not helping."

"It is your life, and you choose to accept it, is that what you're telling me?"

His hands were growing sweaty holding her arms, but he wasn't about to let go. "It is my life, and there is nothing I can do to change it. I have no choice but to accept it. That does not mean that I am averse to it."

"Why aren't you?" she asked at last. "Why do you simply accept this? Why are Ron and Ginny also so easy about the situation? Why is everyone humoring the Ministry and this stupid law?"

Snape felt a little shocked. It was the closest he had ever seen Hermione to coming unglued, and most out of character, in his opinion. She wasn't crying or whining, but she was clearly disturbed. She could kill and watch her friends falling around her, and help Harry defeat Voldemort, but she could not bear being told what to do.

"We are going along with this law for the same reason that you are, Hermione. Because we love our world, and we wish to see it thrive. We wish to give the generations after ours the power of choice that we cannot have at this moment."

He let go of her wrists and sat back in his chair. He felt a little guilty as she rubbed her arms where bright pink welts were growing. He hadn't meant to hold her so long or so hard, but he had been afraid that if he had let go of her, that she would have fled. A quick glance at McGonagall let him know that she was rather upset with him as well. He paid the bill quickly and decided to escort Hermione back to Hogwarts. He would let her think things over and come to him when she was ready.

As they walked, McGonagall and her friend trailing behind, Snape put his hand on Hermione's arm, lightly encircling her elbow with his hand. He made a conscious effort to walk slower than he was used to and hoped that Hermione would notice. Certainly the situation was unpleasant, but that did not mean that it would stay that way.

"Severus."

Snape turned around, the familiar voice of Lucius Malfoy in his ears.

"Lucius," Snape answered, inclining his head slightly.

"What is this about?" the blond man asked, indicating Hermione and McGonagall.

"What is what about?"

Lucius sneered. "Your father petitioned for Granger there the day after I petitioned her for Draco."

Snape shrugged. "I know nothing of your offer. My father acted on his own, and Miss Granger asked her liaison to contact me. I had nothing to do with it."

Professor McGonagall stood next to Snape, who was standing in front of Hermione. They did not need to protect her, Snape knew very well how Hermione could handle her wand as did Minerva, but their protection instinct came to the fore as they stared down Lucius. Hermione put her hand on Snape's arm and tried to push him to the side and he gave a little smile, sensing how impatient she was to stand up to Lucius again.

"You'd better watch yourself, Severus. You've already brought enough dishonor to your family, not to mention the damage your sisters did to your already shaky standing in our good graces. I forgave you at the time because I thought you were my friend, but you have long been begging for my retribution for your deceitfulness."

Snape snorted. He was trying to keep Hermione behind him and stay calm at the same time, but Hermione was giving him a run for his money and his patience was wearing thin.

"Really, Lucius, one would think that you would want to thank me for destroying the Dark Lord and delivering you out of the Imperious Curse you had been afflicted with."

Lucius's face twitched and his hand stroked his cloak where his wand was hidden. He looked at Hermione with contempt, and Snape knew very well that he had been on the wrong end of many of her spells during battles. He then looked at Professor McGonagall and a few other people who were approaching, some students, to see what the commotion was about. Lucius could not let down his pretense of being under Voldemort's power in public and rarely did in private. That he accused Snape of being unfaithful to the other Death Eaters in front of anyone was amazing to Snape, for it showed a certain amount of desperation at his inability to properly display his displeasure at his former friend's treachery.

"This conversation is perhaps better postponed for another time," Lucius said at last. "But rest assured, Severus, it is not over."

"I should expect not," was Snape's answer.

As Lucius walked past them, he turned to Hermione and gave her a smile. "You'll regret the day you turned me down."

"I doubt it," Hermione answered defiantly. "I wouldn't connect myself with your family if my life depended upon it."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Minerva turned to Lucius with her wand in hand. "That is quite enough, Mr. Malfoy," she said calmly. "We are no longer interested in continuing this conversation."

Lucius smirked, then Apparated away.

"You should have just let me hex him," Hermione said in an irritated voice.

"When you are no longer a student of mine, you may do as you wish," Minerva said, taking Hermione's arm and leading her away.

Snape walked with them back to the castle. Lucius, he knew, would be true to his word. This wasn't over, and Snape knew that he would expect him to pay dearly for his deceptions.

In the following few days, Snape found that he had plenty to think on with regards to Lucius Malfoy. Draco and his friends had taken to treating him with contempt and let several threats regarding their parent's feelings about him slip by. For the first time in many years, he found himself deducting points from Slytherin, though he did not add many to the other houses.

"Professor?"

He had seen Hermione lagging behind her friends at the end of their class, and was not surprised when she approached him. He had been waiting for it.

"Miss Granger," he answered, templing his hands in front of his lips.

Hermione looked unsure of what to say, something that Snape had never seen before.

"Professor...about Saturday. I was wondering..."

She shuffled her books in her arms and shifted her feet a bit.

"Yes?"

"When you and Mr. Malfoy had your...discussion...was that," she gave a little sigh and avoided eye contact. "Was that about me?"

Snape indicated a chair close to his desk, and she walked around and sat in it, setting her books on the floor next to her.

"In a round about way, yes, I suppose so."

"That was what I thought," she said in an honest voice. "I just wanted to make sure that I'm not causing you any problems."

"Well, as you have so aptly pointed out, we are both in the same situation, and we are both experiencing repercussions from it. Lucius is unhappy that my father made an offer to you, not because he is so interested in you for Draco, but more because it was on my behalf that the offer was made. If either of us is going to experience any averse effects, I would think it would be you."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Me? Why?"

Snape smirked. "What will Potter and Weasley say when you tell them that you are going to marry me?"

Hermione fidgeted a bit. "I will always be their Hermione. After all, they will be forced to marry as well."

"Yes, I don't doubt that you will always be "their" Hermione, but you will also be "my" Hermione. Your surname will change to Snape. I know too well their feelings for me."

"If my being married would break up our friendship, then it is not as strong as I thought it was. It will hurt, but I would be able to get over it. However, I think you are wrong. Harry and Ron will always be my friends, and they will always be there for me."

"I thought that I would always remain friends with Lucius."

"That's different. We're not..."

Snape felt slightly amused at her sudden floundering. "You're not evil," he finished for her.

Her eyes widened and she placed her hand on his arm. "I wasn't going to say that!"

He smirked.

"Arthur Weasley petitioned me for Ron," Hermione said when Snape didn't answer her. "And Neville's uncle petitioned me as well. There's also a man named Vince Vernon who I don't know, but he petitioned me for himself."

"He's eighty years old and a proud Death Eater."

Hermione shrugged.

"And Krum?" Snape prodded, all too aware of her rather high-profile fling with the famous Bulgarian Seeker.

Hermione gave another shrug. "We parted amicably. He said that he'd petition for me if I want him to, but...I don't know. I thought that I would have time to think these things over, but when my list of suitors grew to over five names, the Ministry started sending owls to both me and Professor McGonagall, pressuring me to make a choice." Hermione looked down at her hands, then back up at Snape. She looked very distraught. "I've had to explain all of this to my parents. You have no idea what that was like."

"No, but I can imagine." Snape was becoming rather uncomfortably aware that Hermione expected something from him, but he wasn't quite sure what.

"Professor...Severus...if I were to make a choice other than you, what would your father do?"

"I'm sure he'd try to call in a few favors, but I'd stop him."

Her eyes searched his. "You would?"

Snape thought for a moment. He had truly resigned himself to marrying Hermione, but it wasn't as though he couldn't simply walk away from her. He was too logical a man to give way to any silly fantasies. Of course she would want to marry a man closer to her age, preferably someone she knew better, like Ron Weasley. "Of course I would."

"But you've already gone through all of your matches."

"I can fend for myself, Miss Granger. I have lived this long without a wife, I can live a while longer as well."

Hermione seemed to consider his words. "And if I were to choose you? What then?"

Snape suddenly felt very confused. "Then I would marry you," he stated as though she were daft.

Hermione shrugged off his harsh tone. "No, you said on Saturday that you were sanguine regarding an impending marriage to me. Is that true?"

"I would not have lied to you." He could feel himself becoming irritated. What was she playing at? What was the meaning behind all of this?

"Professor, I have been forced to think very hard these past few days about you and me. The Slytherins won't forgive me for turning down Malfoy and have been even crueler to me since I wrote in a refusal to the Ministry. Ron and I could be happy together, if we didn't kill each other first, and Neville is not for me. He is a wonderful boy, but he is not the kind of man to make me happy."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Am I the sort of man who would make you happy?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I have accepted an apprenticeship at St. Mungo's starting in January. I've heard that you won't be returning to Hogwarts."

Good news always spread quickly. "I will be taking over an apothecary shop that my father owns. For now, at any rate."

Hermione seemed to think this over. "In Diagon Alley?"

"Hermione, I must be honest with you, I will be making complicated potions for my father's shop in Knockturn Alley. You can guess which sorts of potions they will be."

She nodded. "I take it they're the kinds of potions that you don't teach us here?"

"No indeed." He couldn't fathom that he was actually having a seemingly normal conversation with Hermione, and he wasn't actually causing her physical pain. "What will your apprenticeship entail?"

Hermione gave a smile. "Potions, of course. I'm sure nothing like you'll be making." She licked her lips and looked down, an odd expression on her face. "I...uh...if you ever wanted me to help you..."

Snape laughed, and Hermione snapped her head up to him quickly. He knew that it was probably hurting her feelings, but he couldn't help himself. "Forgive me, Hermione, I mean no offense. It is simply your eagerness to learn something new, even if it is illegal, that intrigues me. Your expression just now reminded me..."

"Of what?" She still looked very affronted.

"Of me."

Hermione's eyes grew a little wide at this, but she regained her composure and gave him a lovely smile.

"Does this mean a truce?" she asked, extending her hand.

Snape regarded her for a moment, then took her hand in his. "Truce," he agreed.

TBC

Seven

Chapter 7 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

AN: Okay, for everyone who keeps looking at the R rating and shaking their heads (I can hear it, okay?), I promise you that the next chapter will have some smutty stuff in it. Borderlining NC-17, even. In fact, I may need to change my rating on this story later.

Oh, and because I suck, I rarely thank my reviewers. I don't know why, I'm mostly superstitious that I won't get any reviews if I thank people. Anyway. Thanks.

Hermione stalked up the stairs towards Gryffindor tower. She was incredibly angry. After going around in circles for three hours with her father about her pending marriage, she felt like punching someone. If only Malfoy would cross her path and call her a Mudblood...

"Hey, Hermione!" Ron said happily. "Why are you going the wrong way? It's time for lunch, and I'm starving."

She stopped on the stairs and looked up at her friends who were standing a few steps above her.

"I'm not hungry," she admitted. It was the truth, she felt sick.

"Are you all right?" Harry looked very concerned.

"What happened?" Ginny asked, bouncing down the steps to stand next to her. "I saw your father come in."

Hermione shrugged. She wasn't ready to have this conversation quite yet. "Listen, guys, just go on without me. I want to take a bath..."

She brushed past them and practically ran up to her room. She knew that throwing herself across her bed and pouting would do no good. She also knew that crying wouldn't help much, either. She just couldn't help herself. Her father had really made her angry, and what's more, his absolute refusal to accept the reality that she offered him ruined a bit of her childish belief that her father was the greatest man in the world. In the logical part of her mind, she always knew that he was just a flesh-and-blood man, but her heart always looked at him as the superman who could do anything. His loss of temper at Hermione's insistence that she would indeed be married could actually be categorized as a tantrum.

"Hermione?"

She felt a person sit next to her on the bed, and by the voice, she knew it was Ginny.

"Ginny, I really don't want to talk right now."

"I've never seen you cry."

Hermione turned over and wiped a few tears out of her eyes. "I thought that explaining my engagement to Harry and Ron would be the hardest part of all of this. Especially since I'm going to marry Snape." Her best friends had actually taken the news quite well, considering their deep abiding hate for the man.

"What is your father upset about?" Ginny asked, making herself comfortable against one of the posts, bringing one knee up to her chin.

Hermione sat up and faced her, leaning against the headboard. "I can't think of any part of it that he doesn't object to. He is upset that he's not considered the head of my family since he is not a wizard. He thinks that as my father, he ought to have some say in this. Honestly, Ginny, I now understand why he couldn't have been in control of this situation."

"But you told both your parents about the law, didn't you?"

"Of course I did! I've sent them copies of everything—the articles in The Daily Prophet, the letters that Professor McGonagall and I have received from The Ministry, all of my petitions... You'd think that I've been keeping him in the dark from the way he reacted."

Again, she felt the urge to punch something.

"What did he say?"

"Well, first he wanted to know why I'm getting married this early in my life at all. I referred him to the law and pointed out that I don't have much choice. He argued that I should be able to say no if I want to. No matter how much I tried to convince him that it's not that simple, he wouldn't listen."

Ginny picked at a lint ball on her skirt. "What did he think about your choice?"

Hermione buried her head in her hands. "That was the worst part. He couldn't believe that I'm marrying a teacher. He thinks that Snape seduced me somehow, and threatened to have him thrown out of the school."

She paused for a few moments, remembering the look on her father's face, and the way his fist ground into his hand when he refused to allow his daughter to go through

with this.

"Then what?" Ginny asked impatiently.

"I told him about Malfoy and Parkinson and how he's leaving the school anyway. Needless to say, it only made matters worse. Now he wants to know what they're teaching us here, and had he known about all this, he never would have let me spend so much time with Ron and Harry."

"Bloody hell, Hermione, I'm so sorry."

Hermione brought her knees up to her chest and rested her chin on them. "All of that still could have been managed, had I not suddenly realized how little my father thinks of me, and how little he trusts me to make the right decisions."

"I hadn't thought of that. Really, he's probably just angry that his baby is going to get married. Mum sometimes talks about how her grandfather hexed her father when he asked for permission to marry my gran."

"I suppose." It didn't help a lot, but it did help. "I just feel as though he's never going to get over the age difference, and Snape's semi-responsibility for what happened with Pansy and Draco."

"What happened between them is their fault, not Snape's. I'm sure he'll come around soon. After all, you came from him, he must be as smart as you."

Hermione thought for a moment, and weighed everything that had been said. "Maybe my dad is mad because no one has asked for his opinion in all this. You said that your grandfather asked for permission-no one has done that with my parents. I've just been telling them what will happen without asking them how they feel about it. Maybe if I got them together with Snape and..." she suddenly realized how stupid that sounded. "Oh, never mind. Snape would scare them both off in three seconds, and my father would lock me up and throw out the key."

Ginny laughed a little too hard at that in Hermione's opinion, but she knew that it was true. Her dour Potions Professor was not exactly the sort of person that you take home to meet your parents. Still...it wouldn't hurt to ask him if he'd do it. Hermione was sure that he'd refuse, but she thought that it might make Snape feel a little better about the situation, as though she were truly accepting him not just in word, but also in spirit.

"Hermione?"

She looked back at Ginny. "Huh?"

"I asked you what you're thinking about."

Feeling a lot lighter, Hermione stood up and stretched her arms over her head. "I have a plan. Come on, let's go eat."

They hurried down the stairs and found Ron and Harry tucking away quickly while wrapping extra food in their napkins.

"We didn't think you were going to make it," Ron explained as he emptied his pockets. "We were going to bring you some provisions."

Hermione smiled at him. "Thanks, Ron."

"So, you're feeling better then?" Harry asked.

Hermione nodded and patted his arm. "Yes, thank you."

She looked over at the head table to hopefully catch Snape's eye only to find that he was not present.

"Where's Professor Snape?" she asked.

Ron shrugged. "Who knows? Here, try the chicken."

~*~*~*~

"That stuff smells awful, Severus."

"Fancy that."

"It looks like something out of a baby's dirty nappy."

"Speaking of dirty nappies, don't expect me to change any."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Besides, you'll be having your own soon enough. Hermione doesn't seem like the sort of girl who would let you off very easily."

Snape looked up from the two potions he was brewing. He hadn't thought much beyond marrying Hermione, but he was almost positive that children wouldn't be in his near future. "Don't put the cart before the horse, Thalia."

His sister approached the cauldrons and wrapped her arms around him. "I appreciate this, Severus. I really do."

Snape patted her hand and then turned back to his work. He was making two fertility potions. Both Thalia and her husband Loren refused to undergo an examination to determine whose fault their barrenness stemmed from. Naturally, Thalia was convinced that it was Loren. Snape wondered, though, if it had anything to do with them being purebloods. Pasithea and her husband did not seem to have any trouble producing children and were already up to three, but Ian was a halfblood. Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy had also been forced to turn to potions to have Draco, and in light of the recent law, it seemed plausible that his sister was suffering from too much inbreeding.

Snape held back a grimace when he thought about Draco and how he was turning out to be just like his father in all ways. He turned his mind to more pleasant thoughts, though, and turned to his sister with a slight smile. "You'll have to take this twice a day every day, you know."

Thalia made a face. "Ugh. If it smells that bad, I can only imagine how it will taste."

Snape didn't yet feel like telling his sister that the consistency, texture and taste would change dramatically as he added the last few ingredients. The two potions were almost exactly the same, but mandrake blossoms were added to the female concoction that were not added to the male version, and the male version required three hairs from the head of a virgin.

He looked up at his sister, intent on saying something, but his words died on his tongue as one of his spyglasses alerted him to a visitor in the potions classroom.

"Just a moment, Thalia. I think a student must be looking for me."

He crossed the room and removed the wards that separated his office from his private quarters. Stepping out into the classroom, Snape found Hermione looking around curiously.

"Miss Granger," he said as he came up behind her.

"Bloody hell, you scared me!" she cried, practically jumping three feet into the air.

Snape contained his pleasure well. "I might be able to say the same about you. This is Saturday, why are you not out with your friends?"

"I wanted to talk to you," she said quietly.

Snape's father had been overjoyed when the Ministry sent him a letter confirming the engagement of Snape to Hermione. Snape only hoped she wasn't having second thoughts, or he'd never hear the end of it.

"Come in this way," he said, taking her arm and leading her through his office. Once back in his own private potions room, he motioned her to go stand next to Thalia. "I believe you've already met my sister?"

Hermione nodded. "Hello, Mrs. DeWinter."

Thalia smiled kindly. "As we are to be sisters, you may call me Thalia."

"Then you must call me Hermione. Your brother already does. Sometimes."

"Indeed." Her tone sounded a little too intrigued for Snape's liking.

He sighed. "Ladies, please, I'm concentrating."

He had no idea what happened after that, as his head was bent over the cauldrons, but he heard Hermione giggle loudly, and his head snapped up quickly.

"Hermione, I do believe that you came here just at the right time. This potion calls for three hairs from the head of a virgin, and my sister seems to be ineligible. You'd do nicely, though."

He grabbed her before she could run away from him and held her with one arm so that her back was pressed tightly against his chest.

"Why don't you just take them from your own head, you git?" Thalia asked.

Snape sneered at her. "Har har."

"I don't remember agreeing to this," Hermione said.

"Yes you did," Snape told her as he separated three hairs from the rest of her mane.

"When?" she turned her head a little to quickly and the hairs pulled. "Ow!"

"When you came to inform me of your decision, you said that you'd like to help me with my potions. This will help me. Shall I pull them one at a time, or all at once?"

"How about not at all?" Thalia said, pulling Hermione from his arms. "Merlin, but you're a terrible flirt. You always have been. No wonder you're still a virgin."

Snape ignored the barb, but not before he caught a glimpse of Hermione's shocked face when she realized that he had indeed been flirting with her. He needed to get ahold of himself.

"Never mind. I don't need your filthy hair after all, someone else has already contributed."

"I'd hardly call your hair clean," Thalia continued to taunt.

Snape pulled a covered vial from his robes with a flourish and set it down between his sister and fiancée.

"There," he said happily. "That I got from a willing participant."

Hermione lifted the vial and inspected the hairs. "Ginny?" she asked incredulously.

"Correct assessment," Snape answered as he took the small bottle from her. "She came down last night to see me. I decided that since she was here, I'd ask her for them." Separating the hairs, he added three to one cauldron and the mandrakes to the other. Immediately, buttery yellow smoke began to billow up from them and swirl around the room, changing the smell from rather dank and unpleasant to wonderfully delicious. He eyed Thalia with a smirk and a raised eyebrow. She glowered back at him.

As the hours went by and the potion brewed, Snape relaxed in a chair and watched as Hermione and Thalia slowly became friends. He was amazed at how quickly his pupil picked up on his family's dry and acerbic sense of humor, and she bantered quite easily and wittily with him and his sister, causing the afternoon to go by rather quicker than he had expected it to. Soon he was adding the finishing touches to the potions and bottling them for his sister.

"I'll put Loren's in these black bottles and yours in the red ones, Thalia. Remember, twice a day for at least three months. No more than a spoonful."

He watched as Thalia lifted one of the red bottles and looked it over. "Very well," she said a little dejectedly.

Snape finished bottling and sealing the potions, then he boxed them up and shrank them down so that Thalia could fit them in her pocket. He watched as Thalia gave Hermione a kiss and put the box away before she walked towards the door.

"Thank you, Severus."

"Come along, I'll walk you out."

Thalia nodded as Snape took her arm.

"Hermione, I shall return shortly. Please wait here. And don't...touch anything."

Hermione actually didn't need to be told to leave Snape's private rooms alone, but when he forbade her to touch anything, she found herself growing curious. After all, she could walk around without touching anything, right? Slowly, as though the room would swallow her up at the slightest movement, Hermione began to inspect all the different potion ingredients as well as bottled potions that her professor kept in his private stock.

There was a door at the far end of the room, and she walked over to it, reaching out tentatively to touch the handle as though it would bite her. Luckily, nothing happened and the knob turned quite easily. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and stepped forward quickly so that hesitation would not keep her out.

Behind the door was a large rectangular space that was crowded with books. There were two chairs sitting in the middle of the room with books on them. By the fireplace sat a table and dilapidated looking sofa. The table was covered with stacks of books, and some were even crammed underneath. Beside the sofa and behind it there were also books. They all ranged in size and shape, but they were bound with leather and more than a few were in bad need of repair.

In the corner, near a high window, sat a perch with an owl dozing atop it. Hermione zigzagged her way through the room to the owl and studied it until it opened one eye and began to study her right back. After what seemed like hours, it opened both eyes and tipped its head in a becoming fashion, inviting her to scratch it.

"What's your name, little fella?" Hermione asked as the owl leaned against her affectionately.

"His name is Bubonis."

Hermione gasped and turned around to find Snape watching her from the doorway with an unreadable expression on his face.

"I told you to not touch anything."

Hermione snatched her hand away from the bird and gave him a brilliant smile. "I didn't really."

The corners of his mouth turned upwards ever so slightly, and she rushed to him, tripping over a stack of books as she did so. Had he not been there to catch her, she was sure that it would have all ended badly, and she would be on her way to the infirmary with a broken neck. Of course, had he not scared her, she wouldn't have felt the need to rush in the first place.

All those thoughts left her head as he righted her, his hands lingering on her arms. And then she started thinking about how it felt to be pressed against him as he flirted with her-or at least, his sister had accused him of flirting and he hadn't denied it-and it had felt wonderful. She knew that she was blushing, but she couldn't help herself.

"I usually have my books in better order," he said apologetically as he rearranged the books she had just knocked over. "I've been here for nearly twenty years, and if I expect to be out completely by the end of the school year, I need to start cleaning up now."

Hermione nodded, her head feeling oddly light. He was still holding her shoulders.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, his hand cupping her cheek.

Hermione gulped audibly. He was standing so close to her, looking more concerned than she even knew him capable of, and she desperately wanted to kiss him. "I think I'm all right." Her shin was throbbing. "Just hit my leg a little..."

Snape ushered her to the sofa, and he lifted the leg of her jeans to reveal a livid spot that was already beginning to turn purple.

"All right, I have something that will help this. Just...sit there, and for the love of Mike, don't touch anything."

Hermione almost laughed at the look on his face. "Yes, Professor."

He exited the room quickly, then came back with a small jar in his hand. "You're suddenly very contrite," he observed as his warm hands took hold of her leg and his fingers gently rubbed some sort of cream into her wound.

Hermione gasped at first, but then the healing properties of the cream went to work on her leg, and she felt the pain begin to dissipate with every pass of his fingers.

"I'm not contrite."

"You didn't yell at me for startling you, and you nearly apologized for invading my personal living space. What can this mean, Miss Granger? Are you losing your spark?"

Hermione glared at him before kicking her leg out of his grasp. "Are you quite finished molesting me now, Professor Snape?"

Snape looked back at her, an amused expression on his face. "Ah, now that's more like it. I feared you were losing your touch for a moment."

Hermione glared at him and stood up, attempting to throw him off balance, only to have him rise with her, still smirking at her in amusement. He was really beginning to irritate her.

Trying a new tactic, Hermione reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her lips against his cheek. Again, she had hoped that this would throw him off balance in some way, or at least make him stop smirking at her. Instead, she found herself thrown off balance as he pushed her against the sofa, maneuvering them so that she was lying against it on her back, and he was lying against her.

Hermione gasped when he pressed himself against her and began to caress a lock of hair that fell against her shoulder and down over her breast. What could it mean? Was he going to kiss her?

"My sister likes you," he said quietly, brushing her hair out of her face.

"She's not the only one," Hermione answered boldly, running her hand up his arm.

"Quite right, my dear. My father fancies you as well."

Hermione laughed. "Is that all?" Was she flirting back now? What was wrong with her! She should be angry with Snape for violating her personal space. Except...she was enjoying herself. She liked how he invaded her personal space. She especially liked how his hand was caressing her thigh at the moment.

"I don't know if we could count my owl as a member of the family per se, but I believe that he likes you."

Hermione pushed him away from her slightly. "You know what I mean!"

He refused to budge and actually leaned closer. "If you're expecting me to take back the 'insufferable know-it-all' comment, then you are setting yourself up for a rather large disappointment."

"I wasn't expecting you to take that back," Hermione countered, feeling oddly elated. "After all, if you took that back, then I'd have to take back calling you a 'greasy old bat'. Where would the fun be in that?"

Elation turned to slight fear when his thumb began to circle a spot on her shoulder, under her blouse.

"What was it that you wanted to talk to me about?" he asked a little suddenly, his thumb still caressing her skin.

"Uh...talk about?" Hermione was beginning to feel very odd.

"Earlier, when you came to see me. You said that you wanted to talk to me about something."

She drew in a deep breath and let it out shakily. He was so darn close to her! "Oh...that..."

"Yes, that. What was it?"

"My father came by. He's really upset about all of this. I was thinking that if you were to meet my parents, maybe they'd feel a little better?"

She looked into his eyes and found that he seemed to be laughing at her, though his face didn't show it. Still, there was an unmistakable twinkle in his eyes.

"Do you really think that my talking to your father will make him dislike the idea of his only daughter being forced into a marriage any less?"

Hermione looked down at the button on his shirt, and her hand unconsciously went to play with it. "No, I suppose not. But then maybe he'll get to know you a little better?"

He grasped her hand and pulled it away from his button. "Do you truly feel that meeting me would alleviate his fears?"

"Probably not," she admitted. "But, he could at least get used to the idea of you before the wedding."

He seemed to consider what she was saying as he continued to look into her eyes intently. Hermione wondered what he was thinking, but she couldn't bring herself to ask him. She was still struggling with the fact that she enjoyed being this close to him. Of course, they were going to be married, so she should enjoy being with him. But still, for the next few weeks, he would be her teacher first and foremost, and this should be forbidden. Especially since it felt so wonderful.

Suddenly, he stood up and pulled her with him. "I'll think it over. Come now, it's time for dinner."

Hermione looked up at Snape and debated kissing his cheek again. As though he knew what she was thinking, he turned around and led her out of his rooms, walking ahead of her while holding her hand so that she couldn't latch onto him again.

Resigned, Hermione followed.

TBC

Eight

Chapter 8 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

Snape was awakened by a sound at his door. Thinking that a student was hurt or ill, he hastily pulled on his robe and walked barefoot through his sitting room, damning the stacks of books as he walked around and over them.

Opening the door, however, revealed not a Slytherin, but Hermione.

"Miss Granger? What are you doing out of bed at this hour?" He knew that she sometimes snuck out with Harry and Ron, but he had heard nothing of their midnight escapades since Voldemort's demise.

"I just wanted to talk to you...professor..."

Her large liquid eyes looked up at him expectantly, and he stepped aside to allow her passage.

"You could have saved whatever you have to say until the morning."

She made her way to his sofa and sat down, still looking at him expectantly. He sat next to her.

"I have class with you tomorrow, Severus."

"Yes, I am aware of that."

"What I wish to speak of is hardly appropriate classroom conversation."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Indeed? And what is it that you particularly wish to say to me?"

"Only this," Hermione answered, pulling his head to hers and pressing her body to his.

Snape was shocked at first by her actions, but he did not stop her. Instead, he lowered her until she was laying on her back, and he took his earlier position on top of her. This time, however, he was naked under his robe, and he was both pleased and surprised to find her equally attired. In no time, he had removed their robes and was gently exploring her with his fingers whilst she explored him with her hand, wrapping it around him expertly and applying pressure as though she knew him already, and understood what he wanted from her.

"I want this, Severus," she whispered as he ground against her.

Merlin help him, he did too. "Yes," he hissed as he pushed into her.

"You're so good," Hermione answered as he began to pound in and out of her over and over.

Snape wasn't sure if it was the ease of taking her or his pleasure awakening him, but just as he got past the point of no return, he realized that it was his mattress receiving the benefits of his attentions, not his fiancée.

With a slight feeling of guilt overpowered by pleasure, he ejaculated with a loud grunt and rolled over onto his back, draping his arm over his eyes. Logically seeking to reason with his feelings, he determined that (1) Hermione would be his wife in a few months, and it was only natural that he would think about her in a carnal way, (2) it was nice to feel a bit randy again after such a long period of self-imposed abstinence, and (3) that fiancée or not, Hermione was still very much his student, and he ought to be ashamed and disgusted for his dream.

Wearily, he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed so that his feet touched the hard cold stone of his floor. His wand sat on the bedside table, and he used it to quickly clean off the memory of a most satisfying dream that lingered on his sheets. As for himself, he decided that an incredibly cold shower would help to clean both his body and his mind.

Snape padded into the bathroom and turned the shower spout on to full blast, then moved the temperature selector all the way over to the right and stepped in. He stifled a yell as cold droplets of water began to pound mercilessly at his skin, but his hands clung to the walls of the shower, his knuckles turning white under the pressure to stay still and allow the water to cleanse him.

Finally, when his body began to feel numb and his lungs began to beg to take a full breath, he reached over and turned the knob to the middle and washed himself quickly, but not before he began to wonder if Hermione would ever feel comfortable enough in their marriage to interrupt his shower by joining him.

Flinging his long wet hair out of his eyes, Snape exited the shower and grabbed his dressing-gown, wrapping it around his body, securing it with the belt. He gave his hair a good rub with a towel, and then walked back to his bedroom and sat down at his desk.

It was still very early in the morning, but Snape did not want to go back to bed. The night before, Apollo, his family's owl, had brought a letter from home, and he had been reluctant to look at it. As he had no papers to grade and his tests had been written, he saw no reason to leave the letter untouched any longer.

In his father's tight yet elegant handwriting, he found a summons to Sunday dinner with the request, or order, that Snape bring "his" Hermione with him, as Snape's mother was eager to meet her.

Snape set the letter down and wondered why he couldn't have been allowed to properly woo and win Hermione without the constant knowledge that his insane family would eventually come into the picture.

Of course, if left on his own, he would never have given Hermione a second look. She was pleasing to look at, it was true, easily one of the prettiest girls at school. Even more, she was well liked by everyone but those in Slytherin. Though she was often accused of being a bit too strict, she had managed to find a balance between being an authority figure and being a friend. Little happened at Hogwarts without her knowing about it, she was almost like Dumbledore in her abilities to discern what was happening around her.

Women as remarkable as that did not connect themselves to men like him unless they were forced to do so.

No, Hermione was not "his", nor was she likely to be.

Still, she had asked him to meet her parents, and after putting her through a night of his family, he was sure that he would owe her more than dinner at the Grangers, where there were only two to be obnoxious and insulting, not an entire brood complete with three unruly children.

Snape took out a small note card and scrawled an answer on it, hesitating slightly before he sealed the envelope and handed it over to Bubonis.

"Here you go," he said dimly. "Take this to my father. I'm sure he'll be well pleased."

The owl preened its tail feathers before grasping the letter in its claws and flying out the window, the new sun of summer shining brightly before it. Snape sat back in his chair and watched as dawn awoke out the high windows facing east.

By the time breakfast came around, Snape was back to his usual self and grumbled a reply to Dumbledore when he wished him a good morning. By the time his third class was over, he had managed to frighten the wits out of a chatty fourth-year and deduct points from Hufflepuff due to a clumsy second-year. The seventh-years, however, were both silent and adept at making their potions leaving him time to think over what he would say to Hermione at the end of the class.

Then his thoughts began to drift towards the fact that this would be his last full week teaching at Hogwarts, indefinitely. It was both liberating and frightening at the same time, to know that he was finally free. Harry had lived, Voldemort had died, and he had managed to keep his promise to Dumbledore throughout the past nineteen years. Now he would be free to travel to distant lands and observe diverse cultures. There would be new potions to discover, new books to read and write, and all the while, Hermione would be with him. He hoped. She might even be happy.

"Miss Granger, I wonder if you would stay for a few moments and talk with me before you leave for lunch?"

Hermione smiled as she set her potion vial down on his desk. "Of course."

"Watch it, Mudblood," a terse voice said, and the next thing Snape knew, Hermione was falling forward. He just managed to catch her before she landed in his lap and stood up, righting Hermione as he did so.

"That's twenty points from Slytherin, Mr. Goyle. Twenty more for using a derogatory name to refer to Miss Granger."

Goyle stared back at Snape with contempt in his eyes. "We could just call her teacher's pet, as that's all she's good for."

Snape felt rage boil within him. "Very well, fifty more points from Slytherin for insubordination, and you shall serve detention with Mr. Filch tonight."

Serving detention with Filch was something that even Goyle hated. Sneering, he turned and left the room. Hermione sat down on the chair next to Snape's desk, and he continued to stand at the head of the class, fairly begging another student to challenge him. None did, however, and soon he was alone with Hermione.

Turning back to her, he noticed that her cheeks were flushed, and her hands were clenched into fists and laying rather tensely in her lap. Kneeling down in front of her, he took her hands with his own and slowly started to rub the anger out of them.

"Goyle is a foolish boy, I am surprised that you would allow his feeble attempts anger you so much."

"It's not that," Hermione said softly, the anger in her voice barely contained. "I just suddenly realized that no one in your circle would ever accept me. I'll always be just your Mudblood wife."

Snape was taken slightly aback. He had not thought about that himself. "I am hardly in the inner circle of ex-death eaters any more. You saw very well my conversation with Lucius Malfoy, and I promise you that all of his friends feel the same way towards me."

Hermione suddenly looked up at him with curiosity. "What did Lucius mean? When he said that your family was already a disgrace, what did he mean?"

Snape sighed. He knew that this question would come eventually, but he had hoped that it would take longer in coming out. "My eldest sister is Thalia. You already know that, as you were reading my family tree all those weeks ago. She and her husband have so far been incapable of producing children. While this is not so completely disgraceful, it is quite shocking. Her choice of husband was at least acceptable, Loren is a Pureblood and his parents were death eaters until Voldemort had them killed three months after Thalia was married. This, of course, prevented Loren from joining the ranks, which I believe he was thankful for. My youngest sister, Pasithea, is a completely different story, however."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Her husband is not a Pureblood, I noticed that right away."

Snape gave a smirk. "No, he is Halfblood, though he did accept the Dark Mark, mostly to please my father. Luckily, Ian managed to remain mostly unnoticed by Voldemort. The disgrace he brought to my family, however, was not so easily disregarded."

"What did he do?"

"The same thing that Draco Malfoy did to Pansy Parkinson, only it was in her sixth year, and her condition kept her from graduating from Hogwarts." He looked down for a moment at their clasped hands, and then back up to her eyes. She smiled at him. "Premarital sex is not frowned upon in our world, Hermione, but children are considered to be something saved for wedlock. You'll not see many single mothers, unless their husbands are dead."

Her eyes were slightly shocked as she took this all in. Snape could not resist reaching out to touch her face briefly.

"I do not blame you if you no longer wish to tie yourself to me now," he said softly.

To his surprise, Hermione gave a slight chuckle. "Sorry, Severus, but I'm only appreciating the irony. Of course I still want to marry you. There's no one I'd rather be an

outcast with."

He was taken by surprise when she threw herself into his arms and gave him a rather large and unnecessary hug, but he enjoyed it all the same. Disentangling himself from her, he moved back and sat on the edge of the desk.

"The reason I wanted you to stay after was because I thought over what we talked about yesterday. I think that you're right, but don't let that go to your head." He gave her a smirk and was rewarded by a smile from her. "I should meet your parents, and you will be introduced to mine. My mother particularly wishes to meet you and has requested that we go to their house on Sunday. Is that acceptable to you?"

Hermione seemed to think over his invitation. "Oh," she said a little breathlessly. "Oh, I see...but that's the night before my first day of N.E.W.T testing. I don't know if I should, for we would not be able to stay for long. Or, at least, I will not be able to."

Snape was briefly touched that she seemed so uneasy about denying him. "Trust me, my dear, I would dearly love an excuse to leave them all as soon as possible."

She seemed to consider this for a moment. "All right, I'll go, but only if you promise that we will leave by nine."

"I promise."

She stood and kissed his cheek. "Then I accept."

He looked at her for a moment and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Outcasts. You make it sound so dramatic."

"And lord only knows that you're never dramatic," she countered.

Looking into her eyes, Snape was suddenly struck with a very disturbing thought.

His father had been right.

~*~*~*~

Hermione took another look through her closet.

"I should probably just wear my dress robes," she said.

"I don't think so," Ginny advised. "Dress robes are for formal occasions, not every day."

"I want to make a good impression on them, though."

Hermione heard Ginny sigh as she joined her at the wardrobe. "If you weren't so much taller than me, I'd loan you something of mine. Here, this is appropriate."

Ginny handed Hermione a simple black dress that she had bought on the off chance that someone would ask her out. She'd been able to wear it five times already that year. "I don't know," she said as she looked the dress over. "It's my date dress."

"So? Isn't this a date?"

"I'm meeting his parents, I'd hardly call it a date. Besides, it just doesn't seem appropriate to wear a dress for Severus that I've already worn for five other guys."

"Then you'd better wear this dress." Ginny took a red dress out of the closet and handed it to her.

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "I don't know how I ever let you talk me into buying this dress, but it was very wrong of me."

"The dress looks great on you, and you know it. Besides, if you put it on with gold jewelry, you'll be wearing the Gryffindor colors. Knock all those Slytherin's socks off."

Hermione was about to protest when a knock at the door stopped her.

"Hermione? Are you ready?"

It was Snape. Before she could stop her, Ginny went to the door and opened it.

"Hello, Professor!" she greeted happily. "Hermione is almost ready, just have a seat there and we'll be with you in a moment."

Unable to protest, Hermione found herself being dragged towards the bathroom by Ginny.

"Ginny, I can't wear that," Hermione said when the door was firmly closed.

"You don't have much choice now, do you?" Ginny pulled at the tie on Hermoine's dressing-gown. "Now lift up your arms like a good girl, and I'll zip you in."

"I'm perfectly capable of dressing myself," Hermione growled as Ginny slipped the dress over her head.

"I'm sure you are, love," Ginny answered as she zipped the dress closed.

Hermione felt very self-conscious. The neckline of the dress plunged down to her cleavage in a V that was very provocative. A little too provocative, in Hermione's opinion.

"What are they going to think when they see this neckline?" Hermione asked as Ginny snapped a gold necklace around her neck that, to her dismay, brought even more attention to her chest.

"Who cares about them? What's Snape going to think?" Ginny's tone was a little too mischievous for Hermione's liking.

"I care!" Hermione protested, trying to pull the neckline a little higher.

"Oh, leave it. Just go out there and watch his eyes when he looks at you."

Hermione sighed and turned to face the door. All her life, she had been known for her brains first and her looks somewhere in second or third. She hated to think that Snape's parents would think that she was only a pretty face with nothing more to say for herself.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and breezed into her room. Snape was sitting in her desk chair, reading a book. Grabbing her cloak off of her bed, Hermione secured it around her and smiled.

"All right, let's get this over with."

Snape looked up just as she was buttoning up.

"Hermione, the weather is actually quite uncharacteristically warm outside, and my mother always keeps a good fire blazing. I doubt you'll need such heavy outerwear."

Hermione could feel Ginny smirking smugly at her.

"Nevertheless, I don't want to be without it. Just in case."

"In case of what? A sudden snowstorm? I think not. Don't you have something lighter?"

"She has a light wrap here," Ginny offered, pulling a black shawl out of the wardrobe.

"That's much better," Snape said, reaching for the buttons on her cloak.

Looking into his eyes, Hermione suddenly came to a revelation. "You heard!" she accused, grabbing his wrists and holding them still.

"Of course I heard," he answered, leaning forward with a sarcastic smile on his face. "I think that everyone at Hogwarts now knows that their Head Girl is wearing a dress that she finds inappropriate."

Ginny cleared her throat. "I'll see you both later on. Have a nice evening."

Hermione looked over as Ginny left, but her attention was brought back to Snape by his hand on her face. He stared at her so intently that her breath stopped for a few moments.

"Let's take this off, shall we?" he murmured as he undid the buttons of her cape.

Feeling naked, she could only stand still as he slipped the cloak from her shoulders. His hands moved over her hips and up to just next to her breasts, pressing her close to him.

"I see what you mean," he conceded. "The neckline is rather low, but one can only see your endowments if they stand just like this and look down."

Hermione felt scandalized at his words, but all she could do was grab onto his arms and bring herself closer. "I am only worried about your parent's opinions of me," she said, grazing her lips across his neck.

She felt him shudder, and then to her great surprise and displeasure, he pushed her away from him.

"If we are to leave my family at nine, then we must be on our way now," he said rather gently.

Hermione nodded. She felt as though her heart was about to explode out of her chest, especially when he fingered her necklace, his hands brushing against her exposed skin.

"I suppose this was Miss Weasley's idea of a joke?" he asked, his voice bemused.

"I think so. Where will we be going?"

Hermione desperately hoped that he didn't recognize her feeble attempt to change the subject, but judging by his smirk, she suspected that he was not fooled in the least. He did stop touching her so intimately, however, and wrapped his arms around her waist.

"We'll be leaving Scotland and heading towards Derbyshire."

"Oh."

"Don't worry, I'll apparate us both so that you won't get lost."

When he let go of her, she thought that she would fall, and it embarrassed her that she had been clinging to him so much. However, he didn't seem to mind, he merely put his arm around her waist and walked out the door with her. The portrait covering her door closed quietly, and the couple made their way down to the main doors of the castle.

"We'll have to walk towards Hogsmeade to apparate. Are you up for that?" he asked, eyeing her high-heeled sandals and, Hermione suspected, looking a little too hard at her legs.

"I'm fine," she promised.

The trip to Snape's family home was a little quicker than Hermione would wish for. Especially since in order to apparate them both, he had to wrap his outer robe around her and hold her close. Hermione held onto his arms during the transfer, and rested her head against his chest. With a crack and a pop, they were standing several yards away from a very large, sprawling manor house. Imagery from Jane Austen novels began to flutter through her head, and she wondered for a moment if this was the house that Pemberley was modeled after.

She then banished that thought, knowing that Muggles would not be able to see this house, and the Snape family had undoubtedly owned it for countless generations. Looking up at Snape's face, she realized that she was still clinging to him. But then again, he still had his robe wrapped around her.

"Nervous?" he asked silkily.

Hermione blushed and moved back a step. "Not at all. Merely anxious."

"Anxious for the night to be over?" he teased.

Hermione gave him a smile. "Thalia will be here, won't she?"

Snape took her arm and began to lead her up the long path to the house. "Of course. This is a family affair, after all."

A house elf opened the door as they climbed the steps to the entrance. It did not speak, it only moved out of the way and gave a slight bow. Snape handed his outer robe and Hermione's wrap to it, and led Hermione to a very lovely sitting room where several people were congregated. Hermione was thankful that the first person she saw was Thalia. The tall woman gave her a smile, but said nothing else. Snape's parents sat on a settee, looking like a pair of monarchs on their thrones.

"Mother, Father, allow me to introduce you to Miss Hermione Granger."

Iona Snape was the first to stand and welcome her, both her hands outstretched. "Miss Granger, how lovely it is to finally see your face!" Hermione found her right hand seized by one of the tallest, most commanding women she had ever laid eyes on. If Iona looked like a queen sitting, she looked like a goddess standing.

"Thank you," Hermione answered, looking up at the woman in awe. "I confess that I have wondered about you for several months now. I cannot tell you the pleasure I feel at finally meeting you."

Iona attempted to smile sweetly, but Hermione could see the signs of a Death Eater behind her eyes. This woman was a force to be reckoned with, she was sure.

Tetricus Snape stood second. He was every bit as tall and imposing as his son, if not more so.

"Miss Granger," he said regally, "I am so exceedingly pleased that you accepted my son's offer of marriage. Consider yourself family from this moment forward."

Hermione was not sure what to make of that. "Thank you," she said simply. "I shall."

"You already know my eldest daughter, do you not?" Tetricus asked.

Hermione nodded. "Yes, and it is a great pleasure to see her again."

Thalia smiled once more.

"Then you shall meet her husband now. This is Loren DeWinter."

Loren stepped forward, looking completely different than Hermione expected. The man who was supposed to be tall and lanky and dark like the rest of the Snapes was broad and handsome and had sandy blond hair framing his tanned face. Hermione almost laughed out loud at her presumptions, but managed to hold off her inner embarrassment and gave Loren a bright smile and a handshake.

"Shall I call you Miss Granger as well?" he asked playfully.

She smiled at him. "Please call me Hermione."

"Then you must call me Loren."

"And this is Pasithea, my youngest," Tetricus continued.

Pasithea was partially distracted by her three children, but she managed to shake Hermione's hand happily and wished her joy in her upcoming marriage.

"And Ian is my husband," she said, passing the pleasantries off to the tall dark-haired man on her right.

Hermione mused that at least she had the physical descriptions of one of the brothers-in-law correct.

"How do," she said pleasantly.

"Adequate," was his reply.

Hermione stepped back over to Snape and looked up at him. She could now see why he wished to leave so early. As the evening went on, his reasoning became more and more apparent. The only civil people there that she could see were Thalia and Loren and herself. Snape had reverted back to his usual hard-faced manner during the course of the meal, and Hermione could not help but notice that while Tetricus seemed to care for his children in his own way, he was also quite abusive to them. Iona was quick to point out any and all flaws in the meal, the state of dress of the various occupants of the table, the way Pasithea reared her children, her husband's topics of conversation and the way the house elves served the meal.

Hermione wondered what it was like for Iona, being the only perfect person in a world of inadequate beings.

When the clock on the mantle struck nine, Snape stood and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Forgive us, but Hermione will begin N.E.W.T. testing tomorrow, and she must be allowed to return to the castle."

Iona did not seem pleased by this. "Ah, but we have not got to the pudding yet!"

Hermione stood. "I am so sorry, madam, but I fear that Severus is right. I wish to do my best tomorrow, and I'm sure that after this week, we will all have sufficient time to spend with one another."

Iona accepted that excuse, but she still did not seem happy.

"Do the family proud, Hermione," Tetricus urged in his overbearing voice, lifting a glass of wine to toast to her.

"Thank you, I shall," she answered politely before Snape pulled her out of the room. "Goodbye, Thalia, it was nice meeting all of you," she called as she followed him out of the room.

Behind her, voices echoed her farewells, and she was soon alone with her fiancée, collecting her wrap and his robe from the closet. They walked quietly down the lane until they were in the same general area of where they landed.

Without a word, Hermione wrapped her arms around Snape's waist and leaned her head against his chest. He pulled his robe around her and apparated them back to Hogsmead.

"I don't think I prepared you for that," he said apologetically when they were standing on the familiar road that led to Hogwarts.

"How could you have?" she asked, closing her eyes and snuggling closer to his chest.

He sighed and rested his chin against the top of her head, an action that took Hermione by surprise.

"I don't suppose I could have done. Still, I could have warned you about some of it."

"Honestly, I know not how I will go about preparing my parents for meeting them, and I have not the obligations towards them that you do. It is a situation that one must go into with both eyes open, however. I will say that."

He stroked her hair, which had been smoothed down by a potion, and tightened his hold on her.

"Mother was right, we never did get our pudding. Would you like to go and have some ice cream?"

Hermione looked up at him and thought it over. "I truly should study tonight, Severus." She thought over her options. "I suppose that you could come and help me?"

He ran his hand over her cheek and leaned down to kiss her forehead. "I don't think that is such a good idea, but I will walk you to your room."

TBC

AN: Sorry that the smut was a little...short...and a dream...But I promise that more is coming. Also, this was a difficult chapter for me to write. I kept deleting and rewriting it. I'm still not sure if I'm happy with it, but I'm trying.

Nine

Chapter 9 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

Severus Snape did not appreciate the feeling of anxiety that was currently overtaking him. Hermione, having finished her N.E.W.T.s, had returned home to London to stay with her parents until the wedding, which was one week away. She still insisted that he come to meet them, and she had Apparated to his parent's house several times to prepare him for it. First, she took measurements of his body, a bit invasively. Then, she brought him a set of Muggle clothing. Now, he was standing before his mirror, assessing the situation.

He was sure that he looked like an idiot. He hated how clingy his odd trousers were, and though the shirt she had brought him buttoned up to the top, the material it was made out of was cold and stiff and stuffy. Still, he wanted to make a good impression on her parents, especially after his family had decided to put their airs away and show their true colors when she was at his house for the first time.

Satisfied that he looked presentable, Snape decided to sit down and read a book until his fiancée came for him. Sitting down, however, posed a new problem with his close-fitting pants. The seam in the crotch was directly down the middle, and proper adjustments were required. He looked longingly at his robe, which hung austere on a peg in his wardrobe. Hopefully, there would only be a few hours of this torture before he could unbind himself and go back to the comfort of his normal clothing.

Before he had too long to think about it, though, a loud crack resounded through the walls of his stone room, and Hermione appeared before him.

"Oh good, you're dressed," she said happily, undoing the top button of his shirt and pulling the collar apart slightly.

Snape scowled at her and buttoned it up again. She only smiled at him.

"You do look very fine," she mused as she walked behind him and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Very fine indeed."

"Excelling in your N.E.W.T.s has befuddled your thinking," he growled to her, knowing full well that he hadn't intimidated her for well over a year.

"Is it such a sin to say that I find you attractive?" Her voice sounded so innocent to his ears that he was almost taken in by her completely.

Then she started playing with his hair. "What in blazes do you think you are doing?" he asked, reaching back to pull her hands away from his hair. He pulled her against him rather suddenly, and her chin made brief contact with the back of his head painfully. "Ow."

"Ow nothing, I might have a bruise. But regardless, I think we should pull your hair back for just tonight so that you don't hide your handsome face behind that curtain of hair."

Snape gave up in resignation. They had already discussed this for well over an hour the night before, and he had conceded to allowing her to dress him up as a Muggle after the spectacular show she had put on for his family.

With any luck, they would never have to see their parents again after the wedding.

"All right, let's get this over with," she said a little too happily for his taste.

"Hermione, once again I feel the need to caution you that this evening may not turn out the way you want it to."

They had discussed her emphatic assurance that her parents would love him the night before as well.

"Severus, my parents may not be wizards, but they are calm, rational people, and I'm positive that once the shock has worn off, they will see the advantages of our situation."

He raised his eyebrow. They hadn't talked over any advantages. "Advantages? Hermoine, your parents will see me not only as a man twenty years your elder, but as your teacher who has grossly overstepped his position of authority to romance a student. They are not likely to overlook that so quickly."

She took his hands as he stood, her face so full of hope that he could not argue with her any longer.

"But you don't know my parents, and I do. They'll soon realize that you are a respectable man from a respectable, albeit eccentric family, and that your knowledge of potions and quick wit are a perfect match for my intelligence and, occasional bossiness."

Snape let go of her hands and pulled her close to him. In the past week, he had come to enjoy holding her, and he liked how his chin rested on the top of her head so well.

"I doubt very highly that your parents will come to this realization in one night, no matter how excellent you believe them to be. They are not aware of our customs and what we consider normal. Promise me that you will not raise your hopes too high, for it is still illegal for me to use magic on Muggles, and as much as I am resigned to my life with you, I am not prepared to endure a life of Azkaban for hexing your parents on your behalf."

Hermione gave a shocked gasp and looked up at him. He was a bit surprised himself, as he had been somewhat unsure as to how deep his feelings ran for her. Inside, however, he knew that he would not like to see her hurt, and though he did not know if his feelings were stronger than admiration, he held a great deal of respect for Hermione Granger. She was quite a remarkable woman.

"Let us be off," he said to avoid further discussion. He had an urge to get this over with as soon as possible.

Kneeling down, Snape wrapped his arms around Hermione's waist so that she could throw her cloak over both of them and Apparate them to her parent's house. Snape actually wished the trip would take longer, as in his prostrate pose, her breasts were exactly equal with his eyes.

Too soon, the hard stone under his knees turned to soft carpeting, and he stood up, banging his head against a rather low hanging chandelier as he did so.

"Hermione love, don't bump your head, I just had to change a bulb..." a female voice came to his ears, sounding a lot like Hermione, only in a slightly different timbre.

"Too late, Mum, I'm afraid that Severus is tangled in it at the moment."

Tangled didn't seem like quite the right word to Snape, as it seemed the arms of the chandelier had suddenly sprung to life and were trying to hold him in their snare.

"Hold still," Hermione cautioned as she gently untangled his hair and led him away from the offending Muggle contraption. "Sorry about that," she mumbled as she gathered his hair into the elastic once more.

"Setting booby traps for me already, are they?"

Hermione gave him a smile, and he was able to turn his attention to her mother.

Certainly it would be a cliché to say that Hermione gleaned her good looks from her mother's side of the family, but it was incredibly apparent. Mrs. Granger was every bit as pretty as her daughter, though her hair seemed more tamable. Unfortunately for Snape, however, she was giving him a look of sheer horror akin to the look Hermione gave Voldemort the first time she came face-to-face with him.

Snape sighed. This would be a very long evening.

"Mother, what is the matter? You look as though you've seen a ghost."

Mrs. Granger managed to stop gaping at Snape, but her eyes stayed trained on him. "I..." she faltered. "I uh...Oh dear lord, Hermione! Your father told me that he was your professor, but...I wasn't expecting this!"

Snape may as well have been a three-week-old rotting fish the way she gestured at him. He scowled at her in return. There were many things he could say, excuses as to why he had to marry Hermione, reasons why it was not such a great deal in his world, and rationalizations as to why he was as good as any other man for Hermione, but in the end, it all sounded paltry and foolish. More than that, whenever he formed a sentence in his head, it sounded as though he was defending himself and his own feelings for Hermione. He did not feel that it was anyone's business but his own.

"Mother, I have explained to both you and Father countless times that I must be married, and that I have made the best choice for myself," Hermione said tiredly.

"That doesn't mean that we have to like it!" a male voice said from Snape's left, and he turned to see a rather large man with an angry look in his eye. "You still have at least ten years before you even need to start thinking about getting married. What about your future?" His eyes turned angrily to Snape. "You make me sick," he spat out.

Snape did not flinch. He had been expecting this, unlike Hermione who looked absolutely crushed. He knew that would happen as well. Thinking about how happy Trelawney would be to know that he seemed to finally possess an inner eye made Snape even angrier.

"I could tell you that I have as little choice in this matter as your daughter does, but that is not the material point," Snape began rather patiently than he felt like.

"I couldn't care half a fig what you have to say," Mr. Granger said angrily.

Though it was taking almost all of his power, Snape managed to retain his calm composure, though his words were heated. "You should. Hermione is your only child, and your support of her at this difficult time in her life, not your criticism, is what she requires!"

"How would you know what she requires?" Mrs. Granger cut in, her arms crossed defensively over her chest.

"I have spent the past seven years with her, as well as fighting by her side during a most horrific war. I tended to her wounds before the Healers could get to her, and I lost three toes keeping her best friend safe. I believe that I am in the perfect position to inform you of what she requires."

Mr. Granger looked as though he was about to yell out a few acidic comments in Snape's direction when Hermione stepped in and glared at her parents.

"I simply can't believe you two," she said, her anger barely contained, her shoulders squared and her chest heaving with her breaths.

Snape didn't feel that it was the right time to remind her how lovely she looked to him when she was angry.

"Hermione, your mother and I don't blame you for any of this-after all, you did what you thought you had to do. This man, however, has abused his power as a teacher. You cannot tell me that he has not seduced you!"

"He hasn't even kissed me yet!" Hermione shouted, frustrated. "Severus Snape is one of the most honorable men I have ever known in my life, and I feel privileged that his family chose me out of so many other women to be his wife!"

Mr. Granger grabbed Hermione by the shoulders and looked her squarely in the eye. "Can't you see how he's controlling you? Can't you see what he's been doing to you? Hermione, you have your whole life ahead of you. You deserve to spend it happily!"

"How do you know that I won't be?"

Her words were so soft that they were almost inaudible, but Snape found that it was his turn to be surprised by her near-admission of feelings for him.

"I can't talk any sense into you. Go to your room!"

Hermione stared at her father for two very long moments before shaking her head. "You can't play that card any more, Father. I'm a full-grown woman now."

"Then get out of my house!"

Hermione, her mother, and Snape all stared at him in shock for what seemed like an eternity.

"Fine," she conceded, turning toward the door.

Snape looked at his future father-in-law with pure contempt on his face. "You'll regret this some day, Granger, and I only lament that I shan't be there to see it. Come, Hermione, I'll escort you."

They walked out the door and onto the streets of London. Snape did not know his way around very well, as Diagon Alley and The Leaky Cauldron were the only places of interest for him in London, but since he could Apparate them both to any place they needed to go, he did not worry about directions, he only walked next to Hermione as she trudged along dirty sidewalk after dirty sidewalk. As the sun slid down towards its resting place, Snape became more and more aware of their aimless situation. There was a low wall bordering in a private garden, and he managed to get her to sit on it.

"You can tell me "I told you so" any time that suits you," she said bitterly.

"I wasn't even thinking about that."

"I can't believe that your family was nicer to me than mine was to you."

"As am I," he responded, a little strained.

She lifted her eyes to his and shook her head apologetically. "I'm sorry, Severus, that wasn't what I meant."

"Indeed." He didn't mean to sound quite so distant, but a rather dodgy-looking character limping towards them with a filthy cup held in his black-with-dirt hand had distracted him.

"Please, Severus, don't you be angry with me, too," she pleaded, grabbing his shirt with her fists.

He looked down at her and pulled her close, mostly to keep the street urchin from touching her hair, but partly for the contact when he knew she needed it. He reflected briefly that he was getting better at this.

"I'm not angry with you. However, I would like to know what you plan to do now that you have no home. Naturally, you are more than welcome to stay with my parents. I am currently looking for a suitable flat for us, so that is the best I can offer you."

"I appreciate that. I really do, but I think I had better go and stay with Harry and Remus at the Black House. I have clothes there."

They found an alleyway, and Snape Apparated them to 12 Grimmauld Place. Remus was the first to welcome them, asking immediately if everything was all right, and if there was anything he could do.

"Cup of tea?" Hermione suggested with a smile.

Remus nodded. "Of course. Your room is just as you left it last year."

Hermione turned towards the stairs, and Snape followed behind her, not really looking forward to meeting up with Potter should he be lurking behind a corner. Soon, they were in a rather comfortable-looking room with two beds. Hermione, however, did not seem to notice the redheaded figure laying prone on one, and immediately turned to Snape and began to sob into his chest.

"What happened?" Ginny mouthed.

Snape shook his head and indicated the door. She left, but not before giving her potion professor's arm a reassuring squeeze. Snape gave her a grave look, but did not take her to task for her impudence. It was obvious that Ginny now included him in her circle of friends. If only her parents felt the same way...but it did not do to dwell on that. He maneuvered Hermione to the bed and held her as she cried against him. Even when Lupin came in with a cup of tea, she was still sobbing. He simply set it on the nightstand and left, closing the door behind him.

Eventually, Hermione fell asleep.

Hermione awoke feeling awful. Her head hurt, her throat felt tight, and her eyes seemed to be glued together somehow. She turned to the side and managed to pry them apart when she finally registered the fact that a very strong, warm body was cuddled up against her back. She turned towards it and was surprised to find Snape laying there, watching her.

"Good morning," he said silkily.

Hermione felt herself grow red and attempted a smile. "Morning." He was still dressed in the same clothes he had been in the night before, and Hermione eyed him suspiciously. "Were you here with me all night?"

He shrugged. "You seemed to need me."

"Is that all? No snarky comment, no acerbic retort? I simply needed you?"

"Very well, I found as the night grew on that you would not let go of me, and I had no other choice. Believe me, I would much rather have been elsewhere, in my own clothes."

Hermione smiled and snuggled her cheek against his chest. "That's more like it."

"I never said you could touch me."

She snuggled in farther and wrapped her leg around his waist. "I don't care."

Hermione had expected him to fight against her and push her away, but instead she found herself pinned to the mattress by a very solid, slightly frightening body, her hands held above her head by his.

Her first thought was to panic and ask him to get off of her, but then he brought his lips to hers and began to kiss her, and all thoughts of panic left as pleasure began to flood through her body.

He started slowly at first, his mouth playing against her gently, but soon he was possessing her, removing her ability to think or reason, and, eventually, breathe. What had started out as wild and wonderful quickly turned frightening, and she began to struggle against him, using up her last bits of breath in an attempt to get away from him.

Just as she thought she would lose consciousness, he pulled away and began to nibble her neck, and she drew in a deep, loud breath, her chest heaving under the pressure of his body. All the while, Snape remained focused on her body, his free hand caressing her carelessly through and under her clothes. Hermione ceased her struggles and began to arch her body against his hand and lips, whimpers escaping her mouth with every sensation he brought about.

He started to kiss her again, sucking her tongue forcefully into his mouth, pushing her against the mattress even farther as he did so. Once again, Hermione began to panic as her breath left her. She tried to turn her head away from his, but he dominated her every move, and again she felt herself slipping away to a world of darkness.

And then it all ended.

She opened her eyes to find him sitting on the edge of the bed looking down at her, an odd expression on his face.

"Was that a warning?" she asked at last.

He nodded. "Indeed it was."

She stared at him, waiting for him to move or explain himself, or even kiss her again. He did none of those things.

"Why?"

"Because I am not your dress-up doll, I'm not someone that you take home to your parents, and I am not easy to please. You need to see that, Hermione. Think of what you're giving up. For me. Is this what you truly want?"

Hermione sat up and wrapped her arms around his neck. "You're stuck with me, Severus Snape. There's nothing you could say or do to be rid of me at this point."

Snape stood up and turned to her angrily. "Dammit, girl! I'm not talking about honoring your commitments, I'm talking about never seeing your family again!"

She stood and faced him, her eyes blazing. "I know what I'm doing! Do you honestly think I could stay in that house another day, knowing that my parents think so little of me? I would rather have them believe me to be mad than think that I could be controlled by someone into doing something that I don't want to do!"

He walked over to her and put his hands on her shoulders. "I respect that decision. However, should you still wish to be rid of our engagement, I will talk to my father and inform him of your change of heart."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your freedom. Some of what your father said last night made sense, especially the part about your being full young to begin a family. My father is the head of my family, and he has the right to demand children from his heir. Think about what you're doing, Hermione." He touched her cheek tenderly. "Think about what you're giving up."

"If I don't marry you, then I will be forced to marry someone else, and I can honestly promise you that there is not one name on my list that I am even interested in entertaining the thought of. Do you remember our first date?"

"Our only date?" he gave her a smirk.

"Whatever you want to call it, that day, you asked me if I was with you because of my suppressed feelings for you. Do you remember that?" she looked up at him hopefully.

"Of course I do. I was hoping to throw you off."

Hermione smiled. "Well, it worked a little, but it was true. I've been thinking about you for a long time now. I've even..." she blushed. "I've even had dreams."

"Dreams?" he asked with a raise of his eyebrow.

Hermione faltered. Perhaps she shouldn't have let that slip...

"I called you my dear that day," he said thoughtfully. "Hermione, I won't lie to you, life with me will not be easy. All I can promise you is my faithfulness in all things. You will never want for money or a home, and I will never betray you."

"I don't care about money. I admit that a home would be nice, but I know that you and I would always be able to make our way. And you are an honorable man, Severus, I have known that ever since I found out about the great lengths you went through to save Harry so many countless times. My fear, my only fear, is to live all my life without being loved."

He looked at her for a long time, and she almost couldn't breathe from being so closely scrutinized.

"Do you love me?" he asked at length.

Hermione dropped her eyes from his gaze and thought the question over. "I don't know," she admitted. "But I do care for you, and I respect you. Is that enough to begin with?"

He gave a slight nod, his mouth drawn in a tight line across his face. "Of course it is. So long as you don't expect more from me than you yourself are willing to give."

Hermione looked up at Snape and gave him a smile. She still felt awful about her father throwing her out, but it was something that she just couldn't bring herself to deal with at the moment.

"Can you stay with me today? We could read a book together or something stupid like that."

"I must go to Knockturn Alley today," he said quietly, his hand caressing her cheek lightly. "I wish to write out an inventory of the current supplies at my father's potion shop before you and I leave for our honeymoon next week."

"Do you need any help?" She was dying to get a look at the shop and the ingredients for dark potions.

He gave her a look that said that he clearly knew her reasons for wanting to come. "I'm sure that another person there would be appreciated. However, it will not be you. I need someone to help me, not distract me with silly, irrelevant questions every few minutes."

"I don't ask silly or irrelevant questions!"

"If one is compiling an inventory, then a question about the properties of a specific ingredient would be irrelevant!"

"Not entirely. If one was organizing ingredients by their properties and uses, then the question would most certainly be relevant!"

"Inventory and organization are two completely different things. The items are currently organized *alphabetically*, and merely require inventory."

Hermione couldn't understand why she felt more like laughing than slapping him. "Well, considering the fact that many potion ingredients have half-lives, I believe that a complete property analysis could benefit an inventory. After all, one would not want to use three-week old dragon's blood, would they?"

She shook her tangled hair behind her shoulder and crossed her arms over her chest, daring him to answer.

"Actually, there are fifteen potions that require fermented dragon's blood. I'm shocked and mildly disappointed that an overachieving show-off such as yourself is unaware of said potions."

"Perhaps if you had signed my pass for the restricted section more often, I would know about them. Unfortunately for me, you were bound and determined to keep me from surpassing your knowledge of potions."

"I was never in any fear of that, rest assured."

"I learned more from textbooks than I ever did in your class."

"And you were always intent to parade that knowledge about in public, weren't you?"

"Perhaps if you had actually challenged me in some way, I wouldn't have resorted to such drastic measures."

"Perhaps I was hoping that if I ignored you, you'd eventually go away."

Hermione smiled smugly. "Then I have the better half of the deal. You'll be stuck with me for eternity after Saturday."

She knew she had won when his eyes shone down at her, looking appreciative. "Indeed I shall be. Good job I don't believe in karma, or I'd have a few ideas about how this came to be."

"Good job I don't believe in retribution, or I'd take you to task for that remark."

He smirked. "I'd love to see you try."

Without another word, Hermione pounced on him, shoving him backwards across Ginny's bed. She grasped his wrists and held them above his head, noting the look of surprise that he gave her when she continued to hold him captive despite his struggles. Her knees were on either side of his hips, her ankles and feet holding his thighs down firmly. She gave a sweet smile and leaned down to kiss his nose.

"I've fought both Ron and Harry, I think I can handle the likes of you."

Using a move that she didn't even know existed, Snape flipped them over so that he was once again on top.

"I was a death eater in Voldemort's army. I am most certain that I could handle one simple, little girl."

"I'm not that simple," she informed him, wrapping her legs around his waist. "And I'm hardly little."

He brought one hand down to her shirt and opened the buttons expertly. She arched against his hand and tightened her grip on his waist when he cupped her breast through her bra.

"You are nicely sized," he conceded.

There was something so familiar, yet instinctual about what he was doing to her. Hermione was at a loss to lay her finger exactly on what it was that she was feeling, but when he would raise his hips and grind against her, she found herself getting very close to recognizing exactly what it was that she was supposed to be doing.

"Please let go of my arms," she breathed. "I won't run away, I promise."

He did as she asked, and she immediately wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply as he continued to grind against her.

At first, she was confused as to what exactly he was doing, for the pressure she felt between her legs, while familiar, was slightly unfamiliar, especially since she was fully dressed. She had only managed to get such feelings when she was touching herself. Then he lifted her skirt higher and pushed against her even harder, his body making forcible contact with her clitoris. She had no idea that she could feel such things while still fully clothed.

"Can you feel me?" he asked huskily against her ear.

"Yes," she moaned. "What are you doing?"

He chuckled and ground against her even harder. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No!" Desperately, she lifted her legs even higher and locked her ankles together, trapping him.

They kissed again, and she began to explore his face with her lips, pausing only to urge him to move against her faster and harder, which he did while he moaned against her ear.

"More, please," she begged when he once again brought his lips to hers.

She gasped when he put his hand between them and pressed his thumb to her clitoris. The friction of him moving both his body and his hand was incredible, and the texture of her panties was driving her crazy. She began to buck wildly against him, begging him to end her torture. When she came, her entire body convulsed and pushed towards him while her tongue drove deep into his mouth.

"Your turn," she whispered when her convulsing stopped.

"Yes," he said softly, taking her hand in his. "My turn."

He felt so odd to her when her hand came into contact with that part of him. As she grasped him through his trousers, she looked up at him for approval. He leaned down and kissed her ravenously as he thrust into her hand. She felt awed that he was allowing her to do this, and elated that he seemed to be enjoying it.

He came quickly and loudly, whispering a few adjectives to describe his experience in her ear. His warm ejaculation soon coated her palm with moisture and left a dark stain on his gray trousers. He simply removed his wand from his shirtsleeve and cleaned himself off quickly before leaning over Hermione once more and kissing her chastely.

"You really are beautiful when you're angry," he murmured before getting up from the bed and walking out the room. "I'll see you later."

TBC

Big thanks to Geekus Maximus for helping me stay in the Britspeak. Also, more big thanks for everyone who's reviewed so far, I really appreciate it. Also, sorry that this took so long. I was on vacation, visiting my brand-new niece who I'll be more than happy to brag about should you ask me...

Ten

Chapter 10 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

Once Snape was out in the hallway, he Apparated back to his room at his parent's house and slumped against his bed. It was taking every ounce of his willpower to not go straight back to Hermione and take her properly. He engaged himself in a breathing exercise that Albus had once taught him to help him control his temper, and eventually, the fire in his body subsided to a low roar.

His Hermione indeed. He could not fathom the feelings that surged through him at first, but he eventually realized that he felt oddly elated. He had given Hermione a chance to leave him, and she hadn't taken it. Her parents, too, had given her an ultimatum, and yet she stuck by him. She had admitted to harboring feelings for him...and the way she had touched him. Even through the thick, uncomfortable trousers that she had forced on him, he could feel her raw skill, needing only a knowledgeable hand to guide her through.

Hermione needn't worry about passion, he decided. There would be enough for the both of them if he had his way. Love, too, may come easy to them. Her debating skills were much sharper than he would have expected, having seen her argue mostly with Weasley and Potter, and he knew all too well their lack of sharp wit. The fact that either of them had managed to make it through the war alive had been a shock.

As Snape changed into his black robes, he thought over an idea he had been brewing since the night before, when he had allowed Hermione to sleep resting against him, her head nestled against his chest. His first plan had been to see if she would leave him and go back to her life as it was before the Marriage Law had come to be. Her emphatic insistence that she would marry him regardless had modified his plan to an uncomfortable resolution. Still, if she could stand by him for eternity, he could certainly lay his pride aside for a few hours.

Resolved, he Apparated back to the Granger's house, determined to talk some sense into Hermione's stubborn father.

"What are you doing back here?" the man in question bellowed. He was still in his dressing-gown and looking rather disheveled. Perhaps this would be easier than Snape had originally thought.

"I came to speak with you regarding your daughter."

"Haven't you done enough?" Granger yelled. "Thanks to you, I no longer have a daughter!"

Snape sat down in a chair across from Granger and laid his wand on his knees. "Actually, I recall with perfect clarity that it was you who threw Hermione out of the house. I had nothing to do with it."

Granger grunted in response. "You've got a lot of nerve, Snape," he muttered.

"As do you. It's not every father who would force his daughter to rely on the kindness of friends and strangers merely because she is being forced to marry by her governors."

"Those 'governors' as you call them have usurped my position as head of my family. If I knew that this was what my daughter would be getting into, I'd never have allowed her to begin her education!"

"Even if your family was magical, it does not follow that you would be head of it. I am not head of my family, and I am subject to my father's will just as Hermione is subject to the will of the Ministry of Magic. And I can assure you, had you refused to allow Hermione to go to Hogwarts, the Ministry would have removed her from your care and Obliviated your memory of her so that you would not even know you had a daughter."

Granger looked positively astonished at that. "They couldn't do that!"

"They could and have. Pity they didn't, then you and I would not be engaged in this conversation at the moment."

"All the better for you," Granger grumbled. "Then you could have just married Hermione without being forced to think about how you're ruining her life."

Putting his pride aside was getting more and more difficult. He would dearly love at this moment to simply hex his future father-in-law and then explain the situation to him. However, his feelings for Hermione's happiness prevented him from behaving as he normally would, and he thought over what he could say to make things a little better.

"I assure you that my thoughts are always on the fact that Hermione is very young, and that she must achieve her full potential. I doubt that one could keep her from doing so. Indeed, it would be quite difficult to persuade her to *stop* learning. No, I doubt that you will ever need worry about that." Snape became thoughtful and leaned his cheek against his hand. "No indeed, she begins apprenticing in January, and I am more than positive that she'll be a Master Healer quicker than anyone could have anticipated."

He had been lost in his own thoughts for longer than he should have, and soon Granger was looming over him, fury in his eyes. "And you'll be there the entire time, won't you?"

Snape sighed. "I'll be her husband. That's what they do, I'm told." He was quickly losing his patience and resolve to stay humble. Standing, he took an intimidating pose, his lean frame towering over Granger's. "I came here to see if there was a reasonable bone in your body. I can see now that there isn't. I couldn't care less what you think of me, and your decision to keep your daughter from you. However, Hermione is not so detached. Your refusal to give her your blessing has hurt her more than you will ever know, and I, caring for her as I do, thought to come here and talk some sense into you. I see now that my time and energy have been wasted. Good day."

He was about to turn around when a hand grabbed his arm. He looked over and found Hermione's mother holding him in place.

"Oh for goodness sakes, Gerald! Listen to the man! If you don't, then I may have to divorce you, because I don't want to live the rest of my life without my daughter."

Snape saw that Mrs. Granger had obviously been crying as much as Hermione had, and his hard heart melted just a bit for her.

"Should you wish to see her, I will be more than happy to take you to her," Snape offered. "But I must dash. I have many preparations to make."

"How will I contact you?"

"Owl me. Or better yet, have your husband owl Hermione and apologize. It may take her a while to forgive you, but I know she'll want you both to be there on Saturday."

With that, he Apparated to his father's potion and apothecary shop in Knockturn Alley. He knew that it would have been nice to bring Hermione along with him, but she'd be raving mad if she knew that he had gone to her parents, and he doubted she would have gone with him. Besides, if he went back and invited her *now*, she would want to know what he had been doing. No, it was best to just get the inventory over with and write out a requisition for the supplies he would need.

Making illegal potions was a risky game, and a few of the potion makers Tetricus had employed had actually spent time in Azkaban after being deceived into thinking that they were dealing with everyday evil wizards when they were making potions for undercover Aurors. Snape was not so foolish, however, and he noticed that Tetricus had actually grown slightly happier knowing that his son would be at the shop instead of the usual riff-raff he was forced to employ. "Decent" wizards did not work in Knockturn Alley.

Nor did organized wizards, he noted ruefully after three hours of trying to make sense out of the supplies he had on hand. Contrary to what he had told Hermione, the ingredients were not organized, alphabetically or otherwise. Perhaps he might have entertained the idea of asking for her help on a different day, but his pride was still smarting from his second meeting with the Grangers, and he was not in the mood to deal with Hermione's smugness when he would be forced to admit that she was right.

No, he would continue in solitude. Thank goodness he still had his wand. If he were forced to go about organizing things alphabetically the Muggle way, he'd be stuck in the office for months!

Slowly, though, he created cabinets and trays for the various bottles and beakers and vials of odd things that were now his, and he dictated each ingredient to a charmed quill and parchment. In all, it took about three hours more than he thought it would, and then a further two hours to properly clean all of his equipment. After that, it was a half-hour more to write out the materials that he required so that they would be ready for him when he returned from his honeymoon. The office was also missing several key reference books that he actually had on hand, but did not want to bring into this part of town. It would be better to buy some new ones and do most of his research at his home.

Finally satisfied, he Apparated back to the Black House to see if Hermione wanted to join him for some dinner and hopefully more snogging. He had to admit that he enjoyed kissing her, and he couldn't wait to get her alone again.

Thankfully, it didn't take too long. As soon as he Apparated, he found his arms full of a very excited Hermione who couldn't wait to tell him about how her father had apologized in a rather lovely letter.

"I don't know what to make of it, though," she said as she led him into a deserted and secluded sitting room.

"Your father severely overreacted last night. I'm sure that his senses finally returned to him." Snape sat down on a sofa and made himself comfortable against the arm, hoping that she would join him.

She did, and she pressed her body against his intimately, communicating her feelings about their session in the morning very well. "I don't know. He was apologetic for

what he said to me, but he never said that he was sorry for the way he treated you."

Snape kissed the top of her head and pulled her even closer. "I don't mind. My only concern is that you will lose your family over this. I do not want that."

She looked thoughtful for a few moments. "Nor do I. But I will not forget what he said very quickly. He hurt me. You warned me about it, but...I had to hope."

She looked up at him, her face looking for permission that it was all right to feel that way.

"Of course he did, the rotten bastard. I'm sorry, Hermione, but I'd rather deal with Sirius Black than your father."

"He's not that bad," she countered, her body tensing slightly next to his. "He is my father, you know. He thinks he's looking out for my best interest."

"Then it's up to you to decide if you can forgive him for doing what he thought was best for you, as misguided as he was."

She snuggled against him once more and wrapped her arms around his ribcage. "I don't want to think about this right now. Can't we just...forget about it?"

It was exactly what he hoped for. But still... "We can for now. But you will eventually have to think about it."

"How did your inventory go?"

"Fine," he answered vaguely, tightening his arm around her shoulders.

"It took you an awful long time to take an inventory. Especially since it was all organized alphabetically."

"I had other matters to attend to. Potion making isn't my entire life, you know."

"Could've fooled me."

She was deliberately provoking him, he decided.

"I could go back there, then, and find something new to do." Snape began to pry her away from him, but her grip held firm.

"If you go without me, I'll never speak to you again."

Snape felt genuinely amused by his Hermione. He knew that she would stop at nothing to get into the shop, but he hadn't expected her to be so impatient.

"I promise that I will take you there. After we are married."

"After? Why?"

He leaned over her, pushing her almost on her back, and gave her his vilest smirk. "Because I'm the Potions Master, and I said so."

He loved how she unabashedly wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him to her with a greedy look on her face.

"I've been thinking about what we did this morning," she whispered.

"Indeed?" He pressed himself against her and kissed her passionately, but he was not as aggressive as he had been earlier. He did not want to suffocate her this time. Taking her head in his hands, he began to direct her in their kiss, fully aware of her hands unbuttoning the front of his robe. He wondered if she knew how little he wore under it when he felt and heard her stomach growl beneath his. In frustration, his own stomach protested at the small amount of food he had nourished it with that day.

Reluctantly, he pulled away from Hermione and sat up on the sofa. She looked guilty as he redid his buttons, watching her closely.

"Let's go to Diagon Alley and eat. Then we can finish this...somewhere else."

They stood, and Hermione wrapped her arms around his waist. "Severus?"

He had his wand poised to Apparate them. "Yes?"

"What do you suppose caused my father to change his mind? He's even more stubborn than I am."

Snape thought that over. "I honestly don't know." It could have been either his entreaties, or Mrs. Grangers'. Or both, even. Either way, she didn't need to know about it.

She gave him a suspicious look, but said nothing else, for which he was thankful. They ate quietly, and no one in the dark restaurant could know that the tall, severe looking man was teasing the pretty young woman who was with him mercilessly with his hand under the table. They also couldn't see her hands, responding to his touch by exploring his thighs between bites of food.

"Are you sure you don't want to show me your father's shop right now?" she whispered when he pulled her back out onto the street and pushed her up against a wall that was hidden by shadow.

"You're a rather evil temptress, Hermione."

"I try."

With a wave of his wand, he Apparated them back to the Black House, to the very sitting room that they had occupied earlier.

"In here?" Hermione asked, confused.

"I like this room."

Snape closed and warded the door, then checked for the blighter Kreacher. Kreacher was no longer a necessity in the Black House, as Dobby had taken his place after Sirius died, but Kreacher refused to leave, even to go and work for the Malfoys. After Voldemort had been defeated, Harry had presented Kreacher with a set of clothes, but still the House Elf refused to leave. Now that he was no longer responsible for maintaining the house, Kreacher took to hiding out in various places, hoping to uncover a secret with which to blackmail someone. Snape had no idea what the creature would do with money, and he didn't want to find out.

Once he was sure that they were not being spied on, he transfigured the couch so that it was plusher and wider so that he and Hermione could both lay on it side-by-side. Wordlessly, he pulled her onto it so that she lay on top of him, her legs straddling his hips. She stared at him for a long time, unease in her eyes. He knew that she was unsure of what to do, but he wanted her to know that he was hers as much as she was his. He wanted to be *her* Severus.

Finally, her hands began to touch his face tentatively, the backs of her fingers skimming over his cheeks, her fingertips brushing his jaw. He did nothing, only continued to look at her. She seemed to take this as encouragement, and soon her inquisitive fingers feathered across his mouth, and he had to laugh at the small yelp of surprise she gave when he lightly bit them. She laughed back at him, her eyes shining brightly.

When her eyelids lowered, he knew that she would kiss him, but he continued to allow her to keep control of the situation. He wanted to see what she would do with him.

"Make love with me," she whispered against his ear, nipping it lightly with her teeth.

Snape suddenly realized that he hadn't thought far enough ahead. He pushed her back a little and set his hand against her cheek. "I won't, not now. Wait until Saturday."

She sighed and gave him a small pout, but she nodded and laid her head against his chest. Her hair fell against his face and arm, and he took his time arranging it so that it was out of his way. When he was done, he wrapped his arm around her, his fingers playing lightly with her ear.

"You went to see my father, didn't you?"

Snape kissed her forehead. "Yes, but that is not the reason for my restraint."

"Why? Why would you do that?"

He sighed. "I know it would make you happy to have them there when we are married."

He could feel her fingers lightly stroking his chest. "It will be nice to have them there..."

"You are angry with me."

He could actually feel her smile. "No, I am not. I promise. I'm only sorry that you had to go through all that."

"I did it for you, and I knew what it would entail. Now go to sleep."

She leaned up and kissed him again, then settled back against him. Her figure felt so good against his, her soft skin and sweet smell. He was lulled to sleep himself within minutes.

~*~*~*~

Hermione awoke with many different thoughts in her head. The first was the remembrance of how Snape had gently extricated himself from her embrace, apologizing for his urgency, but he had so many things to attend to. He promised her that he would be all hers after Saturday.

The second thought revolved around her parents. She knew that she should answer their letter, but she did not know what to say. She would most definitely need to reproach her father for his treatment of her fiancée, but aside from that, she was truly happy that her father was making a bit of an effort. She knew that it took a great deal of humility for Snape to visit her parents again, and after his visit, it took even more humility on her father's part to write to her and apologize. There was also her mother to consider. Snape had not given her details, but she was sure that her mother was beside herself. They had always been close, and this incident had upset Hermione terribly, especially when her mother did not stand up for her.

Of course, she had not been there to see if her mother had turned on her father and told him how he had been wrong. She hoped she had, but she did not know, and it seemed so horrible that she had not done it in front of her.

The third and final thought was about her wedding robes. She had planned on wearing her dress robes, since the ceremony would be informal, but after meeting Snape's family...

She sighed. She was definitely going to have to go see Madam Malkin this morning, as soon as the shop opened. Hermione decided to find Mrs. Weasley and Ginny. They would more than likely enjoy accompanying her.

First, though, she would have to figure out how Snape had warded the door...

"Good morning, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said brightly as she sat down at the long table in the dining room. She had donned fresh robes after taking a rather long shower.

"Good morning, Hermione. What are your plans for the day?"

"I think I should go and buy my wedding robes this morning. Would you and Ginny like to come along? Ginny could get a new dress robe as well, as she'll be my bridesmaid."

"That sounds wonderful, dear. Now, what would you like for breakfast?"

Hermione gave a little laugh as the older witch brought out eggs, bacon, toast and fruit. She knew why Harry liked keeping Mrs. Weasley around. While Dobby was a fine cook in his own right, there was something special about how Mrs. Weasley cooked. It tasted far better than anything else she had ever eaten.

"Hermione should be careful about what she eats now, Mum," Ginny cautioned as she sat down at the table. "She doesn't need all this heavy food. It could make her ill."

"We'll eat it for her," Ron volunteered, sitting next to Hermione, his mouth already full of toast.

"How gallant," Ginny answered sarcastically.

Harry sat down next to her and gave her a smile that Hermione noticed, though no one else seemed to.

"We'll be off to Diagon Alley this morning, boys," Mrs. Weasley said happily. "Promise me that you'll try to stay out of trouble."

"Sure, Mum. We were going to go and help Fred and George out anyway."

"Are you ready, Hermione?" Ginny asked.

"Sure. Are you, Mrs. Weasley?"

"Yes, yes, dear. Now, boys, help Dobby clean this all up after you're finished."

"Yes, Mum," Ron promised, but Ginny gave him a look. Hermione knew that they would never help.

The three witches apparated to Diagon Alley together, and walked the lane to where Madam Malkin had her shop. Luckily, they were the first customers, and wedding robes were Madam's favorite to make.

"Here, love, try this one," The small witch said brightly, bringing out a very simple, elegant white robe.

"This is lovely!" Hermione exclaimed as she closed herself into the changing room. "This has to be the one!"

"It's so plain, dear," Mrs. Weasley clucked.

"But I like it plain."

"We'll get you a proper headdress," Madam promised. "Yes, love, with bunches of roses and pearls. I know a witch who specializes in weddings. Would you like her name?"

Hermione suddenly felt overwhelmed. "Uh, of course."

"When is your wedding, love?"

"Saturday."

"Yes, but which Saturday, love?"

"This Saturday. Three days from now."

Madam looked up from the parchment she had been writing on. "Good lord, child! It's a good job that I'm a witch who can use her wand...dear sweet Merlin. All right, I'll contact my friend for you, and we must fit your dress right away. Why did you wait so long?"

"I didn't. My parents are Muggles, and the Ministry took over as my head of family. My fiancée's father wished for the wedding to conclude almost exactly after my schooling, and I haven't had time."

Madam ushered Hermione onto a stool and shook her head. "Poor dear. Well, we'll have you looking beautiful in no time. Now lift your arms..."

Hermione succumbed to the measuring, poking and prodding that the seamstress put her through, but it was all with a light heart. Her mind was still turning over Snape's face when he promised her that he would be all hers after Saturday. He had almost smiled when he said it. She could still feel his scruffy morning beard on her forehead from where he had kissed her before he left.

Saturday. She would be married in three days to the most brilliant man alive. She was excited about how his knowledge and books would forever be at the tips of her fingers, but even more, she liked the idea of waking up next to him every morning. Having done so twice already, she could safely promise herself that it was the best feeling in the world. She even liked the way his voice cracked in an endearing manner first thing in the morning.

"All right, love. We'll have your gown to you by Friday. I'll do one last fitting then, just to be sure."

Hermione smiled. "Thank you so much, Madam. I will pay you extra for your inconvenience."

Madam shook her head. "Nonsense, love. The June wedding rush is over, and school won't start for another two months. I'm not so pressed for time in the summer."

"Again, I'm indebted to you. And now Ginny will need a new dress robe as well. Something blue, preferably."

"You go and change, and I'll find something suitable."

Hermione stepped into the dressing room and changed back into her everyday robe quickly, eager to see what dress choices there were for Ginny. Emerging, she found Ginny holding one robe out, studying it.

"I love this one," she said wistfully.

"I know, my love, but this one is more practical," Mrs. Weasley said, holding out a robe that was slightly inferior. The color was not quite right for Ginny's complexion, and the cut was for a person who was larger in frame than Ginny.

"I like the one that Ginny is holding far better," Hermione said, handing her white robe to Madam Malkin.

"I do as well," Madam said thoughtfully. "It is always hard to dress a redhead, but I think that this one will do very well."

Mrs. Weasley turned red and flustered a bit. "It's not that I don't like the other robe. I just think that, taken on the whole, this one would be more sensible."

Hermione suddenly realized what the problem was. She took Mrs. Weasley aside, out of earshot of Madam, and smiled. "Mrs. Weasley, I assure you that I am going to pay for all of this. The Snapes have taken care of all the other arrangements, flowers, the temple, and the reception. They don't understand that the bride's family always pays for weddings. This is all I have control over, and I will buy the other robe for Ginny. I am determined."

She knew that there would be no way to say it without embarrassing Mrs. Weasley, a woman she looked up to as a surrogate mother, but she needed to say it.

"Completely unnecessary, Hermione," the witch said, wiping a tear off of her cheek. "But if you insist..."

"I do."

"Oh, very well." Turning to face Ginny, Mrs. Weasley gave a smile. "Go and try on that gown, Ginny."

Ginny hurriedly did as she was told, and when she walked out of the room, Hermione was confident that she had made the right choice. Ginny almost glowed in her gown. [1]

"Lovely," Madam decided as she ushered Ginny onto the stool.

Hermione sat down in a chair next to Mrs. Weasley as she watched as Ginny was fitted to the robe.

"Who did you say you were marrying again, love?" Madam asked.

"Severus Snape, the former Potions Master of Hogwarts."

Madam almost dropped her wand. "Severus Snape? Sweet Merlin, child! What are you about? What could the two of you possibly have in common?"

"Tell her about your honeymoon, Hermione," Ginny said with a giggle.

"We're going to tour several different places. Greenland, Iceland, Egypt, and Budapest."

Madam Malkin looked at Hermione as though she had managed to grow a new head over night. "What could possibly lure you to any of those places? Aren't honeymoons supposed to be romantic? Master Malkin took me to Greece."

"Oh, we're going to try and make it to Greece, if we have the time. We're going to the other places to find rare potions ingredients. Severus's father owns a potions shop in Knockturn Alley, you know."

Ginny started to laugh at the startled looks the old witch was giving. "Don't worry, Madam. Our Hermione is every bit as eccentric as Snape. Looking for rare potions ingredients is her idea of a hot Saturday night date, especially if they leave the cauldron burning over night."

"Ginny!" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed as Hermione turned red.

Ginny only continued to laugh at the absurdity of her good friend and former teacher. It was true, though, Hermione decided. One of the greatest joys of her thoughts of marriage to Snape was that she would be able to help him make his potions. At least, he had sort of hinted that he wouldn't mind having her around if she wanted to be around. She could still remember how it felt to be in his private rooms at Hogwarts whilst he brewed the infertility potions for his brother-in-law and sister. They had shared

something wonderful that day, and she attributed her happiness with Snape now to the time they spent all those weeks ago.

"Good luck to you is all I can say," Madam Malkin said as she made one last mark on Ginny's robe. "Marriage is never easy."

"That is true," Mrs. Weasley agreed.

Ginny went back into the changing room and Hermione took her coin purse out of her pocket.

"You will contact your friend regarding Ginny's and my hair?"

"I've addressed a letter already, love. You just need to take it to the post when you leave."

Hermione took the letter and paid out the necessary coin to settle the purchase of the two gowns. "We'll be back Friday morning," she promised.

When Ginny emerged, they left and went in search of lunch.

TBC

AN: [1] Okay, I really am not much for describing clothes (read: it bores the life out of me to both read and write it), but for some reason, this scene forced me to write it. Maybe it's my fierce love of Ginny. Maybe it's my fierce love of blue. Maybe I'm just sentimental. Who knows? Lock me up now.

I know that this chapter is sort of weird, and I can't say that I'm incredibly happy with it, but I wrote out what I needed to write. Also, I heard the shout of dismay when Snape said "no" to making love with Hermione, and I also heard the shout of dismay in the last chapter when Snape said "no" to taking Hermione to his potions shop. I promise (PROMISE) that it will all be explained eventually.

Eleven

Chapter 11 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

Hermione lay in her bed, still thinking over what to say to her parents. She had spent the entire day at Diagon Alley with Mrs. Weasley and Ginny, shopping and laughing and feeling very free and happy. They had even run into Severus once, when they passed by Flourish And Blotts. His arms were full of books, and he stopped only long enough to tell Hermione that he would not be by to see her later, but he promised that he would spend at least some of the next day with her. After that, she had gone back to Grimmauld Place with her two companions, eaten dinner, and fallen into bed exhausted.

Unfortunately, she found that she could not sleep, and the fact that Ginny was apparently deep in reverie was actually beginning to annoy her. For the first time in her life, Hermione wished that her parents were more like the Weasleys, and that they understood magic better. If they only understood the world, she would not be in such a horrible predicament at the moment, and she would not have to decide the best way to go about forgiving them before her wedding.

She sighed and rolled over, punching her pillow as she did so.

"Aren't you asleep?" Ginny asked.

"I thought you were."

"I thought you were, as well."

Hermione got out of her bed and went over to Ginny's, snuggling under the covers with her friend.

"Do you need to talk about it?" Ginny asked.

"Do you think you could help?" Ginny had a natural ability to see both sides of every equation logically, and Hermione welcomed any insight she would have.

"Even if I have no advice to offer, sometimes talking about it can help. You know that, you've told me that a million times."

Hermione related the whole of the situation to Ginny, even including what Snape had done for her.

"Parents always want what's best for their children, but I think that Snape is right. Your father knew that he made an arse out of himself, and it was only a matter of time before he began to regret that decision. If Snape had not stepped in when he did, your father may have come to this realization too late to do anything about it. You owe him a lot for that."

"I do indeed," Hermione agreed. "It must have been very difficult for him to go and speak with my father. Even though he knew he was right, an ex-Death Eater was forced into the company of Muggles for his Mudblood fiancée. No matter how you slice it, no matter how good Severus is *now*, those things that he learned as a child are still very much attached to him and his thinking. It must have been a mortification for him. I can only imagine how my father treated him."

"Well, he was obviously happy to do it for you, so the first thing you must do is put Snape out of your mind. You said that your father wrote to you to apologize—that must have been a blow to his own ego. It meant admitting he was wrong not only to you, but to Snape as well. He knew that you would tell Snape about his letter, and he wrote anyway. To me it shows a great amount of humility."

"That was sort of the conclusion I came to. It's just that I really want to address the issue that my father has been treating Severus unfairly this entire time, when he is just as subject to his father's will as I am subject to the Ministry. He won't listen to us when we tell him that we have no choice."

They both lay in silence for a few minutes, and Hermione began to think that Ginny had finally gone to sleep.

"If you had a choice," she said at last, "would you have still chosen Snape?"

"What do you mean?"

Ginny turned over and faced Hermione. "If this law didn't come about, and Snape had asked you out...would you have gone?"

Hermione looked up at the black ceiling and pondered this. "I honestly don't know. You know how I've been feeling about him, though. But then again, if the law hadn't happened, then Snape's name would not have been at the top of my compatibility list, and I never would have started thinking about him like that."

Hermione heard Ginny shift again. "We were all in The Order together, though. It's possible that the Marriage Law simply brought your feelings for him to the front of your mind. Mother always says that absence makes the heart grow fonder. It's possible that after having been apprenticing for a few months, you would have started missing him and thinking about him on your own."

It was possible. "But there's no guarantee that I would have done something about it. After all, it's Severus Snape."

"I don't know, Hermione. You're as brave as any Gryffindor."

Hermione laughed to herself, and turned to her friend. She could barely see Ginny's eyes shining in the darkness. "Bravery and stupidity are two very different things. Who knows what would have happened?"

"True," Ginny conceded.

"Since we're discussing relationships, what's going on with you and Harry?"

She could feel Ginny blushing next to her.

"Well, for a while, it felt like the same-old story..."

"But then?"

A shake of the bed indicated that Ginny shrugged. "I don't know...we were in the garden, and he was trying to help me with a Quidditch play, and then everything sort of got awkward between us, and we avoided each other for a few days."

"That sounds like Harry," Hermione decided with a laugh. "Did he work up the nerve, or did you?"

"Actually, it was you and Snape that brought us together."

Hermione turned and rested her head in the crook of her arm. "Really? How so?"

"Well, the other night when you both Apparated here, I was in our room, and I don't think you saw me."

"I was pretty distraught," Hermione agreed.

"Well, Snape sort of kicked me out, but in a nice way, so I went down to the kitchen to look for something to drink, and Harry was in there, reading a book and drinking some butterbeer. We just sort of started talking, and then he brought up about my first year and how I used to fancy him. It was rather embarrassing, but he wanted to know if I still felt the same."

"We both know you did," Hermione finished.

"Yeah. We agreed to give it a go, but we're going to wait to tell Mum and Dad, just in case. I don't really want Ron to know, either. You know how he is."

"Ron's always liked the thought of you and Harry together, I actually think he'd surprise you." During their brief stint, Ron had confided to Hermione that he hoped his best friend would end up marrying his sister some day. This was the closest Hermione had ever come to divulging that information.

"Still, we want to keep it hushed for a while. Besides, it's only been two days!"

Hermione laughed. "Severus and I were discussing marriage on our first date."

Ginny started to laugh as well. Soon afterwards, both the girls fell asleep, utterly exhausted.

When Hermione and Ginny awoke, they made their way down to the dining room, surprised to find Snape already there, drinking coffee as though his breakfasting with the occupants of Grimmauld Place was an every day occurrence.

"Severus!" Hermione said happily. "I didn't think I would see you until much later."

She sat next to him, and he gave her thigh an intimate squeeze. "Sorry to disappoint you."

She squeezed his thigh in return and gave him a smile. "I'm hardly disappointed."

Ron and Harry thundered into the kitchen, their boisterous manners deftly taking the place of Fred and George as the noisy ones in the house.

"Why won't you tell me?" Harry asked, his voice almost as whiney as Ron's could be on such an occasion.

"Maybe it's just none of your business," Ron answered, taking a seat at the table.

"What's this all about?" Hermione asked, not wanting to be forced into an argument with her two best friends so early in the morning and in front of Snape, but unable to keep out.

"Ron went out with a girl last night. I'm trying to get him to tell me who."

"It doesn't matter," Ron protested.

"If it didn't matter, then you wouldn't hesitate to tell," Hermione reasoned. "Who was it?"

Ron turned red and looked down at his plate. "Gabrielle Delacour," he answered quietly. "She's here visiting her sister for the summer, and Bill wanted me to double with him."

Harry looked very surprised at this admission, and Hermione found herself laughing.

"What's so bloody funny?" Ron asked, his temper now getting the better of him.

"Oh, it's just that you always used to comment about my terrible temper, and here you are, trying to make nothing about a girl who's part Veela, and who is obviously something special to you indeed."

"She might be part Veela," Ron answered, "but I doubt she's anything compared to you when I don't finish my homework."

Hermione had to smile. It was probably true. "You always did have a crush on Fleur, as misguided as it was."

"Misguided," Ron scoffed. "You don't know misguided until your best friend dates a boy who can't even pronounce her name."

"Viktor and I never dated," Hermione protested for what felt like the millionth time. "We were..."

"Just friends," Harry, Ginny and Ron all finished off in unison, rolling their eyes.

"Of course you were," Ron said after taking a vicious bite of his toast. "How could you have liked him? What an idiot. Not for you at all."

"I only hope that Gabrielle is not like her sister in that she expects the entire world to be handed to her on a platter, simply because she's pretty. It would never do to waste your brain only because your body is good enough."

"You know, Fleur is actually very intelligent," Ron said. "She speaks four different languages, and Bill said that they were reading a book the other day..."

"More like Bill was reading the book to her," Hermione countered. "How she ever was chosen to be the champion for her school was a mystery to me, since she couldn't even make it past the grindylows!"

"What about Krum?" Ron asked, his voice growing loud. "How many times do you have to be hexed by a person before you figure out that someone's out to hurt you?"

"Hermione! Ron!" Harry hissed.

They looked at him quizzically, and then Hermione realized that Harry was indicating Snape with his head. Looking at her fiancée, Hermione noticed that he looked rather uncomfortable. She knew why as well. She and Ron always fought when they talked, and she knew that she sounded jealous of Fleur as Ron sounded jealous of Viktor. Really, it wasn't a proper topic of conversation to have in front of the man one was about to marry in two days.

Snape did not say anything to her or the others at the table, he simply stood up and left the room. Hermione did not even hesitate a moment, she was up and after him in a flash.

"Severus, wait!"

He turned around abruptly, and she bumped into him.

"I'll ask you one last time, Hermione: are you sure that you don't want to call this whole thing off? I won't be made a fool of by you, and I won't be used as a puppet to make Weasley jealous."

Hermione almost wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it all. "Severus, I promise you...oh, hang it all. In here, I can't talk to you out in the hallway like this." She pulled him into the nearest closet and turned on the light, then warded the door. "Severus, I promise you that there is nothing now, nor has there ever been anything more than friendship between Ron and me. There was a time when we both wanted more, but I can assure you that we soon realized how improbable it would be. I love Ron, yes. Just as I love Harry and Mrs. Weasley. That doesn't mean I want to marry him. I want to marry you."

She could feel herself blush when the words escaped her mouth, but she could not lie to him. Almost desperately, she pulled at the front of his robe and attempted to pull him down to her. She hated the look on his face, so blank and cold. He looked as though he were very angry with her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "Can you possibly trust me after that?"

His face flickered for a moment before he gave her a genuine smile. "Now it's my turn to appreciate the irony," he mused. "Of course I can. I would just hate for you to ever regret this day."

"I don't want you to ever regret it, either. Tell me, Severus. Tell me why you are so insistent that I reconsider? Is it you that has the doubts? Would you be happier if I told you that I want out?"

He grasped her shoulders and bent down to look in her eyes. "Is that what you think?"

"Well..."

He pulled her against him, his hands caressing her hair and down her back. "No...I don't want to break the contract."

It wasn't an emphatic "No!" followed by a declaration of undying love, but it was enough for Hermione.

"Severus...if it weren't for this Marriage Law, and we were simply left to our own devices, would you ever...that is, if I were to have owed you some day in the future..."

She trailed off, suddenly realizing how silly she sounded. "No, of course you wouldn't have. You would have simply thought I was being silly or stupid."

"There's no way to know," he said logically. "A year from now, five years from now, life would be different. It's highly doubtful that you would have entertained any feelings for me, however, were it not for our current situation."

Hermione looked up into his eyes and smiled. "You can't know that. Neither can I. I do respect you, Severus. I want you to know that."

He granted her a smile. "I have found us a suitable flat. I wonder if you would like to have a look at it with me today?"

"I'd love that."

He took a step towards her and placed his hands on her face, giving her a wonderful kiss.

"I like it when you do that," Hermione said when he pulled away.

"Do what? Kiss you?"

She could feel herself blushing. "Well, yes, that too. But when you hold my head...I don't know. I just like it."

Snape laughed at her as he opened the door to the closet. "That is very interesting to know," he murmured.

"Oh, and Severus?"

He pulled her against him so that he could Apparate them both. "Yes?"

"I promise that the next time I feel the up-flaring of my temper, you will be the sole recipient."

He leaned down and kissed her nose. "Your temper flaring is not my concern, so much as your jealousy. If you wish merely to yell at someone, by all means find Mr. Weasley."

Hermione looked up at him, shocked. "You thought I was jealous?" She gave a little laugh and kissed his cheek. "I'm not jealous. I just know Fleur, and if Gabrielle is anything like her, I don't want her involved with my best friend. Ron is superficial and silly enough as it is without exacerbating the situation further."

He stared down at her for a long moment. "That was completely redundant, Hermione. But all right, I believe you."

"Exacerbating further is not a redundant term!"

"If you say so. Now, would you like to see the flat?"

Hermione huffed. "Well, I suppose. But it had better be good!"

Snape had to work hard to keep from laughing. He had been truly disturbed by Hermione's reaction to Ron's new supposed girlfriend for reasons that he could not point his finger to. Certainly he could reason that she was marrying him and had no business flirting with others, especially in his company. But the truth was that it went deeper than that. She had made him feel true jealousy for Ron. He didn't like that feeling.

Pushing all that aside, he pulled Hermione against him and Apparated them to the outskirts of London where a building stood, supposedly empty. There were four stories and a basement. According to the proprietor, the basement had stood empty for two years so far, and he was anxious to have it taken off his hands. Even with his meager savings from teaching, Snape would be able to afford the asking price, and the need to accept finances from his father would be nonexistent. He also supposed that he could do enough side work to keep him and his wife quite comfortable, even through her long apprenticeship at St. Mungos. With any luck, he would not have to ask his father for anything.

"Mr. Snape," a weedy-looking man said happily as he dumped a large pail of water out the door. "So good to see you. Here to look at the flat once more?"

"Indeed. Mr. Hastings, allow me to introduce you to my fiancée, Hermione Granger."

The old wizard walked down the steps of the building and smiled happily. "Miss Granger, how do?"

"How do, Mr. Hastings. Severus assures me that I will fall in love with the flat."

"That you will, Miss Granger." The old wizard led the way down a short flight of steps on the side of the building and magically opened the door. "You have a garden just here," he indicated a rectangular area next to the steps that was just now at eye-level. "Perfect for growing potion ingredients or cabbages. This is the entrance, you have a cloak and boot cupboard just here so's you don't go tracking mud all over, and a lovely kitchen just there, and this nice room. The master bedroom ain't nothing ter sneeze at, neither."

Snape watched as Mr. Hastings pulled Hermione all over the flat, pointing out the various necessities, and how easy it would be to charm any alterations into the magical walls.

"We put the fireplace there, but naturally, you can move it about," he explained after bringing her out of the master bedroom. "And over here is the second bedroom, and the laundry is back there." He brought her back to stand in front of Snape, and Snape mused that Hermione looked dazed. "Whaddaya think, Miss Granger?"

Hermione managed to break away from the wizard and practically fell against Snape, her arms slinking around his ribcage. "It's lovely, Mr. Hastings. Really, I love it." The last sentence was directed at Snape. He smiled at her.

"Then we'll take it, I suppose?"

She nodded. "Yes, most definitely."

Snape held out his hand to Mr. Hastings. "*Syngraphae Propriatis*," he said.

"*Lex Legis*," Mr. Hastings agreed.

A light sprang up from between their gripped hands, and Snape saw Hermione shield her eyes against the glare. When the flash subsided, Snape smiled and said, "I'll have the money transferred from my account at Gringott's into yours."

"Very well," Mr. Hastings said with a grin. "So glad to have this flat bought up now. So very happy. It's no good having an empty basement, you know," he winked and lifted his finger.

Snape gave a wry smile. It wasn't often that he found someone who was superstitious about his or her basement being empty. He was again entertaining the idea of making one of his usual callous remarks to this man, but Hermione's presence at his side stopped him from lashing out in a tirade about age-old wive's tales and how ridiculous they are. Instead, he only nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Hastings. I assume that we may begin moving in immediately?"

"Right-o, Mr. Snape. I'll leave you to it, then," he said happily, whistling as he left.

Snape turned to Hermione and gave her a genuine smile. It felt good to do something independent like this.

"That's all?" she asked him, bewildered.

"Yes, of course." She looked positively dazed to him. "Hermione? Are you all right?"

"What was that light about?"

"Wizard's Agreement," he said amicably, stalking into the front room, getting a feel for the place already. "We are now bound to a contract. It is now in the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry. A lot like the prophecies, only without the threat of madness if someone else takes a look at it. You've never seen a Wizard's Agreement?" He turned to her so suddenly that he almost knocked her off of her feet.

"No, I haven't. We do things differently in the Muggle world."

He thought about that for a moment. "What's it like?" he finally asked, his arms crossed over his chest, his finger tracing the line of his bottom lip.

"What's what like?" Hermione countered, her face red. She seemed uncomfortable all of a sudden.

"What's it like to suddenly be dropped into a world that you know nothing about? Surely your parents always told you that wizards and witches are evil and out to cast spells upon you, or worse, that they don't exist at all."

She turned away from him and began examining the counters in the kitchen. "I never thought much about it. I was always too practical for magic and fairy tales, you know. But I always hoped that it was true. When I got my letter, I thought it was a joke of some kind, but so many things had happened, that it made sense at the same time. It took all of us a while to warm to the idea, and after that, I just...well...you know me."

Snape felt it was impossible for her to grow redder than she was. "I do know you. And I'm getting to know you better with ever passing day, but from what I've learned about Muggles, it must have been difficult for you to fit in with us all at first."

"It was," she admitted, still looking down at the countertops. "It was very difficult. Everyone else in Gryffindor was Halfblood or less, and I was the only Muggleborn. Even Harry...well, he had Ron with him at first. We didn't become friends until Halloween, and so I had two entire months of coping with my new life the way I cope with everything. I read. It was all I knew to do. I read before even getting on the train. I read since my first day at Diagon Alley. I still wasn't ready for it."

Snape walked up the few steps that lead to the kitchen proper and pulled her against him. She immediately burst into tears.

"It was *so* hard," she admitted. "Everyone hated me, even Harry and Ron. Especially Ron. Especially Malfoy. He would whisper about me being a Mudblood in my ear constantly, and I never said anything, because who would I tell? And then when I did become friends with Harry and Ron, I couldn't tell them, because I didn't want them to hate me for being a Mudblood, too. I didn't even know what a Mudblood was-I had to go and look it up in the library."

"Draco and Lucius are from typical Pureblood families. The Weasley's and Sirius Black are some of the few that I know of who were willing to put aside their bloodlines and look on what is right." Snape wanted to add himself to that list, but he didn't feel that he belonged in the same category as Sirius Black. "And if Sirius hadn't hated his family so much...who knows? He could have been the most fearsome Death Eater ever." Snape almost shuddered at the thought. As a member of the Order Sirius had been formidable. If he had been encouraged to use Unforgivables as the Death Eaters always were, he would have been worse than the Lestranges. Snape was sure of it.

"What about you?" Hermione asked. "You've given up that idealism, haven't you? Isn't that difficult? After all, everything you've ever learned about Muggles has been filtered through prejudice and hatred...it must be insufferable for you to have to think about marrying a Muggleborn, let alone do it."

Snape hadn't wanted to get married, period, Muggleborn or not. If she didn't feel so good against him, he probably would have taken up on her earlier offer to be done with the arrangement in full, even though it would have meant the eternal disdain of his father. Besides, she smelled fantastic. "I probably knew about as much about Muggles growing up as you did about Wizards. Only, instead of pretending that they didn't exist, I was taught that Muggles were the source of all problems, and that Muggleborns were the greatest example of what was wrong with the world. I know that a lot of people who were against Voldemort have romanticized my participation with Dumbledore to great extent, but the truth is that my turning away from Voldemort was just as gradual and subliminal as my turn to him. Then one day, I realized that he would never find his end, and it just grew from there. It took me a long time-a *long* time-afterwards to truly understand that Muggleborns are not lower than Purebloods, and that they can be just as powerful and intelligent."

"When was that?"

"Again, there was no epiphany. It was a very gradual adjustment that I attribute to being locked in with Pureblood Slytherins for many, many years. I started to recognize the stupidity of their way of thinking and to find fault with what they thought were their advantages. Having a Halfblood brother-in-law didn't hurt, either, even if he was a Death Eater, the idiot."

"How?" Hermione asked. "After all, Voldemort hated Halfbloods, didn't he? Even though he was one? And how come you're no longer afraid to say his name now?"

Snape sighed. She just never quieted down, did she? "Halfbloods who were dedicated to the cause were allowed to help destroy Mudblo...er...Muggleborns. It was their way to do penance for being Halfbloods."

"I'll never know what your life was like then, will I?"

He smiled at her fondly and ran his hands over her shoulders, down her arms, and back up. "Not if I can help it, no. You know enough."

"You said that we shouldn't have any secrets."

"I was wrong."

She gave him the most skeptical of looks, and he simply stared back blankly.

"Promise me that at some point, you'll tell me the 'Good Parts Version'?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Good Parts Version? What's that?"

"Sorry, Muggle book reference.

His other eyebrow rose. "All right, if you say so."

Hermione laughed and pressed herself against him, and he wrapped her up in his arms. He couldn't believe how accustomed he was growing to her constant physical contact. It was something he had always assumed would repulse him, but now that he was here, with her arms held firmly around his chest, he could not think of even one reason why it would be tiresome to have someone enjoy touching him. Even more amazing was that he loved touching her back.

"Dearest Hermione, This conversation has been most helpful, and I promise to give you a full account of my life-the appropriate parts-at some point in our marriage, but we really must make this flat habitable. What do you say? Some light cleaning charms before lunch, and then we can get down to the business of finding and transfiguring furniture."

She leaned up and kissed his chin. "Sure. Sounds fine."

As she walked away from him, her burgundy robe swishing with her movements, Snape found himself stunned. How did she do that? He followed behind her and found that she had decided to start with what would be their potions lab first. The room had odd angles, and the closet was an actual triangle. A very dusty triangle with bloodsucking pixies infesting it.

"What did Mr. Hastings mean when he said that it's not good to have the basement empty?"

Snape took out his wand and began to kill the pestilence in the closet. They had been in there long enough, though, that they had turned cannibalistic without any other donors around. Still, they were ravenous and started trying to attack him and Hermione.

"*Incendio!* Uh...well, it's an old superstition that if you leave the basement empty, evil will crawl in unnoticed*Incendio!* Naturally, I think it's all bollocks, but some people think it's a warning worth heeding. Most wizards and witches won't live in basements. Only the wrong sort, if you know what I mean."

Hermione laughed. "*Incendio!* Yeah, I think I do know. So that's why you're drawn to the dungeons, to keep evil away."

Snape smirked and dispatched two more pixies. "There are many who would not agree with you."

Hermione laughed. "Don't give me any more reasons to feel like hexing people on your behalf."

He smiled and moved on to the rest of the room while Hermione got rid of the tiny dead bodies of the pixies that had been preyed upon by their closet mates. Thankfully, there were no curtains or any other fabrics to clean in the flat, it was all just long walls that were infested with insects of dubious origin that Hagrid would probably have foamed at the mouth to get close to, and a laundry area that was clearly inhabited by a Boggart. In the master bedroom, they found a few water sprites in the bathtub, playing in the drain where a leak in the tap was splashing at odd intervals.

The floors were, unfortunately, tile set atop stone, and they made the entire flat seem cold and unwelcoming. Snape was wondering about the merits of starting a fire in the fireplace when he realized that a grouping of rather large spiders were living in the chimney. He sighed. This was going to take longer than he thought.

"Come along, dearest. Let's go get some food."

Hermione looked up from behind one of the kitchen cabinets where she was battling a few large dust bunnies. Her hair was wild and she had dirt all over her. Snape almost

started laughing, but stopped himself.

"Good lord, woman! What have you been doing?"

Hermione was the one who started laughing first. "Me? What about you! I wish I had a mirror...half a moment..."

Deftly, she transfigured one of the kitchen cabinets to a mirror and swung it closed so that he could see himself. They both gasped when they saw their reflections, and went to work at once, cleaning each other off. She had dust bunnies in her hair, and one even went to hide in the back of her robe so that he had to put his hands in inappropriate places in order to get rid of it, and before he knew it, they were on the floor of the kitchen, snogging heavily, grinding against each other in search of release. He was about to object to their current situation when he felt her hand on the bare skin of his stomach, and realized that somehow, his hand had found its way into her underwear and was currently stroking her into a beautiful, babbling Hermione. When his fingers stroked their way inside her, and her hand wrapped itself around his erection, he lost all train of thought whatsoever. He didn't know if she was matching his strokes, or if he was matching hers, but soon he felt the magic between them begin to grow, and he was thrusting mercilessly against her hand as she ground herself against his.

His release was sublime and longer than normal, but he was glad that his was first so that he could savor her reactions as he brought her over the edge manually, which he did with a very smug smile on his lips. He knew that he should feel ashamed of himself for breaking his resolve to keep his relationship with Hermione chaste until the wedding day, but he could not bring himself to feel that way. Especially not when she grabbed his head and pulled him down to her for a kiss as the aftermath of her orgasm continued to cause her to convulse.

"Satisfactory?" he asked as he removed his hand from her panties.

"More than that," she admitted, blushing slightly. "Much more."

Snape's hand was positively soaking in her juices, and he brought it experimentally up to his lips, sniffing the odd scent before giving his fingers a lick. He was surprised when he felt her tongue on the other side of his fingers, licking herself off of him, touching his tongue as it darted between his fingers. He moaned. If they kept this up, he may as well bin his plans to remain chaste and take her right where they were, on a cold, hard kitchen floor.

Removing his hand from between them, he reluctantly pulled away from her. "We need to stop before we go too far," he said sternly.

Hermione lay back down and rested her head on his arm. "If you say so."

"I do." He pulled his wand out again and cleaned them both off before he stood up and helped Hermione to her feet. He was surprised at how shaky she was, even her hands as she tried to smooth her hair back into an elastic, were trembling. "Was I that good?" he murmured against her ear as his hands went to help gather her uncontrollable mane into the elastic.

"Stop being so smug," she mumbled, her hands abandoning their objective as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Snape transfigured the elastic band into a brush and tried to brush her hair instead. To his surprise, she stood still while he muttered detangling spells and managed to at least make her hair look presentable.

"You look lovely," he decided.

Hermione blushed. "Thank you. Now, are you just going to stand there and smirk at me, or are you really going to take me somewhere and feed me?"

Several thoughts about what he'd like to feed Hermione fluttered through Snape's mind, but he did not voice any of them. Instead, he took hold of her arm and led her out of the flat, warding the door as it closed behind them, and walked her down the street to a Wizard's Pub called The Dragon's Claw. It wasn't quite the same as The Leaky Cauldron, it was a bit cleaner and the food was much better, but the clientele was considerably dodgier.

He knew in retrospect that he should have taken her someplace better, someplace where he was lightly less comfortable, but where his dear Hermione would be infinitely safer. Those thoughts were far from his brain, however, when he ordered at the counter and pulled her into a secluded corner table, next to a charmed window. They talked quietly about the flat, and he caressed her hand, his fingers moving over and around hers, sometimes squeezing her palm lovingly, sometimes playing with her fingertips. When his fingers began to caress her ring finger, the one that would hold his wedding band in a few days, his spine grew absolutely cold as a voice said, "Well, well. If it isn't the happy couple."

Hiding his discomfort and anger, he turned with an amicable smile and said, "Hello, Lucius. How are you today?"

TBC

An: Syngraphae Propriatis basically translates to an agreement to pay for property. Lex Legis means "it is agreed". According to my Latin book, any way.

The book reference is to The Princess Bride. Supposedly, the book is "The Good Parts Version", as told by William Goldman. Hilarious. Absolutely Hilarious. Much funnier than the movie, though the movie is, admittedly, awesome.

Twelve

Chapter 12 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

Hermione could feel her eyes growing wide as she took in the sight of Lucius Malfoy, his son Draco standing coolly behind him.

"How pleasant, really," Snape said, his voice belying the tight hold he suddenly had on her hand. "I was just thinking about you. Naturally, my mother sent you and Narcissa an invitation to our wedding. Apparently, you have yet to RSVP."

He stood, and Hermione stood with him, still unable to speak.

"You still think that I will allow you to marry her, Severus?" Lucius asked angrily, yet his voice was quiet. To anyone observing, they would look as though they were having a friendly conversation.

"Hermione has made her decision," Snape said in a tired voice. His hand was still holding tightly to Hermione's.

"I have a right to contest-I petitioned her for Draco at the same time that your father did for you!"

"As flattered as I'm sure Hermione is at hearing how desired she is, I feel that I must point out that any dispute regarding her hand should be directed at my father, not me. He should be at his home now. If you'll excuse us, Lucius, we were just leaving."

Snape pulled Hermione's hand until she was walking in front of him, and his hand on her shoulder guided her out of The Dragon's Claw Pub. She was sure that there was something she should do, something mean and nasty she could say, but no words came. She could only wordlessly put one foot in front of the other until they were in an alleyway where they could Apparate back to Grimmauld Place, where they would be safe.

"This isn't finished, Severus!" Lucius called, jogging to catch up with them. "I will have my say with you!"

Snape turned to his old friend, and Hermione saw a look of pure hatred on his face. "Hermione, go. Apparate back to Grimmauld Place now."

She finally found her will again. "No! I won't leave you! I can't."

"You can and you will," he snarled.

"They'll kill you." Hermione wondered why they didn't both simply Apparate back to Grimmauld Place together. "I won't go without you."

"If I don't finish this now, it'll never be done."

Lucius was almost upon them.

"You don't have a Second!" Hermione continued to protest.

Snape grabbed her shoulders, his eyes intense. "Mad-Eye Moody. Go get him! Hurry!" Without another word, he held up his wand and Disapparated her from the alley back to Grimmauld Place.

"No!" Hermione yelled as he faded from her sight, and she found herself standing on the Victorian hardwood floors of the Black House. Taking a deep breath, she screamed out, "Alastor Moody!" at the top of her lungs, hoping that he'd be there.

"Hermione!"

She turned around to see Remus Lupin, looking concerned and yet somehow relaxed as he chewed on an apple.

"Remus-where's Alastor? Severus is in trouble!"

Lupin threw the apple core over his shoulder and swallowed hard. "Good lord...use the floo, he should be at his house."

Remus wasn't even half finished with his sentence when Hermione made a beeline for the kitchen fireplace where a large pot of floo powder stood on the mantle. "Alastor Moody's house," she said clearly before dropping a handful of powder into the fire. Taking another deep breath, she plunged her head into the green embers and prayed that she had found the right house. "Alastor!" she called out as loudly as she could. "Alastor!"

"Calm down, there. Can't a man catch a few winks?" the familiar voice said, annoyed. "Who's there?"

"Alastor, it's me, Hermione Granger. You must come quick, Severus Snape is in trouble!"

The imposing man finally came to stand in front of the fireplace, his odd-looking blue eye scrunched in concern. "Severus Snape? Merlin! Well, get yourself out of there, child, so's I can come over!"

Hermione gladly pulled her head out of the floo and got out of the way quickly. It was a good thing, too, for Moody came barreling through in a wind of dying embers and soot.

"Where is he?" Moody asked, his magical eye looking this way and that for Snape.

"He's outside of The Dragon's Claw. Lucius Malfoy challenged him to a duel, and Severus sent me here to get you."

Moody brandished his wand quickly. "Give me your hand, Granger," he said.

"I'm coming, too," Remus said, pulling out his own wand.

"Quickly!" Hermione cried.

Without another word, the trio Apparated back to The Dragon's Claw. Hermione reasoned later that they must have made a rather odd sight to any Muggles who happened to be on that particular street that day, but at the time, none of that mattered to her as she led the two men around the corner to the alley where Severus had last been.

To her relief, he was still there, and he was still standing, though "standing" might not have been quite the right word as he seemed to be leaning heavily on a large trashcan, holding his arm to his side. He had multiple scrapes and cuts on his face that caused blood to trickle down his forehead to his cheeks. Hermione gasped, but Alastor held her back.

"Listen to what he says," the old man whispered quietly.

"You have defiled the Dark Lord's name, you have betrayed your kind! You are a disgrace to everything the Dark Lord worked so hard for, and then you helped Potter kill him!" Lucius shouted, dealing out a few harsh blows with his wand.

Snape managed to deflect one blow, but the other one hit him, and he fell forward in pain.

"No!" Hermione screamed, running towards him.

Later, she reflected that she wished she had seen Lucius's face when he realized that a Senior Auror was standing behind him with a werewolf, listening to everything he was saying; but at the time, all she could think about was getting to Snape and making sure he was all right.

"You filthy little Mudblood!" Draco hissed, slinking towards Hermione. "How dare you betray us!"

She looked up at him, disgusted, as she pulled Snape's head into her lap. "You won't weasel your way out of this one, Malfoy," she snarled. "Now you have witnesses."

"What? A daft old man, a werewolf, and a Mudblood? Like anyone would believe any of you!" He raised his wand, as if to hex her, but Lupin cut him off before he could, by putting him in a full-body bind.

That was when Hermione finally looked past her injured fiancée, and saw the other things that were going on around her. Moody had Lucius bound as well, and was contacting a few other Aurors to come and meet him behind The Dragon's Claw.

"Take Snape back to the Black House, Hermione," Lupin said quietly, so that Draco couldn't hear. "Take care of him."

"I don't need to be taken care of," Snape growled, wiping blood out of one of his eyes. "I was doing just fine on my own."

Lupin laughed good-naturedly at Snape. "Very well, I'll let Hermione take *me* back and give me a little TLC. With Tonks away on recon, I get little comfort at night."

Snape grunted and Hermione laughed. "He's right, let's get you back to the Black House."

He grunted again, but he didn't protest when she Disapparated them from the alley and levitated him back into the sitting room they had spent the night in and once again transfigured the couch so that it was wider and longer than usual.

"I see. You're simply intent on having your wicked way with me," he mumbled as Hermione hoisted him onto the sofa.

"I don't remember you complaining this morning," Hermione answered coyly, unbuttoning the sleeves of her robe and rolling them up to her elbows. "Besides, I'd like to see you try and walk out of here. What did he do to you?"

Snape grunted. Hermione sighed.

"Very well, don't tell me. Accio Quidditch First Aid kit!"

"Hey, watch it!" Remus said from the doorway, ducking the flying metal box.

"Sorry, Remus," Hermione mumbled as the box hit her squarely in the chest, nearly knocking her over.

"Do you have a reason for being in here at the moment?" Snape asked Remus.

Remus shrugged. "Just thought I'd see how you're feeling."

"Like hell. Get out."

Hermione gave Remus an apologetic look, but he only shrugged and winked at her.

"All right. I can take a hint."

Hermione tried desperately to keep Snape lying down, but to no avail. He sat up and fixed Remus with a murderous look. "Hint? Bloody hell...Lupin! Out!"

Remus left, and Hermione pushed Snape back onto the sofa. "Lie still," she commanded. "He was just goading you...stop playing into him."

She looked him over before poisoning her wand over his head and giving him one more exasperated look.

"Well?" he mumbled.

"I'm trying to decide if I should give you a Simple Sleeping Draught. At least it will make you more willing to cooperate."

She watched as a small smirk chased itself across his face. "I promise, my dearest Hermione, that I will cooperate with whatever you wish me to do."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at this. Especially since he used the term "my dearest" in a sarcastic tone of voice. She also knew that his promise was the closest he had ever come, and perhaps would ever come, to an apology. Smiling to herself, Hermione charmed his boots off his feet, and then began to unbutton the neck of his robe.

"I promise I won't hurt you more than necessary."

He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. "So comforting to know." His voice sounded very parched.

"Oh...here, drink this..." Hermione pulled a vial out of the kit and handed it to Snape. It was supposed to help replenish his bodily fluids. To her surprise, he did as he was told, and she mused briefly that he had meant what he said. "Now, I'm just going to use a simple deduction charm to see what's wrong with you..." she decided that he should be told exactly what she was doing to him so that he wouldn't panic.

"Already a fine Healer," he mumbled sarcastically. The potion he just drank was obviously making him tired, Hermione decided.

She poised her wand over his head and began to feel for breaks and bruises, making a quick note of everything she found as she moved her wand down to his chest. His ribs had been badly bruised, she discovered, but was pleased that they weren't broken.

"Lucius must not have used any forbidden curses on you," she mumbled.

"No, he was saving those for last."

"You shouldn't have sent me away." She reached into the kit and began to pull out a few liniments and cleansing potions, then transfigured a cloth from a vial stopper. "I could have helped you."

"You found Moody. He's the only one of us in a position to do something useful right now, with Shackelbolt and Tonks out in training classes. You know that."

She kept her eyes on the cloth in her hands, wringing it between her knuckles, fighting back her feelings. "I didn't like just leaving you like that. What if we had been too late?"

"You weren't."

She finally met his eyes, and saw that he was regarding her with an expression she had not yet seen. He looked...tender? Was that the right word? Slowly, she poured one of the cleansing potions over the cloth and brought it to his face. To her surprise, he did not flinch away from her or tell her that he could do it himself. He simply allowed her to heal him. Tentatively, she leaned forward and placed a kiss on his forehead, where a large gash had been. When he did not move or tell her to stop, she swiped the potion over his lips to heal the cut in the corner of his mouth before pressing her own to him. She was happy when he answered her kiss, but when he began to walk his fingers up her arms, she felt him wince, and then he fell back against the pillows with a moan.

Hermione felt utterly chastened. She had almost forgotten his bruised ribs! "Severus, I'm so sorry, here, lie still..." she busied herself with unbuttoning the rest of his robe and pulling it apart to reveal his long white linen shirt. It had buttons only on the first half, and the rest was solid. She knew that pulling it over his head was not an option, so she spelled it away, leaving him clad in only his boxer shorts. She was surprised at how incredibly thin he was. She had been somewhat expecting it, as every time she put her arms around him, she could distinctly feel his bones jutting against her, but this thin took her by surprise.

"Do you have an aversion to eating?" she asked, a little more shocked than she intended.

"I have a mother, thank you," he answered acerbically.

She looked his chest over again, and saw the dark purple bruise that was already forming under his right breast.

"Stop ogling me," he said with a growl. "I agreed to cooperate, but I didn't agree to have you scrutinize me."

Hermione blushed and looked at his face. "I'm more concerned about that horrible bruise than your current state of emaciation right now," she said with more snark than she had intended. The end result was priceless, however, when his eyes grew wide and he settled back into the cushions of the sofa, as if waiting to see what she would do next.

In the kit, she found a potion for bruised bones and poured a goodly amount on her hands, warming it before spreading it over his chest. She wondered how long it would take to be effective when Snape suddenly let out a groan and shifted his hips upward briefly, but long enough for her to take notice. Looking down at his boxers, Hermione noticed something that she had only felt thus far.

"Looks like you're feeling better," she quipped.

He gave her a sheepish grin. "I want to know why I'm the only one who has to get his kit off," he answered, his eyes looking pointedly at Hermione's breasts.

"Because you're the one who decided to take on two Death Eaters in an alleyway all on your lonesome. Now turn on your stomach."

He complied, and Hermione found that his back was just as bony as his chest, but she decided to make no further comment. She was sure that she would be able to help him gain a stone or two after they were married.

She put more of the potion on her hands and ran them over his back, massaging away his aches and pains. When she was finished, she cleaned off her hands and put away the kit. Then she warded the door and picked his long white shirt up off the floor and changed into it with her back to Snape. After that was all sorted out, she moved onto the sofa and transfigured a few of the cushions into blankets and charmed two throw pillows so that they grew larger and softer.

"Isn't this better?" she asked Snape as she pulled the blankets over them. He was still lying on his stomach, watching her with interest.

"Much better," he said softly. Then, to her surprise, he turned on his side and pulled her close to him and cradled her head against his chest. "I...that was...what you did..." he faltered and sighed.

"You're welcome," Hermione answered, smiling.

~*~*~*~

Snape decided that it was miserably unfair to wake feeling as though he had a hangover when he hadn't even touched a drop of liquor in the past seventy-two hours. He was thankful that the room he was in seemed to still be dark, except for a low fire burning somewhere behind him, and that Hermione was apparently still snuggled against him. He smiled to himself and pulled her closer, his healing body protesting only a little at his exertion. To his surprise, Hermione stirred and wrapped her body around his.

"Morning," she mumbled.

"I'd hardly call this darkness morning."

"We went to bed awfully early last night."

He was surprised when she pulled away from him, and a round blue glow suddenly gave off from her wrist.

"Muggle watch," she said apologetically. Then she started laughing. "Severus, it's only nine in the evening!"

Snape grabbed her wrist in disbelief and looked for himself. He thought over the events of the morning, settled on an approximate time line, and decided that they must have fallen asleep somewhere around one in the afternoon.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"I'm starving," she answered, fumbling for her wand in the dark.

"That's not your wand," Snape said dryly when her hand flitted across his bare thigh.

"Oh, hush." With a swish and flick, she lit all the candles and lamps in the room.

As his eyes adjusted to the light, Snape decided that he would not point out to Hermione how his shirt, that she was currently wearing, was not buttoned up at all, and even if it was, he would still be able to see her breasts through the thin linen. Feral instincts taking over, Snape found himself pushing Hermione back against their makeshift bed and kissing a trail from her neck to her bellybutton. Her gasp on his way back, when he pushed the material aside and latched onto one of her nipples, was what brought him back to himself. With a ragged sigh, he pulled away from her and turned to the floor, grabbing his robe.

He offered to find them some food, but Hermione insisted on accompanying him. Snape didn't know if this was because she was worried about him going off on his own, or because she simply wouldn't wait to eat. Regardless of which, he was forced to watch her dine from across the kitchen table, his shirt poking through the collar of her robe, still unbuttoned. When they made their way back into the study an hour later, he found himself being accosted by her, and as she began undressing him, he reflected that his resolve was definitely shaking.

"I loved what you did to me earlier," she whispered into his ear, her warm breath against his skin causing his arousal to grow. "You have the most wonderful hands."

Snape smirked. Hers had been quite adept as well. "Very well, I will repeat your pleasure," he said huskily, guiding her hand to his growing erection. "But you must see to mine as well."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," she murmured, kissing a hot trail down his chest.

Snape gulped. He was in trouble.

The next morning, they woke up before anyone else in the house, and as a result, helped Dobby prepare breakfast. Thanks to his trouble with the Malfoys the day before, several Aurors who had been in the Order had come to stay at the Black House as a precaution, unnecessary though it was. Snape mused that some of them were simply looking for some good food and better company, and he was more than likely right in that assessment.

"What're your plans for today, Snape?" Moody asked as he spooned marmalade onto his toast.

"Hermione and I have got to finish our flat. We're getting married tomorrow..."

"Oh dear!" Hermione cried. "I almost forgot!"

"Madam Malkin!" Ginny said, a hand over her mouth. "We need to get our final fittings today."

"That shouldn't take long," Molly Weasley said with a smile. "Madam Malkin is the best in the business for a reason. Here, Severus, have some more oatmeal."

Snape hated oatmeal. "Thank you, Molly. I don't see why I can't accompany the both of you to Madam Malkin's, and then Ginny can find her way back here while Hermione and I buy some furniture."

"As long as you don't look at the gown," Molly clucked, grabbing the marmalade before Snape could.

"That is a silly superstition-hand me that when you're finished-and you know it, Molly."

"I'll go with you to Diagon Alley," Harry volunteered. "Ginny wanted me to help her look at some Quidditch supplies, anyway."

Snape raised an eyebrow in Potter's direction, but said nothing. "That would be fine. What time do you need to be at the robes-makers?"

Hermione checked her watch. "In about an hour-it's only seven in the morning right now."

"That gives me time to shower before Fred and George wake up," Ginny said happily, standing up with a piece of toast hanging out of her mouth. "Cheers!"

"I wanted to jump in the shower," Hermione said with a frown. "I wonder how long Ginny will be..." Grabbing a piece of bacon, she walked out of the kitchen with a distracted look on her face.

"I should go with you," Moody said sinisterly. "The Malfoy's aren't the only ones looking to make trouble for you, Severus."

Snape sighed and rubbed his eyes. Spending the day shopping for a few pieces of furniture was suddenly becoming a trek to Indonesia. "Very well, Alastor. I appreciate your caution. Also, I must go into Knockturn Alley to make sure that a shipment has arrived, so I would appreciate you keeping an eye on Hermione while I go and do that-not that she needs any help."

Moody laughed. "Course she doesn't. I'll just be there to give her someone to talk to."

Snape was relieved that someone else understood Hermione and refused to coddle her, no matter how tempting it would be to do so.

"Well, if Hermione and Ginny are showering, then I'll be on my way home to do the same thing," Snape decided, looking at his own timepiece. "I should be back in a half-hour."

Moody nodded, and Snape Apparated away. He wasted little time in his ablutions, though he did pull his hair back and secure it at the nape of his neck as Hermione had done when he had gone to see her parents. He would never admit it to her, but it was nice to get his hair away from his face every now and again. Deciding he looked presentable, and feeling fresher in a clean set of robes, Snape Apparated back to the Black House.

"They're still getting dressed," Moody muttered when Snape stepped back into the small study he and Hermione had claimed as "theirs".

Snape sat down across from Moody and regarded the older man. "You didn't have to come to my rescue yesterday."

"And yet you sent for me."

Snape nodded. For saying so little, he felt that a large conversation took place. The older man continued to regard him wordlessly until Snape noticed his magical eye swivel towards the door.

"That'd be your Hermione," Moody said amicably. "And Potter and Weasley."

Snape gave Moody another questioning look before greeting Hermione. The lot of them Apparated to Diagon Alley together. The first stop, as promised, was Madam Malkin's. There, Hermione and Ginny both tried on their robes while Madam Malkin made a large fuss over Snape being present. He was sure that if he heard one more superstition, he would lose his temper. Thankfully, that did not happen. Hermione and Ginny soon held a package each in their hands, which they walked across to the Owl Post to have delivered at the Black House. At that point, Harry and Ginny said their goodbyes, and Snape took control of the situation, directing them to Gravelbar Alley, also referred to as "Furniture Row."

"They look like doll furniture!" Hermione exclaimed as she looked in the window of a shop.

Snape smirked. He was sure that after she saw a Wizard's Agreement for the first time, that she was not aware of what the furniture looked like.

"Shrinking spell?" she asked.

Snape shrugged. "Of course. How else would we get it home?"

"But how do you try it out first? I want a sofa that's comfortable."

Snape put his hand on her arm and guided her down the row. "That's what Charms are for, Hermione," Snape said mildly. As much as Hermione had learned at Hogwarts, he was still amazed at how different her Muggle life seemed from his upbringing. He wondered if she would ever truly get used to life as a witch. He wondered how it would affect their children-if they had any.

Snape was glad that his new flat was small. The amount of time Hermione took in buying the furniture for it was exhaustive-he would have thought that it was the most important decision of her life!

"Dearest, if you don't like the material on the sofa, you simply transfigure it."

"But I need something to work with in order to transfigure. Look at this! Have you ever seen such ugly, large flowers before in your life? Roses-ugh! I don't want my grandmother's sofa!"

Snape didn't want her grandmother's sofa, either. He wanted something in leather. Finding the item in question, he held it out in the palm of his hand.

"Green, of course," Hermione mumbled.

"Color is unimportant."

Hermione shrugged. "If that's what you want..."

"It is," Snape said. He had always used second-hand furniture in his dungeon at Hogwarts, and he wanted something nice that he picked out for once. Of course, when he examined the price tag, he realized *why* he relied on the kindness of his parents' outcast furniture.

"Forty Galleons!" Moody exclaimed. "You must be insane, Severus."

Snape shrugged. He was determined that this sofa would be his. He was happy when Hermione shrugged as well and placed the item gently into her shopping basket.

After what seemed like hours, Snape managed to maneuver both Hermione and Moody to a restaurant that was close to Knockturn Alley. Making a few excuses, he ran off to his father's Apothecary to check and make sure that his ingredients had arrived, as well as his reference books. He was not prepared to see that the front window was broken, and the word "Traitor" was spelled out in potion ingredients on the floor of the laboratory. Everything that could have been broken had been, and anything that

would not break was burnt or otherwise rendered useless. Snape bowed his head in shame and anger. Why did his sins have to be visited on his father and the rest of his family?

In a fit of uncontrolled rage, Snape kicked at the offensive words, smearing several volatile ingredients together as he did so, causing a few mild explosions that tore and singed the hem of his robe and slightly burned his leg.

"Scourgify!" Snape growled, his wand pointed at the mess on the floor. "*Reparo*," he muttered to the front window. "*Munimentum Apothecary*," he said finally, leaving the shop. There was little else he could do at this point, but anyone else attempting to do harm to the shop would find it a difficult task.

Exiting back into Knockturn Alley, Snape noticed many hostile faces staring him down. He knew that any of these dark wizards and witches would be more than capable of revealing who the vandal had been, but they would never betray that person or persons to Snape the way that Snape had betrayed his "kind".

"Next thing you know, he'll be in love with the Mudblood," someone behind him whispered loudly.

Snape stopped short and turned around. "Call me whatever you like, but leave my fiancée out of it. And my family!"

Angrily, he turned on his heel, his robes swirling around him dramatically. He was so out of sorts that he didn't notice the odd looks that both Hermione and Moody gave him as he slumped into his chair. A witch came to take his order, and he simply growled at her.

"He'll have a sandwich," Hermione said. "And a glass of pumpkin juice."

"With a chaser of firewhisky," Moody added.

Snape gave a grunt of appreciation for the old wizard's intuition, but still said nothing.

Everything was ruined! Everything! What would he tell his father? What would he do for his livelihood? Would his sisters and their husbands be adversely affected by this? What was Lucius Malfoy up to right now? And why did Hermione keep looking at him as though he were a mantichora?

When the waiting witch came back with his firewhisky and pumpkin juice, Snape pushed the juice out of the way and downed the whisky in one gulp. It burned on the way down and he was happy for the temporary respite of pain.

"What are you just standing there staring at?" Snape asked gruffly. "Go and get me another!"

The young witch ran off as though he had set her arse on fire, and he chuckled to himself at the thought.

He felt Hermione's hand on his thigh, and he turned only to find himself staring at a pair of extremely worried-looking eyes that were currently asking him a million questions. Unable to answer her, he turned away and pinched the bridge of his nose while closing his eyes. Hermione's hand moved from his thigh to his shoulder, and he felt her give a slight squeeze.

"It can't be that bad," she finally whispered.

"Can't be that bad?" Snape repeated, his voice low and silky and full of malice. "It's all ruined-practically gutted-traitor indeed!"

Her hand remained on his shoulder, and Snape began to feel very odd inside. It was a feeling that he did not like at all, though he was ignorant as to what it could possibly be. He felt suffocated and angry and he knew that if Hermione continued to be nice to him, he was sure to take out all of his frustrations on her. Rudely, he shrugged her hand off of him.

"Eat quickly, I want out of here."

The waiting witch came by with another firewhisky, and Snape stared at it, unable to meet the eyes of his companions.

"I'm ready now," Hermione said, her voice sounding hollow and scratchy. "We can leave whenever you like."

"Very well, let's leave."

He heard the sound of several coins hitting the table, and then the swish of robes opening and wands being drawn. He drew his own, his head still bowed low. When Hermione and Moody Apparated back to the Black House, Snape Apparated to his new flat, where he could be alone. In the kitchen, he hunched himself into a corner and buried his head in his knees, wrapping his long arms around himself.

After all he had done, the supporters of Voldemort called him a traitor, and the fighters of Voldemort called him untrustworthy. Aside from Hermione and his sisters, Snape could think of few people who truly trusted him and knew who he was on the inside. Even he didn't know who he was at times.

Snape could think of few times that he ever felt sorry for himself. When he was a teenager, he was in a perpetual state of self-pity, he supposed, but he knew few teenagers who were not angst mongers. But as an adult, he had always accepted anything that came towards him, no matter what. Now he found that his past had finally caught up to him, just as he was attempting to start a new future on a path that no one could have envisioned for him.

If he ran fast enough, he could perhaps keep his past just at his heels, unable to catch him, but he was tired of running. The only option left was to rebuild what he had, and he didn't know if he was capable of that.

The sound of someone Apparating into his flat caused him to look up swiftly, and he found himself looking at Hermione, concern etched into her face.

"I thought you'd come here," she whispered, walking to him quickly and kneeling down next to him. "I'm so frightened for you, Severus. Won't you tell me what it is?"

Her hands were once again on him, and he felt her pull him against her, his head resting against her breasts as she embraced him, whispering soft words of encouragement. With sudden realization, Snape grabbed her around her waist with both arms, as if hanging on for dear life.

"It's all right," she whispered. "Whatever it is, it'll all be all right."

Snape closed his eyes. He didn't believe it, but it sure felt good to hear it.

TBC

AN: Firstly, Munimentum is a Latin word for "Protection" that I felt was better for a protection spell than a simple "Protego". Munimentum is more like a deep protective shell, so...that's what I chose.

Also, sorry about the time between when I update. I actually was hoping to update last Thursday, but I left the chapter on a different computer and didn't save it or e-mail it to my home computer, and then I ended up deleting about four pages and re-writing them about three times-the last four pages-and I'm finally happy with them. I think I've taken a few too many liberties with Snape's character here, and I've set myself up for some deep repairing of the damage my little writing fingers did, but I think I'm up to the challenge right now. Anyway. That's all. I hope you all enjoyed this chapter.

Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

Hermione felt as though she had aged ten years within three days. The night before, she had held Snape while he confided what had happened to his father's shop and how he felt about it. After that, they went to his parents and apprised them of the situation. His father had been devastated, she was sure, but he tried his best to not show it. His mother was a different story all together. She began to cry and fuss over Snape as though he were three years old. Hermione had a hard time reconciling this emotional woman to the cool goddess she had met the week before.

In the end, plans had been made by Tetricus to have the shop repaired and replenished while Snape honeymooned. Tetricus also offered to set the flat that Snape had bought to rights so that the newlyweds could come home to a comfortable home, but Snape and Hermione had both declined.

After that, they had stopped by Hermione's parent's house and sorted that mess out. Hermione naturally apologized for not writing sooner, and her parents both apologized for having overreacted. Her mother even went so far as to kiss Snape's cheek, and her father shook his hand.

After that, both Hermione and Snape had felt rejuvenated, especially since Mrs. Granger had fed them a wonderful meal, and they ended up being able to sort most of their flat that night. Hermione, unfortunately soon realized that they had been foolish to buy a bed, but no linens. They had no towels for the shower, either, and by that time, it had been far too late to do anything about it. She had transfigured her robe into a bottom sheet, and Snape turned his into a blanket.

They slept in their underwear for the first few hours, but then Snape had accosted her and kissed his way down her body, removing her bra and panties as he did so. The memory of what he had done after that with his mouth and fingers was such that Hermione found herself gasping for breath as her hand moved up to her chest.

"Did I pull too hard, love?" the witch behind her asked.

"No, you're fine," Hermione said with a smile. If the friend of Madam Malkin knew what thoughts were currently running through her head, Hermione was sure that she would leave.

She was in a small room in a wizard temple with Madam Ezmerelda Albert, the friend of Madam Malkin. She had been more than happy to do both Hermione's and Ginny's hair for the wedding and like Madam Malkin, had not charged extra for the short notice.

"You're a bit nervous, I'd expect, marrying an ex-Death Eater and all," the old witch, Madam Albert, said.

"He's saved my life more times than you can imagine," Hermione said sternly. "He's also saved Harry Potter's life. The Wizarding World owes Severus Snape a great debt, Madam Albert, though few people know it. Rest assured, he is a wonderful, honorable man, and I am lucky to have been paired with him."

Hermione looked in the mirror and saw that the woman was regarding her with a bit of shrewdness mixed with slight surprise.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said. "I've had a rough couple of days."

"That's all right, love," the old witch clucked, arranging roses in Hermione's hair, now twisted like a crown on top of her head with just a few tendrils of curls falling down from it.

"You do look lovely, though," Madam Albert said kindly.

Hermione blushed, remembering how Snape had told her the same thing after he kissed his way back up her trembling body the night before. They had then talked for a long time about the wedding, and what it would entail. Snape explained that Wizard weddings were far more spiritually binding than Muggle weddings, and that the promises made were like a Wizard's Agreement, they were expected to be upheld. Even so, Hermione still had little idea about what was expected of her, other than to say "I do" at the correct moment.

"There you are, have a look at yourself."

Hermione stood and took in the full effect of herself in a wedding dress. She gasped.

"Wow, Hermione!" Ginny exclaimed, walking into the room. "You look fantastic."

Hermione turned and saw that Ginny looked rather fabulous herself, and told her so. "Harry won't know what to think."

Ginny shrugged. "I've almost given up on him," she admitted. "He's really brilliant when it comes to defeating Dark Lords, but when it comes to love, he's an imbecile."

Hermione could sympathize. Ron was the same way in their sixth year, and looking back, she was glad that they were both so awkward and unable to fully express their feelings. Ron made a much better friend than lover, she was sure.

"Are you scared?" Ginny asked.

"Just a little. I wish it was all over with, and that Severus and I were on our honeymoon."

Ginny laughed. "Off to Iceland to find rare potion ingredients."

Hermione shrugged. "It's not all that bad, you know. Finding someone who actually shares your interests is...sexy."

Ginny wrinkled her nose. She looked as though she were about to comment when the door opened, and Thalia walked in, looking just as imposing as her brother. In her arms, she held a silver-wrapped package.

"Hello, Hermione," she said with a smile.

"Hello, Thalia. Meet my friend Ginny-she's standing up with me today."

Thalia held out her hand. "I was told that a Weasley would be in the ceremony. Nice to meet you."

Ginny nodded, her eyes narrowed. Hermione knew that the Weasleys weren't very well liked among most Pureblood families, but Thalia's comment was not snide.

"How long do we have?" Hermione asked. She had taken off her watch as it clashed with her gown.

"About ten minutes. Here, this is a gift for you. For tonight."

Hermione took the package from Thalia and sat down at the only table in the room.

"No one has given me anything for my trousseau," Hermione said with an odd feeling in her stomach. This was really happening...

Inside the box, underneath about a pound of tissue paper, was a silvery, silky nightgown with soft embroidery around the neck and hemlines. A deep slit went up one side, and the thin straps crossed in the back. Hermione gulped audibly.

"It's gorgeous," Ginny breathed.

"I can't tell you how bloody odd it was to buy a negligee that my brother will enjoy," Thalia quipped, changing the mood of the room immediately. "God, I feel downright filthy."

Hermione managed to give a small laugh and put the nightgown back into the box where it was out of sight and shrank it so that it would fit in her pocket, and then hugged Thalia closely.

"Thank you," she whispered, giving her cheek a kiss.

"If he ever tries to be a bastard to you-and he will-don't you let him get away with it. Punch him if you have to. Or better yet, put on that negligee and settle down with a good book and ignore him completely."

Hermione laughed again. "Don't worry, I won't give him even an inch."

"Good," Thalia answered. "That's the way with men, Hermione. Keep them guessing, always on their toes. If he seems to be settling in, rearrange the furniture. If he doesn't like it, then make it worse. Keep him fighting with you."

Hermione could tell that she was joking, but she could also tell that there was sound advice hidden in her sister-in-law's words.

"I promise I will."

"Good. Because it's time now. Where are your orange blossoms?"

Hermione leaned over and lifted her small bouquet of fragrant flowers, believed to bring a new bride fertility. She smirked, knowing what Severus would think of such a silly superstition.

"Let's go, then."

The temple was shaped like a circle, and all of the spectators-friend and relatives-stood against the walls, all in their best dress robes. Thalia entered first and took her place next to her husband with the rest of Snape's immediate family. Ginny entered next, walking up to the altar to stand next to the priestess who would perform the ceremony. On the other side of the priestess stood Remus Lupin, a shocking choice for best man, Hermione thought. Next to Remus stood Snape, dressed in dark green velvet robes. They were just as nondescript as his every day black robes, but for a beautiful silver clasp at the neck.

Hermione stood and looked at the room for a long moment, wanting to remember every part of it for later. She then stepped into the room, and the circle of people completed itself, everyone joining hands as Hermione walked towards the altar.

Once there, she knelt and acknowledged the power of the priestess to bind two human lives together. As she stood, Snape came forward and took her hand, and Hermione felt an odd twinge in the magic around her. She knew what it was: Snape took her hand with intent, and she accepted his intent. They would be bound together all their lives and, some believed, all eternity thereafter.

The priestess began to speak, but Hermione barely registered what she said, she was far too intent on the hand holding hers and the way it felt. Looking into Snape's eyes, Hermione saw the great power he possessed and she shivered.

"I do bind myself to this woman," Snape said.

Hermione looked back at the priestess, realizing that she would be addressed next.

"And woman, what is your pledge?"

"I do bind myself to this man," Hermione answered, taking Snape's other hand and looking into his eyes again.

The magic around them stirred once more, and like with the Wizard's Agreement when Snape bought the flat, there was a brief flash of light and a slight ripple in the atmosphere. Hermione had to will herself to stay standing as the magnitude of her pledge swept over her. They were bound. Only the Ministry could break their bond, and even then only after a Wizengamot.

As if sensing her inner thoughts, Snape pulled her to him and placed one hand on her cheek. "It is done now," he said.

Hermione smiled weakly. "Good."

"You look as though you're about to be sick."

"I'm not, I promise."

He pulled a simple gold ring from his pocket and placed it on her finger. "I use this ring to seal my promise."

Hermione pulled a similar ring from her pocket and repeated his actions. Then the priestess closed the ceremony and blessed the new couple. Still feeling overwhelmed, Hermione practically collapsed against her husband, resting her cheek against the softness of his robe.

"You're not going to throw up on me, are you?"

Hermione laughed. "I'm not going to be sick, you great gawp!" She looked up at him and gave him a very large smile. "I'm just fine."

To her surprise, he looked down at her and the corners of his mouth lifted ever so slightly. He fingered her hair gently and then, slowly, he lowered his head and kissed her softly on the lips. She held onto him even tighter, and the crowd began to surround them, offering congratulations and asking about when the feast would begin.

"Hermione, Professor, over here!" Colin Creevy called out, holding his camera up to his eye.

Hermione and Snape both dutifully turned and stood still while Colin insisted on capturing the moment.

"Did you *have* to invite him?" Snape whispered in Hermione's ear.

"He was part of Dumbledore's Army. You don't just throw away people like that. Besides, he's all right once you get to know him."

Snape snorted in response.

"Do we really have to attend the feast?"

"It's part of the ceremony," he answered. "I know it probably doesn't seem like much, but breaking bread over our pledge will fortify our bond."

Hermione nodded. "That doesn't mean we can't skip out whenever we want, though, right?"

He gave her a peculiar stare, but agreed with a slight nod.

"Let the bride and groom pass," Iona Snape called, motioning that the happy crowd should part. "They should go out first."

Hermione and Snape linked arms and began to walk towards the exit of the temple. From there, the entire group would go back to Snape's family house where the feast was prepared. Naturally, however, the Weasley twins would not allow Hermione's wedding to end so serenely, and as the couple exited the building, a great fireworks display exploded in the sky. It was not quite as magnificent as it could have been, as it was the middle of the day, but the noise was deafening.

"Confounded! Fred! George! If those things start chasing us around, I'll have your heads!" Snape yelled.

His outburst was only met by the laughter of the boys in question, however, and Hermione stood close to her husband, watching the colorful explosions with a smile on her face.

"Good luck, Hermoine," Fred said, rubbing her arms as he came up behind her.

"Yeah, good luck," George echoed. "You'll need it."

Hermione raised her eyebrow at them. "Don't think that I can't still bring you both down," she threatened.

"You never have," Fred commented with a laugh, before Apparating away.

"Never will," George said, Apparating as well.

Hermione sighed. "They'll never grow up."

Snape only grinned at her in response.

The rest of the afternoon practically flew by for Hermione. She had forgotten how full the guest list was, especially since there were so many people from Hogwarts who came—teachers and students and ghosts alike. There were also people from Snape's family's acquaintance in attendance—proud wizards and witches who said very little other than the obligatory congratulations. Their gifts, however, were of money rather than the small trinkets and books that Hermione's friends gave, and Snape mentioned later that the money would be of great help, especially now that his future seemed to be so uncertain.

After what seemed like only a few hours at the feast, Snape drew Hermione aside and showed her his timepiece. "We must leave soon, dearest. The hour is growing late, and I wish to arrive in Iceland before too long."

Hermione couldn't believe her eyes. Had they really been feasting for over five hours?

"Hermione! One more picture!" Ron called. "Come on!"

Hermione looked up at Snape. "All right. One more picture, and then we'll leave."

He nodded. "And you thought that you would have to drag me away."

She laughed at him. "No wonder you gave me that look! Come on, you need to be in the picture, too."

He protested only a little, but he relented in the end, sitting between Ginny and Hermione, Harry and Ron standing behind them, Fleur and Bill holding each other tightly, and Fred and George kneeling in the front. After that, it was a quick farewell as Snape lifted Hermione into his arms and Apparated them away to Iceland.

Snape had procured a cabin for them, small, but cozy, made with warm wood and decorated with strong, masculine wooden furniture. Hermione spent the first fifteen minutes simply exploring while Snape lit the fire and watched her. She could feel his eyes on her, but it did not make her uncomfortable. She opened every cupboard and door and familiarized herself with her surroundings, calling out any little amenities that she found in her search.

"Oh, look! They've got tea and scones stocked in here!" and "This bathtub is huge!" and "My goodness, there are a lot of blankets—oh! There's a bottle of champagne next to the bed!" and "Our luggage is here! Jolly good!"

When at last she made her way back to Snape, he was leaning against the dining table, his arms crossed over his chest, an odd smirk on his face.

"Happy? Does it suit you?"

"Very much," she breathed, wrapping her arms around his torso. "It's beautiful."

He stroked her back, moving his fingers to her bare neck where he began to tease her sensitive skin. "Good. I thought it looked beautiful, but one never knows where a woman's fancy will stray."

Hermione felt her body responding in an odd way to Snape's touch. She knew that they would consummate their vows shortly, she could feel it in his touch. It was as though he were speaking through his fingers.

"My fancy will never stray," she promised.

He moved his hand to her head so she would tilt it back, and lowered his lips to hers. Again, the intent in his actions was such that it almost overwhelmed her. She could *feel* his power all around her, as though his aura was cloaking her somehow. She wondered if he felt her the same way, and asked him.

"Yes," he murmured, his lips against her neck. "I feel you acutely."

"Will it always be like this?"

He pulled away from her and took both her hands in his. "I honestly don't know."

She nodded, then leaned up and kissed him again. "Wait here for me, okay?"

"Where would I go?" he smirked.

Hermione shook her head and dragged one of her bags into the bathroom with her and closed the door. She then took the box containing her new negligee out of her robe and began to undress after restoring the negligee to its normal size. Once naked, she began an assault on her hair, undoing the spells that Madam Albert had used to keep it in place, setting each rosebud down on the sink in front of her. Once her hair was down, she gave it a few swipes with her brush, but she was very careful as to not disturb the potion that was keeping it smooth and silky.

When that was done, she lifted the nightgown over her head and felt slightly scandalized at how revealing so much fabric could be. Still, it wasn't as though he hadn't seen any of it before, and she pulled on her dressing gown before exiting the bathroom.

Snape was sitting on a bench at the foot of the bed, his head resting in his hands. Hermione walked up to him quietly and waited as he lifted his head to look at her. He smiled and drew her between his knees, his hands possessively set on her waist. He was also clad in a dressing gown, but Hermione had a feeling that he wore nothing underneath. She could feel her body flushing at that thought.

He stood and her breath caught in her throat. She felt once again that she would faint, but his strong arms were around her, keeping her upright. His mouth claimed hers once again, and she answered him eagerly, her arms snaking around his neck as her breath continued to go shallow.

She felt pressure on her arms, and she lowered them as his hands pushed her dressing gown away, revealing her negligee to his gaze. He stood back from her for a long moment, simply drinking her in, as though he were memorizing the moment. She smiled nervously, and he pulled her close once more.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered against her hair, smoothing his hands over it. "So beautiful..."

His lips found hers once more, and this time he began to direct her towards the bed, maneuvering her so that she was laying atop it. He joined her, sliding into place by her side, his fingers brushing lightly over her stomach, up to her breasts, over her collar bone, and back down, over her hip, circling her knee, and then pulling her against him strongly, his mouth kissing, nibbling, and licking its way over her exposed skin.

Hermione gasped when he took one of her nipples into his mouth through the silky fabric of her nightgown. His hand was working its way up her thigh, and she parted her knees instinctively for him, urging him on with words until his mouth closed over her, silencing her as his hand moved between her legs and began to stroke her clitoris, his fingers teasing her opening, but not quite entering.

Hermione attempted to tease him in the same way, but he would not let her.

"My time will come," he promised, his teeth grazing against her shoulder.

Her only answer was a shaky sigh as one of his fingers finally entered her, sliding in and out slowly. A second finger was added, and she once again felt the slightly uncomfortable stretching of tissue. She couldn't exactly say that it *hurt*, for it felt too good to call it painful, but it was a sensation she was not accustomed to, and it made her slightly frightened as well, for after holding his length in her hand, she was sure that he was much larger than even three of his fingers. She wondered how he would fit inside of her. She also wondered if he was frightened about it as well.

"You're so tight," he whispered. "So very tight."

Hermione licked her lips and lifted her hips against his hand. He felt so damn GOOD!

"I'm sorry," she managed to mumble.

"Oh no, my dearest," he chuckled, "this is a good thing."

She turned and looked at him, her hands reaching for him, feeling dazed. "Severus...take me...please..."

He licked her lips before driving his tongue into her mouth, but his hand stayed where it was. She cried out and arched her back as his ministrations became more intense, and she knew that she would feel the same release he had brought her to those times before.

"Do you wish me to stop?"

"No! Oh god, Severus...I just want you..."

He smirked at her and moved so that he was lying between her legs. Hermione knew what would happen and she whimpered in anticipation, moaning deeply as his mouth clamped down on her clitoris, his fingers still pumping in and out of her. The sensation was intense as her pleasure built, and she found it impossible to stay still. Thankfully, he did not seem to mind, he simply moved with her. When at last she felt as though she could not take any more, she felt a familiar twinge, and then the explosion of sensation as she climaxed, shouting out her pleasure loudly.

Feathery kisses rained down on her, over her thighs, her twitching clitoris, her stomach, her breasts, her neck, all the way up to her lips as he slid her negligee over her head. She felt his fingers continue to tease her, causing her to groan in agony as he prolonged her orgasm. Then, she felt him push against her and she looked down to see that he was poised at her entrance, his erection looking even larger than she remembered it.

Looking at his face, she noticed that he was smirking at her, but not unkindly. He looked almost triumphant.

"Relax," he commanded. "I'll try not to hurt you."

She nodded, and he moved closer to her, thrusting in at the same time. Hermione couldn't help herself, a shriek escaped her lips. Snape grunted. She whimpered.

"Relax for me," he groaned out as though he were the one in pain.

"It hurts," she whispered, a few tears trickling down her cheeks and into her hair.

As quickly as the pain began, it stopped, leaving a dull throb in its wake. Hermione also felt conspicuously empty. She looked up at Snape apologetically. "I'm so sorry..."

He shook his head. "My fault. I thought I had prepared you well enough."

Hermione gulped. Was this it? Had she ruined it? She looked up at Snape, tears still in her eyes, but he did not look angry. Instead, he kissed her tears away and held her close.

"Do you still feel me?" he whispered. "Do you feel me like you could before?"

Hermione concentrated. "Yes." His aura was becoming overpowering again.

"Feel me," he whispered, his hands caressing her body. "Feel me around you." His lips were wet as they nipped at her cheeks and neck. "Feel how much I want you, Hermione."

Hermione took a deep breath and relaxed against the mattress. She could actually feel his concern for her, not disappointment at all. She looked up at his eyes and pulled him to her. Once again, she felt him at her entrance. She was sore, but determined that they would consummate their marriage. He entered her slowly, and though she couldn't say that it felt as wonderful as his fingers had, she couldn't say that it hurt, either.

His large hands moved over her body again, caressing, loving, massaging until she gradually grew accustomed to his size.

"That's right," he murmured, pulling her head back so that he could lick and kiss her neck. "Yes, Hermione..."

Slowly, he began to move, setting a tempo that her body quickly accepted, and she relaxed even more as the feeling became familiar to her. Familiar soon turned to pleasurable, and she was once again moving beneath him, thrusting her hips up to meet his movements. Her nails scratched at his shoulders, her feet caressed his thighs, and her lips locked onto his as he continued to ride her, his pace quickening with every thrust. Hermione barely registered her own moans as his were louder and deeper, and every word that sprang from his mouth was scandalous and exhilarating, words that would make her blush under normal circumstances. In bed, however, they drove her wild, and she wondered just how far she could go when she felt his fingers against her once more, stroking and caressing her clitoris in time with his movements.

She came first, screaming in ecstasy, and he followed closely behind her, his hot breath on her ear as he groaned her name and a few well-meaning epithets as he did so. He thrust until he could no longer, and Hermione felt his size waning inside her until he pulled out completely, still shaking and breathing heavily.

She looked at him questioningly as he pulled her against him, cleaning and drying the bed with a few flicks of his wand. He then lowered his head and kissed her a few more times, but she hardly registered it as sleep began to claim her.

TBC

AN: Okay, this chapter is a little shorter than the others, and it's all about Hermione. I also totally glossed over the wedding ceremony and reception. Reason being: I hate weddings. If I ever get married, away to Vegas I will go so that a Captain Picard look-a-like can perform the ceremony. But that's just me. I just couldn't describe the wedding, and I'm sorry. I did get to the smut, though, and I feel good about keeping this chapter focused on Hermione. The next chapter will, naturally, focus on Snape, but this is Hermione's important day in many ways.

I'm also sorry about the smut. I don't write it well, but I try. Thank Michmak for talking me out of keeping Hermione from having an orgasm her first time. Apparently, there are women out there who went through that instead of the intense pain of being invaded the first time. To all those girls who managed a climax their first time: Cheers. To all the rest of us, I know how you feel.

Ah well. Hope you liked it.

Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

Snape had been surprised when Hermione slipped her hand into his as they walked along the low, flat planes of Iceland. In the distance, they could see a few low mountain ranges with snow capping the top. It was lonely country, in more ways than one. It had a way to make one feel as though they were alone in an infinite universe with nothing but low shrubberies and rocks for companions. Even the wildlife and birds were scarce.

The paradox was that he was not alone, and the tug of his arm or squeeze of his hand every so often confirmed that. He was not alone, not any more. He had Hermione with him now, smiling at him from under the silly hat she had insisted on wearing.

"Do you really think we'll find any rock elves?" she asked conversationally, breaking his pensive mood.

"More than likely not, but we're sure to find plenty of Mountain Orchids, Purple Glaciers and Cowbells. I've often bought these flowers, but have never had the pleasure of seeing them actually growing and alive. Look, over here! That's a Dwarf Willow plant! Its presence in a potion will help to keep it fresh for much longer than a month under normal temperatures and lighting conditions."

He felt supremely excited to finally see such a magnificent specimen up close, but suddenly became self-conscious about his glee. He had never known a woman to take pleasure in discussing potions. One look at his wife dispelled all his fears. She was leaning down and sniffing at the fresh plant eagerly, her hands touching its odd, spiky blooms with great gentility.

"It's lovely, isn't it?" she murmured. "I've never seen this plant up close, either." She straightened. "Oh, and there are several clusters of Moss Champion over there. Let's have our lunch there. Please?"

Her brown eyes turned up to him, and he felt himself smiling at her. "Of course we can."

He was rewarded with a huge toothy grin from her as she grabbed his hand again and began to practically run to the area she had in mind.

"Hermione, slow down," he called, trying to wrench his hand away from her.

Abruptly, she stopped and fixed him with a mischievous smile before grabbing him by the lapels of his Muggle shirt and pulling him down, both of them falling onto the soft herbs that actually felt remarkably like heather, only slightly softer.

He stared at her, amazed. "Hermione?"

She smirked and lifted his hand to her lips. "You haven't even tried to kiss me since last night."

He gulped. "I didn't want to push you. After all, I hurt you."

She grinned and wrapped her legs around his hips. "A moment of pain, Severus. That's all."

His hips ground involuntarily into hers, and he placed his hands on her thighs, bared by her skirt moving up her raised legs. He felt her warmth against him, and it surprised him that she would be so hot after such a short time, and his hands moved up her thighs until he pulled away from her slightly, feeling very surprised.

"You're not wearing any knickers," he said matter-of-factly.

She shook her head. "You're so observant, my clever husband."

He studied her face for a few more moments, shocked at the desire he saw in her eyes. Desire for him. She wanted him.

"Help me with these damned Muggle trousers," he mumbled as he raised himself to his knees and shrugged off his knapsack.

Hermione seemed more than willing to comply as her hands joined his at the button of his trousers. He hated trousers, and a situation like this was exactly why. In his robe, he could cover them both easily against any prying eyes. If he removed his trousers, they would both be exposed.

Exposed...something tingled in the back of his mind.

"Just a moment, Hermione," Snape whispered, pulling his wand out of his shirtsleeve. "*Occulere*" he mumbled, setting a perimeter of privacy around them.

Smiling, he removed his jacket and transfigured it into a blanket.

"I liked the idea of making love on flowers," Hermione mumbled.

Snape grinned. "You'll thank me later."

He pulled Hermione to her feet and spread the blanket out, then laid her back on it, tucking the edges so that the small white blossoms would still be able to tickle her face. She gave him a dazzling grin for that and leaned up to kiss him. Not wanting to hold back any longer, he kissed her back and forced her back onto the blanket, his mouth opening against hers hungrily as his fingers worked at the buttons on her shirt.

"And take of that infernal hat!" he muttered as he pulled her up against him and removed her shirt completely.

"Yes, master."

He smirked at her saucy tone before he returned to kissing her own smirk away. From there, he trailed his lips down her neck, sucking and licking and nipping as he went down. As he reached the valley between her breasts, he inhaled her scent before placing a kiss directly between them. Clumsily, his fingers worked at her blasted Muggle bra, fumbling until he finally managed to unhook it.

"You're really overdressed," she muttered as he pulled away, her small hands already at the buttons on his shirt.

"Quite right, my dear. And so are you."

Her skirt was held on by a zipper and small button at her side, which he unfastened deftly, pulling the soft material down her hips and discarding it quickly. She had already undone the button and zipper on his pants, and he pulled them down and off with annoyance. When his shorts were added to the pile at the foot of the makeshift blanket, he looked back at Hermione to find her smiling at him in an odd manner.

"What is it?" he asked, draping himself across her once more.

"You..." she bit her lip. "Watching you makes me happy, Severus. You make me happy."

Snape lifted himself up on his elbows and regarded her. Never had he thought that he would actually be able to make someone happy. "How is it that I make you happy?"

Hermione shrugged and pulled him to her, kissing his shoulder. "The way you are...the way I see who you really and truly are on the inside. Sure, you're a cranky old bastard, but the way you made me a bed here among the flowers so that I wouldn't get mud all over my back...you try to please me."

Snape thought this over. "It is true, I suppose. I don't wish to cause you discomfort. But, I am a right bastard at the same time."

She laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I think that's what makes me the happiest; the difference between how you treat me and the rest of the world. I see that I matter to you, Severus Snape. And you matter to me, too. I so wish to make you happy."

Snape felt something prickling in his eyes, causing him to blink rather rapidly for a few moments. When he could finally look back at Hermione, he saw her through new eyes, or perhaps it was simply a shift in the sun, but she seemed to glow. Her smile radiated, and her eyes sparkled. It was a completely different twinkle than that of Albus Dumbledore. Instead of a calculating, manipulative twinkle, her eyes held warmth and caring. He believed her, though he feared he would regret it later, but he believed that she truly wanted to make him happy.

The words "you do" would not come from his mouth, so he settled on kissing her instead, deeply, sincerely. When she kissed him back, he relaxed against her and settled his weight on her, attempting to not crush her too much. He was rewarded by the feel of her limbs tangling around his body, her legs sliding like silk against his hips. He groaned into her mouth and allowed his tongue to lick at her lips before entering her mouth, his hands firmly rubbing over her hips and thighs as she responded to his every touch. When he entered her, she gasped and arched against him.

Unsure of whether he was hurting her or not, Snape withdrew a little, only to find his way impeded by Hermione's locked ankles behind his hips.

"It feels good," she assured him with a smile. "Please..."

Groaning, he moved back into her, gasping himself as her hot heat engulfed him. He could live within her, he decided. He could live and die inside of her and be happy for the rest of his life. His brain, however, could not satisfy his body, and he began to thrust into her as slowly as his passion would allow.

At first, Hermione stretched beneath him, arching her back and rolling her head with ecstasy, caressing his arms and meeting his thrusts. Soon, she began to try and pull him down to her faster, small whimpers escaping her lips. Snape smiled evilly and continued his languid movements, enjoying the way her smooth skin moved in time with his, the bounce of her breasts as she arched her back, the way she would lick her lips as they became dry.

"More," she moaned as he kissed her.

He thrust upwards powerfully, but still with the same methodical and deliberate speed, causing her to grasp his hips with her feet once more and dig her fingernails into his back. Snape smiled at that act and repeated his thrust, earning the same response, only more intense this time. He was sure she was about to draw blood, and it excited him.

"You feel so good," he murmured as he drove into her again. "So wet and hot, Hermione."

She drew several shaky breaths before replying, "So do you, Severus...don't stop, please..."

He chuckled and began to lick her neck, sucking it lightly as he sped up his thrusts a little. Hermione responded by digging her nails in even further and crying out loudly with pleasure. Snape finally gave up his self-control and began to thrust with abandon, his moans mixing with hers as they moved in unison. His body felt as though it was on fire, and he could feel Hermione's tight canal moving around him, squeezing and massaging him as her fluids leaked out and onto him and the blanket. Just as he was reaching his peak, she convulsed once more, and he felt her practically squeeze the life out of him as she came magnificently, her nails now scratching harsh lines on his back that he could almost see, he felt so alive at that moment.

"Yes," he groaned as his own orgasm washed over him, his seed spurting into as her walls continued to massage his length. He continued to thrust until he was soft and slipped out of her completely.

After that, they lay together for a time, kissing and talking softly, caressing with hands and feet and lips.

"I think I just made you very happy," Hermione finally said in a saucy tone.

"Indeed, you did."

He took her hand in his and pressed a kiss to her neck.

"Very happy," he added.

The rest of the afternoon, they lay amongst the flowers, naked, talking and eating their packed lunch. For dessert, Snape took a canister of berries from his knapsack and placed them strategically over Hermione's body—a strawberry sliced in half on her nipples, a necklace made of sultanas and blueberries, and a large blackberry sitting like a jewel in her bellybutton—then ate them all off thoroughly, licking the sticky juices from her flesh until all evidence of fruit was gone. That was followed almost immediately by another lovemaking session.

It was late when they returned to their cabin, though the sun still shone brightly in the sky. Snape removed the wards from the door and pulled his tired wife in by her hand.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Mmhm," was her answer.

"Go take a shower, I'll sort dinner."

Snape watched as Hermione walked sleepily towards the bathroom, then began to pull out some bread and cold cuts for a light supper. When he had the table all laid, he looked at the door of the bathroom and wondered what was taking Hermione so long.

"Hermione?" he rapped lightly on the door.

No answer.

Gingerly, he opened the door and peeked inside. The shower was turned on, and she was obviously in it. "Hermione?"

Still no answer. He pushed aside the curtain and almost laughed when he saw his wife, sitting on the bench in the shower cube, sound asleep. He turned off the water and pulled a towel out of the cupboard beside the loo. She stirred a little when he dried her off, and mumbled something incoherent when he lifted her into his arms, but when he laid her on the bed, she was still sleeping quietly.

Snape put a preservation spell on the food and waved all the blinds and curtains closed before he undressed and joined his wife in bed.

TBC

AN: I'm really sorry that this took so long for me to update. I'd like to offer an excuse, but I really have none. Hopefully, the smut will exonerate me. Only a few chapters left, too!

Oh-and Occulere is Latin for privacy, or a private place.

Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

Hermione could not imagine being happier than she was when she and Snape finally returned to their home after their three-week long honeymoon. They had unpacked their trunks together, and then Hermione had gone to take a nice long bath in their lovely bathtub, big enough for both of them. She had been shocked when Snape had poked his head through the door and explained that his father needed to see him immediately, but after three week's absence, she understood that they both needed to get back to 'real' life.

"Don't mind me," she had said. "I'll just finish my bath and tackle our mail."

He had kissed her goodbye, and she did as she said, finishing her bath. It was then that she remembered her lack of bath towels.

Sighing, Hermione walked into the bedroom and transfigured the first thing she could find—her husband's cloak—and used it to dry off. She had only one clean robe left after her trip, and it was her least favorite.

She added laundry to her "To Do" list along with buying linens. Dressing quickly, she went into the living room to read the mail.

In the stack of parchment-colored envelopes, one that was silver caught her eye, and she smiled with delight when she saw that it was from Thalia. Quickly breaking the seal, she flung herself onto the sofa and began reading what her new sister-in-law had to say.

My dear Hermione,

I hope that this letter finds you well, etc. How are you? How is my brother? I shan't send this missive to you directly while you are on your honeymoon, but I must encourage you to respond to me either by floo or owl directly you return-day or night-for I have such news to give to both you and my brother.

Yes, Severus, I realize that this letter should be addressed to you, but if I did that, Hermione would never see it. As I have addressed it to her, I have no doubt that you will open it and read it, then attempt to put it back in the same order you found it. It's no good trying to pretend, you know.

I eagerly await your answer,

Thalia DeWinter

Hermione smiled and went to the floo. There was no doubt in her mind what the wonderful news was, but she wanted very much for Thalia to tell her herself. Dropping a handful of powder into the fireplace, Hermione called out the directions for Thalia's floo and called out, "Thalia? Are you there?"

A few seconds later, the woman herself stepped through Hermione's floo, and they embraced happily.

"You look fabulous!" Thalia said as Hermione pulled her to the sofa.

"So do you. Severus has gone to see your father, so we are quite alone. I wonder, though, if you would mind going to the shops with me? We bought furniture, but we forgot linens entirely. I had to use one of Severus's robes for a bath towel." She laughed at her own stupidity.

"And naturally, Severus's robe was the closest thing you could find," Thalia finished, laughing.

"Well...he wasn't here, and what he doesn't know won't hurt him."

They both laughed, and Thalia took Hermione's hand gently.

"There was something I wanted to tell you, though, the reason that I wrote you that letter."

"Oh, yes," Hermione said happily, "tell me about that!"

Thalia smiled brightly, showing off teeth that were every bit as crooked as her brother's. "The potion that Severus made worked. Loren and I are going to have a child!"

Hermione smiled and hugged her sister-in-law. "I knew it! I just wanted to hear you say it. This is wonderful news, Thalia! Of course, now Severus will have to say that it was all thanks to him and his fertility potions."

Thalia laughed. "Yes, we've thought of that. Of course, after what happened at Father's shop, and being forced to resign, he may need a morale boost."

Hermione nodded. "I hadn't thought about that for three weeks. Has anyone been implicated?"

Thalia looked down and shook her head, looking a bit dejected. "Oh, Hermione...the culprits will more than likely never be captured."

She sighed. She had a feeling that it would be that way, but she held out such hope that the culprits would be brought to justice. Not that it was a big secret who the offenders were. Lucius Malfoy's supporters were few now that most of them were dead, and there were only three or four that came to mind. Hermione was sure that each one was just as stupid as the other, and would never be able to keep the secret of how he thwarted Severus Snape, the traitor.

"We won't dwell on it, then," Hermione said. "Instead, we need to go to the shops and find some sheets!"

"Sheets?" Thalia balked.

"Yes, we went furniture shopping before we left for Iceland, and we forgot linens completely."

Thalia took her by the hand and pulled out her wand. "It really is quite perverse that you should go and buy a bed and no bedding."

It was Hermione's turn to look down uncomfortably. "That was the day that the shop was vandalized. Severus wasn't in the mood for any more shopping, and we sort of forgot about it after that."

Thalia gave an apologetic look. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to put my foot in it just then."

"Oh, don't give it another thought. Just go shopping with me."

When they Apparated back to Hermione's sitting room, each holding parcels, they found Snape sitting on the sofa, reading.

"Hello, Severus," Hermione said as she dropped her parcels on the coffee table.

"Hermione," he greeted, marking his place and setting his book aside.

Hermione was surprised when he stood and kissed her forehead in front of his sister, but she was pleased with the attention. He then turned and pulled his sister into an embrace.

Hermione stood back and watched with pleasure as her husband greeted his sister and kissed her tenderly.

"I'm very happy for you," she heard him murmur.

"Thank you, Severus," she answered. "But I must go now. Write us later and we'll all have dinner together some night soon, all right?"

Snape and Hermione nodded before Thalia stepped back into the floo and went home.

"I forgot to leave you a note, Severus, I'm sorry," Hermione said as she began to levitate her parcels towards the bedroom.

"I knew where you were," he said with a smirk, holding up Thalia's letter. "For something my sister obviously did not want me to read, you made very sure to leave it in plain sight."

She laughed and pulled out a set of new sheets. "I'm sure Thalia will be devastated." Hermione began to make the bed with swift flicks of her wand. "What did your father need you for?"

She looked up at her husband, and almost dropped her wand. He looked...odd. She couldn't tell if he was happy or sad or indifferent. She had never seen this new expression on his face, and it scared her just a little.

"Hermione," he took her hands in his. "The most extraordinary thing has happened."

She felt as though her world was crashing down. "What is it, Severus? Is everything well? But you were reading a book, not pacing, so...what is it?"

She found herself pressed very tightly against her husband, his soft chuckles reverberating through his chest. "Do not worry, Hermione. I have good news, but it is extraordinary."

She looked up at him, and he pushed her gently against the bed so that she was sitting, and then knelt before her.

"Hermione, my father has decided to sell the family home and take a smaller flat in town. He has decided that this is the best course of action in order to keep his head above water, financially speaking."

Hermione failed to find any sense in his words. "I don't understand...how is this good news? Your family home..."

"I care not for that place. This is our home. But more than that, now that my father has admitted to being virtually penniless, I am no longer subject to his every whim. He is

still the head of my family, as I will be when he passes, but without the promise of an inheritance, I can be my own man and pursue my own interests."

Hermione was beginning to feel overwhelmed. His own interests? What did that mean? Did he expect her to let him go gallivanting around the globe, returning only when he felt like it only to find her waiting for him?

She felt his hand on her face, and she focused her eyes on his. "Hermione, my dearest, I see what you are thinking. I will always be here for you; you need not worry about that. But think, if I am free to pursue my own interests in occupation, if I am not forced to hold onto merely making potions for the rest of my life, I can perform the research that I have always wished and perhaps be more. With my father ruling my life as he has, I would be stuck in his little shop in Knockturn Alley forever."

"So he is selling the shop?" What would they do for money?

"Yes, he is. And he has promised me the money from the sale."

Hermione gripped Snape's shoulders to steady herself. She felt his arms around her then, and his body pressing her back against the bed.

"It's all right, dearest. I promise you. Trust me."

She snuggled against his chest and wrapped her arms around him, taking a deep breath as she did so. She decided that she was too young for all this worry. What eighteen-year-old was concerned about their income? Wasn't she supposed to just apprentice and allow her parents to continue supporting her, as they would have done if she had gone to a Muggle university? What was the ministry thinking, asking children to get married?

Shocked, she suddenly realized why her father had been so upset at her marriage. The worst part of it all was that she couldn't imagine her life any different at this point. No matter what, good or bad, she wanted Severus Snape by her side.

Still in wonder at her own emotions, Hermione sat up and stared down at her husband. "Do you still know what I'm thinking?"

He turned on his side and rested his head in his hand, regarding her closely. "No, I cannot. And I do not want to use Legillimens to find out. I assume that you are a bit overwhelmed at the moment, however."

She nodded. "More than just a little, actually."

Snape sat up and put his hand on her cheek. "I forget how young you are sometimes. I know I've given you more than enough to think about for the next few weeks, but the promise I made you at the beginning still stands. You will never want for anything."

Hermione smiled and put her hand over his. "I know."

He leaned closer to her, a gleam in his eyes that she had never seen before. "I remember what you asked me for, too." He kissed her. "Passion was first on your list. Remember?"

She nodded and kissed him back. "You asked me if I love you..."

Hermione was pulled into a strong embrace, lying on top of Snape. "I've felt it this past week, Hermione," he whispered, brushing her hair from her face and over her shoulder. "I haven't said anything about it, I wanted you to come to me first."

She stared in his eyes, still shining brightly. It was all so different for her—he was different. She could feel the change in her heart. He would always be churlish and surly to others, always sarcastic, mean and crabby, but he was hers. She could tell just by looking at him that he belonged to her. "I do love you, Severus Snape."

Snape was still trying to acclimate himself to the bustle at Grimmauld Place, his dinner still digesting in his stomach, when Hermione emerged from her old bedroom, Crookshanks sitting happily in her arms, Ron and Harry following closely behind her.

"He really missed you. I don't think he went to sleep unless he was laying on your blanket," Ron said, giving the cat a look.

"We all missed you," Harry said. "I hope you won't be a stranger now that you're an old married woman."

The sound of Hermione's laughter was music to his ears. "You can always count on me to be here, Harry," she answered. "Isn't that right, Severus?"

The last place Snape liked to be was in the Black House. Even as a young boy, he hated being dropped off to play with Rudolphus and Sirius. When Sirius started teasing him mercilessly, hatred turned to loathing. "I won't stop you coming here," he promised.

When Hermione shoved Crookshanks into his arms, he balked, but wrapped his arms around the marmalade-colored cat, reflecting that it was nearly impossible to remove cat hairs from one's robes. Crookshanks merely looked up at him with wise eyes and placed his furry paw on Snape's shoulder.

It didn't help that he was still half-erect, and all he could think about was getting Hermione back in bed as soon as humanly possible. He had just been driving her wild by nibbling on that sensitive area behind her ear when Harry's owl had dropped a letter off, inviting them both to come for dinner and pick up the cat while they were there. Hermione could hardly wait to get her familiar back, so she had insisted upon Apparating immediately.

Snape knew that he was being selfish, but after three weeks of having Hermione all to himself, and after telling her that he loved her, he did not want to share her. Ever. Or at least until after a few hours of *showing* her how much he loved her.

He took Crookshanks down to the study—their study—and sat down on the sofa with the cat in his lap. He didn't feel that he needed to say how he felt. Crookshanks gave him a look of understanding, and Snape remembered that he was part Kneazle. They spent a few minutes commiserating, Snape scratching Crookshanks's ears while Crookshanks purred and kneaded Snape's lap, when Hermione walked in, her face flushed.

"Severus, what are you two doing in here? Never mind...you need to read this."

She shoved *The Daily Prophet* in front of his face, taking Crookshanks as she sat down beside him.

On the back page, hidden between two advertisements, was a simple article.

Edmund Eberheart, new Minister of Magic, seeks to repeal Marriage Law. "The Marriage Law is not achieving the success that my predecessor hoped for," Eberhart stated on July 8th. "We are looking to repeal the law and annul any marriages that came from it."

Whether or not Eberhart will be successful remains to be seen.

Snape felt his blood run cold.

"Severus, you don't think that they'll annul the marriages of the couples who are happy, do you?"

"I don't know, Hermione. The Ministry can do anything it likes. How did you find this?"

She pointed to an advertisement for the newest Nimbus broom. "Ron was showing me that. I don't think anyone else has paid attention to it, neither he nor Harry had seen

it."

"Of course not. The Ministry is going to repeal the law and annul the marriages, and then say that they had given ample notice. Where is Arthur Weasley? He'll be able to give us the pertinent information."

Snape stood and Hermione took his arm, standing next to him. "Arthur is at a raid tonight. Perhaps Tonks knows something."

They found Tonks in Remus's room, lounging on his bed and reading while Remus was putting together some sort of contraption at his desk.

"Tonks, do you know anything about the repeal of the Marriage Law?" Hermione asked without preamble.

Tonks raised her eyebrows and sat up. "I haven't heard anything. Why?"

Remus joined her on the bed, looking concerned.

"Here, in *The Daily Prophet*, on the back page," Hermione said, handing them the paper.

"That's typical, isn't it?" Remus asked. "They put it on the last page, and when no one protests, they assume that it's all right. That's the same way they snuck the law, in the first place."

"They can't annul *all* of the marriages, though. Some people must be happy!"

"Not everyone is as lucky as you are, Hermione," Tonks said quietly.

Snape felt his stomach tighten. He could only imagine how some of the spouses of proud, Pureblood families were treated. In all honesty, repealing the law was the best thing to do.

"But they can't annul them all," Hermione protested again.

"If the couples are given a choice, Hermione, anyone involved in an abusive relationship would be forced to stay in it," Snape said gently, his hand on her shoulder.

She turned and wrapped her arms around his waist. "I won't leave you," she promised.

It was something so simple, and so sweet, that he didn't know what to say at first. "I'd love to see you try," he murmured against the top of her head, smoothing her hair down.

The sound of Remus chuckling brought Snape out of his current thoughts, and he turned and faced him. "I see you've found something amusing, Remus. Won't you share your thoughts with the rest of us?"

Remus smiled and waved it off. "I was just thinking about the Weasleys and all the things they were going to do to you if you didn't treat our Hermione right. They'd all eat their hats right now to see you two like this."

His smile was warm and friendly, and Snape found that he could not be angry with him for too long. "Indeed. How honorable of the clan to naturally assume that Hermione would be the sufferer in the relationship, and care nothing for how she treats me."

Hermione laughed and snuggled closer to him. "Yes, I abuse him horribly. You should really do something about it."

"I doubt you'd garner much sympathy, Severus," Tonks said with a smile. "You aren't much of a damsel in distress, if you know what I mean."

Snape was saved from retort when Crookshanks rested his paw against Snape's leg and let out a pitiful howl. Hermione pushed away from Snape's embrace and lifted her cat into her arms. "I think Crookshanks wants to go home," she said.

Thank goodness. "He's not the only one. Let's get away from these two barmy Byzantines."

"I'd say that we've missed you, Severus, but you know how I hate to lie," Remus responded.

"And you know how I hate to hex people for lying."

Remus smirked at Snape, and Snape answered with a smirk of his own.

"See ya all later," Tonks waved merrily.

Snape sneered and led Hermione from the room so that she could bid farewell to her friends. He stood by stoically as Potter and Weasley made over Hermione and vice versa. When he Apparated them back to their flat, he set Crookshanks on the floor unceremoniously and pressed Hermione against the nearest wall, lifting her so that her legs straddled his waist.

"Crookshanks is going to stop talking to me if I keep ignoring him..." she mumbled against his lips.

"Who would you rather have, the cat or me?"

She laughed. "I need to think about that for a minute."

Snape carried her to the bedroom and threw her onto the partially made bed. She laughed and opened the front of her robe so that he could see her black lacy bra. Smirking, Snape opened his own robe and discarded it on the floor, the front of his boxers obviously tented. He put his hand on his hardness and raised an eyebrow. Hermione's eyes darkened and she licked her lips.

"I think you've already made your decision, Madam Snape."

She giggled, and he pressed himself on top of her, opening her robe the rest of the way. He lowered his head and kissed her, his hand pulling her breasts from her bra as he ground himself against her.

"Oh, Severus," she moaned as he sucked at her neck, biting it lightly.

A sudden shift in pressure occurred on the mattress, and he lifted his head, focusing on the deep orange eyes of Crookshanks. The cat wore a very disapproving glare as he stared Snape down.

"Blast!"

TBC

AN: What? Your cat has never interrupted you during an inopportune moment? If a door's open, the cat goes in there. If there are people in the room, he hides himself. You can close the door (though Severus has never owned a cat, so he probably doesn't understand why he would have to close the door in his own house), but they

usually find their way in.

Anyway, got this one out pretty quickly. Thanks to everyone who's reading and reviewing, and especially all of you who have given me great reviews for my new story, Mister Mom, as well. I appreciate the time you guys take to review, and I try to answer the reviews, but some of them fall through the cracks. I shall endeavor to do better from now on, though.

sixteen

Chapter 16 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

An: Okay, here's the second-to-last chapter. I'll be posting the last chapter within a few days (it's been written for a while), and then follow up with an Epilogue. Not very long, just a little tidbit. Anyway, I hope you all enjoy this!

The Daily Prophet

August 17, 1998

The Ministry Of Magic has made a law to repeal the Marriage Law of September 18, 1997. Any and all marriages that have come about due to the Marriage Law will be annulled unless a formal protest is made by August 31, 1998. The annulments will become official on September 1, 1998. A Ministry Spokesman has said that all annulled marriages will be finite, and there will be no chance for remarriage between the couples. "The Repeal is to keep any abuse from Purebloods against their Muggle-born spouses. Allowing the couples to remarry would negate the protection that we are offering them. The appeal will take several weeks, but that is because the Ministry will use Muggle technology called Psychiatry to determine if a Muggle-born is indeed involved in an abusive relationship. Another condition for appeal is pregnancy, as we do not wish any children to be raised in a home with only one parent if we can help it."

The Ministry will be sending out letters and appeal forms to all couples affected by the Marriage Law and the Repeal. Those interested in protesting are encouraged to do so immediately.

Hermione looked up from the paper and stared in the eyes of her husband.

"Are you pregnant?" he asked hopefully.

Hermione shook her head sadly.

"It's probably for the best, at any rate. We really don't need the addition of a child on top of our other stressors."

She could only agree, but was saved from comment when a Ministry Owl came flying in the room, looking very important with an emblem on his chest, and delivered a package directly to Hermione. She stared at it for the longest time, not wanting to open it. She didn't want to face the truth behind the envelope.

"Dearest, the sooner we protest, the faster we'll put this all behind us," Snape said simply, taking her hand in his. "Open it. I won't let you go."

Hermione looked up at her husband, happy that he spoke the words she so longed to hear. "Thank you."

He gave her an imperceptible smile and squeezed her hand before letting it go. Hermione took a deep breath, and broke the seal on the letter.

"Dear Miss Granger," she read aloud. "Oh, that burns me! My name is Mrs. Snape!"

"Darling, I know it is. Please read on."

"This letter is to inform you of your marriage annulment, effective September One, 1998. If you wish to protest this annulment, please fill out the attached form and return it to the Ministry Of Magic, Marriage Department as soon as possible. Thank you."

Hermione set the letter down and took out the protest form, checking it for charms. She found only a Veritas Charm, which she smiled at. That way, the Ministry could not accuse her of lying on her application.

"Love, could you get me a quill please?" she asked as she began to read the questions on the application.

Name: Hermione Jane Snape, Order of Merlin First Class

Spouse: Severus Saloniux Snape, Order of Merlin First Class, Potion Master

Floo Direction: Basement Flat, Kingsley Townhouse

Preliminary Questions

All applicants will be asked these questions

Is your Pureblood spouse abusive to you in any way?

An unequivocal no

Is your Pureblood spouse's family abusive towards you in any way, ie, do they belittle you and treat you in an inferior manner due to your bloodline?

No, the Snape family has been more than accommodating to me since I became engaged so Severus, and had accepted me as a member of the family even before we were married.

What is your reason for protesting this annulment?

Severus and I have fallen in love, and wish to remain together the rest of our days.

"Don't you feel that's a bit much, darling?"

Hermione looked up at him. "No, I don't. I mean it, and this parchment knows that I can't lie."

He leaned over and kissed her cheek.

She smiled and finished filling out her protest form.

Three days later, another Ministry Owl flew through the window and set an envelope in front of Hermione.

Dear Miss Granger,

Hermione frowned.

This letter is to inform you that the Ministry has received your protest form and will process it in due course. In the mean time, you will be allowed to live with Severus Snape until the Ministry contacts you. If you wish to leave, please forward your directions to the Ministry immediately.

Thank you,

Aubrey MacAllister,

Marriage Relations Investigator

"What does it say?" Snape asked, looking a bit worried.

"They received my protest, and are allowing us to continue living together during the protest process. However, if I need to leave, they'll allow me to and even send an escort to make sure that I'm all right."

Snape laughed. "Darling, I know that you wrote to them that you love me and don't wish to leave, but what does it say?"

Hermione looked up sharply. "I just told you that it says that we are to live together during the protestation process."

"Yes, I understood that."

"And that the Ministry will send an escort if I wish to leave. Tell me what I just said."

"You said that the Ministry understands that you do not ever want to leave me."

Hermione sighed and shook her head. "They obviously put a charm on this so that if I try to paraphrase or read it, you will only hear about how devoted I am to you."

Snape shrugged and took a drink of coffee. "Once all this is over, you'll be able to tell me about it."

Hermione was about to reply when a knock at the door stopped her. The Sneakscope showed her father's face, so she opened the door without hesitation.

"Dad! It's good to see you. But don't you have to work today?"

Mr. Granger walked into the kitchen and eyed Snape, who was still drinking his coffee and reading the paper.

"Hermione, I got a letter from the Ministry today, and I want you to explain it to me."

Hermione looked a little confused, but took a rolled-up parchment from his hand.

"Oh, this is your letter informing you of my protest to the annulment." She looked up at him. "That's all."

Mr. Granger gave Snape a look, and Hermione frowned at him. "Would you mind giving us some privacy?"

"Of course not," Snape said, standing to his full height before lifting his coffee mug and paper and retreating to the study.

"Hermione, have you gone mad? Here you have a perfect chance to get out of this sham and have a real life, and you're protesting?"

Hermione sat down at the table, unsure of what to say. "I understand that our courtship and marriage were unorthodox—"

"That's bloody sure!" he shouted, and then sat down facing her. "Hermione, I don't blame you in this at all, I never have. I have blamed the Ministry all along, and now here they've offered you a way out, and you won't take it!"

Hermione said a small prayer that she would choose her words wisely before she spoke. "Dad, if I allow this annulment now, I will never be allowed to marry Severus again—the Ministry has prohibited it. And before you ask, no, that is not a good thing, and yes, I see myself married to him in ten years. I have never met a man who has challenged my intellect as thoroughly as he, and I have never met someone so bent on making me happy, either. I know that I'm a bit young, and lord only knows how inexperienced I am at all this domestic stuff, and everyone in the Wizarding World knows that I am the greatest witch of my age. What has that got to do with my marital status? Not one person has objected to Severus—the greatest Potions Master of his age—getting married and taking time away from his research. Severus supports my apprenticeship completely, but I am the one who is being questioned as to whether or not I can handle this!"

"This has nothing to do with feminism, and everything to do with ageism," Mr. Granger said sharply. "I don't doubt that you can juggle work and family. I do think that you are too young to handle those things!"

"If I had married Ron instead of Severus, would you still object to my protest?"

Hermione watched as her father's eyes lowered a bit. "Yes," he said. "Even though he is closer to your age, I still feel that you are too young to be married."

She reached out and touched his arm. "Thank you for being honest. But Dad, you must trust me to make the right decisions for myself, especially now that I am of age. I know what I am doing, and I wish to stay with Severus. I love him."

Mr. Granger took her hand and stared at her for a long time. "Madness," he finally mumbled.

"You always said you wanted me to be happy."

"I do." Hermione was surprised to see him near tears.

"I am happy, I promise."

Mr. Granger gave a heaving sigh. "I can't talk you out of this, can I?"

Hermione shook her head. "You'll have to be happy for me, Dad. And I promise, Severus and I aren't about to make any sudden decisions about family until after my apprenticeship and after he decides what he wants to do with his life now that he has it to himself."

"He could come and see me at my office. I'll whiten his teeth for you."

Hermione giggled. "Go say something nice to him before I hex you."

Mr. Granger gave a smile, in spite of himself, Hermione surmised. "You can't. That would be an unauthorized attack on a Muggle."

"Too right. Of course, I could just say that you got my ire up, and I had an uncontrollable fit."

Hermione smiled as her father pulled her close, but her smile faded with the intense gaze he gave her.

"Just be careful, Hermione. That's all I ask. Be careful, and think clearly first. Don't make any rash decisions."

"Of course I won't, Dad."

Snape heard everything through the thin walls of the flat. He knew that Granger was only looking out for the best interests of his daughter, and Snape could appreciate that. But he also knew, as Granger undoubtedly did, that Hermione was the last person who would make a rash decision about anything.

Part of him couldn't shake the thought that Hermione was fighting for him merely on a matter of principle rather than out of a desire to stay married to him. He knew it was an unfounded thought, but he couldn't quite rationalize it away, no matter how hard he tried to. He sometimes cursed the fact that he didn't have the same Gryffindor stubbornness of his wife, but he did have the sly cunning that all Slytherins possessed, and he would use it to work on Hermione, to determine what her motives were through all of this. The Slytherin mind just could not grasp Gryffindor honesty, especially the kind that Hermione so often displayed. She must have an ulterior motive. There must be something else she wanted.

He still could not pull apart what seemed true and dwell upon what was true. He knew that Hermione simply loved him for who he was, but every smile, every touch, every time they made love, he could not keep himself from wondering, "How much will this cost me later?"

When he heard about the law being repealed, his first thought was that Hermione would wish to leave. When she resolutely stated that she would stay, he wondered again, at what price? He had not expected that she would want his heart.

After Granger left, she came and sat down on his lap, her fingers tickling his cheek and neck before her lips pressed against his skin, feeling like rose petals. He rested his chin on top of her head and decided that he would never let her go.

The beginning of September found Snape nursing his wife for a severe case of Bat Flu. Every time she sneezed, the kettle boiled spontaneously, and the lid flew off, no matter where it was hidden in the house. If it didn't have water in it to begin with, it did when she sneezed.

It didn't help when he began to feel weak, no matter how much Pepper-Up potion he had been taking. Walking into the bedroom, he saw Hermione curled up inside three blankets, her hair falling lankly over her face. Gently, he moved her a little and rearranged the blankets, then undressed and joined her, pulling her body to his.

He was just on the verge of very deep sleep when a pounding at the door shocked him awake.

"Bloody hell!" he groused as the pounding came again, even louder this time.

Hermione groaned and rolled over, pulling her robe off the chair where she had thrown it the night before. Snape followed suit and dressed himself, pulling on bedslippers before going to the door, Hermione shuffling along behind him.

"Who's there?" he called, unwilling to open it lest he be caught up in socializing instead of resting, where both he and his wife should be.

"This is Oliver Oberforth with the Ministry of Magic. Open up!"

Snape raised his eyebrow at Hermione.

"If this is about my protest, I wonder why they didn't just send an owl?" she wondered sleepily, wiping her nose with the sleeve of her robe.

Snape shrugged and opened the door, his nose feeling a bit stuffed as well.

"Yes?" he asked as the very large man on the other side pushed his way in the door. Hermione moved close to him, and he surrounded her protectively with his arms.

"I'm 'ere to escort Miss 'Ermione Granger off these premises, as per the Marriage Law Repeal set ou' by t'Minister of Magic."

"I protested the annulment," Hermione said thickly, her throat obviously straining out the words. "I have a letter from the Ministry that says that I can stay with my husband until after the hearing. And the name is Hermione Snape, thank you very much."

"I 'ave my orders," the large man growled.

Snape began to feel just the slightest bit nervous. Could they simply remove Hermione from him like this? He was sure that the letter they had received stated that she was to remain only if she wanted to, and she replied that she wanted to.

"Perhaps your orders were wrong," Snape suggested.

"Yer ta stay outta it, Snape," Oliver Oberforth insisted, pointing a very large, very strong looking finger at Snape's nose. "'Aven't you done enough ta th' poor girl?"

Hermione removed a handkerchief from her pocket and blew her nose. "I have the flu," she said angrily. "Severus has never done anything to hurt me, as I said in my protest. I also said that I refuse to leave him, and that if my marriage is annulled, then I will continue to live with him regardless. I'm sorry you came all this way. You may leave now."

She began to sag under her exertion, and Snape pulled her against him tightly.

"My wife is extremely ill," he said evenly. "She needs to go back to bed, not with you!"

"Look, Snape," Oberforth said threateningly, his finger back in Snape's face, "I told ya ta stay outta this! Now if you don't dry up, I'll get an Auror in 'ere!"

"That's a very good idea," Hermione said. "I think we should get two-Nymphadora Tonks and Kingsley Shackelbolt. They'll do for starters."

She pushed away from Snape and went to the lamp stand and opened the drawer. Snape knew that inside there were communication mirrors for most of their friends, just in case they didn't answer by Floo and it was an emergency. He watched as she found Tonks's mirror in the shuffle and called to her. Within seconds, a friendly voice

called back, and he could actually see Hermione relax a little with relief.

"Tonks, could you come over? There's someone here from the Ministry who is trying to take me away from Severus."

Within seconds, Tonks Apparated into the living room and assessed the situation.

"What's the argy-bargy?" she said amicably as she escorted Hermione to the sofa.

Snape followed his wife and wrapped an afghan around her as her head fell back weakly against the cushions.

"This man is trying to take my very sick wife away from me."

"I've got me orders," Oberforth countered.

"And I'm an Auror," Tonks said merrily, placing the back of her hand over Snape's forehead. "And these two need a Mediwitch more than they need you to break them apart."

Oberforth snorted and pulled out a piece of parchment. "These are me orders, Tonks," he said again, more firmly.

Snape wondered if perhaps Hermione ought to just go with Oberforth for the time being, until their hearing. He didn't like the idea of her leaving him, and he certainly didn't want her to sleep anywhere other than with him, but so far everything was looking very bad.

"Don't even think about it," Hermione mumbled. "I'm not leaving with him."

Well, that settled that. Snape arose from the sofa and went to a small writing desk that sat against one wall of the living room. He opened the slanted top and found the file that Hermione had been keeping, labeled "Correspondence With The Ministry".

"This is the parchment that allows Hermione Snape to stay with me until our hearing," Snape said, shoving the parchment at Tonks.

Tonks took the paper and studied it for a few moments.

"All right, Ollie-let me see your orders."

Oberforth handed over his parchment, and Tonks spent several moments looking at it, a deep frown forming more and more with every passing second.

"What is it?" Snape finally asked.

"All of these couples have filed appeals."

"I don't know nuffin' 'bout that," Oberforth said defiantly, crossing his large arms over his chest. "All I know about is what it says on that paper there. It says that I need to escort 'Ermione Granger ou'a here, an' that's what I aim ta do."

Tonks shook her head. "You have no grounds to do that, though. This is a list of people who have protested the annulments-not people who should be moved from their home."

"Then why was I told to escort them all out?" Oberforth countered, pointing at the paper.

Snape had to admit that it was a logical question.

"I don't know," Tonks admitted, pocketing both parchments. "But I'm going to find out. Ollie-you know as well as I do that no one at the Ministry holds out any hopes of you getting this job done today. Why don't you go to a pub and have a Firewhiskey on me? I'll check all this over, and get back to you tomorrow."

"I've already been sittin' on it fer a week," Oberforth argued.

"And this is significant....how?"

Oberforth turned quite red in the face, and Snape surmised that he was known for sloughing off his duties at the Ministry.

"Right, I'll just go on my way then, Tonks, but if I get questioned, I'm sending my boss over to you."

Tonks smiled at the hulking man. "You do that, Ollie. I'd love to have a word with your supervisor. Severus, Hermione, I'll see you two later. In the meantime, get some sleep."

Snape nodded mutely as the pair exited his house. He could hardly pull up enough strength to latch the door. He simply sat on the sofa, Hermione propped against his shoulder, and fell asleep.

In his dreams, he saw a very large snake. It looked like a python to him, but much larger than any he had ever seen. "I'm a snake," it hissed.

"Sssssnaaaaaake. I'm a ssssnake."

I can bloody well see that, he thought to the reptile.

"Ssssssnake. I'm a ssssnake. Oi, I'm a ssssnake."

"Oi, Snape!"

Snap

Snape opened his bleary eyelids, and found himself staring at Nymphadora Tonks, her blue hair spiked in large chunks, and a dog collar around her neck.

"You all right, love?" Hermione's voice asked, concerned.

He would have answered, but the bloody snake put cotton in his mouth.

"Looks like he nursed you out of your cold, and caught it himself for the trouble."

"Poor dear," Hermione murmured, her hand smoothing over his forehead.

"Good news, though. Got this letter from the Ministry. Neither of you are going to be forced to move, and your hearing is set for the sixteenth."

Snape finally managed to swallow. "That's great."

"Here, I'll make some tea," Tonks said, moving off towards the kitchen.

"I'm so sorry I gave you my cold," Hermione said quietly as she continued to stroke his face. "And you were so good to me all the time I was ill."

Snape managed a small smile and twisted one of her curls around his finger. "I'm fine," he lied.

Hermione simply shook her head and asked Tonks how the tea was coming.

"Just bringing it around," the Auror answered happily. "Here we are, nice and hot with lots of honey."

Snape hid his grimace and took the cup that had managed to remain unscathed by Tonks's clumsiness. He hated sweetened tea, but he drank the cup down, knowing that it would do him good.

"You seem to be feeling much better," he remarked to Hermione in a gritty voice.

"Much better. Still not great, but doing better."

"I'll get out of your way," Tonks said as she pulled a cloak over her shoulders. "I have lots of stuff to do. Oh, and Ollie says he's sorry about yesterday. I hope you feel better, Snape."

Snape nodded to her, then let his head fall back on the sofa. "The sixteenth?"

"That's only a week away."

He only hoped he would be up for it by then.

"You'll be feeling better in no time. Come on, let's get you to bed."

TBC

Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 17

Marriage Challenge Fic.

Ministry of Magic

Docket # 327589

Regarding: Severus Snape and Hermione Granger

Testimony given by Harry Potter, Order of Merlin, First Class, friend of Hermione Granger since 1991

September 18, 1998

Hermione [Granger] is one of my best friends, and I would never want any harm to come to her. I do not consider her to be in any danger from her husband [Severus Snape], as he seems to love and care for her a great deal. In the list of questions I have been asked, one sprang to mind immediately, involving Snape trying to keep her from her friends. On the contrary, Snape has actually been willing to share her with us [regarding Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley, Ginevra Weasley, Molly Weasley, and Arthur Weasley], and has told me himself that he understands her attachment to us. If you are asking my opinion as to whether or not they should stay married, I don't see why not, if they want to.

Signed, Harry James Potter

Testimony given by Ronald Weasley, Order of Merlin, First Class, friend of Hermione Granger since 1991

September 18, 1998

Yeah, Hermione [Granger] seems to like [Severus] Snape, so if she wants to be with him, I say let her. I've never known Hermione to do something she didn't want to do, if that helps, so if she's still with him and appealing this annulment, then that's what she wants.

Signed, Ronald Bilius Weasley

Testimony given by Ginevra Molly Weasley, Order of Merlin, First Class, friend of Hermione Granger since 1992

September 18, 1998

I've known Hermione [Granger] for the past six years, and have shared a room during holidays with her for the past three. I can honestly say that I have never seen her quite as happy as she is now with Severus [Snape]. I have read through your checklist thoroughly, and will go through each item specifically.

1. Is he jealous, does he attempt to keep her from family and friends? I have only seen Severus react jealously once, and I think he had good cause. Hermione never behaves Jealously over Severus.

2. Blames others (including you) for his faults. They are generally too busy berating themselves over a mistake, that they forget there's even anyone else in the room. No for both.

3. Blames circumstances for his problems. As an ex-Death Eater, Severus could easily blame others for his problems. Instead, he became a spy against Voldemort, and never bemoaned the danger he was in. Likewise, Hermione could easily claim prejudice at every corner, as she is a Muggle-born witch. She instead works past that. No on both counts.

4. His behaviour is unpredictable. This is a warning sign? Who's behavior isn't unpredictable? However, predictability is something that we have all come to expect from both Hermione and Severus.

- 5. He belittles you verbally.** Hermione is always fair and thinks before she speaks. I have never known her to react angrily unless provoked. Severus...no comment.
- 6. He cannot control his anger.** I think it's a testament to his control over his anger that Severus has not hexed even one of his students for the stupidity they often display in his class. Severus is a powerful wizard, and he understands this. Therefore, he keeps control of his emotions. With regards to Hermione...no comment.
- 7. He always asks for a second chance.** Doesn't everyone deserve a second chance?
- 8. He says he'll change, that he won't do it again.** Severus *did* change, and he changed his life. As for Hermione, I can't think of anything other than forcing everyone to study exhaustively for their N.E.W.T.s. And she's never promised to not do it again. Without Hermione, most of the Gryffindors would never have graduated, Harry Potter especially.
- 9. His family resolves problems with violence.** I actually don't know Severus's family, but Hermione says that he is nothing like any of them. As for Hermione's family, they are all loving and kind.
- 10. He plays on your guilt.** No for both of them.
- 11. His behaviour often worsens when he uses alcohol or mind-altering potions.** Neither of them imbibe to excess.
- 12. He is close-minded. His way is the only way.** Both Hermione and Severus are open to new ideas and different ways of seeing things. The extensive research that each goes through before even presenting a hypothesis is incredible. No for both of them.

Signed, Ginevra Molly Weasley

Note from the Ministry Of Magic-As Ginevra is still in the process of being educated and an under-age witch, it is our belief that her testimony be removed from the following proceedings. Frederick Fletcher, Interrogator for the Wizengamot, Department of Mysteries

Decision: As Ginevra is a recipient of the Order of Merlin, First Class for her acts in defeating He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named, it is our decision that her testimony stand, but with the caution that she is immature and unable to understand what love and marriage are truly about. Grizelda Marchbanks, Interrogator for the Wizengamot

Testimony of Albus Dumbledore, Order of Merlin, First Class, and Grand Sorcerer; Founder and Secretkeeper, Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, educator of Hermione Granger since 1991

September 21, 1998

It is my opinion that Severus Snape, and Order of Merlin, First Class recipient is faring well now that he is married to Hermione Granger, an Order of Merlin, First Class recipient. I have never had any doubt once I found out that they were engaged, that they would live splendidly together. In a world where opposites attract, Miss Granger and Mr. Snape are a testament to those who prefer partners with similar intellects and interests and get along swimmingly. I am exceedingly happy for both of them, and can only surmise that if their marriage is annulled, that they will simply remarry in a Muggle fashion as soon as they can without changing any aspect of their lives at all. I recommend that you not annul their marriage. I can testify first-hand that Severus is happier than he has been in decades.

Signed, Albus Dumbledore, etc.

Testimony of Thalia DeWinter, sister to Severus Snape

September 21, 1998

Since Severus [Snape] became engaged to Hermione, I have been very happy for both of them. I find your "checklist" to be offensive, especially considering that the abuser is referred to as "He" rather than a more diplomatic "They". It automatically brings one's thoughts towards my brother as the abuser in the relationship, though I can tell you firsthand that neither he nor Hermione [Granger] would ever put up with any sort of abuse whatsoever. Severus is a loving and sensitive brother, and I could not ask for a better one.

Signed, Thalia DeWinter

It is the opinion of the Wizengamot that Mrs. DeWinter's Testimony is biased in her brother's favor and will not be considered in our final decision.

September 23, 1998

The finding of the Wizengamot for Docket number 327589.

It is the decision of the Wizengamot that Hermione Jane Granger remain married to Severus Salonus Snape. No further inquiry into this marriage is required. Hermione Jane Granger's name shall forthwith be changed to Hermione Jane Snape.

Grizelda Marchbanks, High Inquisitor

Hermione and Severus waded through the many parchments that had been sent to them until they reached the findings. Each breathed a sigh of relief and fell against each other for comfort.

"I was so sure that we would win, but I could not be easy until I finally saw this."

"Me as well," Snape answered, kissing her forehead.

Hermione turned and climbed into his lap, straddling his hips and kissing him soundly on the lips.

"Now that we're married again, don't you think we should have sex?"

Snape smiled at her, a sight that had become rare in the past weeks. "I believe it is tradition to consummate a marriage in such a way."

Hermione began unbuttoning his robe and giggled. "Oh, I love it when you talk to me like you're still a professor. Take points from my house."

He looked as though he was about to comply when he suddenly stopped. "Where's Crookshanks?" He looked around the room.

"Sleeping on our bed," Hermione whispered, grazing her teeth against his neck. She didn't stop when her husband lifted his wand and locked and warded the bedroom door.

"That furball isn't going to ruin this for us," he grumbled. "Now, where was I?"

Hermione smiled and pulled her robe open. "You were about to take points from my house if I don't..."

She loved the mischievous smirk that his lips formed. "Ah, right. Ten points from Gryffindor if you don't remove that blasted bra this instant."

The door began to pound as though a very heavy hand were knocking upon it.

"We know you're in there!" someone called through the wood.

"We kin hear yeh breathin'!" Hagrid's voice called out next.

Snape sighed a long-suffering sigh and buttoned Hermione's robe back up, then opened the door with a flick of his wand. Instantly, Hagrid, Harry, Ron, Bill, Fred, George, Lupin, Shackelbolt, Tonks, and Molly and Arthur crowded in to their tiny flat, offering congratulations and bearing food. Hagrid was carrying a cake that was nearly too large for him to carry.

"I'm so happy for you two! Really, it's wonderful!"

"Oh, set that down over there, Hagrid. I'll conjure some plates."

"Where should the sandwiches go, Mum?"

"George, stop trying to hide things inside the custards!"

"Ginny, come sit with me at the table!"

"Remus, don't drop the platter."

"Hermione, Crookshanks is locked in the bedroom, did you know?"

"Hold it!" Hermoine called, standing on the sofa to make herself taller. "Wait! Wait! Everyone! Severus and I are the only couple so far that has been granted a hearing by the Ministry of Magic. If you insist on staying here," she looked very hard at Harry and Ron, no doubt remembering their lack of enthusiasm regarding S.P.E.W., "then you'll help me plan a campaign to get every couple heard."

Snape almost groaned. Only five minutes before, he had been VERY ready to consummate his marriage. Now he was going to be dragged into helping others remain married.

"We're behind you, Hermione," Tonks said as she knocked over a pitcher of lemonade. "Whoops!"

"Yeah, totally. What they did was so wrong," Harry agreed.

"Besides," Ron put in, "after Voldemort, this oughta be a snap."

Hermione sat back down and beamed at her friends. "And you, Severus? Will you help me?"

He looked her up and down for a moment. "Of course I will."

Hermione positively glowed at him.

Conclusion:

The Daily Prophet

January 17, 1999

Last Hearing Held For Marriage Law

The last couple protesting their separation from the Marriage Law, Emmeline Tetchner and Gustav Jagermann of Brunswick, have had their hearing before the Ministry of Magic. From a unanimous vote, it has been ruled that Mr. And Mrs. Jagermann are allowed to remain married, thereby ending all mention of the marriage law, save for anecdotes over dinner, and the occasional write up in history books. "By far," the Minister of Magic was quoted saying this morning, "it is not the worst blunder The Ministry has made, and I am proud of that fact."

We are all very happy that the Minister has managed to keep his sense of humor through this trying time. Particularly given his outspoken opposers, it had been doubtful whether the handling of the Marriage Law would drive Minister Agnew from office. Hermione Snape, a young witch forced to marry along with many others, directly after graduating from Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and then forced several months later to divorce.

"The Marriage Law was ludicrous, but we went along with it," Hermione Snape said in an interview after Mr. And Mrs. Jagermann left the Ministry yesterday. "Then they decided to split us all up, with no chance of ever being able to marry the same person again. My life had already been turned over once, I wasn't about to sit by again and have this happen. I learned to love my husband, as many others had, and we needed to be heard. I was happy at the repeal, but saddened at how it was handled. This day marks a triumph for me in the power of protest, and the power of the people to make a difference in this world."

Mrs. Snape is also an activist for House Elve's rights.

-Colleen Clark, Special Correspondent For The Daily Prophet.

The End

"What do you mean, "The End"?" Hermione asked. "You put nothing in there about the rights of House elves!"

"Oh, come off it, Hermione! They're *happy* that way!"