

You Can't Have One Without The Other

by RachelW

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Winner of the Multifaceted Award, round three, Courage category. Thanks!

A Law Passed; A Life Forever Changed

Chapter 1 of 31

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Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge heaved a sigh as he placed his quill on the desk. It was done. The Muggleborn Marriage Act was now law. It was an emergency measure brought on in the wake of the fall of Voldemort. The wizarding world had lost a number of its citizens, and the issue which had been merely a concern previously was now an emergency. The reports of St. Mungo's regarding the wizarding statistics and arithmantic projections on birth rates, defects, and Squibs had become more and more alarming with each year.

It hadn't been a problem at one time...there were enough families that purebloods could find others of equal "purity" to marry; but now you could trace any pureblood to any other through their family tree...it was estimated that most British based purebloods were only as far removed as fourth cousins. Many others were much more closely related and the effects could no longer be ignored. The fertility clinic of St. Mungo's had tripled treatments in the last decade...the decade before that had seen an upsurge, true, but at the time it hadn't been thought a problem. One especially concerned Healer and researcher had noticed the trend of infertility and had formed a committee fifteen years previous to track and report the growing problem. It had been largely ignored; the vast majority of purebloods had scoffed at the idea...especially since the solution was to bring in fresh genetic material, in other words, mudbloods.

The committee had produced more than reports of the problems of inbreeding...they had also produced reports concerning half-bloods. In almost all cases, half-bloods carried none of the negative effects of inbreeding...they generally had strong magical ability as well. They had cited the example of Harry Potter, child of a pureblood of an old line and a Muggleborn witch...he was one of the most powerful young wizards of his age, surpassing by far his pureblood classmates. His highly publicized defeat of Voldemort (also a powerful half-blood), had turned the attention of many of the purebloods who had previously seen no problems with marrying their third cousins, or with arranging marriage for their children to second and third cousins who were related on both sides of the tree.

Muggle research on genetics had been included in the reports as well. Information about negative recessives and double reinforcement of genes showed in no uncertain terms that this would lead to absolute disaster within another decade or two. And so, in an emergency secret session of the Wizengamot, the law had been drafted and passed.

It was not a perfect document by any means. In the end, it was such a conglomeration of so many opposing forces Fudge couldn't help but wonder how long it would stand. Long enough, he hoped, to serve its purpose. Even one generation of children produced from these unions would stave off disaster...and perhaps it would bring a somewhat forced end to the bigotry.

Medical professionals had helped to draft a large number of clauses to ensure that the purpose of the act was carried through. Pureblood opponents of the law had managed to include a number of clauses which were detrimental to the muggleborns of the unions. When it became clear there was nothing they could do to prevent the passage of the law entirely, they had determined that if a child of theirs would be forced to marry a mudblood, they would not be forced to share the usual provisions of traditional wizarding marriage. The results would be disastrous for the muggleborns who ended up with less than ideal mates, but nothing could be done about that now. All they could do was hope for the best. Yes, there would be casualties...he knew that, but he also knew that failure to act would result in far more than a few unhappy brides...the end of the Wizarding world as they knew it was in jeopardy.

Cornelius Fudge had been surprised and rather relieved that opposition had not come from one powerful pureblood family. Lucius Malfoy had helped to argue the necessity of the law and had been instrumental in the final acquiescence of the opposition. However, he had also been the one to convince the Wizengamot that while the law was necessary, measures would have to be taken to ensure the cooperation of the muggleborns. After all, they had silly notions of marrying for 'love' and wouldn't understand the necessity of contracted unions.

So now it was done. It would begin soon...there would be an outcry, but soon enough the purebloods opposed would see the advantages. They could no longer marry other purebloods, but the advantages the law now gave them in regards to acquiring a Muggleborn bride would alleviate that concern.

Lucius Malfoy grinned slyly as he surveyed the documents before him. It had been done. And now, he would take revenge for the death of Lord Voldemort. That Potter boy had defeated Voldemort but this was not the end of troubles. And that mudblood Granger would pay for her part in it all. He had the perfect legal means by which to do so now. Narcissa was gone...killed in that last horrible battle. Granger would take her place, at least in his bed. No Muggleborn could ever hold a candle to his Narcissa, beautiful Narcissa...especially not some bushy haired tart like that Granger Girl.

His bid had been sent that morning and he wondered if he would get an heir from her before disposing of her. The thought of a half-blood heir was distasteful, but would win him favor for complying with the law to do his part to save the wizarding world. Of course, he would receive all due sympathy after his young bride met with an untimely death, leaving him to raise their child.

It was true that she could accept another petition...likely the Weasley boy would attempt to save her but he would be no problem. Lucius had given Draco instruction to lure him into Hogsmeade. Weasley would not stand in the way. They wouldn't kill him outright, but Granger would have no other young suitors...his message would be quite clear...Granger was his and anyone who thought to get in the way was making a very dangerous choice.

Another idea struck him. Choices...she would have a choice. He rose from his ornate desk to make a floo call to Goyle.

Hermione Granger sat in stunned silence in Headmaster Dumbledore's office. His usual bright expression and kind smile were gone, replaced by a grave seriousness. Not that she noticed, she was much too distracted thinking about what she had been told, but reality wasn't sinking in...it was more like a numb haze, as if it were happening to someone else. She fidgeted with her cup of tea and stared at her shoes. The travesty which had befallen her was too much to wrap her mind around at the moment.

"Miss Granger." Dumbledore's gentle prodding pulled her from her silent reverie. She simply looked up at him, not speaking. "Your parents will be here in a moment."

"My parents?" She thought her own voice sounded hollow and distant.

"Yes, I've sent someone to retrieve them," he explained softly, gently. "They should be here; they deserve to know what is going on, and to give any guidance they may have in this time."

"Yes...of course," she mumbled and went back to fidgeting with her teacup.

Presently, the door to the Headmaster's office burst open and Hermione's parents rushed in to her. "Hermione, dear...what has happened?" Her mother worriedly demanded to know. In the nearly seven years she had attended Hogwarts, her parents had never been called up to the school. So, this was certainly cause for worry, and they had worried themselves nearly frantic.

Professor Snape came in and closed the door behind him, and took a seat in a darker corner.

"Mr. Granger, Mrs. Granger...please have a seat. There is something of great importance I must discuss with you concerning a new law which directly affects your daughter." His presence behind his desk was commanding and reassuring at once. Hermione wondered at how he could manage to seem to be so many different things at different times. During the battle with Voldemort he had exuded power of a frightening level, his stern face surveying the battle before him as he led the way to victory. Then at other times, he seemed but a simple, happy man handing out lemon drops.

They sat, and looked at the man with trepidation.

"How much has your daughter told you of the division between muggleborns and purebloods?" He began, pulling them into conversation to ease the tension which was thick in the room.

"Well...she has mentioned that some purebloods believe they are superior, though not all do. We've met the Weasley family, and they are very nice...and I understand they are pureblood?" Her mother answered, clearly confused at the opening conversation. It had the desired effect of calming her though.

"Yes, the Weasley family is a treasure for their kindness, and several of their children are good friends with your daughter. To the problem at hand though; many purebloods have been intermarrying with other distinguished pureblood families for many centuries. This has created problems because of inbreeding, much like those problems which Muggle royal families have had issues with. I understand you both are in medical professions?"

They nodded, and Mr. Granger answered "Yes, we're both Dentists...I understand what you're saying here...continued intermarriage between close relatives can cause all sorts of genetic problems. But, what does this have to do with our....oh my...what is this law?" Halfway through speaking he suddenly realized, with horror, what the solution would be.

"The Ministry of Magic has passed a law to eliminate the small genetic pool problem, and has decreed that Muggleborn witches, such as your daughter, should be required to marry if she has a pureblood suitor petition her for marriage." He allowed the news to sink in before continuing. "As Hermione has recently turned eighteen, she is now of age, and under the law may receive petitions for marriage.

"Thank you so much for telling us, we'll take her home right away. If she isn't here then they can't make her marry." Mrs Granger stood up and began to move to her daughter, ready to usher her away to the safety of home.

They were interrupted by the Headmaster clearing his throat and motioning them to sit once more. "No, I'm afraid they can. You see, she has already received two offers just this morning," he told them gravely.

At that moment, the fireplace in the office roared and turned green, and the head of Madam Pomfrey appeared. "Headmaster, I wanted to inform you right away that Mr. Weasley is going to be fine. He will need to spend the rest of the week here."

"Thank you, Poppy." The fire returned to its normal color, and Poppy Pomfry's head disappeared. The Grangers looked startled, and then looked to their daughter as she breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm afraid there are more problems here. You see, your daughter played an important role in the downfall of a very powerful wizard recently who was determined to destroy much of what this school stands to protect. Additionally, she is one of the most powerful young witches Hogwarts has seen in many years. This has attracted attention from those who were in support of Tom Riddle, under the name of Lord Voldemort, rising to power, and I'm afraid they see this law as the perfect opportunity for revenge."

"That's what happened to Ron." Hermione, who had been silent through the discourse thus far, finally spoke. "He offered to marry me, so I wouldn't have to marry the ones who already sent in offers..." She drifted off, biting down on her lower lip to stifle the tears she would not allow herself to shed.

"Mr. Weasley was attacked this morning in Hogsmeade by unidentified assailants; however the message they gave made it clear it was from those who want to make sure Hermione did not take Mr. Weasley's offer. Fortunately, he will be fine now, but we are now hard pressed to find a suitable husband for your daughter in short order. He must be able to protect her from her other suitors. I must impress upon you the dangerous nature of those who wish to have your daughter. This law gives them the perfect method to acquire revenge." The Grangers had become quite pale during the revelation. It was too much to take in at once.

"I'm sorry headmaster, but thinking of Hermione getting married, when she isn't even out of school is preposterous! How in the world can this Ministry of Magic do something like this?"

"They can, because the people in power saw no other choice to protect the world we have...the birthrates amongst purebloods have dropped to dangerously low levels, and even still, many children born to purebloods have no magical ability, and often have other serious birth defects.

"These seem to be desperate times for our world, and when faced with desperation, people do things which they would consider unwise in other times. According to this law, your daughter now has two weeks to accept a marriage offer. She has three so far, all of which I cannot allow to happen. However, I would like you to know that I am working on a plan to keep Hermione safe."

"What plan would that be?" Her father asked suspiciously.

"I am searching for someone, a pureblood, who will be able to submit a petition for marriage. I have several people in mind right now, but I will be speaking with each of them individually."

"Who are you talking about Professor? How can I marry someone I don't even know?"

"I am very sorry Hermione," the Headmaster said gravely, "This does not have to be a bad thing. I will tell you those I am considering are all members of the Order."

"Oh..." Hermione quickly went over who in the order would possibly be powerful, pureblood, and single. She shuddered at the thought of Mad-Eye Moody. "Sir, can you at least tell me who you're considering right now? Please tell me you're not considering Mr. Moody..."

Headmaster Dumbledore allowed a small smile to comfort her. "No, Miss Granger. I am hoping to find someone a little closer to your own age than that."

"Remus maybe?" Hermione asked, somewhat hopeful. He wouldn't be bad at all. She considered him a good friend, and had had something of a crush on him since her third year when he had been the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor.

"I'm sorry, but he's not eligible due to the fact that he is a werewolf. Hermione, if it were possible he would be at the top of the list of possible candidates for you."

That statement produced a snort from the Potions Master sitting in the corner, who up until that point, had remained silent.

"Professor Snape is there something you would like to add?" asked Dumbledore with raised brows, obviously conveying that he hoped for him to say a certain something.

"Headmaster, let's not tease Miss Granger with her fate. There are only two members in the order who possibly could qualify; you and I both know that."

"There is a third, Severus," Dumbledore said softly.

"And you've already had the answer to that," Snape retorted with a glare that usually could send first years straight into tears.

"Yes...yes I have, very well then," he answered regretfully. "Severus is right, I should tell you, but I still have not spoken with them. Until I do so, I think it best that we keep their identities unknown.

A scratching sound was heard at the window, causing the elder Grangers, unused to message by owl, to startle. Dumbledore waved a hand and the window opened, the tawny owl flew to the desk to drop its burden. The owl was given a treat as Dumbledore opened the missive. His brows drew together as he read the message and he turned to Professor Snape and nodded.

"Mr. Granger, Mrs. Granger," he said, nodding to each, "if you will excuse me, I must attend to another matter quickly, and I think you should have some time alone to talk about this. Can I offer you any refreshments?"

"No thank you, I don't think any of us will be hungry," Hermione's father answered.

"Very well then, if you should change your mind Hermione knows how to summon a house elf who can bring you something."

The Headmaster and the Potions professor left the room to discuss the letter, which unfortunately contained the news that one of the Headmaster's hopes for Hermione had already become engaged to another muggleborn who could have been destined for a disastrous marriage.

"Thanks for coming Mum and Dad. This is all such a mess."

"Oh darling," her mother said and reached out to embrace her daughter, "I'm so sorry this is happening; I just can't believe it. I just don't understand this whole world of yours sometimes, but I know you have always been so happy to be a witch and now this happens."

"I know...it came as a big surprise to everyone. I'm going to have to get married to a complete stranger...well, maybe not a *complete* stranger, I know most of the people from the Order, but I'm not sure who Professor Dumbledore is thinking about here. I know he will do his best to try and keep me safe though."

"I hope so dear, I really hope so."

"Hermione," her father finally spoke, "What about Harry? I understand he is powerful."

"He is, but his mother was a Muggleborn, so he's only half-blood, he wouldn't be able to petition for me either," she explained to her parents. They sat thinking and wishing for another few moments.

"We will find out all we can about this law. But, maybe if it can be overturned you can find someone who you can just marry for a short time, just a paper marriage so you don't have to stay with someone you don't love."

"Mum, I'm not sure...from what I know of Wizarding marriages, they are for life. I've never heard of wizards getting divorced. It's a magical as well as legal binding. Whoever I end up married to, I will have to stay married to," she told them, her voice sounded hollow.

They sat in silence for a few moments, Hermione's father sat looking helpless and angry, and Hermione's mother patted her daughter's back. Presently, the headmaster returned along with Professor Snape, who, instead of taking his previous seat, stood in the background of Dumbledore's desk.

"I believe we may have found a solution which would least disrupt Hermione's life," Dumbledore announced.

"What solution is that Professor?" Hermione asked, filled with a strange combination of hope and trepidation.

"Your solution...is me," announced Professor Snape. His jaw was tightly clenched, and his shoulders held stiffly straight. The three Grangers sat in shock, staring at the black-clad, imposing professor.

"Please, allow me to explain," the Headmaster interjected softly. "Severus Snape is a pureblood wizard who qualifies under the law. If he submits a petition for marriage, and if Hermione accepts, this will allow the least possible disruption of her life; she can remain at Hogwarts. I trust Severus, and can assure you that he will allow no harm to come to Hermione." Much of this had been addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Granger, but now the kindly blue eyes focused solely on Hermione.

"It may not be what you were hoping for in a marriage, but this is the best we can do on short notice. Professor Snape will do his best to protect you, as well as allow you freedoms you would not have otherwise. Other than a change in residence within the school, this should not affect your life significantly while you are still a student here. There is one other option open to you, but another person I was considering has already become engaged to help out another muggleborn witch in a similar predicament."

"Who is this other man?" her father asked, scowling at Snape. It was quite obvious what he thought of that option. He had also placed that he was the professor who had made Hermione miserable at one of her favorite subjects. His formerly high opinion of the headmaster of Hogwarts had plummeted.

"For now, I would prefer to wait until he has responded. If he is able, he will meet with Hermione tomorrow, and you can meet with him Friday as well."

Hermione was looking back and forth between the kindly, concerned Headmaster, and the stiff Potions Master. She had never seen Professor Snape look so uncomfortable. But, she had to say something now. "Headmaster, could I have some time to read the law fully, so I know what is going on here?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, yes child, you may. We should act within the week though. You can have time to read the marriage law," he indicated several rolls of parchments on his desk, "and you will have time to speak with Professor Snape. I will also speak with the other person who may still be available who I was considering and see if he would come and meet with you tomorrow."

"Um...okay." Hermione was still in a daze. She was sure she should have felt something more, but the feeling would not come. Perhaps tomorrow, when she'd had time to think this could seem clearer. But now she was faced with marriage to Professor Snape, or perhaps some other person, still unknown to her that Professor Dumbledore thought was safe.

"Very well, Professor McGonagall is waiting outside the office to escort you to your room. Mr. and Mrs. Granger, if you would like to stay here I can we can arrange rooms for you."

The elder Grangers exchanged a glance before Mrs. Granger spoke. "Thank you, but no, Headmaster Dumbledore. We would like to come back this weekend however, and we can arrange for our appointments for next week to be canceled if we could stay with Hermione then."

"Yes, that will be good then. I have a portkey here for you which will return you home, and another which you may use to return Friday evening," he explained, and held out two stones. "The blue one will return you here, to my office. I have a copy of the marriage law for you to read so that you may be informed fully of this by the time you get back. I am sorry that this had to happen, but I promise you that I will do my best to make sure the best possible solution for your daughter happens."

"I understand. I'm just so sorry this kind of thing can happen to our Hermione," Mrs. Granger said sadly.

The Grangers were gently ushered out of the headmaster's office into the care of Professor McGonagall. Mr. Granger clutched the rolled parchment tightly, and Hermione held a copy as well to read.

"Thank you for agreeing, Severus," he finally said to the surly man.

"She still has one other option which I am sure would be more appealing to her. Why on earth could you think I would be an appropriate husband for the girl? You should know me and her better than that," he growled. He began to pace back and forth in the office.

"Severus, I do know you both quite well, which is why I think this could be a good match. Still, I will leave it to her to decide which option will be best. I have sent an owl to Mr. Shackbolt, requesting his presence here tomorrow. I do not think that is the best option for her...she would have to leave school to reside with him if she chose him."

"Albus, this seems a drastic measure for a short term solution. She may not finish this year at school if she chooses Shackbolt, but in the long term he should be a much better option for her. I'm sure she would qualify to take her NEWT's early. I sincerely hope, for both our sakes that she chooses him."

"And would marriage be such a bad thing for you, Severus?" Dumbledore asked gently.

"You know me Albus, and you should know that marriage to me would be a bad thing for whoever is unlucky enough to get stuck with me. I do not want a wife, and I most especially do not want a student of mine for a wife. Now, if you will excuse me, I have papers to grade," he replied with venom and stalked out of the room.

He glared menacingly down the corridors as he stalked; the few students remaining in the halls quickly removed themselves from his path. When this first came up the previous day the Headmaster had spent some time trying to convince him to petition Miss Granger for marriage.

He had refused quite firmly.

But now, the girl had one less option and somehow, he had agreed to marry her should she choose him. He was angry with Dumbledore, he did not like being manipulated, and this was the ultimate manipulation, aided by the infernal Ministry of Magic.

He had seen the way her parents had glared at him; he perceived they thought him a pervert, despite the gentle explanations of the headmaster. Of course they would not know that the thought of being married to their daughter was just as repulsive to him as it would be for her.

The thought of sharing his space and of sharing a bed with the girl was disturbing. He still saw in her the first year she had been. He saw all his students that way. In his eyes they did not grow, they stayed forever children. Occasionally, he would see a former student, now adult out in the world and he would still see in them the child they had once been.

When he reached his rooms, he went straight for the liquor cabinet and poured himself a double shot of brandy. He told himself she would choose Shackbolt, he was certainly the best option. She did not know the Auror well, and what she knew of himself would surely drive her to not want to be with him. However, should there be any doubt, he would make it clear to her that he was certainly not a suitable choice.

The Choices are Presented

Chapter 2 of 31

Hermione has a meeting with the two 'safe' choices for marriage. But still, neither can be ideal as it is still forced.

Hermione Granger sat in her Head Girls' room, early morning light trickling into her window, the parchment detailing the new marriage law was held loosely in her hand as she stared at the wall. She had read it through twice.

When she first returned to her room the previous evening she had tried to sleep, but could not. And so she decided to read the law. The provisions were fairly straightforward, but were frightening. The Muggle-borns had no rights in these marriages. Whoever she married, she may as well be their chattel. She could not hold a job without her husband's permission; she would not even be able to open her own bank account without permission of her husband.

The injustice did not stop there. One word kept repeating in her head, 'consummation'...she had read the coitus clause over several times. The whole point of the muggleborn marriage act was a revitalization of the wizard population, and so "coitus of not less than weekly frequency" was required. And, while the use of contraceptive potions were not strictly forbidden, they were now nearly impossible to come by. The Ministry had legislated that they should not be sold any longer, and certain key ingredients for contraceptive potions were no longer sold as well. It may be possible not to become pregnant for a few years simply by lucky chance, but it was inevitable. They had not actually legislated that the couple must reproduce, but in effect they may as well have.

As the light in the room grew, she decided it was time to face the day. She'd had no sleep, but a shower and a generous amount of coffee would get her through. Professor McGonagall had told her last night she was excused from classes today, but she had to meet with her other option today and she had no idea who he would be. So, it was a mystery man, or Professor Snape. At this point she just wanted to wait and see who the mystery man was before she thought more about Professor Snape.

In the shower she adjusted the magical shower head to provide her with a stinging needle spray. As the water buffeted her body she found awareness arising once more. By the time she exited and toweled herself dry with forceful friction she felt much better physically.

Soon enough, after her second cup of coffee, she felt as ready as she could be to face the day. A knock sounded on her door, and she rose from the chair and crossed the room to open it. She was relieved to see it was Harry.

"Hermione, how are you doing?" he asked with concern.

"As best as can be expected, I think...how's Ron?"

"He's awake, I visited him for a little while this morning. He asked about you, we're all worried about what will happen now, Dumbledore told us he had a plan...did he tell you about it yet?"

"Yes," she sighed as she went back to her chair and sunk into it, wrapping her arms around herself. "He has two people who can offer to marry me...I'll be meeting with one today, I don't know who he is except that he's a member of the Order. The other is Professor Snape."

"Snape? You're kidding! He wouldn't do that to you," Harry exclaimed. He ran a hand through his tousled, black hair and flopped into the chair opposite Hermione.

"Well, I don't know who the other person is yet...honestly I'm worried since Professor Dumbledore seemed to think Professor Snape was the better option."

"Gods, Hermione...I'm so sorry. I wish there were some other way."

"Me too," she sighed.

They lapsed into worried silence. He wanted to be there for her, and he wished like nothing else he could fix this for her. "Do you want me to be with you when you meet the other person?"

"I don't know...I wish Professor Dumbledore would have told me who he wants me to meet. But, if you want to be there that would be good, I would appreciate it Harry." Hermione became aware that her stomach was growling, but she really didn't feel up to breakfast in the great hall. She decided that despite the butterflies in her stomach, it would be best to get a little bit of food at least and so she used her privilege as Head Girl to floo an order for breakfast to the kitchen. "Harry?" she asked with her head in the fireplace, "do you want breakfast here?"

"Yeah, that'll be great."

Once they had finished their breakfast a knock was heard on the door before it opened. "Miss Granger?" it was Professor McGonagall standing in the opened doorway.

"Come in Professor McGonagall."

"Good morning Miss Granger, Mr. Potter...how are you feeling Hermione?" she asked with concern.

"Tired, worried," she replied while fidgeting with a scrap of toast in the mushroom gravy on her plate.

"Professor Dumbledore sent me to get you; he has someone for you to meet."

"Oh, okay...can Harry come too?"

Their head of house looked at Harry with clear compassion and said, "Very well, but if the Headmaster asks you should leave immediately."

"But Professor..."

"No Mr. Potter, I'm sorry but that is that," her stern tone was countered with her concern. "Now, let's go."

The three walked to the Headmasters office in tense silence. When they reached the gargoyle, Professor McGonagall addressed Hermione, "Miss Granger, I want you to know that although this seems like a terrible thing now, Albus is doing his best to help you, and I know that whichever option you choose, everything will be fine in the long run."

Harry grasped her by the shoulders. "I'm here for you, Hermione."

Hermione nodded and followed her Professor up the spiral staircase and into the office. She was surprised to see Kingsley Shacklebolt there as well. Could he be her other option? She really didn't know him outside the work he had done in the Order. Apparently though, Harry did know him quite well.

"Kingsley! What a relief," Harry exclaimed as he strode over where the tall, ebony man was standing. The two embraced, slapping each other on the back and smiling turned to Hermione, who stood looking a bit stunned, but had a shy smile.

"Harry," the headmaster interrupted, "Hermione, Mr. Shacklebolt, please have a seat." The headmaster also sat down once more at his desk. "Lemon drop?" he offered a

dish of the yellow sweets. All declined and he plopped one into his mouth to suck on it.

"Harry, it was good of you to come and offer your support to your friend. Now, Miss Granger, Mr. Shackbolt is the other person who is able to petition for marriage. I have arranged for you to speak at length with Professor Snape this afternoon as well so you may make the best decision."

"Headmaster Dumbledore, you absolutely can't be serious about Hermione marrying Professor Snape! That's just so wrong..." he trailed off as the headmaster held a hand up to still him.

"Harry, I must ask that you allow Hermione to decide for herself what her choice will be. This is her life, and she needs to make this decision herself; do you understand?"

"Yes sir," he replied, sounding somewhat perturbed.

"Hermione," Kingsley now spoke in a rich, deep baritone, "Headmaster Dumbledore tells me that you must get married quickly, and that your current offers leave quite a bit to be desired."

"Yes," she agreed, "they do."

"He asked me here to speak with you and offer a petition for marriage. I will answer any questions you have for me."

"Oh, thank you," she replied. Hermione was quite aware of being the center of attention in the room and it was not a comfortable feeling. Sensing this, Dumbledore rose from his seat.

"Now, Professor McGonagall and I will leave you to talk. Harry, I think it best that we leave Mr. Shackbolt and Hermione to talk alone for a while. You may catch up with him at lunch."

Harry looked uncertain for a bit, he wanted to stay, but at the same time he realized Hermione was uncomfortable with all the attention. "Alright," he agreed. Then, he turned to Hermione and said softly, "Don't worry now, it'll be all right, Kingsley is great." He left the room then with Dumbledore and McGonagall.

Once they left, Hermione turned directly to the large, bald man. He was quite an imposing figure, but he had a friendly aura. She had seen him during the war on a number of occasions, as well as at Order headquarters, but had never spoken at length with him. Apparently, Harry had, and thought well of him. He smiled gently at her, revealing a flash of white teeth which contrasted starkly with his deep ebony skin.

"Well," she finally started, "I'm really not sure where to start."

"I understand," he said, "I can start, and you can ask questions wherever you think you may need to."

Hermione nodded and listened as he spoke. His voice was quite nice, she realized, as he told her about himself. It was a nearly musical quality, deep and rich and kind. His family originated from the wizard lines of Africa, and had come to England only in the last century. He spoke some of his job as an Auror, his hobbies watching Quidditch and reading mystery novels.

He seemed really nice, and Hermione began to think this might not be so bad after all. Harry liked him, so if she did have to marry someone, better it be someone who would be friends with her friends. He was also a respected Auror, he spoke easily and gently, yet she knew that if need should arise he was quite powerful; he would be able to protect her.

Finally, after a generous introduction and overview of his life, he turned to the topic at hand. "You know, I had always wanted to settle down and have a family, but really hadn't perused it before now. I know this is sudden, but I'm sure we will be able to get along well. I make enough money as an Auror that we can afford a good house once the children come, but for now my flat in London isn't bad. You'll have an allowance, of course, and whatever you want to do with your free time you would be free to pursue," he explained.

Hermione hadn't heard much after 'once the children come,' and so decided to ask. "So, you want children?"

"Oh yes, I love children. I never thought I'd have time to meet someone and start a family, but now I think we can make the best of it. You know, twins run in my family, I was something of an exception, really, not being a twin...so I'm sure we will have a large family, I've always liked the Weasley's, and wouldn't mind matching them in example."

"Oh..."

"Professor Dumbledore tells me that if you choose me, you can take your NEWT's early."

"Oh, he did?" She was reeling now. Her last hope, Kingsley Shackbolt, wanted a gaggle of kids.

"Yes...you would live at my place...well; it would be our place if we get married. But from what I hear you're so far ahead on your studies that you won't miss too much not being here for your last year. We'll come up and visit your friends as often as possible."

She nodded dumbly as she watched him. He wasn't a bad looking man at all. Rather striking really...the light glinted off his shaven head, and the gold earring sparkled by his face. He had a kind smile, and deep mahogany eyes which glinted with laughter and good cheer. He was well built, and his robes fell over his shoulders in a way which seemed to accentuate the muscular body beneath them.

She wondered what their kids would look like...she tried to imagine coffee-with-cream skinned children with her features and his mixed together. It wasn't a bad image at all. But still, twins ran in his family? She wanted kids...or maybe a child someday, once she had finished school and had a career of some kind. She couldn't imagine wanting more than two at the most...the Weasley's were great, but she knew that kind of life just was not for her. She wondered how easy it would be to come by the ingredients to make her own contraceptive potions. And speaking of potions...

An hour after the meeting she was sitting in her room once more with Harry. He seemed quite excited...she had listened to him for the last half hour regaling her with tales of his adventures with Kingsley, and what a great, nice guy he was. It was with some irritation that Hermione realized that Harry had already made his mind up as to who she would be marrying.

"I know this whole marriage law thing is bad, it really is terrible, but I'm glad Kingsley could help you out here."

"Harry, I haven't made my decision yet," she reminded him.

"It's not like you have much to go with here...come on, you can't marry Snape."

Honestly, she was starting to wonder.

Professor Snape paced in his living room. The girl would be here in a few moments to meet with him to discuss this ridiculous proposal of Dumbledore's. He had to meet with her; Dumbledore wouldn't let him back out of a meeting, pointless as it was.

Right on time he heard a knock at his door.

"Enter," he called out as he dropped the wards on his rooms. He watched as an unusually timid and tired looking Miss Granger walked into his living room, looking at him warily. He scowled at her and said, "Sit, Miss Granger...the Headmaster insists we continue with this useless meeting, so let's get it over with."

Hermione walked to one of the rich, hunter-green leather chairs situated near the cold fireplace and sat. She watched as Professor Snape stalked over to a cabinet, withdrew two glasses, and poured generous portions of what she thought was brandy. He brought her one, and then sat heavily opposite her.

"Well Miss Granger, I suppose congratulations are in order...To the Future Mrs. Shackbolt," he said and knocked back his drink.

"Professor?"

"What?"

"Um...I haven't actually decided yet...and Professor Dumbledore told me you were also submitting a petition for me...right?"

"Please Miss Granger; we both know how ridiculous that is. He insists that we meet, but it would be much better to choose Shackbolt. You do agree, don't you, Miss Granger?"

Hermione considered his rather rhetorical question carefully as she looked down at her glass before raising it and taking an experimental taste. The harsh liquor caused her face to twist and she coughed. When she looked back at Snape he had an amused smirk on his face. "Actually, I'm not sure I agree. I simply haven't decided yet. I had a very informative meeting with Kingsley this morning, and now I'm meeting with you. Supposedly, this is to evaluate my options."

"Miss Granger, you do not want to be married to me." His former amused smirk melted from his face.

"Why not?" she asked, and took another, this time larger sip, of the brandy. Somehow, though it was entirely inappropriate, she saw some twisted humor in this.

"Why not?" he asked, his voice rose in alarm. "Where have you been for the last seven years? I thought you had been in my class, raising your hand and taking every opportunity to spout your knowledge...I see I was mistaken in thinking you may have been paying attention all that time."

"So then why did you agree to submit a petition?"

"Because, Miss Granger, Dumbledore was quite adamant that you have at least the illusion of a choice in this matter. That's all it is, an illusion. You will marry Shackbolt. He's a great friend of Potter; he will simply be another addition to your group of friends, albeit one with whom you will engage in at least weekly intercourse, as demanded by law. Potter and Weasley will be happy, Dumbledore will be happy, I'm sure even your parents will be happy, and I will remain alone as I prefer to." His scathing, sarcastic tone struck Hermione like a bucket of ice water.

"I see," she said guardedly, contemplating what she should say next.

The glare he gave her caused her insides to clench. But, since she was here, she may as well play along and question him. She felt certain Professor Dumbledore wouldn't allow him to deduct points or give her detention for what was said, as long as it was within reason, in this meeting. "No, I don't think you do Miss Granger. Do you realize what life with me would be like?"

"I thought the purpose of this meeting was to determine that, Professor," she retorted.

"Have you read this law...do you realize we would be required to consummate a marriage, should one take place between us?"

"Yes...that would be required if I married Kingsley as well," she tried to state it bravely, but couldn't help but blush and look down into her cup.

"Look at me, Miss Granger," he said softly. She felt compelled to do so. "Do you *really* want to know what it would be like to be my wife?" he asked, his voice dangerously low, his face now wore an evil looking smile. She nodded, he continued, "As my wife, you would not have a doting husband to buy you gifts, or to read you sonnets. You would live here in the dungeons with me, you could spend your time studying, or at a job, I care not of those matters. But, I would take full advantage of the coitus clause, and I would do so with great pleasure."

Hermione's eyes widened and she blushed further.

"However, I do not want you to have any illusions that I would be a romantic lover...no, I would not be. I seriously doubt that you would want to know what exactly my sexual proclivities are, but I would have no intention of holding back for your sake. You should know better than to consider a former Death Eater such as myself."

She sat, stunned.

"Now, drink up," he said lightly, seemingly as if his previous threats were not voiced. Drink she did. He summoned the bottle of brandy and re-filled their glasses. She could already feel the slight tingling of the alcohol permeating her system, lowering her defenses and inhibitions.

She drank again, and thought about the entire absurd situation. Why on earth would Professor Dumbledore have thought Snape could possibly be a good choice for her? Perhaps he didn't know what a bastard he could be? Or, perhaps Professor Snape was simply trying to drive her away. After a good five minutes of silence, she forged ahead.

"And what about friends?"

He frowned at her, brows furrowed.

"I mean, would you want to stop me from being around my friends?"

His eyebrows shot up. He let out a short bark of a laugh which didn't sound joyful in the least. He thought she would have abandoned the idea by now. Clearly, he hadn't scared her enough. "If your friends would still be around after you've married the great, greasy bat of the dungeons, I would not prevent you from seeing them. However, I don't think you understand what I mean regarding my sexual proclivities. Tell me then; have your lovers been gentle with you?"

"Um...I haven't..." she trailed off as she spoke, thoroughly embarrassed at this line in the conversation.

"You haven't what? You mean Potter and Weasley have been following you around like lovesick puppies for seven years and you've never given in to them? What about that Krum celebrity?"

This was getting a bit uncomfortable, but she steeled herself and glared at him. "No, I have not ever had..." she couldn't quite bring herself to say 'sex' "...but there is no reason for you to be rude about it."

"So then you're an innocent...untouched. Whoever your husband is would have to give you lessons perhaps?" he asked, mocking her.

"Listen, just because I haven't ever had sex," this time she was angry enough to say it, "that doesn't mean I'm completely ignorant. I have read books....with pictures." She glared at him and crossed her arms.

"Books? With pictures?" Hermione knew that sounded silly, but his scornful impression made it sound like she was a child with a picture book. "Oh my, I should have known

the know-it-all would study anything she could," he said in a sultry, derisive voice. "I have a book to show you," he said, smirking as he rose from his chair and crossed the room. He didn't even bother to scan the titles; his hand knew exactly what he was looking for and where it was. He selected a tome from the shelf and brought it to her, tossing it into her lap. "Here is a book you would likely not have seen, take a look," he invited.

She looked at the book, the exterior was unassuming...a rather large book with a worn leather cover, but no title. So, never being one to be afraid of a simple book, she opened it and looked at the first page and gasped. Snape watched her as the color drained from her face and she looked up at him, finally with a hint of fear in her eyes. "Yes," he thought, 'this should scare her off.'

If Albus Dumbledore knew what he preferred, he would have never let the prize student of Gryffindor even consider him. He wouldn't be as bad as Lucius Malfoy or the senior Gregory Goyle...she would live, he wouldn't actually seriously harm her...but she would likely be quite sore, quite often.

Hermione couldn't believe what she saw. It was a picture...she had seen pictures in books before...she had even extensively perused the Kara Sutra, but never had she seen anything like this.

A woman stood nude, arms stretched above her head and wrists tied to a post. She was blindfolded and a man stood behind her, a leather strap in his hand. It was not a moving wizard picture, it was still...but she could see from the red streaks across her buttocks, back, and thighs what the strap had been used for.

She turned the page.

Another picture, in this one the woman was bent over a bed, a dark-robed figure stood behind her, once again brandishing a strap. On the plate opposite, the man was entering her from behind, his hands cruelly grasping her hips in a vice-grip...the long, pale fingers digging into her skin.

She turned the page.

At this point it must have been morbid curiosity which drove her on. She gasped as she gazed at this set of pictures. On one page, the woman was bent backwards over a bed with her feet on the floor, her hips rested on the edge of the bed. As before, her hands were tied together and stretched above her head. Once more the dark-robed figure stood over her. She was blindfolded and her mouth was open in a scream as those long fingers pinched and twisted her nipples. On the next page the man had the woman's legs thrown up on his shoulders and he was driving into her as he stood beside the bed.

She turned the page.

This time, the woman was kneeling before the man, his robes were open, exposing a rather large (at least as far as she could tell from what she'd read and the pictures she'd seen) phallus which was inches from her mouth. His hands were entwined in her long, curly, nearly bushy hair. She looked closer...yes; it was bushy, curly, brown hair. She looked even closer...the man had shoulder length black hair...she couldn't see his face fully, but she could make out a distinctive nose and a twisted smirk....oh gods! It was her and Snape.

She snapped the book closed and looked at Snape. Her breath came in shallow gasps and she felt an odd, tickling sensation in her groin. He was sitting calmly, one corner of his mouth quirked up in a smug, superior expression.

"How...that was you and me...how did you do that?"

"Magic, my dear...magic," he said smoothly, clearly enjoying her discomfiture. That particular tome was a favorite of his...it was enchanted to change the pictures based on who viewed it. "Now, Miss Granger, I am sure you understand why you should marry Shacklebolt."

"Wait, why would Professor Dumbledore even suggest this if you...if you want this..." she trailed off, gesturing at the book.

"What makes you think he knows of my personal tastes?"

"But, he wanted for you to protect me from that sort of thing..."

"No, he wanted me to protect you from those who would seriously maim, injure, and possibly kill you. What you saw was not dangerous...it can produce soreness and bruising, but it wouldn't kill you," he explained, still with that smug smirk.

"You're just trying to scare me off," she said, trying to sound like she was surer than she really was.

"Are you willing to take the risk that I'm just trying to scare you? Perhaps I am, and your wedding night will be a blissful encounter of gentle sweetness atop rose petals? But what if I'm being absolutely truthful...are you ready to submit to my command on your wedding night?" He stood as he spoke and crossed the room to pick up a paper off his desk. He looked at it thoughtfully, and then picked up a quill and signed it. Hermione watched with dread as it rolled up and disappeared with a little 'pop'.

"There, my bid is submitted. I suggest you go tell Mr. Shacklebolt that you will be his wife, else you will have to accept my petition." He faced her with his arms crossed; a clear challenge had been issued.

Hermione looked into her brandy glass, empty again. This was unreal, had to be totally unreal. She was surprised when Snape was once again filling her glass; she hadn't noticed him crossing the room.

"I really shouldn't be drinking," she said, starting to feel a bit slow.

"You're an adult in the eyes of the Ministry, and you likely need it. Drink," he prompted just before he took another large gulp from his own glass.

"So you're really serious about all that...that stuff in the book?" She reached over again to pick it up, now not sure why she hadn't run screaming from the dungeon and into those strong, dark arms. Maybe it was the sheer ridiculous situation...she wasn't sure what she had left to lose. She had her choice between a cheerful guy who her friends liked, but who wanted a house full of kids, and a surly professor who wanted to tie her up and spank her. She laughed; it was just too much to not laugh about.

"What is so funny?"

"This whole thing...I mean, I'm stuck with a choice between you and Kingsley Shacklebolt," she laughed again, and realized that the alcohol probably explained her current reaction.

"And why is Shacklebolt such a dismal prospect?" he asked. She thought it odd that his previous threatening tone had gone.

"He wants kids...lots of kids...he thinks the Weasley's are a wonderful example to follow...oh, and twins run in his family."

"And you don't want children? Miss Granger, I'm afraid the Ministry has made the decision for you."

"I don't want children right now...if I did marry Kingsley, I'd have to move in with him in London right away, I wouldn't be able to finish school. And another thing about the ministry...they have made contraceptive potions illegal to sell, but I could make my own...but I'm not sure how it would work with an Auror for a husband."

"True," he agreed. "But you're looking at a lifetime marriage...you can't base this decision on very short-term problems. And, regarding the potions, surely you can find the ingredients to brew your own?"

"I could brew my own, yes...but I would have to lie about it. It doesn't seem right to be married to someone and lie to them," she explained. She thought she was beginning to slur slightly, but hoped it wasn't too bad.

"How utterly Gryffindor of you," he drawled.

"So what about you; do you want kids?"

"I can't believe you're still carrying on with this line of questioning, Miss Granger. The matter should be settled by now."

"No, really...would you want kids?" she persisted. Fear was gone in this surreal situation. Or maybe it was the alcohol.

He paused a moment to think. "I've never really thought much about it as I have never had any prospect by which to acquire an heir. However," he continued, swirling the contents of his glass, "I would not be opposed to a child...perhaps two one day when I am no longer teaching." He couldn't believe that he was actually discussing this with the girl. Though his alcohol tolerance was quite high, he thought he must have consumed just enough to lubricate his tongue.

He looked at her, she was looking in his direction, but her eyes were unfocused. Her face was flushed and he could clearly see that she did not partake in alcohol very often, if ever. She looked contemplative, and Snape wondered if she were actually considering marrying him. The book she had picked up again still sat in her lap, unopened. It appeared she had forgotten its presence.

"Miss Granger," he called to her.

"Yes Professor?" She snapped back to attention, startling slightly.

"Open the book to page fifty-three," he directed, and rose from his chair to stand behind her, looking over her shoulder. She paused and looked at the book with trepidation, not wanting to open it, but still curious enough to overcome her nervousness.

She opened the book.

Page fifty-three was blank. She looked back up towards Snape, but he pointed her back to the book. He withdrew his wand and tapped the page, muttering a spell Hermione had never heard before.

She watched, transfixed as lines appeared on the page, quickly becoming a picture of herself, nude and kneeling. A dark robed figure, Snape, came into the picture and stood behind her. She watched as a scene played out on the page. It was a moving wizard picture now, not like the ones she had seen in the front of the book. She watched her own face in the drawing...the wincing which accompanied the painful moments, and the look of thorough arousal she could not have thought herself capable of expressing.

As she watched she became aware of a warm, tingling sensation on the back of her neck. He was twining his fingers in her hair. She took a deep breath, but allowed him to continue, strangely aroused. She continued to watch as the animated drawing of Snape roughly bent her over, and his hand began exploring the drawing herself intimately. Slowly, behind her, he moved his hand through her hair to the base of her skull and she was aware of breath on her ear. She relaxed into the sensation; it was a feeling like none she had ever known.

Suddenly, it all changed. His fist clamped tight in her hair and her head was jerked back. He stood in front of her now, looming and frightening, his dark eyes were fathomless pools in which dangerous secrets seemed to lurk. His other hand traced her jaw line as she froze, petrified by the sudden change. She was shocked to feel his hand drop to her throat, where his fingers wrapped around her windpipe and pressed firmly on either side, finding the arteries pulsing quickly under the muscle and tendon. He pressed against the blood vessels, and Hermione began to feel a light, tingling, floating feeling in her extremities along with a rushing sensation, as if she were being hurled through the air though she remained still.

"Miss Granger, if you accept my offer, I want you to be fully warned ahead of time what awaits you. I will keep you safe from those who wish to seek revenge on you, but I will not be denied my desires," he said in a dangerous whisper.

As suddenly as he had descended upon her, he left, crossing the room to open a cabinet. Hermione grasped the arms of her chair for support, blood rushing back to her head, causing her to feel a rush of dizziness. She shook her head to clear it, and again Professor Snape had moved with sudden stealth. He held a small vial in front of her. "Drink this," he ordered. She warily took the potion from him and drank. Her head cleared almost immediately, and all traces of intoxication left her system.

"Now Miss Granger, we have had our talk, and you have a decision to make. If you will excuse me, I have papers to grade, good day."

Hermione walked quickly from the Dungeons, her heart pounding and her breath coming in quick, short gasps. Her mind was reeling from the revelations, yet she was not scared. She had a choice to make, and she would think long and hard and make her choice.

Applying Arithmancy

Chapter 3 of 31

Hermione ponders her choice. But, is she allowing her decision to be made based a bit too much on pure logic?

Hermione was back to class. It was Thursday. It was hard to believe that only two days ago she had found out she had to marry someone, and yesterday when her only two safe choices were presented to her. Her meeting with Snape had been strange. She kept half her mind on her lesson, transfiguring objects and animals as instructed. From time to time she was aware of Professor McGonagall casting her worried glances. She could have stayed away from class today as well, but she wanted to get back to her routine. Sitting and just thinking for another day would have driven her insane with worry; having something to do helped somewhat.

The shocking revelations in her interview (if that's what it could be called) with Professor Snape had resulted in the strangest erotic dreams she had ever had. She knew some couples engaged in a few kinks from time to time...her former roommate, Lavender, had once told her about being tied with silk cords and lashed lightly with a tassel end of one of the cords. It sounded like something a bit silly, but perhaps fun.

However, the pictures in Professor Snape's book showed no silken tassels, she hardly thought it would be something to giggle about afterwards as Lavender had about her experience. It looked more like something that would require the use of healing salves afterwards. She still wondered if he were just trying to scare her away, but the way he had roughly grabbed her hair, and the memory of the feeling of his fingers on her throat, of growing light-headed through lack of oxygen to the brain was a disturbing feeling. Even more disturbing was the fact that she had left his office aroused. When she checked her throat in the mirror of her bathroom after the meeting she had been surprised to find no marks. Surely, the kind of pressure which could cause that reaction would have to leave bruises. But, there were none.

Class was dismissed and she packed her books into her bag.

"Miss Granger, would you stay behind please," Professor McGonagall said.

Hermione hung back as the students filed out of the class on their way to the Great Hall for lunch. She knew Professor McGonagall would have something to say about her impending engagement. And sure enough, after the last student left the room, she spoke. "Miss Granger, Headmaster Dumbledore tells me you met with Mr. Shacklebolt and Professor Snape yesterday. Have you made a decision?"

"I haven't decided yet...I think I need to talk with both of them more first."

"You know, Mr. Shacklebolt was a student of mine here. He was quite a nice young man then, I know it's a hard choice to have to make so quickly, but, considering the circumstances I think you would do quite well with him," she said sincerely.

Hermione nodded and answered, "Yes, he seems very nice. But, it's a big and sudden choice...I have another week to decide, and I want to make sure I consider everything thoroughly before I do."

"Yes, that is a good idea," she replied, but Hermione could tell she had also decided who was the correct choice. "Well, you had best get to lunch," she prompted gently. Hermione left to get to lunch, still wondering what to do. Harry had waited for her outside the classroom.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

"Oh, Professor McGonagall asked if I'd made a decision yet," she replied, rather dreading the upcoming lecture about who she should marry. Sure enough, it came.

"Hermione, I'm not sure what you think you're doing here...this is serious! Come on, we're talking about Snape...you know, mean, greasy bastard Snape. You'd have to sleep with him. Gods, I don't think I can deal with the thought of that," he exclaimed, and shuddered in disgust.

"And why is it such a big issue to you who I'm going to be sleeping with?" she demanded.

"Aw come on Hermione...I just want you to be happy. I know you don't know Kingsley very well; which is why I've been telling you all about him. Anyway," he said a little shyly, "I hear most girls think he's really hot anyway..." he trailed off, grinning at her.

"Harry, this is not a decision to be made based on who's got the hot body...but...you've heard correctly." She smiled back at him, blushing slightly. There were so many things to think about here...a list would certainly be of help here. "Anyway Harry, let's stop by and see Ron before lunch...he was asleep last time I visited him."

"Yeah, good idea...um...do you want to tell him? He's really worried about what you're going to do."

"I suppose I should..." she agreed.

Ron was awake when they entered the infirmary, and she was somewhat surprised to see Kingsley there, sitting in a chair by his bed. They were having an animated conversation, though she could tell Ron looked tired. He saw them as they walked over to his bed and his face lit up.

"Harry, Hermione! I'm glad you're here!" he said.

Kingsley nodded to them and smiled. "Hermione," he said, "I was hoping that I would see you again today."

"Hi Kingsley," she replied. "Yes, me too," she said, forcing a smile.

Harry and Hermione took a seat in the empty bed next to Ron, opposite Shacklebolt. "So, are you feeling better Ron?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm still tired, and the pain-killing potions make me feel a little off. They tell me I should be out of here by Monday, but I think it could be sooner," he replied. He looked worried, and asked Hermione, "Professor Dumbledore said he had a plan for you...so you wouldn't have to marry one of the Death Eaters who wants you...I'm sorry I can't anymore. What's the plan anyway?"

"Well," she said, shifting uncomfortably, "He has the plan that I can choose between Kingsley and Professor Snape."

Ron's eyes got big and he looked over to the other side of the bed at Kingsley, then back at Hermione. "Well, at least you have one good option there." He grew quiet for a moment, and then looked back at Kingsley. "I know you'll take good care of her." Hermione thought he didn't sound the least bit disappointed that he wouldn't be the one marrying her. But, of course, his offer had been an act of friendship. They had dated in the past, and soon realized that it would never work out between them.

It was Shacklebolt's turn to shift uncomfortably now. "Yes, Ron...but she does still have another choice and we shouldn't pressure her into making a decision." Hermione was glad that at least one person realized that she had another choice. She wondered if he thought marrying her would just be a favor to Professor Dumbledore though. He hardly knew her, though she figured he would have heard about her from Harry and Ron.

"Anyway," Harry interjected, "She's got another week to choose now, so...well, it'll be ok Ron."

After saying their goodbyes Harry and Hermione left for lunch. Kingsley had asked to meet with her afterwards...she had two free periods after History of Magic in which to go over some more things with him.

Professor Snape took a seat at the Head Table. He had considered skipping lunch, but he was curious as to what Miss Granger would do when she saw him. It had been his intention to scare her away last night, but apparently the girl didn't scare that easily. In his attempt to drive her away, he had nearly been caught up in the excitement of watching her as she watched the moving picture in the book. He hadn't planned on touching her, and he wouldn't have dared to dream that her reaction to his touch would be arousal. Yes, there was fear too; but he was sure she had been aroused when she left his quarters.

There was a good reason he always thought of his students as children. Even those who were of age and those who had graduated and moved on remained children in his mind. It was a line he could not cross, and had it not been for the Marriage Law, and Dumbledore's ridiculous suggestion, he never would have considered Miss Granger to be anything other than a know-it-all child. But now, the line had been crossed. He now saw a young woman...an adult who was faced with a decision she shouldn't have to make; and he found himself hoping that she might choose him.

He had to wonder how that would go. A wizard marriage would mean for life. He supposed they would spend most of their time apart. But, if he was going to make the sacrifice to marry her, and share his personal space, he would certainly get something in return. Her body bent to his will would be adequate payment. She would enjoy it though...Slytherin's weren't considered the masters of manipulation for nothing. It was one thing to get something you wanted out of someone, but to do it and have them enjoy it and come back for more was an art form.

He saw her enter the great hall and watched as she found a seat with Potter; Weasley was still in the infirmary recovering from Lucius Malfoy's attack. She looked distracted, but that was no surprise; she had quite a lot to think about. As she sat, she glanced up to the head table and caught his gaze. She froze and blushed, then looked down and studied her plate as if it were an intricate puzzle. But, after only a moment she looked back up to him and returned his stare, a defiant expression on her face. He smirked at her and lifted his glass in salute before turning his attention to his food. Her unexpected reaction was auspicious for his plans.

He felt sure that he would be hearing from her soon.

Hermione ate her lunch quickly, wanting to avoid any more looks from Professor Snape. History of Magic was dull as always, and since she had already read the section they were on, she pulled a blank parchment from her bag and began listing everything she knew about Professor Snape and Kingsley Shacklebolt. This would be the most logical way to go about it.

This wasn't just a list of pros and cons, however. She began to work out an arithmantic calculation based on all the information she had, assigning numerals and symbols to each factor. She had used Arithmancy extensively to help calculate what the Order should do next during the months leading up to the final battle. Many a late night had been spent with Professor Vector bent over parchments, scratching out complex calculations. She had resented being cooped up while Ron and Harry were out helping with the missions, but that was where she was most useful. By the time class ended, she had the start of the calculation. She hoped by this evening she would have the information to plug into the equation, and then her decision would be made.

She would meet with Kingsley Shacklebolt in one of the sitting rooms near Gryffindor tower for tea. Once that meeting was done with, she would go see Professor Snape after his last class and by then she was sure that she would have the information to complete the equation.

Snape was unsurprised when later that day as he was grading homework assignments handed in from his last class he heard a knock on the classroom door.

"Enter," he called out. The door opened and Hermione Granger stepped inside.

"Miss Granger, am I safe in assuming that you are not here regarding a potions assignment?" He spoke in his usual, terse classroom tone. He continued to grade the papers; knowing that his lack of visual acknowledgment would cause her more discomfort.

"No, I'm not here about a potions assignment. I was hoping to talk to you a little more about the terms of the Marriage Law," she said tentatively.

"You were? And what would you like to know?" He could sense her shifting uncomfortably; he still did not look up from the papers.

"Well...a few things really," she said nervously.

He made a show of placing his quill down and looking up at her, fixing her with a glare. "What?" he snarled.

Hermione steeled herself, forging ahead with her query. "Well, basically, according to the law the muggleborn wife has no rights...not to a job, or even her own bank account. She can only get those things with specific written permission from her husband. So...I just wanted to ask what you thought about that."

"Very well, Miss Granger, come with me and we will talk again." He stood and strode quickly for his rooms, leaving her to scramble to catch up with him. "Sit," he ordered when they entered his living room. He could see she resented being told what to do, but she sat anyway.

"Would you like a drink?" he asked conversationally as he turned to pour his own drink.

"Um...no, I don't think that would be a good idea, Professor," she answered.

"Very well then...tea?" he asked. Apparently, she thought better than to become intoxicated in his presence again...too bad really.

"Um...yes, tea would be nice."

He flooded the kitchens and ordered tea service; it appeared on the coffee table in a moment, by which time he was seated and studying her. She looked decidedly uncomfortable; which was exactly how he wanted her to be. If she did choose him, he wanted for there to be no misunderstandings about who he was and what he would be like.

"So, you would like to know if I would allow you to have a bank account and a job," he reiterated.

"Yes," she replied, and pulled out a quill and parchment. He scowled at this, but decided to ignore it for the time being.

"Not only would I permit you to have a job, I would encourage it. I think you should like to have money with which to buy things?" he asked, with a raised eyebrow. Yes, that was another point out of the way...he would not be expected to give her an allowance. He was sure Shacklebolt would have offered her a stipend of some sort. "However, there could be some difficulties due to the fact that you need to remain out of the reach of Malfoy. For your own safety, you would not be able to leave Hogwarts without my company for as long as danger exists from that quarter. I imagine that the headmaster would see fit to employ you as a teacher's assistant or within some other capacity in the school. And as for a bank account, yes, I would gladly allow that."

"Oh...I see," she answered, and wrote a few things on the parchment. "Yes, okay." She took a sip of tea and chewed her lower lip, trying to work up what to say next. "And what if we had a child...would the child be my financial responsibility?"

"If we had a child...and I remind you that I would not want a child until I retire from teaching...I would bear the financial responsibility for my heir," he answered truthfully. He couldn't help but be impressed, if only slightly, with her determination to carefully weigh her options. He watched as she processed the information, clearly she was considering him. He knew, due to her admission yesterday that the main issue would likely be about children. She clearly did not want a large brood. He assumed she was weighing the positive aspect of his comparable opinion on children with his previous warning of what would be expected of her sexually. "Is there anything else, Miss Granger?" he asked, purposely disrupting her contemplation.

"How long do you think you will keep teaching?" she pried further as she scratched once more upon the parchment.

"I had planned to retire within five years. After that, I plan on doing my own potions research. I suppose next you will ask where I would live."

"Yes...actually that was my next question," she answered, quill poised to write.

"I haven't yet decided," he stated.

"Oh...ok." She frowned and looked down at her parchment again.

"What in Merlin's name are you doing Miss Granger?" he asked. Instead of waiting for an answer though, he strode to where she was seated and snatched the parchment from her lap.

"Professor Snape, that's mine," Hermione protested.

He ignored her, and walked away studying the equations. "I see...allowing arithmancy to make your decision for you then?"

"Professor Snape, since I have only two options I have to make the best decision I can based on whatever information I can find. I am doing my best to be practical."

"I see," he said, studying her work. It was impressive, though obviously incomplete. He was surprised when he saw her calculation regarding her potential future with Shacklebolt. "I see here Mr. Shacklebolt would not allow you to have a job? That is surprising..." he said and turned to look at her with a raised eyebrow, inviting explanation.

She took a deep breath and rolled her eyes. "It's not that he wouldn't allow it exactly...he avoided directly answering the question and told me he made enough money that I wouldn't have to work. He seemed to think I would prefer to not work and just to have him give me spending money. Of course, between all the babies I would be popping

out there wouldn't be much time for work." She crossed her arms and glared at him. "Will you please give my parchment back now, sir?" she asked with forced politeness.

"Your calculations appear to be lacking quite a bit of relevant information, Miss Granger," he informed her, ignoring her demand as he walked to his desk and placed the parchment down. He sat and began revising her equations.

"Professor, please! What are you doing?" Hermione stood and stalked over to his desk.

"Correcting your work," he answered casually and continued. "I suggest you pay attention, Miss Granger. While your skills at arithmancy are notable, you have made a very common error. Calculations of a personal nature such as this need more information than what you have included to be complete. This is quite a different kind of work than what you were doing for the Order. You have ignored several important factors," he explained in his classroom lecture tone. He made several more marks as she waited impatiently, added a few side equations, and then handed the parchment back to her.

Hermione looked over his revisions. The outcome was not significantly different. Before his revisions he had been the most promising choice by a little bit...now he was clearly the better choice by a somewhat greater margin. "How do I know you didn't just add this in for your own benefit?" she asked skeptically.

"Check it over, Miss Granger. You will see that I am correct." He leaned back in his chair and watched as she scanned the parchment. "You will also see that I have left a few blanks for you to fill in regarding information I don't know. When you calculate this revised equation you will have a much more accurate answer."

She looked quizzically at him, then back to the equations. "I hadn't planned on including emotional factors," she said quietly. "And besides, why would you even care about my state of mind?"

"Pure self interest, Miss Granger. If you do decide that I am the one to marry, and considering your equations it appears that will be the case, then it directly affects my future as well. Marriage to a miserable bride would be tedious for me. Therefore, it behooves me to assist you in making the correct decision."

"Oh...um, well ok then...and what about this?" she asked, turning the parchment and indicating the arithmantic symbol for the unknown. She could see that it added some instability to the projection of her future satisfaction and happiness. Still, she could see that even with the worst possible variable in its place her future looked much better than with even the best of the possibilities with Kingsley.

"That is one factor which will remain unknown until after the wedding. You can experiment with various factors, but it would be directly related to your reaction to our...marital relations," he said with a smirk. He stood and walked around his desk to stand near Hermione, who was double checking the equation. "Unless," he said in a low voice, "unless you want to have a more accurate result for your equation by filling in the unknown variable."

She jumped away from him, staring with wide eyes. He laughed at her.

"Oh come now Miss Granger, don't be frightened," he purred. "It was only a suggestion. You have a week in which to make your choice. My offer stands until you make your decision. Otherwise, you can wait until the wedding night. In the meantime..." he said, walking over to the bookshelf, "look through the book more thoroughly." He pulled the book he had showed her the previous night from the shelf. "If you choose me, I want you to be prepared," he said as he held the book out for her to take.

She stood with her arms by her sides, not wanting to reach out and take the book from him. Finally, she reached out and accepted it. She considered the book carefully, and then looked back to her Professor, wondering if he could still just be trying to scare her. As if he had read her thoughts, he said: "No, I am not bluffing. I will admit that it was my aim at first to scare you away with nothing more than the simple truth. However, I have thought more on it. If you are willing to put your typical efforts of studying into learning the arts of coitus, I believe that a marriage between us could be satisfactory.

"In fact," he continued, now with a more thoughtful smirk, "if you prefer to look at this whole thing as yet another subject to learn, and our encounters as tests, you would probably do quite well." He was satisfied to see a deep blush spread up her face, even her ears turned bright red. She began to breathe deeply, and he wasn't sure if it was from anger or embarrassment or both. "Yes, I think that is what I will do. I know how much you love tests...wouldn't you like to try for the best possible grade on the practical exam?" He was really enjoying this and was having a difficult time maintaining his typical smug expression; he felt nearly ready to burst out in laughter.

Her nostrils flared as she got even redder. 'Oh, definitely angry,' he thought. She began to shake and looked about ready to explode.

"How could you do this?" she finally shouted. "I'm about to be forced into marriage and you're gloating about how you're going to use my body like I'm some kind of whore! Not only that, the things you want to do to me are just plain abusive and sick!" She threw his book on the desk, causing several stacks of paper to fly off as the book skidded across the smooth surface.

"Miss Granger, calm yourself!" Snape growled.

"No! I'm not going to be calm...I'm tired of always being calm. I will not be treated like this! I am not some kind of whore!" she shouted at him and stamped her foot. His reaction was swift...fast as lightning; he reached out and grabbed her by both upper arms, twisted her around and clasped her wrists together at the small of her back in one hand. His other hand grabbed a handful of her hair and in three strides he had dragged her across the room to where the coffee table was. He placed one foot securely on the table, and thrust her forward across his thigh. It was at her waist level and she toppled over and hung there struggling, unable to find purchase with her feet. He still held her wrists firmly behind her back.

"Let me go! Stop!" she screamed at him, sounding a little scared.

He responded with five quick swats to her upturned bottom.

"Ow! No! You can't hit me...let me go!"

His response was another five swats, this time harder. "Miss Granger, I will let you go when you cease this tantrum."

"Unhand me you greasy pervert!" She screamed and accentuated her words by flailing her legs, trying to kick or unbalance him.

This time it wasn't just five swats. He didn't bother counting; he kept up his assault with his open hand on her denim covered bottom until she stopped struggling and he heard muffled whimpers of pain with each stroke. He stopped and allowed her to simply hang across his thigh as she caught her breath which hitched slightly. When she didn't struggle for a good half-minute he asked, "Are you quite done with your tantrum, Miss Granger?"

He waited for an answer. When none came he gave her three hard swats. "When I ask you a question I expect an answer. Are you quite done with your tantrum?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

"Yes what?"

Another pause...he raised his hand to deliver another blow when he heard her sob; "Yes, sir."

"Good," he replied and set her on her feet. He led her to the couch and nudged her to sit. He saw the unshed tears in her eyes, and noted the rough breathing she was doing her best to still. She glared at him in disbelief and anger. Her current acquiescence was from sheer shock of being turned over his knee and spanked. He hadn't had to use this method to deal with a woman throwing a tantrum in years, but it certainly hadn't lost its effectiveness.

He stood over her in front of the couch, leaning over and placing one hand on the arm of the couch next to her. "Now, there are a few things I am going to make clear to you. I will not be shouted at, and I will not have my possessions thrown," he said in a threatening tone. "I am not treating you like a whore. No," he said and raised a hand as she opened her mouth to protest, "You *will* hear me out," he told her in a tone which brooked no argument.

"I admit that some might find my preferences to be...perverted. However, they are my preferences and I make no excuses for what I want. If you do choose me, we will both be required to do things we may not like if we are to have a satisfactory marriage. I will be sharing my personal space with you and giving up a level of privacy I have grown accustomed to. I will allow you to pursue studies and a career when it is safe to do so to whatever level you desire. I will not interfere with your relationships with your friends or family even though it means I will have to accompany you on visits to your family while there is still danger, and if you wanted to entertain your friends or family in my home once we left Hogwarts I would even allow that, within reason. I will leave the decision of when to have a child up to you, aside from the stipulation that it be after I no longer teach at Hogwarts. I will make sure you have a consistent supply of contraceptive potion for as long as you like. And most importantly, I will protect you from those who seek to harm you.

"In return, you will respect my wishes. Expecting cooperation from a wife in the physical pleasures of marriage is not unreasonable, nor is it treating you as a whore." He saw a tear slip from one eye and down her cheek. Snape continued, unrelenting, "I may push you to your limits, but never beyond what you are actually capable of. I may cause you pain at times, but I will not actually *harm* you. I also would demand to be treated with respect. I will not suffer tantrums. If I really wanted to be perverted and cruel I would allow you to enter into a lifetime marriage with me with none of these facts known; you should be grateful that I am informing you beforehand." He fell silent, finished with his speech and waited for a reaction from Hermione.

She sighed deeply and looked up at the stone ceiling of his dungeon living room, trying to avoid his piercing glare and keep more tears from overflowing. "And would you spank me every time we disagree about something?" She tried her best, but couldn't stop her voice from cracking slightly.

"If you revert to the behavior of a three-year-old like you just did, then yes, I would," he said icily. "If we had a disagreement I would expect you to present your case through logical discourse. I may then consider what you have to say before I make my decision." He moved to sit beside her on the couch, abandoning his former looming presence.

She gradually calmed her breathing as she looked up at the ceiling. He watched her jaw work, grinding her back teeth and then relaxing as she pulled her lower lip between her teeth to chew on it. "So then...what about all those pictures? There was quite a bit of spanking going on there."

"That is sexual play and has nothing to do with a disagreement about leaving your socks in the living room," he replied dryly. "Speaking of which, I absolutely will not tolerate socks left in the floor." While his voice was venom, he knew the absurd subject change would jilt her enough to pull her from her self-pity.

She chuckled and found she had a small smile at the thought of disagreements over leaving socks in the living room. It was just so...domestic. She thought back to a story her mother had told her about her dad's socks. When they first got married, he would leave his socks out in various places around the house. At his desk, by the couch, under the kitchen table, even on the stairs. Her mother started out picking them up and depositing them in the hamper for him, occasionally giving him a gentle reminder about where the socks go. He persisted in leaving his socks out all over the place, and after about a year of picking up socks she'd had enough. She started throwing them away instead. Within two weeks he had no more socks. Finally, he asked what happened to all her socks and she told him. He quit leaving his socks out after that.

"Would you care to fill me in on what is so funny?"

"Oh...it's just that an argument over leaving socks out sounds terribly domestic," she explained. "Also...what's that about entertaining friends 'within reason'?"

"By 'within reason' I mean I would not want fifteen Gryffindors having a class reunion for a week in my home." He relaxed somewhat. The turn of the conversation was a good sign.

"Oh...well, that's reasonable," she agreed.

"Now, are there any more questions?"

"No, I guess not."

"In that case," he said as he stood and walked to his desk, "I want you to look through this book. Return it when you are finished, and if you choose me I expect you to be prepared for what is to come." She stood and gathered her arithmancy calculations on her possible futures, and took the book from his hands. He led her to the door in silence. As he held the door open for her, she glanced up at him. He wore his usual stern face, unreadable and frightening...but there was something else there, a glint in his eyes...something that looked almost like excitement.

As she walked down the corridors and up the stairs to Gryffindor Tower she could still feel the tingling and burning on her bum from the spanking. It had been totally unexpected. She had felt mortified, hanging there across his thigh, helpless and vulnerable. It hadn't been incredibly painful...yes, it stung...but it was more the shock than anything else. What she found strange was that she wasn't angry about it. She had felt oddly at ease afterwards, as if all the tensions over the decision had left her. He had been stern with her, and she couldn't imagine anyone would call him nice after the speech about what he was doing for her and what he expected in return. But, he had been surprisingly helpful. And, she supposed he was being truthful. That was more than she could say about Shackbolt who had uncomfortably skirted several questions of hers.

The Common Room was empty when she arrived. She looked at the clock and realized it was dinner time, but she didn't really feel up to dinner in the great hall. She went to her room and flooed for supper to be sent up to her and settled down to look over the calculations. Professor Snape's revisions added a depth to the equations which was previously missing. She had wondered at first if he had fixed it to show the result he wanted, but as she checked it over she could see he had been correct. In her attempt to make a completely rational, logical choice based only on the facts she had left out how she would feel and how those feelings would affect the outcome.

She hardly tasted her food as she ate. She was busy filling in the blanks of the equations, watching as each finished segment reordered itself to fit into the web of fate...her potential future. She compared the two separate equations. Kingsley was a nice guy, but was certainly not a good match for her. The potential outcome with him ranged from subdued indifference with their large family...so many problems to deal with, to downright misery. Noises from the common room didn't distract her from her concentration, though she did hope Harry wouldn't choose this time to come pounding on her door.

The potential with Professor Snape was much different. At worst it was satisfied acquiescence...the lines regarding her potential career satisfaction were very promising...and at best, well, it looked like the best chance for true happiness. She wasn't one to put much stock in divination...but arithmancy was different...there may always be an unknown factor, or a random variable which would change things but it was closer to science than mysticism.

She set the parchment on her side table and pulled out the book. Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, she opened it. Yes, it was shocking. At each turn of the page she learned more, and wondered exactly how much of this Professor Snape would do. And would she think of him as 'Professor Snape' for much longer? Her room grew dark and she lit a candle after a while to see. The noises from the common room gradually faded; likely everyone was headed to bed.

She was studying a particularly interesting picture...it was herself and Professor Snape again. He must have re-charmed the book, because now all the pictures moved. She wondered how accurate the book picture was. It appeared to be accurate judging on the portrayal of her body. In most of the pictures he was clad in his full black regalia. However, in this one he was nude. His body wasn't bad...he was thin, yes...but his muscles were well defined. As to other regions...she was watching the picture of herself orally pleasuring the picture of Professor Snape. Her breathing quickened at the image...she wasn't tied up in this one, but was on her hands and knees in a richly draped bed, he was upright and on his knees. His hand was twisted firmly in her hair and he was nudging her to move. It wasn't forceful though.

She watched as he nudged her to take his cock all the way...she was having difficulty doing so, appearing to gag slightly at the length nudging the back of her throat. His other hand reached down to massage her throat...she could see his lips moving, giving instruction probably, and she watched as slowly, she took his cock down all the way into her throat. Could she do that? He was large; obviously he would have to go deep into her throat. The picture of herself pulled back and took in a deep breath and tried again. She smiled and wondered if he had been serious about assignments on "the art of coitus" as he had put it. At the time it had enraged her, leading to her totally out of character tantrum. He had chosen his words carefully, and the result had been pure rage. She wondered if he did that on purpose to have an excuse to spank her...she would certainly have to be more careful with him to know when he was trying to goad her into reaction.

The picture changed to a closer image, showing much more detail of what was going on. Picture-Hermione changed techniques...no longer working on deep-throat, she

now pulled out to the tip of his cock, pulling the foreskin back and forth with one hand and taking just the head into her mouth then pulling the foreskin forward and running her tongue between the glans and the fold of skin over it.

How much of this would he expect of her on their wedding night? She took in a deep breath, recognizing that she had come to a decision. She closed the book and went to her desk where the marriage proposals were waiting. Kingsley hadn't submitted one yet, he was waiting for her to accept first. She picked out Professor Snape's contract and looked at it for several minutes. Finally, she inked her quill and signed. It rolled up and disappeared with a little pop. She sat back after it was gone, feeling nervous and satisfied at once. It was all going to work out. At that moment, she didn't care what Harry or Ron or Professor McGonagall or even her parents would say. It was her choice, and it was made.

Breaking the News

Chapter 4 of 31

Harry finds out about her decision, and Hermione meets with her parents again. Her dad takes a stroll to the dungeons to confront Snape.

Hermione woke the next morning to the sunlight streaming in her window. Her parents would be here today. Her stomach roiled and clenched as she thought about what would happen next. Her calm assurance of the night before was gone...she would marry Professor Snape, and she had to tell her parents about her decision today. She groaned as she got out of bed and went to shower. It was going to be a long day.

She went to breakfast with Harry, who was still telling her all about how wonderful Kingsley Shacklebolt was. She wasn't sure how to break the news to him so she let him carry on as they walked into the great hall. A glance towards the head table revealed that Professor Snape had chosen to attend breakfast in the great hall. She hurried to her place, feeling suddenly embarrassed in his presence. She had a flashback of being bent over his leg getting spanked...strangely enough; the result was to make her feel guilty about throwing a fit. Hermione picked up a piece of buttered toast and nibbled on it...she really didn't feel like a full breakfast today.

Students around the great hall looked up as the morning owl post arrived. She looked up into the din of owls flying around and spotted a Ministry owl headed for the head table...right towards Professor Snape. Another large Ministry owl swooped down upon her and dropped a scroll on her plate. This must be it, but she didn't think it would be so soon.

She looked back to the head table where Professor Snape was looking at his scroll curiously as he held it. Hermione watched as he unrolled the scroll...she saw the start of surprise on his face. He looked over to her and actually gave her a small smile as he tucked the parchment away in a robe pocket. Harry had come to attention when she got the Ministry Scroll and followed her gaze.

"Hermione..." his voice was hesitant. "What's going on?"

She didn't answer, she couldn't. Instead, she opened her scroll...

The Ministry of Magic congratulates you on your upcoming nuptials.

This certifies that

Severus Marcus Aurelius Snape

Is hereby betrothed to:

Hermione Jane Granger

You have thirty days in which to perform the wedding ceremony. Contact the Ministry of Magic with your expected Wedding Date and a ministry official will be sent to perform the binding spells and proper paperwork.

And there it was in black and white ornate script. No turning back now. She was really, truly going to marry Professor Snape. Severus Marcus Aurelius Snape. Marcus Aurelius? Somehow, the name of the philosopher who wrote at length of serenity and peace with your fellow man seemed a strange irony to be the two middle names of Severus Snape.

"Hermione..." Harry had leaned over to read her mail. "Hermione...what...what have you done?"

"I have made a choice, Harry," she said quietly.

"But Hermione...why?" Harry looked absolutely stricken. "You could have picked Kingsley...why did you do this?"

"I made the best choice I could with the facts I had." She spoke firmly, hoping her voice wouldn't shake. Now was the time to put up a positive, self-assured front. She couldn't quell before Harry now.

"When?"

"Last night. I had a meeting with Kingsley yesterday afternoon and another with Professor Snape before dinner time. After that I had all the facts I needed to make my choice and I didn't see any point in waiting any longer," she told him.

Harry just stared at her, mouth agape. "Wait...did you drink anything when you met with Professor Snape?" he asked suspiciously.

"I had tea...what does that have to do with anything?" she asked, but had a suspicion where he was going with it. She wasn't about to admit to the brandy followed by the sobriety potion he had given her the evening before that.

"Oh gods, Hermione this is terrible...he slipped you a potion, that's why you signed for him. Come on, we've got to go tell Dumbledore and get this mess straightened out before it's too late!" He stood and grabbed her arm to help her up.

"Harry," she hissed. "He didn't give me any potions...I made this decision on my own."

"I don't believe it; you wouldn't do that to me!" He was nearly shouting now, people were beginning to crane their necks to see what was going on.

"Harry...hush! Sit down. I didn't do this *to you*, I did this *for me*. Now would you sit down?" She grabbed his arm right back and tugged for him to sit.

Harry stilled suddenly and stared up the path between the tables. His features hardened to a look of pure hatred. Hermione turned to see Professor Snape walking through the tables with an incredibly smug look on his face. He gave Harry a cursory glance before turning his attention to Hermione.

"Miss Granger, I require your presence after class today," he told her and walked away, leaving Harry standing and staring after him.

She turned back to the table, trying to ignore the looks of pity from those who thought she was in trouble, and nibbled at her toast. She didn't think the looks would be any better if they knew why he wanted to see her. Harry flopped down heavily on the bench beside her, appearing completely defeated. "Why did you do this?" he finally asked weakly.

"Harry, I made the best choice I could. Kingsley was very nice, but it would never have worked out. I'm sure everything will be fine, just calm down."

"I still think we should go to Dumbledore...I don't trust him, and you shouldn't either."

She decided to ignore him...he would come around, and right now she didn't want to deal with him taking her engagement as a personal affront. She decided to compose a note thanking Kingsley Shacklebolt for his offer and informing him of the decision she had made. It would probably be better to let him know that way.

Professor Snape strode to his office. He had been quite surprised that she had accepted him so soon. However, he realized that since she was trying to be practical she would want to get the decision made and out of the way as quickly as possible. After she left his room last night he decided to work his own arithmantic equations, the results were more than satisfactory.

It appeared she had not informed Potter, if his expression towards him in the Great Hall was any indication. He was glad she hadn't told him...seeing the look on Potter's face for himself had been perfect. Although, he would likely get over it since he was forever Miss Granger's ever-present friend and then he would have to put up with him in his home. At least while he was still at Hogwarts they would be able to meet places other than his quarters. He was at the top of the stairs when he heard the sound of footsteps rushing in his direction.

"Severus!" It was Minerva McGonagall. He took in a deep breath, savoring the moment and prepared to etch what was sure to be Minerva at her most incensed into his permanent memory. When she neared him, he turned to face him with his best smug, triumphant expression.

"Minerva? How may I help you?" he asked in silken tones.

"What did you get from the Ministry?" she asked, her voice was shaking and her eyes narrowed to slits.

"I didn't realize you took such interest in my personal mail," he replied. He was pulling the moment out just for sheer enjoyment. He had so few of these moments, and he wanted to make the best of it.

"Severus what was it?" she raised her voice. Her face was the picture of perfect indignation and fury.

"Very well," he said and reached into his breast pocket. "This is what I received from the ministry," he said, withdrawing the parchment with a slight flourish and holding it out for her to see.

She snatched it from his hand and held it tightly. Her eyes widened and she began to shake. She looked up at him with cold suspicion. "Why did she accept you?"

"Miss Granger is a bright young woman, as you remind the staff frequently, I am sure that she made her decision with all consideration due to something of this magnitude."

"If I find out that you have done anything untoward to influence her decision..." she threatened.

Snape narrowed his eyes and his smug expression moved to one of cold fury. "I have done nothing but answer numerous questions of Miss Granger's. She has made this decision based on what she wanted. The only reason I even submitted a bid was because Albus asked me to. After all I have done for the Order, after all my years of spying, all those years of protecting Potter how dare you insinuate that I am untrustworthy." He snatched his Betrothal Certificate from Minerva's shaking hands. "I look forward to your congratulations for my upcoming nuptials. I do hope you won't antagonize Miss Granger about her decision, though I suppose I shouldn't expect too much. Good day," he snarled, then turned on his heel and stalked down to the dungeons.

The insinuation that he would have misled or manipulated or even given a potion to Miss Granger in order to influence her decision to marry him put a stopper in his elated mood. But, he didn't expect much more of Minerva the self-righteous stuck-up head of Gryffindor. She had always looked down on him, even after the war, after all the times he had risked his life to bring essential information from Voldemort's inner circle. The battle never would have been won without him. How soon people forget.

Potions class was nearly the same as usual for Hermione. Professor Snape paid her no more or less attention than he normally did. The major difference was with Harry. He hadn't talked to her since they left the great hall. He sat in his chair in potions glaring at Professor Snape as if he'd like to hex him right there in class. Hermione wasn't sure if she was relieved or not that Professor Snape chose to ignore Harry completely.

At the end of the class they cleaned up their supplies. Professor Snape announced that class was dismissed, and Hermione hung back, slowly packing her bag. Harry didn't move either. He stood behind his chair and glared at Professor Snape, who continued to ignore him for the moment. Once the class was empty except for the three of them, Professor Snape looked up from his desk.

"Mr. Potter, I do not recall requesting your presence after class. You may go," he said dismissively.

Harry just continued to stare, and looked as if he was seriously thinking of confronting Snape with accusations.

"Harry," Hermione whispered, "It's ok, I'll see you later." 'Oh just please leave; don't make this more difficult' she silently begged him.

He turned to glare at her angrily for a moment before stalking out of the classroom and slamming the door behind him. Hermione winced at the loud noise as she turned to face Professor Snape.

"I take it Potter did not appreciate news of our engagement?"

"Well, no...I think he really wanted me to marry Kingsley," she explained with a shrug.

"Apparently, McGonagall wanted the same thing."

"Yes...she did," she answered. Despite the fact that she had been absolutely certain of her decision the night before, faced with the reality of her Professor in the cold light of the dungeons she felt nervous. She shifted uncomfortably under his piercing gaze.

"I hadn't expected you to make a decision so soon," he said.

"I didn't see any point in waiting. I had the information I needed, I wanted to get the decision out of the way and move on," she said firmly.

"Very well...your parents were planning on being here this evening. They should be relieved to find this matter settled when they arrive. I would appreciate it if you would pass on an invitation to dinner for tomorrow night. It would be best to meet my future in-laws soon enough for them to become accustomed to me."

"Um...yeah...good idea, I'll let them know."

"Miss Granger, you don't regret your decision so soon, do you?" he asked and walked to stand closer to where she was seated. She was definitely nervous.

"Well...um...no, I don't regret my choice...um, I just...well..." she shrugged as she trailed off and looked down at her book bag.

"Miss Granger, I will be your husband within a month. You should get used to looking at me when we speak," he said with a note of amusement in his voice. Her eyes snapped up to meet his as her face flushed red. "And speaking of which, I suppose we should work on planning the wedding ceremony. Would you prefer a large ceremony or a smaller gathering?"

"I haven't thought that far..." she said, surprised that he was offering her a choice. So, since she didn't know what she wanted on that particular point she asked, "Do you have any preferences?"

"I would prefer a small ceremony. I will speak with Albus about officiating. The ceremony will be a traditional wizard binding, along with the...additional ministry bindings which have been enacted specifically for these unions." His last words were said with distaste. She knew what he was referring to. Included in the Marriage Law were additional provisions to magically ensure fidelity of both parties as well as to monitor the union for adherence to the weekly coitus requirements. Even though he had made it clear that he would take full advantage of those requirements, she knew that someone like him would resent being required to do anything, even if he would enjoy it. "Though I would prefer a small ceremony, you should think on it. Wizarding marriages are for a lifetime. Unless I meet with an early death, this will be your only wedding. If you would prefer a large, ornate wedding then I will not oppose you on the matter."

"Oh..." she said in surprise "Um...thanks."

"Did you take a good look at the book before you signed the contract?" he asked. He smirked as she turned red and looked down at her book bag again.

"Yes," she answered quietly. She looked back up at him, but her eyes shifted around, not quite meeting his. She flushed further.

"Are you sure you had a good look? I was sincere about not wanting you to have any *unpleasant* surprises," he purred softly to her.

"Um...yes...I looked." Her voice was half an octave higher than usual. "I looked through the entire book after I finished filling in the equations," she answered with a firmer voice this time.

"Good, I look forward to meeting with you and your parents tomorrow evening for dinner then. Until then, Miss Granger," he said politely. Hermione gave him a small smile as she left the classroom and then hurried on to her next class.

Once again Hermione and her parents were sitting in the Headmaster's office. They had both read through the marriage law and were furious about it. The Headmaster sat and listened patiently as they railed against the injustice done to their daughter, and he offered words of condolence at helpful intervals. Finally, they settled down enough to discuss the situation rationally.

"So who is her other option, besides that professor of hers?" Mr. Granger asked sullenly. Hermione hadn't had a chance to get a word in edgewise in the conversation thus far, and felt her stomach sink to her knees. She would have to tell them, and Professor Dumbledore already knew who she had chosen.

"A wizard by the name of Kingsley Shacklebolt was her other option. However, I believe that Hermione has already made her choice...isn't that correct Hermione?"

Her parents looked to her in shock. "You already...Hermione dear, did you sign anything?" her mother asked warily.

"Mum, Dad...Professor Dumbledore had me meet with my two options...and I made a decision. I looked at all the facts and I chose someone who would least interfere with my life and future." Once again, she was trying to justify herself and her decision. She only hoped her parents would understand better than Harry and Professor McGonagall had. She had cornered Hermione after transfigurations class, demanding an explanation for why she hadn't chosen Kingsley. After her initial anger, she had looked with pity upon Hermione and had told her that if Professor Snape ever did anything to hurt her she should tell Professor Dumbledore and they would 'take care of him'.

She took a deep breath and announced: "I decided Professor Snape would be the best option."

Her parents stared at her for a long moment, eyes wide. "But, did you sign anything yet?" her mother asked again, nearly in a whisper.

"Yes, I signed and we are officially engaged," she said. She felt a twinge of guilt about springing it on her parents like this. She knew the decision was correct, but still, maybe it wouldn't have hurt to let them think they had some kind of influence. She knew they felt completely helpless about the whole mess. They had crumpled back into their chairs at her announcement, and she decided she may as well try to make things better. "He said he would like to invite us to dinner tomorrow evening to talk about upcoming plans..." Well, she had hoped it would help anyway.

Jane Granger leaned forward and buried her face in her hands. Frank Granger sighed deeply and shook his head, reaching over to pat his wife's shaking shoulders. He turned to the Headmaster. "Why on earth did you let her do this?" he asked angrily.

"Mr. Granger, I did the best I could in this situation to allow Hermione to have the best chance for happiness in the future. While she did make her decision much more quickly than may be ideal, I do not think she decided without first knowing everything she possibly could."

"But he's a teacher! I thought this school had standards. How could you permit this with a teacher?" he shouted.

"Please believe me, if it were not for the Marriage Law, as well as the unusual circumstances surrounding your daughter's situation a teacher-student relationship would never be allowed at Hogwarts. It is only because of the grave circumstances that I considered it. I did find another person who was not a teacher, but the decision was left to Hermione to make. This is sudden, but she is now out of danger from those who wish her harm. I trust Severus to do his duty to keep her safe."

"Do his duty you say...I read this law...he's going to...going to..." he trailed off, voice shaking. He didn't want to say what he knew his daughter would be required to do and who would be with her. Hermione looked at her hands uncomfortably, then back to her dad.

"Dad...listen, this was my best chance to get away from Lucius Malfoy. The important thing is that I will be safe. It may not be perfect, but it could be a lot worse," she explained, wishing her father would understand.

Dumbledore decided it would be a good time to intervene. "Mr. and Mrs. Granger, perhaps it would be best to let things cool off for a little bit. I'm sure everything will seem better once you're settled into your rooms. You have this weekend and next week to go over everything. The staff and I will all be here to assist you in any way possible. Now...if you would come with me please, I will show you to your rooms."

They allowed themselves to be led to a corridor near Gryffindor Tower. The walk was tense, but Professor Dumbledore easily filled the silence by temporarily acting the tour guide with some brief explanations about the parts of the castle they walked through, he even introduced them to the Ravenclaw ghost, The Grey Lady, as she passed through the corridor. They were a bit shocked at seeing a ghost, but eased as Hermione and the Grey Lady exchanged greetings.

The guest rooms were opulent, and despite the stress of the situation they seemed to relax in their new surroundings. The room was conveniently situated just down the hall from the outer door of Hermione's private Head Girl's room.

"Here you are," he announced when he had showed them around. "Dinner will be here in a few minutes. I have also made you a map to ease your stay here," he said, producing a parchment from his robes. He took it to her parents and opened it to explain its workings. "If you need to get anywhere just state the location to the map and it will guide you. As you can see, I have also charmed it to show you where you are in relation to the map." He handed it to the Grangers with a gentle smile and winked at Hermione. She had noticed the similarity to the Marauder's Map and Dumbledore was likely aware of its existence. "Now, I will leave the three of you to discuss matters. Good evening."

No one said anything for a while after Professor Dumbledore left. Hermione walked over to the large couch and sat on one side. Her mother followed after a moment and sat in the middle of the couch and reached out for Hermione's hand. They sat in silence for a while, not speaking, simply holding each other. After a while her dad came and sat in a chair adjacent to the couch.

"Oh Hermione," her mother finally said. "I just wish we could take you away from all this. We've always been so happy for you, that you had found such a wonderful, mystical world that seemed to be so perfect. I guess we never thought this sort of thing could happen."

"I know...it was a big surprise to a lot of people. They're trying to overturn the law, but it's something that could take years, and I don't have years to solve this. I'm sorry I didn't wait longer to sign the contract, but even if I had waited I would still make the same choice. It seems strange to me too that I'm going to marry Professor Snape, but after a few talks with him I think it's going to be ok," she assured her mother.

"This is the professor Harry was talking about last summer when he visited, isn't it?"

"Yes...Harry really doesn't like him, but he's not anything as bad as what Harry makes him out to be."

"So did you pick him because he was nicer than the other one?" Her mother asked. Hermione realized that she was ready to listen this time. Her dad sat silently and waited for an answer as well.

"No...if I was just looking at 'nice' I would have picked Kingsley. I picked Professor Snape because he would have given me the best opportunity to remain independent...or at least as independent as I could be while married. Also, did you see the part of the law that said the muggleborn wife would have to have her husband's permission to have a job?" Her parents nodded. "Well, that was another big issue for me. If I had married Kingsley, he acted nice about it, but I could tell he wanted to just give me an allowance and have me stay at home. Professor Snape, on the other hand, pretty much said he would prefer me to have a job, and strongly implied that he wouldn't provide me with spending money."

"Why that..." her father sat straighter and looked angry.

"No, Dad...let me explain. I would much rather be independent than have someone just give me money. Also, Kingsley wanted about eight kids..." her parents both started at that "...and Professor Snape said that he didn't want any kids at all until after he retired from teaching, which would be in about five years, and that even then one or two children would be all he wanted. I feel the same way. This would give me time to finish school, as well as do an apprenticeship if I wanted to. He will also make sure I have contraceptive potions," at this her parents both winced since it brought up the obvious reason for taking said potion, "and would also leave it up to me as to when to stop taking the potions. There were several other reasons involved, but those were the major ones. Do you understand why I picked him now?"

Her parents both looked thoughtful. "Yes...that does make sense," her mother admitted. "I hate this situation, but I agree with your reasoning. I just hope you will be happy," she said sadly as she turned and hugged her daughter.

They were interrupted by a house elf that suddenly appeared near the fireplace. "Excuse me...Dobby is not wanting to interrupt, but Dobby is bringing dinner for Miss Hermione and her parents," he squeaked while balancing a large silver tray over his head.

"Oh Dobby, thank you so much, please set it down here," Hermione said and patted the large coffee table. There wasn't a dining table in the room. The elf placed the chair down and looked curiously at Hermione's parents who were staring in open shock at Dobby. He certainly was a strange sight, even for a house elf. He still wore several of the knitted hats that Hermione had left out for the House elves in her fifth year, and a strange hodge-podge of bright, rainbow socks, a yellow and brown plaid kilt, a bright purple and green checked shirt, and a red bandana worn around his neck.

"Mum, Dad...this is Dobby, remember the nice house elf I told you about?"

"Oh Miss Hermione is so gracious, Dobby does not deserve such praise...Miss Hermione is so kind and Dobby is so happy to meet her parents." The elf bowed low to the gathered Grangers. "Just call Dobby when you need anything and Dobby will come and take care of you," he told them with a proud smile before he snapped his fingers and disappeared.

The casual dining in the living room of the guest quarters was comforting, reminding Hermione of her summers at home during which dinner in the Granger household was usually eaten in the living room and filled with conversation. Though stilted at first, conversation soon flowed and for the time being they caught up on things other than the upcoming marriage, all seeming to want to avoid that issue at the moment. They caught up on her friends, and heard more about Dobby the house-elf. Frank and Jane Granger had taken the next week off of work and there would be plenty of time to get everything worked out.

After dinner, however, Hermione's father became agitated and paced the room restlessly as she and her mother talked. Finally, he announced he was going for a walk and left with the map. Hermione and Jane Granger cast a worried glance at the door after he left, but knew things would be better when he got back. It was his usual method to deal with a problem...he would leave for a walk for several hours, but when he returned would be more settled about things.

Dr. Frank Granger strode through the castle, thoughts churning in his head. An occasional student passed him and looked curiously at the sight of a man in muggle clothing in the halls of Hogwarts, but he paid them no mind. As he walked, he thought about the whole crazy situation. His little girl had grown up quickly over the last seven years, it seemed to him that it hadn't been long since she had been a giggling little girl asking to ride on his shoulders, the little girl who proudly displayed her latest coloring with crayons, who brought home the straight A report cards from primary school...she had quickly become the young scholar who came home during school breaks to tell them of all the wonderful things she was learning about magic and potions and magical creatures and many other subjects that they didn't really understand...it had been like something out of a fairy tale. Even the little bit she had told them about the dark wizard Voldemort hadn't seemed to mar the picture of the wonderful world his daughter lived in, and that he and her mother contended themselves to just hearing about through her.

But now this world seemed a strange and twisted place where the laws of physics and science did not apply as they rightly should. This was the world that was taking his daughter from him and delivering her to be bound to a man she hardly knew and he was helpless to stop it. As he thought, he came to the conclusion that while he may be helpless to stop what was coming, he was still her father and he would look out for her as best he could. He wasn't going to sit back and take Albus Dumbledore's assurance that this professor of hers who he had heard so much about from Hermione and Harry and Ron...some things good from Hermione, but horrible things from Harry and Ron. He was going to address the matter directly.

Decision made, he stopped and opened the map and said, "Take me to Professor Snape's rooms." He watched as a red dotted line appeared on the map, originating from his own position. He then followed it down the corridor with a determined quality to his stride.

Professor Snape was lounging with a glass of brandy in his living room and thinking about his upcoming wedding. He had spoken with Albus earlier that afternoon regarding performing the ceremony. Albus had actually congratulated him. He had asked Miss Granger to extend a dinner invitation to her parents for tomorrow evening, and he wondered how he would handle her parents. He chuckled to himself, thinking that bending Mrs. Granger over his knee probably wouldn't be the best way to handle any trouble from her. He really didn't have anything to worry about in regards to his safety. They were muggles and couldn't hex him. However, he would be married to

Hermione for the rest of his life; it would not do to begin relations with his in-laws badly.

Hermione Granger had proven to be incredibly practical in a situation which would have sent some girls into hysterics. She had chosen him based on logic, despite the fact that he had warned her fully of what he would expect once they were married. He hoped she wouldn't be too much trouble to deal with...but, he could take things slowly with her and savor her training.

There was no reason not to start now, and he went to his desk to retrieve a paper and quill. He would begin now and assign her something to study, along with rewards and punishments associated with the grades he would assign. He would start mild, he didn't want her to be completely terrified of him...slightly scared would suffice. Fear could not override arousal and curiosity. He thought for a moment, wondering what to assign to her first. With a smile he began to write.

Soon after he began writing, five sharp knocks sounded on his door. He wasn't expecting anyone, and students would know better than to knock on his door in that manner even if it were an emergency. He strode to his door, paper and quill still in hand, and opened it. His eyebrows went up fractionally when he saw who was standing there looking rather perturbed. It looked as if his relations with his soon-to-be father-in-law would begin earlier than he had anticipated.

"Dr. Granger," he said in greeting.

"Severus Snape, I would like a word," Frank Granger said with a bit of a growl. Snape didn't allow it to bother him, but he did wonder how he had found his quarters.

"Then please, do come in." He stood aside and allowed his visitor entrance. "Please have a seat. May I offer you a drink?" he asked formally. Hermione's father stood and regarded him thoughtfully for a moment, then acquiesced.

"Yes...what do you have?"

Snape walked to his liquor cabinet as he spoke, bypassing his desk to place his half-written 'assignment' to Miss Granger in an out of the way spot. "Brandy, whisky, and vodka," he listed.

"Brandy then," replied Frank Granger. Snape pulled a glass out and poured a generous portion of brandy. He delivered the glass to Dr. Granger and placed the bottle on the coffee table before sitting in the opposite wing-backed leather chair. The two men eyed each other over their glasses. Snape waited for the other man to speak first. He noticed the map on the coffee table which answered his question as to how he had found his rooms.

"So...my daughter tells me she's chosen to marry you," he began.

"Yes, that is what she has chosen," Snape answered. Dr. Granger narrowed his eyes, trying to evaluate the black-clad man.

"I suppose you find this new law to be quite convenient," he stated abruptly. Snape recognized the suspicion as concern for his daughter...it was understandable. At least he was being reasonably civil about it.

"I think this new law is deplorable, actually. Your daughter isn't the only one who will be forced to make a decision she shouldn't have to before this is all over. Until a few days ago, marriage to anyone was the furthest thing from my mind. However, now that Miss Granger has made her choice, I can only hope that we will have a satisfactory marriage."

Dr. Granger listened closely and took a swig of his drink. "Hermione explained her reasons for choosing you...at least some of them anyway. I can't help but wonder if she was too pragmatic in her methods," he said. "What do you know of her reasoning behind her choice?"

"I know that her education and future career were prime considerations in her choice, as well as the fact that my ideas on children match her own. She was pragmatic, and faced the decision maturely. However, she did take into consideration her feelings on the issue as well. She asked a number of questions when considering her decision, and I answered all her questions honestly. I truly did not think she would consider me at first; but, when it became clear that she was I made sure that she had all the information needed to make her decision...even though it meant telling her things I thought would discourage her from choosing me," he admitted. "I can tell you that she made a fully informed decision; and it is my hope that she does not have reason to regret her choice at a later date."

"I see." He paused and sipped his drink again. "I also found it odd that she listed your implication that you wouldn't help support her financially to be a point in your favor."

Snape raised an eyebrow and drank. He considered his answer before speaking. "It would be a shame to see such a bright mind lie fallow. And, I believe she would resent being a kept woman. I did imply to her that I would not provide her with spending money, but I do not object to covering her basic living expenses since we will be married. Miss Granger's career prospects are promising, considering her grades, so I believe that money will not be an issue of contention at all."

"Yes...she has always been independent and strong-willed," he admitted. He paused, then continued, "Her mother...my wife, Jane is a dentist as well. Early in our marriage, while we were still both in medical school, I suggested that she could stay at home and not work if she wanted...took her quite a while to forgive me for that one."

"Now I understand where your daughter gets her tenacity," Snape replied with a small smile.

Dr. Granger considered his answer and seemed to relax a bit. "I also hear you plan to retire from teaching within five years...where do you plan to live after you leave the school?"

Snape was satisfied with the new line of questioning. It was a degree of acceptance of the situation, as well as concern that he wasn't too far to visit. "I don't have a specific place in mind currently, but it would be within the British Isles. I can assure you that I would not take her too far for easy visits."

Dr. Granger nodded. He drained the last of his glass and started to get up for a re-fill.

"Allow me," Snape offered and withdrew his wand from his sleeve. With a flick, he levitated the bottle over to Dr. Granger and caused it to tilt and re-fill his glass. He levitated the bottle back to himself and re-filled his own. Snape noted that the other man masked his surprise at the use of magic fairly well. The two men sipped their drinks in silence for a few moments before Dr. Granger spoke again.

"I don't like this situation one bit. We had always imagined that Hermione would meet the right young man one day and settle down to marry...but not for a long time yet, and certainly not something like this," he told Snape. "But, this appears to be inevitable," he finished.

"Yes, it is inevitable," Snape agreed. "Though I know this is a disturbing situation to you, I am confident that her future will not be dismal. You have my word that I will not allow her to come to harm," he assured Dr. Granger.

Dr. Granger cleared his throat and shifted somewhat uncomfortably. "I've read this law through several times..." Snape knew the reason for the discomfort now, "and I was alarmed at the fact that the Ministry of Magic has also outlawed the sale of...ehem...contraceptive potions given the...er...requirements of the marriage law." Snape decided now would be the time to drop the calm assurance and match his betrothed's father's appearance of discomfort...purely for future familial harmony, of course. "Hermione did say that your position as a Potions Master was also part of her decision because of this...and that her other prospect was some kind of police officer and there would be difficulties getting around the law there. But, since the situation is what it is..." Dr. Granger took a big slug of his drink and scratched his head. "What I'm trying to say is that Hermione is our only child...we want for her to be happy in a career...but we hope to have a grandchild or two one day. Not too soon, mind you."

"I understand. I did explain to Hermione my thoughts on children. While I am still teaching I am not in any position to become a father...but after that I will leave the decision on when to have a child to her. She said she would like to have one or two children, and I would not be opposed to that."

Dr. Granger looked at him for several long minutes. Snape watched the emotions play across his face before it appeared that he had reluctantly accepted the situation. "All right then...I should be going," Dr. Granger announced as he drained the last of his brandy, stood up and retrieved the map. Snape stood as well and accompanied him to

the door. Dr. Granger awkwardly reached out a hand, and Snape grasped it in a firm handshake. "Take care of my daughter," he told him.

"I will, Dr. Granger," Snape answered with all seriousness.

"Call me Frank," he said as they released the handshake.

"Very well Frank...please call me Severus. I look forward to seeing you and your wife for dinner tomorrow evening."

"We'll be there Severus...I still don't like this, but it could be much worse," he reasoned as he stepped out into the corridor.

Snape closed the door, thinking the meeting had gone quite well. If she got her tenacity from her mother, surely her logical reasoning in difficult situations was inherited from her father. He felt more confident now that marriage to Hermione Granger would not be as objectionable as he had first feared when Albus had convinced him to submit a proposal.

He walked over to his desk and retrieved his note to Hermione and finished writing and applied a spell to the parchment. He smiled and thought it was too bad he wouldn't see the look on her face as she read it. He started to roll it up, but then stopped and added a post script before he sealed it and summoned a house elf to deliver the note. Actually, though he wouldn't get to see the look on her face it was probably best that he would not be present...her reaction if he were within reach would likely give him reason to turn her over his knee again.

Hermione returned to her rooms. She had waited for her father to return for a while, but after conversation became peppered with yawns, her mother urged her to get some sleep. She got ready for bed and just as she slipped under the covers a house elf wearing an old towel appeared in her rooms.

"Master Snape sends a note to Miss Granger," the elf said as it handed her the note. Hermione took it and the elf disappeared. She wondered what he would be writing her about, and opened the note. She looked at it curiously, as it didn't seem quite complete.

Miss Granger,

Open the book I loaned you to page 93. Further instruction will appear when you have done so...

Hermione got out of bed and retrieved the book from her bookshelf with trepidation, returning to her bed before she opened it. When she opened it to page 93, she blushed as she once more viewed the picture of herself performing fellatio on the picture of Professor Snape. She looked back to the note and words were appearing below. Her eyes widened and she dropped the book on the bed. She started turning red as she scanned the message.

Now that you have followed instruction, this is your assignment: Study the techniques demonstrated on page 93, you will be tested and graded on day two of our marriage. Grade points will be deducted for improper use of teeth, awkward tongue technique, gagging, failure to bring me to climax, and for failure to swallow the results of climax.

Grading scale and associated actions are as follows:

A: I return the favor to you thoroughly, you will enjoy this.

B: I return the favor after giving further instruction and practice on the techniques for which points were deducted.

C: You will receive three lashes, and further intensive lessons. I may be convinced to return your attentions if you demonstrate sufficient improvement in a re-test.

D: I do not return the favor, you will receive six lashes, and again, further instruction will be required.

F: You really do not want to receive an F

Demonstration of the lashing you would receive for a C or below grade is on page two. Extra credit is available for correct application of deep-throat technique; I suggest practicing with a cucumber.

Regards,

Severus Snape

P.S. Your father just paid me a visit. We had a long talk and you will be relieved to know that he is handling the situation admirably and I believe that we will get along sufficiently well.

Hermione knew he wasn't kidding about what he would expect, but this certainly clarified his position had there been any doubt previously. She wasn't sure what to feel currently...and his post script on that kind of letter seemed so out of place. However, at least there was some good news...she wondered what they had talked about. Whatever it was, at least it hadn't resulted in her dad trying to attack Professor Snape.

She picked up the book again and turned to page two. She had seen this picture in their first conversation. There she was in the picture standing and bent at the hips with her hands on the luxuriously draped bed, and this time the picture was moving as professor Snape stood behind her with a wide, leather strap. Her stomach plunged as she watched him swing the strap from a high arc to land forcefully across her buttocks. Picture-Hermione jumped a foot in the air and she saw the bright red mark appear. She watched the picture through another four blows before she snapped the book closed and worked on controlling her breathing.

She placed the letter and the book in her bedside nightstand drawer and laid back. She wasn't really sleepy anymore. Cucumber indeed...but, she had agreed to this. And so, she determined to study the picture and hope for the best...but she absolutely could not imagine practicing on a cucumber.

Dinner, Discussions and Danger

Chapter 5 of 31

Hermione and her parents go to dinner in the dungeons, Hermione brings up issues she has regarding the situation with her fiancé and the betrothed couple go shopping in Diagon Alley

As always, news traveled fast in Hogwarts. When Hermione went to the Gryffindor common room Saturday afternoon the din of conversation stopped suddenly when she entered and all eyes turned to look at her with expressions of shock, pity, and disgust. She froze and looked around...most people quickly turned away and tried to pretend to return to neutral discussions, but now she knew that everyone else knew. Harry wasn't there; she wanted to talk to him and hoped he wasn't still mad. He didn't have any business being mad; it was her decision, her life.

She left the common room and headed for the infirmary. Harry was probably there with Ron, and she needed to talk to Ron too. She hurried through the halls, ignoring the various glances of students who looked on her with curious pity. When she arrived at the Infirmary Harry and Ron both stopped talking and looked at her.

"Hey guys, I was hoping to talk to you soon," she said with false brightness as she plastered a smile on her face.

They both muttered subdued hellos and she went to sit on the empty bed next to Harry. They looked at her uncomfortably. Ron spoke first; "So you're gonna marry Snape then..." he said with a wince and looked at her as if she had just discovered she had some horrible terminal disease.

"Yes. Kingsley is nice and all and I know you're both friends of his...but I just couldn't see it working out very well," she explained, really hoping her two best friends would understand.

"Yeah, but can it work with Snape?" Harry asked.

She sighed deeply...she certainly hoped so. "I think it will be ok...I mean, I know it's not any kind of love match, but I think it's the most practical choice."

"Well, geez Hermione...why do you have to be so practical all the time?" Ron asked. "I want you to be happy...how can you be happy married to Snape?"

She sighed deeply before answering. "Ron, I had two choices...I *know* that I could not have been happy having a bunch of kids...that's another reason I chose Professor Snape. Contraceptive potions are all but illegal now...how would I be able to get them with an Auror who wants a bunch of kids for a husband?"

They both looked uncomfortable at that question.

"But we're not going to get to see you...at least with Kingsley we could have visited..." Harry said helplessly.

"Listen, while we're still at Hogwarts it's not going to change much. I'll have to move to the dungeons," she said as they both cringed, "but other than that I'll still be in all my classes and I'll still help you study in the common room and all the usual stuff. After Hogwarts...well, we'd be living in different places anyway, and we can still visit each other...he already agreed that he wouldn't interfere with my friendships."

"He may have said that, but how do you know he wasn't just saying that to get you to choose him?" Harry accused.

"Listen guys...I'm going to go talk to my parents some more since Professor Snape invited us all to dinner tonight and you two just need to get over it. I'm going to marry him now and there's nothing that can be done to stop it. I've already signed the petition, and can't un-sign it so just get used to it," she exclaimed, exasperated. She left the infirmary after that. She needed hurry to meet up with her parents again. They would be meeting with Professor Snape for dinner and she hoped that encounter would be ok.

As she passed through the entrance hall of Hogwarts after leaving the infirmary she saw Draco flanked by his ever-present goons. She wanted to rush by and ignore them, but they were moving to stand before the stairs.

"Hello Mudblood," Draco said with a sneer. "According to my father you'll be my step-mother soon. Don't think that'll keep me from enjoying the brief time you'll be a part of the family...Father already said he would share your affections." He eyed her up and down as he spoke; making it quite clear what affections he thought he would be sharing.

"Move Malfoy...I'm not marrying your father so you can forget it!"

"Who else are you going to marry? I hear Weasel tried to come to the rescue but met with an unfortunate accident...guess he wouldn't be able to perform his marital duties anymore?" he said with a chuckle. Crabbe and Goyle both found this funny as well. They failed to notice the black shadow that crept up the stairs from the dungeons.

"Good morning, Miss Granger," he said silkily. "Mr. Malfoy, are you here to congratulate Miss Granger on her upcoming wedding?"

"Oh yes sir...I'm looking forward to her becoming the new Mrs. Malfoy," he said with a conspiratorial wink.

"Mrs. Malfoy? No, no Draco...you seem to be mistaken; you see she will be Mrs. Snape in less than a month." He stood with his arms crossed, enjoying the brief confusion on the junior Malfoy's face.

"But my father said..."

"Your father did submit a petition for her; however, I did as well. Miss Granger has made her choice and we are now betrothed. So, it is my suggestion, Mr. Malfoy, that you treat Miss Granger with the respect due to the future Mrs. Snape," he said with an undertone of a threat.

"My father will hear about this," Malfoy retorted.

"Then I will look forward to receiving congratulations from him as well," he said with a smirk. Turning his attention to Hermione, he said, "Miss Granger, I believe your presence is required elsewhere."

"Yes sir," she replied and rushed past Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle and on her way to the guest room her parents were in. She couldn't help but wonder if her encounter with the younger Malfoy and news of her decision reaching Lucius Malfoy would have dire consequences.

It was five PM and Hermione was walking with her parents to the dungeons. Her dad hadn't said anything about his meeting with Professor Snape, but he did seem to be a bit more at ease today about the situation. She hoped that was a good sign. They reached his quarters and Hermione knocked on the door. It opened and Professor Snape invited them inside.

"Dr.'s Granger, Miss Granger, please come in," he said as they entered the living room.

There was a door on each wall and the bookcases which covered nearly the entire living room were built around them so each threshold was widened significantly by the bookshelves. It turned out the door on the right wall led to a dining room. She was surprised that he would have a dining room in his quarters; it seemed redundant since everyone ate in the great hall. They sat around the table, and Hermione noticed her mother kept casting nervous glances towards Professor Snape, but her dad seemed to be more at ease.

"I am glad you could come dine with me this evening," he said with a smile...yes, it was small, but it was a smile. He withdrew his wand and with a flick dinner appeared, or at least the first course. She had noticed that the table was set for a formal seven-course dinner. She smiled nervously and then looked down at her food and barely stifled a yelp, drawing curious glances from her parents. With her parents gaze on her, she saw him smirk triumphantly for just a moment before his expression turned neutral.

"Oh, excuse me...just a hiccup," she said nervously as she tried to cover her reaction to the first course...which was cucumber salad.

"That is good, for a moment there I was afraid you did not like *cucumbers*, Miss Granger," Professor Snape said with suave nonchalance. She felt a surge of embarrassment and anger. How could he make such blatant innuendos with such calm assurance right in front of her parents? This was the time to put them at ease about what was happening. But, she realized after a moment that they wouldn't know anything about the insinuations connected with the cucumbers, nothing would seem at all improper...she was the only one who would make the connection.

Professor Snape made small talk about dentistry, listening attentively as they explained what they knew of the differences between Muggle and Magical methods of dealing with teeth, and they asked about Potions. He managed to explain some basics of potions without sounding condescending. All carefully avoided directly speaking of marriage, but he managed to talk about a number of things which would directly relate to the future.

"You will be applying for your apparition license soon I believe, Miss Granger?" he asked conversationally during the meat course which was duck.

"Oh...yes I suppose I will...now that I'm eighteen earlier than I thought I would be," she answered.

"That is good. I'm sure after some practice you will find Apparation quite easy across the British Isles. You would be able to make more frequent visits to your parents than you can now," he said helpfully.

At that point, it appeared he had won her mother over, and her dad seemed even more at ease. Hermione was reeling...he was charming, she couldn't believe it. Of course, she had no illusions that this was any kind of 'real Snape'...it was an act to put her parents at ease. While she was glad that he was helping immensely in the task of helping her parents come to terms with the situation, to her it only served to emphasize the fact that he was a master manipulator.

For most of the rest of the week Hermione didn't see Professor Snape outside potions class again, and then he didn't make any change in the way he behaved towards her. However, on Wednesday evening she received a note from him asking for her presence on Friday evening to discuss the wedding and future plans again. The Headmaster had met with her and her parents several times to discuss wedding arrangements and they had decided to perform the wedding on the 30th of October...nearly the full thirty days after her acceptance of the contract. It would be a small gathering, nothing too extravagant but they would have the traditional wizarding elements.

She had skipped eating in the great hall as well for most of the week, partly to avoid Malfoy, and partly to spend the time with her parents. Her Head of House had decided to be amiable about her choice, for which Hermione was grateful. Professor McGonagall had even discussed the traditions of wizarding marriage with her and her parents at dinner Monday night, though she mentioned nothing of Professor Snape in the conversation. She still seemed distressed about who Hermione had chosen, but had apparently decided that Professor Snape wouldn't do her harm after all.

Her mom and dad, while still quite upset over the news of her marriage, were becoming resigned to the fact and had decided that Professor Snape, while not ideal, was much better than Lucius Malfoy (especially after they had been filled in about him more thoroughly during the dinner with Professor Snape). So, they would be headed home on Friday morning and then would return to Hogwarts on the weekend of her wedding to attend the ceremony.

Most of the Gryffindors had been filled in by Harry and Ron about the real reason behind her upcoming marriage to Professor Snape, and she had condolences and pity from all around. Still, whispers followed her everywhere she walked as students discussed her fate in the halls and classes of Hogwarts.

She still felt a bit numb from the sudden changes going on, but the numb feeling as if it were all happening to someone else was fading and so she thought more about what life with Severus Snape would be like. Love was not likely. Still, she had checked over the calculations of her arithmancy projections again and it made her feel better. She had looked through his book at nights before going to sleep, trying to imagine what it would be like to experience what went on in the pictures with growing trepidation, and wondered if she had accepted his petition too quickly after all. He had told her he wouldn't push her beyond her limits, but still, the pictures looked scary in places.

In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she wondered if he would end up walking all over her in other aspects of their relationship as well. If he thought he was, she was going to have to find a way to handle the problem. However, he seemed open to reasonable discourse, so she determined to speak with him about it at their meeting.

Severus Snape finished the final touches in the room. It was almost his personal 'room of requirement' though it did require more work, and its changes could be made permanent. He had decided it would be best for Hermione to have her own room in which to study and keep her things. He would not put a bed in here, preferring instead to have her share his bed, unless she proved to be an extremely restless sleeper or loud snorer. As it was he had arranged for one full wall of bookshelves, a magical window which gave an adequate view of the lake and faced west and had a comfortable window-seat, a good sized writing desk, and a full couch. He left quite a bit of open space for the things she would move into the room.

Hermione should be arriving soon...and, if he thought correctly, she would likely have many questions for him. Reality should be sinking in about now, and she would probably be quite worried about just what she had agreed to. He smiled as he thought about the look on her face when he had presented cucumber salad as a first course. Of course, he had been facetious when he had suggested the use of cucumbers; knowledge of the fact that she was a virgin had driven him to the joke. He was fairly well endowed, but still, the average cucumber was more than an exaggeration.

He walked into his sitting room where the tea service he had ordered had just arrived. And, just on time, he heard a knock on his door. When he opened it, he realized that reality had hit quite well, judging by the determined look on her face.

"Come in, I have tea ready," he said as he stood aside for her to enter. She gritted her teeth and came in, not saying a word until they were seated by the fireplace.

"Professor Snape," she began, "I think we need to talk about things." He sat silently and raised an eyebrow to indicate he was waiting. "First of all, I know I chose you, and I know what you said I would be agreeing to...but, I would rather hold off on certain *aspects* of what you want in our marriage," she stated firmly. He sat silently and waited for her to continue. She fidgeted a bit and then spoke again. "I mean, I've looked through the picture book you gave me, and I'm not going to be ready for that sort of thing right away...I'm not saying I won't do it at all, just that I won't be ready right away." She finished and looked at him.

He allowed the silence to stretch uncomfortably, deliberately taking a few moments to sip his tea. Finally, he asked, "I see...and what has caused you to come to this conclusion?"

She chewed her lip and fidgeted a bit more. "Well, I don't enjoy pain," she stated.

"Most people do not enjoy pain, Miss Granger. There is an art to making it enjoyable, an art which you will discover I am quite adept at. But, I think we should save this subject for later, I have other things I want to cover first," he said, dismissing her concerns.

"No sir, I think we need to cover this right away," she answered firmly.

He shifted in his seat and looked at her for another long moment. "Very well," he agreed, "we will cover this issue now. Did you not believe me when I told you I would not cause you serious harm?"

"Well, I do believe you...I just don't think I could do some of what was in that book. I didn't see anything that was seriously harmful, but most of it looked like it would hurt, and I just don't want for my first, um, sexual encounter, to hurt like that," she said and looked him in the eye. Obviously, she had planned out what to say quite well and would not be deterred.

Severus Snape placed his teacup on the side table and steepled his fingers, elbows resting on the arms of his chair as he looked at her appraisingly. He knew he was making her nervous, but he wanted to see if she would crack first. She returned his gaze with her jaw set in determination. "Very well then...I will not cause you pain, other

than the that normally associated with the breaking of the maidenhead, in our first encounter. And, what you saw was a sampling of possibilities...some of them admittedly extreme. Most of our encounters will likely not be extreme in the least."

"And what about your note from last week?" she finally asked.

"What of it?" he asked, feigning indifference.

"Well...the one you sent about the...er...test," she finally said.

"I trust you will do your best to achieve a passing score," he said without a hint of levity. She looked as if she were about to retort and so he added, "Miss Granger, have you ever known me to cancel or postpone a test?" this time he asked with a slight quirk of an eyebrow.

"But...this isn't a potions test...sir," she stammered.

"No, it is not. Miss Granger," he said as he leaned forward and smirked at her, "this is actually supposed to be fun. Do try to look at it that way. Though yes, you will be graded. Think of the grading scale, and associated consequences as incentives to do well. You were well informed of what to expect, and you made your choice. You must live with that choice now, but that does not mean that you have to be miserable. Accepting the situation for what it is will go a long way towards your future happiness." He sat back and watched her again. "Have you been practicing?" he asked, jolting her from her thoughts.

She looked at him, slightly stunned before speaking. "Well...um...no," she admitted.

"You do realize I was joking about the cucumber, do you not?" he asked with a completely straight face.

"Oh...you were?" she asked, and began to blush.

"Yes, I was. It is actually physically impossible, or at least highly improbable, to deep-throat a cucumber," he informed her, "While I am of above average in length and girth in that regard, I'm not that big."

"Oh," she said and blushed further. "Well, that's a relief." She jumped slightly when he laughed.

"So is that matter settled to your satisfaction, Miss Granger?"

"Well, not completely," she said. "I am also concerned about what would happen in cases of disagreements. I mean, would you try to use those sorts of punishments as ways to keep me under control." She looked back to him. "I do not want to end up in a relationship where I'm always taking orders."

He glared at her. "Miss Granger," he hissed, "I am not in the habit of repeating myself. I already told you that I would not use those sorts of punishments to settle differences unless you insisted on throwing tantrums like a child. If a disagreement over something should come up, we would discuss it at that time as adults," he said. He was a bit angry, actually. He thought she should be smart enough to not need constant clarifications. "Otherwise, I still will expect for you to submit to me and obey me. That will not change and if you insist on believing otherwise you will be disappointed."

"Okay...I understand. But, I did need to clarify things. There is no reason to be upset about it. This has happened very fast so I should hope you would understand that I really don't know you all that well," she told him firmly. "I am sorry if I offended you, but those were my concerns...sir."

He glared at her a moment more, but decided to drop the subject. He rose from his chair and said, "Follow me, Miss Granger," over his shoulder as he walked. He didn't bother looking to see if she was following him, but went straight ahead into the room he had prepared for her. Once inside he turned around in time to see her hurrying through. Her eyes got bigger as she looked around.

"This is to be your room," he announced. "I prefer my quarters to remain as they are, and so this will be your space in which to keep your things and to study."

"Oh..." she said as she took in the room. "I didn't know there was a window in here before," she said as she walked over to look out onto the lake."

"It is technically not here...this is a view from one of the towers which I have had placed here. There is adequate room for your books, but if you should require more space in the future that wall," he gestured to the wall with the doorway, "can be used for bookshelves as well. Will this be enough space?" he asked.

"Um...I think so," she said. "Thank you. But, what happened to the dining room?"

"I rarely have need for a dining room...this particular room is actually set up with similar spells as is the 'Room of Requirement' though in this case I have made the changes semi-permanent. You can change the colors of the walls, woodwork, and furniture if you wish."

"Okay, it will be nice to have my own space. And this is where I would have guests?" she asked. That was another thing she wanted out of the way. If this was to be her home, she did not want to be relegated to finding other places in the castle.

He scowled at her a moment. "If you plan on having guests often you can have a doorway put in...that wall is against the dungeon hallway," he conceded. He decided it would be best not to make an issue on that matter. He could ward the room in a way so her guests would not be able to enter his own rooms, and place silencing spells on the walls. "Do you snore?" he asked suddenly.

"Um...no, at least I've never had any complaints, why?" she asked, looking slightly befuddled.

"If you were a snorer I would have a bed placed in here as well. But since you do not, come with me, I will show you to the bedroom," he said and walked out.

Hermione followed him to the door in the back of the living room, feeling a bit perturbed. His behavior had her off-balance, and she still wasn't sure what to think about the test. Once in the bedroom she saw the centerpiece of the room was on a raised semi-circular dais against the back wall. It was a very large bedroom, about twice the size of the room he had set aside as hers which also wasn't too small. The bed was a king-sized four poster of mahogany wood and had drapes around the bed in deep navy blue velvet which were currently drawn. There were two chests of drawers also in mahogany and a large wardrobe.

"In here is the bathroom," he said, indicating a door to the right. She followed him through the French doors and into the dramatically opulent bathroom. It was completely done in black marble and silver fixtures. A large bathtub which could easily hold four people was in the center, sunk to floor level. A water closet was in the back, she peeked around the dividing wall and discovered it had a bidet as well as a toilet and on the other side of the back wall was a fairly large shower with four shower heads.

"Nice bathroom," she observed.

"Yes, it is. This will be your sink, and your cabinet," he said, indicating one of the sinks which were situated in the corners on either side of the doorway. A cabinet door was flush with the wall and she opened it to reveal a good-sized cubby. "I will expect your things to remain in the cabinet when not in use. I am accustomed to being alone here and I prefer things to be neat. However, if you prefer a more casual approach to order I will not bother with how you keep your room," he explained, not unkindly.

"I understand, actually, I'm quite neat as well. I thought the best part about having my own room as Head Girl was that I wouldn't have to deal with the mess Lavender and Parvoti made constantly."

"That is good to hear. I think similar attitudes in things like this will make this adjustment easier for both of us. I think it would be a good idea to discuss small personal habits over dinner. If there are differences which could potentially cause problems, it is best to have methods to minimize aggravation for both of us in place."

"Sounds like a good idea, Professor," she said as they walked back to the living room and sat once more.

"First...we will be married soon. In private you should call me Severus."

"Okay *Severus*, I was wondering how much longer we would keep up the Miss Granger/Professor Snape forms of address."

And so they began to cover whatever came up. Everything from preferred bathing times to preferred room temperatures. She was a little surprised to discover he usually showered at 5AM and had a bath at 10pm and determined to secretly check and see if he actually used shampoo at some point. He agreed to use a silencing spell in the shower since she was a light sleeper and didn't usually rise until 6:30. They discussed temperature, but she ended up conceding to wear more clothing since part of the reason he kept it cooler was so he didn't have to take off his outer layers so he would be ready for hall patrols and emergencies in Slytherin if they should come up.

By the time dinner arrived they had already found a number of small things in common, and had both made concessions to make living together easier. He informed her during dinner that she could begin packing and moving her things in at her convenience, and gave her a key and the passwords. Dessert was chocolate mousse, which Hermione found surprising, especially since Professor Snape seemed to enjoy it quite a bit.

"Tomorrow," he said between bites of chocolate mouse, "we will be making a trip to Diagon Alley to pick out wedding rings and clothing." He took another bite and glanced at her. "Traditionally, we cannot see the rings we pick for one another before the wedding. I understand you may not have money for a ring and dress, you will charge these things to my account."

"Is there any particular kind of ring I should look for...and what price range?" she asked.

"I have enough that the price of the ring should not be an issue. I would prefer something that is not flashy. But, the choice of the ring should reflect what your hopes for the future of the marriage are," he said. "The jewelry store will have attendants who will explain the meanings of the various stones and their cuts."

She nodded, not sure what to say at that. She would have to pick his ring out and she had no idea where to start. What were her hopes for the marriage? And what would reasonable hopes be? After tonight she felt they could at least be fairly civil, and she had put forth her own concerns and he had agreed to some extent with her. She turned the problem over and over in her mind all the way back to Gryffindor Tower. Fortunately, most of the hubbub had died down about her impending marriage, though she still got the pitying looks from everyone in her house. Ginny was sitting on the couch in front of the fireplace with homework when she entered.

"Hermione, how are you doing?" she asked, concerned, when she came in.

Hermione sighed deeply. "I'm not sure really," she answered and flopped down on the couch next to Ginny. "We're going to pick out rings tomorrow," she said.

"Oh...do you know what you're going to pick?" Ginny asked.

"I have no idea...he said the cut of the stones and the choices of the stones have particular meanings, but I don't know what they are and I'm not even sure what I should hope for," she explained. Ginny nodded somberly.

"And, he showed me my room...I'm going to have a separate entrance put in so I can have friends over."

"You'll have separate bedrooms...well, that's nice of him," Ginny responded.

"Well...not separate bedrooms...he just wants me to keep my stuff out of his space, but he ended up being fairly nice about it by the time we were done with dessert. Though maybe there's a potion I can take to make me snore loudly...he asked if I snored, but since I didn't know why he was asking I just told him I didn't. Turns out he would have had a bed put into my room if I did snore," she said with a bit of a tired laugh.

"Oh..." was Ginny's reply since she couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I'd better get my homework done and get to bed. I'll see you tomorrow Gin." Hermione went to her room to think about what she would get for Severus.

The next day they apparated to Diagon Alley. The street was crowded with witches and wizards going about their business. Hermione was relieved that he actually slowed his pace so she could keep up with him without running. First stop was at a small wizard formal wear shop. A past-middle-aged witch with too much makeup and blue hair and exceedingly bright robes was tending the counter.

"Oh hello, how may I help you?" she asked sweetly.

"We are here to purchase wedding attire," Snape said.

"Oh how wonderful! A wedding! Such a happy occasion, come now," the woman came out from behind the counter and dropped a full foot in height. Apparently the area behind the counter was raised. "A beautiful young bride we have here; what is your name dearie?" she asked in her sing-song voice.

"Hermione Granger," she answered.

"Oh very good, very good...just come with me and we will get you all set up. Gregory!" she called out and in a moment an elderly wizard came tottering out. Hermione took a look at professor Snape, who was standing stiffly and looking like he wanted to roll his eyes. "Gregory! It's another wedding, get the groom set up," she ordered in a not-so-sing-songey voice.

"Right dear, right dear..." he muttered as he shuffled over to Professor Snape.

Hermione didn't see anymore as she was ushered into a back room which was filled with wedding dresses of all different styles and many bolts of white satins and laces. There was another girl in there too who turned to look at her who had an attendant with needles held between her lips adjusting the train of a dress around her. She looked vaguely familiar to Hermione.

"Now then, you just wait right here and Adma here will get to you right away. Oh, business has been quite wonderful, all these weddings, it's such a happy time isn't it?" the woman carried on, seemingly oblivious to the rather dejected looks on both the girls faces.

"You're Hermione Granger, aren't you?" the girl asked when the proprietress left.

"Yes...do I know you?" Hermione looked over the form of the blond haired girl before her. She was fairly non-descript.

"Sarah Pearson," she answered. "I was three years ahead of you at Hogwarts in Hufflepuff."

"Oh...I thought you looked familiar. So...you're getting married too?" she asked even though it was obvious.

"Yeah...came as quite a surprise really. I had two petitions almost as soon as the new law came out...one was from another Hufflepuff, Alexander Brudnell, who was a few years ahead of me in school. He seems nice, but I never really knew him that well. The other was from some weirdo who gave me the creeps. How about you?"

"I had three offers. I'll be marrying Severus Snape," she answered in a monotone. The former Hufflepuff student's eyes seemed to triple in size and her mouth gaped open.

"Oh gods! You mean Professor Snape? Potions Master Snape?"

"Yes."

"And he was the best of the lot? Who else bid for you?"

"Lucius Malfoy, and one of his friends who was even more horrid."

"I'm so sorry to hear that."

"Well, I don't think it will be too terrible. I'm still in seventh year so this way I can finish school, and the Headmaster mentioned that after I'm done I could get a job as a teacher's assistant if I'd like."

"Well, I hope it works out ok for you," she said even though she looked like she thought Hermione was about to walk into a basilisk's den.

"I hope it works out well for you also," Hermione replied.

There didn't seem to be much to say after that. Sarah's fitting was finished quickly and the attendant soon started with Hermione. They found a fairly simple dress with long form-fitting sleeves and a vee-neckline and a scoop to mid-back. The train was about two feet long and the hem, sleeve tips, and neckline were embroidered in a mother-of-pearl type thread with roses. It required very little adjustment. Within an hour her dress was wrapped up and she went out into the entryway where her fiancé was waiting impatiently.

"I trust you found something satisfactory?" he asked.

"Yes, I did."

"We need to get rings next," he said as he gathered two packages and levitated them with a spell which would cause the packages to follow along behind them

"Do you remember a Hufflepuff named Sarah Pearson? She was a few years ahead of me at Hogwarts," Hermione asked once they had left the shop.

"Yes, she was of above-average talent in potions," he answered. "Why do you ask?"

"She was in there getting a wedding dress...another muggleborn contract. She said she was marrying another Hufflepuff who was a few years ahead of her...Alexander Brudnell was his name."

"I remember him as well. He was absolutely atrocious at potions though he was an adequate beater for the Hufflepuff Quidditch team. I don't know anything of him otherwise."

"I have to wonder how many people are going to end up in horrid marriages because of this law," she mused as they walked past Gringotts bank towards the Jewelry store.

Severus was thinking about answering when a signpost they were passing underneath exploded. He acted quickly and grabbed Hermione, pushing her down and holding her as he covered her with his wide shoulders. When the splinters finished falling he rose up and looked around for the cause of the explosion. Activity on the street had completely stilled, and a path was widening in the crowd. The reason for the pedestrians backing away was quite obvious when he saw Lucius Malfoy standing in the street with his wand drawn and pointed towards them. Severus stepped in front of Hermione and drew his own wand.

"Severus Snape," Lucius spat. "I hereby challenge you to a duel for the right of the hand of Hermione Granger."

The crowd backed further away, a mother grabbed her children and ran into a nearby shop for shelter. Duels weren't common anymore, but they were a tradition and completely legal. There was little else to do but accept.

"Lucius Malfoy, I accept your challenge," Severus Snape snarled.

Hermione looked from one to the other as she backed into the windows of the shop they had been passing. This was an official duel, she couldn't interfere or the duel would be forfeit. However, she reached for her wand to hold it at the ready...if by some chance he did win, she would not go without a fight.

Reviews, as always, are very much appreciated.

The Duel and Aftermath

Chapter 6 of 31

Lucius and Snape duel in Diagon Alley. Ginny and Hermione talk.

Severus Snape moved to the center of the quickly deserting street, both eyes firmly on the fuming platinum blond man before him.

"Severus, concede now and let me take the girl. I'm sure there are plenty more muggleborn students of yours you can petition," he said as he approached the other man.

"Hermione," Snape said without taking his eyes off Lucius, "get back to Hogwarts, NOW."

"How touching, keeping your mudblood out of danger, Severus?" drawled Lucius. He followed with a snap of his wand and shouted, "Diffindo!" A stream of light shot from his wand and sliced across Severus's torso, slicing through his robes, shirt and into flesh with a spurt of red.

"Expelliarmus!" Snape shouted in return, but Lucius was too quick with his own "Protego!"

Hermione couldn't leave. She watched as Severus's shirt flapped open and the blood flowed from the gash across his chest. She did, however, back away out of his sight.

"Incendio!" Severus shouted and aimed the jet of fire to the feet of his attacker.

"Locomotor

Mortis!" Lucius shouted at the same time.

Severus's legs snapped together from their former wide dueling stance and he toppled, but managed to fall in a seated position. The flames from his curse caught Lucius'

trousers and lower hem of his cloak on fire. He put it out after only a moment, but his legs had been badly burned in that time.

Severus aimed from his seated position in the street, shouting, "Diffindo!" Lucius had been rising from his position as he was crouched aiming a spell to douse the flames around his shins and Severus's slicing spell cut through the long platinum blond hair and into the side of his face. Malfoy recoiled and drew a hand to his face where he had been cut, giving Severus just enough time to cast a counter curse and once more regain the use of his legs. He flew to his feet and they stood poised to attack or defend.

Severus was beginning to feel dizzy and sluggish from the blood loss, though the adrenaline counteracted the effect somewhat for the time being. The gash across his chest wasn't too terribly deep, but it was long and he was careful not to slip in the slippery puddles which were forming around his feet and he tried to ignore the hot stickiness which flowed down his front and through his pants. Lucius Malfoy wasn't looking good. His fine trousers had patches burnt away under his knees and he could see the blisters rising quickly from the burns. The formerly long blond hair was now cut at an odd angle along his scalp and several thick locks of white-blond hair lay scattered about him along with splashes of deep crimson.

He knew he had to act quickly, Malfoy was nearly his equal in dueling and he could not allow him to win. Duels to the death were rare, but he had no doubt that Lucius intended to kill him. It was something of a surprise that he would risk his own life to win Hermione; but perhaps his inflated ego caused him to overestimate his skills and he thought that he was superior to Severus in his dueling skills.

"Expelliarmus!!!" they both shouted together. The two spells struck simultaneously and they each flew backwards with the force of the blast. Snape hit the cobblestone street with force enough to knock the breath from his lungs and for a moment he felt paralyzed. He drew his strength together and scrambled to his feet and saw Lucius doing the same. For a frantic moment, they both looked around for their wands.

Snape saw his lying near a potted plant by a store entrance and rushed to retrieve it with a quick glance to Lucius who was getting to his feet. Wand retrieved, he pointed it back to Lucius who came rushing towards him in an insane, wandless, rush.

"Petrificus To...." Snape was cut off, mid-curse as Lucius leapt through the air with a roar and tackled him bodily. They fell to the ground with a crash and Severus felt a sickening thud and a bright flash of light and pain as his head hit the street. He was dazed for a moment, but it was long enough for Lucius to reach under his cloak. He reacted quickly, grabbing the wrist of his attacker which wielded a dagger. He didn't have time to think of the absurdity of Lucius Malfoy stooping to muggle street-brawling.

"She's mine Severus, give her to me now and live," he growled as they struggled.

"No," Severus gasped as he brought a knee up to Malfoy's groin and gave a quick jab to his throat. Malfoy was thrown off but lunged back with a desperate slash which landed on Severus's inner thigh. Pain lanced through his leg and his body as blood spurted from the wound in a high arc. With his other leg, he pulled back and kicked Malfoy full in the face, toppling him backward.

He leveled his wand and pointed to his legs again and stated "Brachia Ermendo!" Lucius attempted to get up, but his boneless legs merely writhed on the ground sickeningly. Severus Snape looked over at the pathetic figure...it would be so easy to end it now, there were too many witnesses to use an 'Avada Kedavra' but there were other spells...something to keep him permanently out of the picture...and then he realized what it would be. "Obliviate!" he said firmly. The memory spell could be used in varying strengths and he took the opportunity to get him out of the picture once and for all. Lucius Malfoy wasn't dead, but in effect, he may as well be. He watched with satisfaction as the spell hit and Malfoy collapsed in the street, his head made a pleasing thud on the cobblestone.

"Professor!" Hermione shouted as she ran to him...the duel was over now. It had been fierce and quick. Severus closed his eyes as a wave of dizziness overwhelmed him.

"Miss Granger..." he gasped, "You were supposed to go back..." he said as sternly as he could.

Hermione took in the scene...the front of his robes were open and the gash in his chest was seeping copious amounts of blood. A wound in his thigh was spurting blood...she immediately realized it was a punctured artery and wasted no time in applying pressure to his upper inner thigh. Her parents had insisted on advanced CPR training during her summer breaks, and even she knew that there were times a wand wouldn't necessarily solve everything.

"What are you doing?" Severus asked weakly, his voice was hoarse and distant and he was having difficulty in keeping his eyes opened.

"You have a severed artery," she explained as she reached for her wand, "I'm going to help you." Hermione muttered a gentle cleaning spell over the wound and clamped down on her tongue to keep focused and to stave off the wave of dizziness and nausea. The wound was deep, and she could see the torn muscle before the wound was filled once more with blood. The pressure on his femoral artery was enough to stop the spurting, but the veins which filled his leg were emptying quickly. She quickly thought of a healing spell and was relieved to see the muscle knitting together. It was a stop-gap measure, but it would hold him together until she could get him to a medi-witch.

She looked behind her when several pops filled the air. Aurors were apparating to Diagon Alley. Someone had apparently flooded the ministry to call them in.

"What is going on here?" asked a stern looking man with short-cropped brown hair as he quickly walked over to where Hermione was crouching near her fiancé.

"A duel, Watson," Snape intoned after he had glared at the auror for a few seconds. Hermione looked to him with surprise.

"Professor Snape, sir," the slightly startled auror acknowledged...apparently he had known him from school.

"Malfoy challenged me to a duel over a disagreement regarding my recent engagement," he explained, quickly gaining his professorial tone.

"Your engagement, sir?" he nearly squeaked.

"Watson, do you typically carry out your investigations with this level of futility?" he bit out.

"No sir, sorry sir," he said hastily and tried to recover what was likely his typical air of authority on the job. "Brudnell, get this man to St. Mungo's," he ordered, pointing at the prone, unconscious form of Lucius Malfoy. "Pearson, get eyewitness statements...you too Grundy." The other aurors snapped to follow directions and Malfoy was apparated away by one auror while the other two started calling out to several concerned bystanders.

"Professor Snape, I will apparate you to St. Mungo's...you look as if you could use immediate attention, sir," he said as he crouched down next to his former professor.

"In a moment, Mr. Watson. Hermione, you seem to have misplaced your bag, and if you would gather mine as well," he directed in a voice which only slightly betrayed the strain it took to remain conscious.

"Oh...yes, of course," she answered and looked around for the bags containing their wedding apparel. Though he looked nearly ready to pass out, he retained the ability to think clearly, and insult former students, even in the midst of it all. She found her bag near the storefront with the decimated sign, and his bag a few feet away. When she returned she could see that Severus was struggling to hold his head upright, yet he continued to give his rendition of events to the auror.

"We need to get you to St. Mungo's sir," the auror said.

"I would prefer to return to Hogwarts, Mr. Watson. I trust you can perform a double apparation without causing a splinching incident?"

"Yes sir."

"Good, apparate Miss Granger to the Hogwarts gates and then return directly for me," he directed.

"Sir, I can't leave you here like this, I'll take you first."

"No," Snape snarled, "You will take Miss Granger directly to Hogwarts. Lucius Malfoy was intent on acquiring her by any means as his unwilling bride, and he may have associates waiting for us to leave. You will take her first," he ordered. It may not have worked had the auror not known through seven years in Professor Snape's classroom that even covered in blood and near unconsciousness as he was, Professor Snape was not to be trifled with.

"Very well then sir," he answered stiffly. "Miss Granger," he said as he stood and faced Hermione, "I'll be right back for him," he said as he placed a hand on her shoulder and apparated them directly to Hogwarts front gates. Hermione blinked with the sudden change and just as soon as she had her bearings, the auror Watson apparated away. She waited only half a minute before he returned, this time with kneeling with Professor Snape on the ground. He took one look around and finally ceased his struggle to remain awake and alert. He slumped back and Mr. Watson caught him then performed a "Mobilecorpus," and ran quickly to the entrance of Hogwarts to deliver Severus Snape to the care of Poppy Pomfrey. Hermione followed at a slower pace, and by the time she reached the infirmary Watson was exiting and asked to speak with her.

Hermione got back to her room late Sunday afternoon and collapsed on her couch. She'd had several more "interviews" with aurors which seemed more like interrogations as well as a long talk with Professor Dumbledore who seemed to be confident that she would be much safer now that Lucius Malfoy was out of the picture, but he had also warned that trouble may come from his son.

Draco had been informed of the duel, and of his father's incapacitation. He was still underage, but would inherit control of the Malfoy fortune upon reaching majority later that year. He had left Hogwarts to visit his father, but he would likely return soon, and Hermione was warned to stay in the company of friends or with her fiancé when he did. The Headmaster would do his best to keep Draco under constant surveillance, but caution was still the best policy even within the halls of Hogwarts until Draco was gone from Hogwarts for good.

Lucius Malfoy had regained consciousness, she had heard from one of the Aurors, in St. Mungo's with boneless legs and complete unawareness of who he was. She remembered that moment in which her fiancé had paused before casting the Obliviate curse...she was sure he would have killed him, but he hadn't. However, she did realize later that the killing curse would have landed him in Azkaban, legal duel or not.

She had asked to see Severus, but had been told he preferred to recover alone. She wanted to thank him. Severus Snape had held true to his agreement to protect her even after the obvious danger had passed, even as he lay bleeding and in intense pain in the street he had thought of her safety first.

Of course, that was what this whole arrangement was about, but she felt safer now. She knew Lucius Malfoy was dangerous, but the duel in Diagon Alley really brought to reality the seriousness of the situation. He couldn't hurt her now...but there was still Draco to deal with and after seeing Severus in action she felt much more confident. There had been a worrying moment or two in the duel, but he had held his own and had defeated Lucius. If there was a next time, she knew he would be prepared for that as well.

She jumped slightly when she heard a knock on her door. Sighing deeply, she crossed the room to open the door, wondering who it was this time to offer condolences on her impending doom. She was relieved to see Ginny Weasley standing in the doorway, looking concerned.

"Hey Ginny, come in," she said as she opened the door wider to admit the youngest Weasley.

"I just wanted to see how you were doing...I heard about the duel and all," Ginny said with genuine concern.

"I'm fine now. There for a bit of it I wasn't sure who was going to win...but Malfoy will be joining Gilderoy Lockhart in St. Mungo's spell damage ward."

"Really?"

"Yes...Professor Snape obliviated him, directly after he removed all the bones in his legs," she said with a bit of a smile at the memory.

"Wow...that's good," Ginny said with a little giggle as she took a seat in the head girl's room. "I heard he's in the hospital wing though," she said, face sobering. "Is he going to be alright?"

"Yes...he looked really bad yesterday, but Madam Pomfrey told me he'll be fine in a few days. Mostly he's dealing with blood loss and some nasty cuts. I did a little bit of healing on him before we came back to Hogwarts, right after the duel. He was bleeding so much..." she shuddered at the memory of all the blood.

Ginny nodded seriously before asking, "So...did you get the ring?"

"No...I did get a dress, and he got something to wear for the wedding too, but Malfoy attacked us when we were on our way to the ring shop."

"So have you thought about what kind of ring to get?"

"I'm really not sure, Ginny. I don't even know what all the stones mean. Being muggleborn and all you know...most of the wedding rings I've seen were gold and diamond, and occasionally some variations. You know, they've got Muggle studies, but they really should have 'introduction to wizard society and customs' for us muggleborns."

"Okay...well, I'll give you a rundown. First, the cut of the stone determines it's symbolism as well as the type of stone it is. Wedding bands usually have several different kinds of stones and often the stones associated with the various wishes for the marriage are square-cut to symbolize the building blocks of the marriage. Usually you would also have a larger, central stone in a round cut which symbolizes encompassing all aspects. Take my parents for example, diamonds are for true love...my parents have diamonds as the center stone of their rings flanked by rubies for passion," Ginny said.

"Well that's out...this isn't any kind of a true love marriage," Hermione said a bit sadly.

"You're right Hermione...but think of it this way...you choose based on what you hope to have in the marriage...you may not have true love now, but the kind of ring you get has magical properties to help guide the marriage in that way. So, what are your hopes?" she asked.

Hermione thought on it a moment. "Well...I suppose first of all this is based on protection...so something that signifies that...and another hope is that we'll tolerate each other..."

"That would be sapphire...they're believed to promote tranquility, peace, and amiability, and to suppress wicked and impure thoughts," Ginny recited.

"Now *that* would be good..." Hermione said thoughtfully, and then amended, "tranquility and peace for Professor Snape would be helpful." She hoped Ginny didn't press the issue on the 'wicked and impure thoughts' part.

"I thought you said he was being nicer about things?"

"Yes...but it's still Severus Snape...my fiancé...oh gods," Hermione sighed and buried her face in her hands. "I'm going to spend the rest of my life with Professor Snape."

"What about passion?" Ginny asked suddenly.

"Passion? With me and Professor Snape?"

"Well Hermione, you will be married to him for the rest of your life. I know you may not think of him like that now...but that is something you may want to think about," she said seriously. She got a gleam in her eye and smirked after a moment and continued, "I mean, I've always thought there was something intense lurking under all that black wool and scowling sarcasm."

"Ginny!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Well you *are* going to be married to him...I know the law says you have to...well, do it once a week. You should at least enjoy it!"

"Well...I guess..."

"You absolutely should. Just because you'll be married to Professor Snape is no reason you shouldn't enjoy some aspects...it really can be too nice not to enjoy," Ginny said with a faint blush and a smile.

"Ginny!" Hermione exclaimed again.

"Oh come off it Hermione, I wasn't going to stay a virgin forever," she said with an air of play exasperation. "Oh wait...you've never..."

"No, I haven't," Hermione admitted.

"Oh...well, take my word, it's quite nice," Ginny said. Hermione was quite surprised with Ginny's assurances on the positive aspects of carnal knowledge.

"So you and Harry?"

"Actually....no," she said and blushed. "It wasn't anyone from Hogwarts...a muggle actually."

"A Muggle?" Hermione was shocked. "But when? How?"

"Well, this past summer I spent some time touring muggle London. I had already decided I wanted to well, lose my virginity, but I had also heard enough to know I didn't want it to be with someone who wouldn't know what they were doing. So, I met this guy...an American on vacation actually, from Texas...his accent was really nice," she said with a wide smile and deeper blush, "and he was agreeable to helping me."

"Oh gods Ginny...I can't believe this! You just went and jumped some poor helpless muggle?" Hermione was laughing now.

"Well...I wouldn't say he was poor or helpless. He had quite a, ah...commanding...personality. That and he wanted to see my drivers' license because he didn't believe I was of age."

"But you don't have a driver's license Ginny," Hermione stated in confusion.

"Hermione, do you think I would roam muggle London without the appropriate muggle identification? Before I left I transfigured one which stated that I was eighteen, just in case I wanted to order drinks while I was out."

"But still, he asked for your drivers' license? Isn't that a little weird?"

"I thought so too...but apparently he didn't want to get in any trouble...said something about 'jail-bait'"

"Well then...so how was it?"

"Very educational," Ginny said and both girls burst out in giggles. To Hermione, it felt as if there could be some normalcy...she hadn't had a chance to really laugh and talk since she had learned of the new law and she had missed it. She was sure Ron and Harry would get over it soon enough and life would be back to something similar to what it was before.

Severus Snape eased into his seat at his desk in front of his classroom Monday morning. He usually went for the dramatic entrance, but the limp he was currently sporting would diminish the effect. Albus had tried to convince him to take a few days off of teaching, but he had refused. He'd been hurt worse than this before and had survived just fine. He considered a pain-killing potion again since the last was wearing off, the deep aching across his chest and in his thigh were becoming distracting, but the pain-relief potions tended to dull the wit and senses...he would take it after classes today and woe unto any student who stepped a toe out of line in his class.

The clock struck nine and he used his wand to unlock and open the door of his classroom for the students to enter. His Gryffindor/Slytherin double potions seventh year class entered quietly and took their seats. He looked up to see Hermione looking at him, apparently worried. He hadn't allowed her to visit him in the infirmary, he never allowed anyone but Poppy and Dumbledore to see him in that sort of weakened state and he would make no exceptions for his fiancé.

"You will be brewing a blood-replenishing draught today; directions are on the board, ingredients in the storeroom. Begin," he instructed the class. The blood-replenishing draught wasn't on the usual schedule, but since he had used the last three bottles in the infirmary they needed replacing. There would be a few potions which would not be up to par, but overall his class of seventh years would be capable of brewing the potion.

He began to grade essays from his fourth years as the students began to move to get their ingredients. He was soon aware of a presence at his desk and he looked up to see Hermione standing there.

"Are you ok, sir?" she asked timidly.

"Miss Granger, my well-being is none of your concern at this time. You will brew your potion with the rest of the class and keep silent. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir, sorry," she replied quietly, appearing slightly shocked at his harsh tone.

He watched as she turned to the storeroom, her jaw was set in a way that made him think she was angry. Perhaps she thought their impending marriage would cause him to treat her differently in class. However, her concern for him was surprising, he hadn't expected that. Then again, since he was her protector, his welfare was of some concern. Poppy Pomfry had told him before he left the infirmary last night that Hermione Granger's quick action had likely saved his life. He would thank her later, after he was sure she would not expect preferential treatment in his class.

He was finished with the essay grading by the time class was coming to a close. He glanced up to see most students had finished their potions. Hermione had taken the initiative to begin bottling hers as well.

"Why are you dunderheads standing around looking useless? Bottle a sample potion for grading and bottle the rest of your potions, including your name on the label in the storage bottles. After seven years in this class I would think you would have learned something by now."

The students scurried to comply and soon a queue was lining up at his desk to turn in their potion samples. After he dismissed the class, he called out to his fiancé before she could leave.

"Miss Granger, I require your presence after class." Hermione packed her books and waited for everyone else to leave. When they had done so he spoke. "Miss Granger, while you are in my class you will continue to treat me as your professor and no more. Is that understood?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Good. Also, we should meet again next Saturday to pick our rings since we were disrupted in that endeavor last week," he said as if it were nothing more than an inconvenient delay. "Additionally, I would like for you to have dinner with me this evening in my quarters at five, I have something to give you to help ensure your safety. Mr.

Malfoy may decide to take revenge upon you for his father's incapacitation and it would not do to have him succeed should he attempt to do so."

"Yes sir."

"You are dismissed," he finished curtly and turned his attention to the fresh potion samples on his desktop. However, he realized Hermione had not yet left. He looked at her again, this time with anger. "Did you not hear me? You are dismissed Miss Granger."

She set her face in a stone mask and turned and hurried from his classroom. He realized she probably was going to have some difficulty separating the fact that she was his betrothed as well as his professor, and acting appropriately for each situation. He was glad she would be done with school after this year, but still, it was only the start of the year.

Just after five pm, Hermione settled herself in what were to be her quarters in a few weeks across from the man who would be her husband. She hadn't said anything yet, and was still a bit off-balance by his rudeness in class. She didn't see a dinner service platter around, and so figured he wanted to get a few things out of the way first.

"Hermione, just to make things clear before we start; when we are in class I will treat you no differently than I have in the past, and you will behave as you have always done before. I will not have insinuations from anyone that I am showing you any partiality."

"Yes, I see that I guess," Hermione answered. "I did want to ask you something else though. I thought since we were already contracted that a duel wouldn't make any difference...I mean, could Malfoy have just come along and won me like some kind of prize?"

"Lucius fully intended to kill me. If I had died, you would have gone to the next available suitor, which was Malfoy. He believed I would be no match for him, but I was careful to mislead him in previous years as to my full abilities," he explained. "There is also the possibility that he meant to incapacitate me and simply take you and wait until the scheduled wedding date had passed. However, if he had done that it would have been more difficult for him to legally marry you, but I don't think he cared much for that plan anyway. It was just a convenient way for him to legally acquire you."

"Thank you, Severus. You've risked your life for me."

"From what Madam Pomfrey told me, you may well have saved my life. If you hadn't acted quickly I would have likely bled to death. So, thank you, Hermione."

"Oh...well, of course I wouldn't let you die either. I am glad you are better now."

"Well, that is good. But, enough of that for now...I have something for you," he said as he got up. Hermione watched him curiously as he entered the bedroom. He returned a few moments later with a small box and opened it. "This is a communication amulet," he explained as he withdrew a pendant on a gold chain from the box. It was a gold pendant, with an oddly glimmering jewel in the center which appeared to be an opal which had been enchanted.

"Stand up," he prompted, not unkindly and she complied. He stepped beside her and drew the chain around her neck. Hermione pulled her hair out of the way and closed her eyes as she felt his body heat near her. It was disconcerting how he could go so quickly from strict business-like attitude and then switch...it wasn't anything really observable, it was as if the very air in the room changed as he drew closer to her and held the chain before her. She was surprised to hear him whispering an incantation in much more than a regular whisper...it was as if he harnessed the wind itself and its power moved around her.

She felt his hands brush her neck as he clasped the chain together. She held her breath as he continued the incantation and then felt both his hands on her shoulders as he finished. "The incantation is a kind of ward which will alert me if this necklace is removed or if you are in danger at any time."

"Thank you," Hermione finally said shakily. She let her hair go and dropped her hand to her side. His hands remained on her shoulders and she wondered if she should move away.

"Hermione, relax," Severus said in a near-whisper directly behind her ear. She jumped, startled at the fact that he had moved so close and she hadn't noticed. She heard him chuckle behind her and felt him step closer, his chest against her shoulders. "Do I scare you?" he asked.

"Um...no," she lied in a voice half an octave above normal.

"Close your eyes Hermione," he directed softly. She wasn't sure where this was leading but his presence was overpowering. She gulped and did as directed. "Very good Hermione...very good," he purred and began to massage her shoulders. She tensed at first, but as his large hands moved over her neck and shoulders, squeezing gently she felt the tension begin to ebb.

"Come sit with me," he said and directed her to the couch. His leg was beginning to throb again despite the potion he had taken earlier. Once seated, he continued stroking her shoulders and back with one hand as he spoke softly in her ear. "I would prefer it if you became more comfortable with me. We will be married in a few weeks, after all."

"Yes...I know," she responded and nodded nervously.

"Kiss me Hermione," he said.

"Um...I don't know..." she turned to look at him and his lips descended upon hers. His hand at the back of her neck prevented her from leaping away as was her immediate reaction. She sat stiffly on the couch, lips clamped shut and eyes wide open as his lips caressed hers. Even as awkward as she felt, it was still a better kiss than she'd had from Ron or Victor in the time they had dated. He pulled away from her and raised an eyebrow, smirking at the shocked look on her face.

"I'm sure you can do better than that," he teased. He leaned over again to nibble her neck and she couldn't help but react to the chills which ran over her body at the nip of his teeth under her ear. It felt incredible...nothing like the time Ron had tried to lick her neck...that had felt more like being slobbered upon. This was quite different. She began to relax at his ministrations and at the hands which were softly rubbing up and down her spine. Really, she could get used to this...it probably would be a good idea to get used to this since she would be married to him soon and would likely get a lot of this. Maybe Ginny was right, if she was going to be married, she may as well enjoy it. And so, tentatively, she brought a hand up to graze along his jaw line and tangle into his hair. Yes, it was a bit greasy, but he didn't smell bad and in their previous dinner conversation she had discovered he washed twice daily...so maybe he just didn't like shampoo. Hermione stifled a giggle at her train of thoughts. She was experiencing incredible sensations while still fully clothed and was pondering his shampoo usage.

Severus pulled away from her a moment to gaze deep into her eyes...he saw she was much more relaxed this time and leaned in to kiss her properly. She stiffened slightly at first, but relaxed soon enough, and allowed him to part her lips and delve his tongue in...not far, it wasn't his intention to scare her at this time. He enjoyed the sensations; it had been a while since he had properly kissed a woman and now he found it quite satisfying to think that he would have the opportunity to do so frequently, and much more, in the near future. The fact that she was responding was encouraging.

She was his legally, but he wanted more than that. It had nothing to do with any affection on his part...she was a duty to him, someone he was to protect. But, it was also so much more than a duty; she would be a welcome diversion from the stress of teaching, a fitting reward for his years of spying and doing without for the good of the Order. He idly wondered how long it would take for her to become fully comfortable with him as he worked out a timeline of what to introduce her to and when...how many months would it take to have her waking him willingly in the morning with her lips around his cock. His hardened length jumped at that thought. He was quite convinced marriage may not be bad at all for him.

"That was much better," he purred as he pulled away from Hermione and was pleased to see her half-lidded, flushed expression. "And now, would you care for dinner?"

A Busy Day

Chapter 7 of 31

Ring shopping. Harry and Hermione clear the air and study together. Severus contemplates the future and has an attack of conscience and a plan. Hermione is surprised to find him visiting her and then one thing leads to another. McGonagall walks in at an inopportune time...

Severus Snape peered into the glass cases in the jewelry store. It was determined that this trip to Diagon Alley would be uneventful and so Mad-Eye Moody had accompanied them(though why Albus thought Moody and uneventful could go together he didn't know). His presence was an annoyance; the jumpy retired auror saw conspiracies at every turn and nearly every noise had him reaching for his wand and whirling his magical eye around, eager to hex something. Hermione and Mad-Eye were currently on the other side of the shop along with Ginny Weasley who Hermione wanted to accompany her. He glanced over to where the two girls had their heads together, furtively whispering about what stones to get. Severus was a little surprised she was putting so much thought into this decision, but was glad she had enlisted the aid of a pureblood who knew the traditions to help in this, even if was a Weasley.

He had to choose a ring now, and was weighing the options of the various stones and cuts to be included. He had waved off the proprietors' cheerful help and questions about his hopes and dreams for the marriage. Somehow, he didn't think answering with; "I want for her to stay out of my hair yet be ready to service me at command" would have gone over well.

But, what did he really want to choose for this? He knew he wanted to maintain his typical level of quiet solitude and privacy for the most part. He wanted to keep her safe...that was the whole point of this marriage anyway. In regards to marital relations, his only real hope was that she would be trainable and would learn to enjoy being at his service. However, she was strong-willed and not necessarily compliant. He doubted if she would have ever considered experiencing anything other than typical sex if it weren't for the fact that she was engaged to him through necessity.

The Ruby for passion would be prudent...but not as the main stone. Passion could be fierce too, and would drive her temper...that wouldn't do. The Sapphire would be a good calming influence to counteract the more volatile effects of the Ruby. And to protection...the tiger's-eye signified protection, but it was another stone of volatile force ...no, he wanted something docile for her. Peridot also signified protection of a gentler sort. However, high quality peridot was rare...most were cloudy, it was typical of the stone, but it would be best to find as clear a peridot as possible if it were to go well with the ruby and sapphire. He glanced over the stones and paused at the diamonds. They signified true love, yet he well knew that there would be no true love in this marriage...however, if she thought that was a hope of his it could help with her attitude towards him.

On the other side of the store Hermione and Ginny examined the various stones. Traditionally, they weren't to see what ring was chosen for them until it was placed on their fingers in the ceremony, and so they had been whispering as they discussed which stones to get.

"Are you sure you want that for the central stone rather than the diamond?" Ginny asked in a whisper.

"Yes...this isn't about true love, and really that's not my biggest hope for the marriage. I should include something to signify protection too...what would that be again?"

"Tiger's-eye or peridot," Ginny answered.

"Excuse me," Hermione said to the clerk, "could I see a selection of your available peridots please?" She didn't think tiger's-eye would look right for the ring.

"Oh yes, right over here," said the clerk as he pushed aside one display case to reveal the various cuts of peridot. Several were large, round cut, one carat gems...there were other half-carat rounds, and half and quarter carat square cuts. Hermione didn't want to get anything too large, he didn't want something gaudy and she would respect that.

"How about the wedding bands...can I see your selection of those?" she asked. The clerk moved down the counter to show the wedding bands. Some were quite wide and large, a few in a nuggety looking wrought gold, but the ones she looked to were the simpler bands. However, she couldn't see him wearing gold...not only would it go badly with his skin tone, it could potentially react with potions. The platinum bands looked very nice and her eye fell on one in particular. It was brushed platinum, giving the ring a matte sheen rather than the shiny patina of the other bands. The store clerk noticed her attention to that particular one and pulled it from the display case for her to get a closer look.

"It is charmed so that the brushed effect will not wear off," he informed her helpfully.

"And what about fittings for the stones?"

"You choose the band and the stones and then they are magically sealed into the ring. You will not have to worry about losing gems."

"Hmmm, ok, that sounds good.

Twenty minutes later they had both selected rings and were ready to leave. Hermione hoped her selection would be appropriate and she couldn't help but wonder what he had purchased for her. He walked next to Hermione and gathered her arm in the crook of his elbow. He was aware of the scrutiny of Moody beside and slightly behind him, but honestly didn't care. Let him glare and have his suspicions. He noticed the scrutiny of people on the street as well, several of his former students happened to be around and they did a double take when they recognized their former potions master walking along with a young girl on his arm. He relished being able to glare at them triumphantly.

"Um...Severus? Would it be possible to go into muggle London today? There were some things I wanted to pick up."

Alistair Moody spoke up instead, "Sorry, Miss Granger, but I've got orders from Dumbledore himself to see you back to Hogwarts as soon as possible. No can do today."

"Oh..."

"If it can wait until next weekend, I will accompany you then," Severus said.

"Yes, thank you, I would appreciate that."

Harry and Ron looked up as Ginny and Hermione entered the common room through the portrait-hole. They both thought it suspicious that the girls looked happy, as if they had simply been out shopping together and not shopping for a ring for the bastard. Harry still couldn't believe that she had chosen Snape, and though he knew on one level

that she did make her choice based on whatever strange logic she had come up with, he still felt it was a personal affront for his best friend to pick his worst enemy to bind herself to. Maybe she had to do it, but she sure as hell didn't have to look like that...she should be miserable, not laughing and talking with Ginny as if everything was normal. He glared moodily at her.

Hermione scowled in return but decided to try and act friendly. Ron and Harry had barely spoken to her since she decided to accept Professor Snape over Kingsley, and she knew Harry especially took it personally. "Hello Ron, Harry...how are you two doing today?"

"Oh okay," answered Ron. "How about you two...did the ring shopping go alright?"

"Yes, it went fine. Ginny helped me pick out the stones for the ring; I think I found something appropriate."

"Oh? Did you get something black, for mourning?" Harry snarled.

Hermione glared at him, wondering how to handle this. She felt like slapping that look off his face, but she knew that despite his current attitude, he was still her friend and she wanted to remain friends with him. "No, Harry...I didn't. I will be married to him for quite a long time and there is absolutely no reason I have to look at this with mourning and if you would get your head out of your backside you would realize that. What's the matter with you, do you *want* me to be miserable? Just because I didn't choose to marry your friend doesn't mean I have to be. Will you just get over yourself Harry?" she ranted. The common room had gone very still and quiet during her tirade, everyone looking up with shock at the members of the formerly inseparable trio. She watched as he clenched his jaw and looked down, clearly considering what she had said.

"I don't want you to be miserable," he finally conceded quietly. "But, I just think it's strange that you seem so happy. Hermione, the man is absolutely horrid, can't you see that?"

"I understand that *you* see that, but there is more to him than that. He has actually been fairly nice about this. He even risked his life last week when Malfoy tried to take me in Diagon alley. My life isn't going to be over, Harry. I'll just be living in the dungeons...really, not that much will change," she said, softening her tone. "Harry, don't be like this, please. We've been friends for so long, and I don't want for that to change."

"She's right, Harry," Ginny interjected. "He was really very polite today."

Harry looked at Hermione for a long moment as his jaw relaxed and his scowl receded. He sighed heavily and finally said, "You're right, 'Mione. Sorry I've been an ass about this." He ran a hand through his messy black hair.

"Thanks Harry," Hermione said with a relieved smile. "Now, I have to go put this away. How are you doing on your Arithmancy?" she asked.

"Um...kinda bad actually...would you mind helping me?" he asked, hoping he wasn't asking too much, too soon, but he was glad when she complied.

Severus Snape sat in his armchair, ring in hand, wondering if he had made the right decision on the stones. Now that he had the ring he found himself besieged by new thoughts. First, it brought home the fact that this would be permanent...Hermione Granger would be his wife for the rest of his life. The firelight caught the sparkle of the gems with a warm glow...this was the ring he would place on her finger in just under two weeks when they were bound together. It was one thing to think of her as a new toy, a welcome distraction and reward...but this would be permanent.

He felt as if the responsibility weighed more heavily upon him now. Simply protecting her was a responsibility he could deal with. Using her body in exchange for his protection had seemed only reasonable. But now, he had to wonder what the long term effects he would have upon her.

Severus knew he did have the advantage of her inexperience. What he introduced to her, if he did so correctly, she would view as normal and acceptable, he could even adjust her behavior and attitudes to those which would be less wearisome. But now, watching the firelight glimmering in the array of stones on the platinum band, he knew he would have to be very careful.

She may be the mother of his child one day. He still had not spent much time considering children, but now it was high time he did so. The Snape line was an old one...one which, until recent generations, was venerated as a family of renown. There was no reason his family line could not once more take a prominent place in wizard society. His child, or children, must be well brought up. He knew, from his many years as a teacher, that one could tell what kind of parents a child had from their behavior, that no matter what they were taught at school, the impressions upon the child of three years, five years, and seven years had far reaching consequences upon the person they would become. He had seen the effects of weak-willed mothers, or weak fathers, and even the strong mother and hen-pecked father, but most detrimental was the mother who had once been strong and who had been pushed past the breaking point by an overbearing husband.

Yes, it would be possible to train his wife to the point where she would kneel before him and lose her individuality and temper around him while still maintaining a somewhat normal personality when out of his presence...but if they were to have a child together, that would require them to work together as equals in parenting one day.

On the other hand, he really didn't want to compromise on some things. He could possibly accept that in potions making she would be acceptable to work beside, but otherwise, he desired power. He would not be satisfied with having her in his bed and simply making do with performing the requirements of the law and leaving her alone the rest of the time. He had already told her what she could expect...if he did not follow through with that he knew she would be very difficult to manage in the future if she believed he would not do as he said. Yes, he wanted her submission...but not her complete subjugation.

He rolled the ring over and over, observing it still. On a whim, he rose from his chair and crossed the living room to enter Hermione's room. She had already started moving her things in. There were already a number of books on the shelves, many muggle paperbacks but he saw a number of classics amongst the newer books. He perused the titles, noting that she had good taste in books, and that many of these were books he had copies of as well. He found nearly an entire shelf filled with the extensive works of Mark Twain, though he did not recognize many of the titles, American muggle literature not being his forte...a good collection of W.H. Hudson; several tomes by Kipling; a boxed, leather-bound set of the Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. He came across an extensive collection of books all bearing the word 'Oz' in the title...hmm, Frank L. Baum, another unfamiliar name but the illustrations on the bindings led him to believe this was a children's series. He also found a book of the collected writings of his namesake, Marcus Aurelius (or at least the middle names his parents had burdened him with).

He scanned the paperbacks and saw that one author seemed prevalent in her library, Robert A. Heinlein, a name he hadn't heard before, apparently a favorite of hers judging by the fact that there were well over thirty titles. Though the books were paperbacks, he could sense the charms she had placed on them to keep the books new; and could see the care she took with her books and he briefly wondered why she had not obtained leather-bound copies of such obviously favored works. He assumed the lack of anything relating to any of her school subjects was due to the fact that she would keep them around to study in the two weeks remaining before she would live here.

She had filled the wardrobe with off-season clothing and she had already arranged personal effects on the walls. He scowled at the portrait of Hermione, Ron, and Harry which had been taken in their first year, along with a collection of the trio and even a few of Potter on his broom. He was definitely glad for his decision to give Hermione her own room, the thought of waking up to the Boy-Who-Lived smiling and waving at him from a picture frame confirmed it was the best decision.

He looked over the odd mixture of muggle and wizard photographs which adorned the wall, surprised that she would have started her move so quickly. She had done most of this while he was teaching class, during her free periods. He had given her permission to enter his quarters for that purpose, as well as the key and password to his quarters. That had been a decision he had wondered about...but he supposed it would help her make the transition easier.

He still hadn't put a door in here for a separate entrance...this seemed the best time to do so and he withdrew his wand and pointed it at the wall adjacent to the dungeon corridor. His attention was drawn away by a knock on his door. Wondering who could be bothering him now, he stalked to the door and flung it open. He was somewhat surprised to find Albus standing in his doorway.

"Good evening, Severus. I understand you had a successful trip to Diagon Alley this morning?" he asked.

"If by successful, you mean we were not accosted by jealous would-be suitors, then you would be correct," he replied. "I suppose you want to come in?" he asked sourly.

"Oh thank you Severus, don't mind if I do at all," the Headmaster replied jovially. "I see you have made a change to your quarters," he said when he noticed the open doorway.

"I thought it best that Miss Granger have her own room," he stated, deliberately keeping his tone short and clipped to discourage further talk on that subject.

"I see then," he said and strolled inside. "She has started moving already then...that is a good sign. I believe she will adjust quite well to this."

"If she keeps to her own space then I am sure we will have no problems."

"Oh yes...true," he said as he looked around the room. "Of course, I am sure that if you want her to keep her distance, you will be providing a bed for her in here as well. After all, the terms of the law could be achieved in less than five minutes a week; you hardly need to share a bed." Albus turned and regarded him with an unreadable expression.

Severus stiffened and clenched his jaw. The last thing he wanted now was Albus bloody Dumbledore prying into his marriage and making decisions for him. While the headmaster was the one who had maneuvered him into the position of being engaged to Hermione, he would not stand for him trying to interfere and manipulate him now and if he had a problem with that then he could stow it and his bloody lemon-drops.

"Oh I see how it is then, Severus," Dumbledore chuckled with twinkling eyes and a knowing smile. "You do think there could be more here than just a convenient arrangement. I am happy for you Severus, really I am. I did hope Hermione would make the right choice, and I was right in believing that she would see past what her friends thought was obvious. May I see the ring, Severus?"

Scowling, Severus handed it over. Albus held it in his hand, rolling the platinum band over and over. He smiled as he looked to the stones. "Very good choice, Severus, very good choice," he said with a nod and handed the ring back. "I do believe this is very appropriate, and I believe that the hopes it represents will be realized."

When the Headmaster had left, Severus sat again in Hermione's room, wondering if perhaps he had done a disservice to Hermione in showing her only pictures. She would glean some understanding of the physical acts through them, but would likely not understand everything involved. She wasn't naturally submissive, he knew that. Though he knew it would be a bit out of character for him, he decided it would be best to introduce some games before they were married in a less threatening way. Something simple, perhaps even something silly...he wasn't silly, but when dealing with an eighteen year old girl, silly could work to break through certain barriers.

And so he got up, transfigured a separate entrance for Hermione's room, and headed out of the dungeons to have a talk with her once more.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were seated on the floor around the coffee table in her sitting room. They had spent the last three hours working through arithmancy homework and Hermione had been able to get them through several points on which they had been having a difficult time. Harry was obviously trying to get over his issues with her impending marriage. She was honestly surprised that Ron wasn't the one with problems, but then again, they had broken off any kind of romantic liaison last year. He was likely relieved that he wouldn't have to marry her.

A knock sounded on the door and Hermione called out, "Come in!" It was nearly curfew, but it could be a prefect or someone else who needed to go over business with her on Head Girl duties. The door opened and she was surprised to see her fiancé there. Harry and Ron both looked stunned.

"Miss Granger, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, good evening," he said dryly. Harry and Ron both stared at him.

"Good evening, Professor Snape," said Hermione, a bit nervously. Harry looked back and forth between Hermione and Snape.

"We were just leaving," Harry said, getting up and gathering his notes and books. "See you in the morning 'Mione."

"Oh...ok, if you're sure you've got this stuff down then?"

"Um, yeah...we've got it down," Ron spoke up, catching the pointed gaze of Harry. They quickly gathered their things together.

"Would you like to sit down, Professor Snape?"

"Yes, thank you," he replied and took a seat on the couch, watching the two boys as they packed their things without looking at him. When they had both left and the door was closed he turned to his fiancé. "I suppose you are wondering why I am here?" he asked.

"Well, yes," she replied and sat on the couch about two feet from him.

"I wanted to talk to you some more regarding our marital arrangements." He shifted to face her on the couch, placing a hand on the back of the couch not far from Hermione's shoulder.

"Okay...anything in particular? I thought we had already talked about most of it, right?"

"We have covered many of the practical issues, yes. That is not why I am here," he said. "I am confident that we will be able to cohabitate with minimal strain. However, I was *concerned* that you may not understand fully what I will expect of you."

"Well," she said, shifting uncomfortably in her seat, "Um...I know you will want me to ...experience things which are a bit...well, extreme by normal standards."

"Yes, but there is more to it than that," he said carefully. "Tell me, what are your perceptions on how you will adjust to submission?" he asked.

Hermione thought for a moment. She had perused the pictures in his book nearly every evening. Though the first time she saw them she was shocked, she realized that most of the pictures detailed activities which, while they would be uncomfortable, and sometimes painful, they would not be actually damaging. "I suppose I thought it would be something I could tolerate...I'm not sure how enjoyable all of it will be, but I know you aren't going to seriously hurt me."

"So you're saying that you are looking at it as something to endure passively?"

"Um...yes, I suppose so."

"I want you to understand that I will require more than your endurance of my attentions...I will require your active participation and willing submission. There are going to be times at which you will find this difficult."

"Difficult in what way?" Hermione asked. This was already a highly uncomfortable topic of conversation, and his bold, matter-of-fact presentation, which was quite similar to his lecture of last week on the properties and uses of moonflower extract, didn't make it any less uncomfortable.

"You will be uncomfortable with some things emotionally, and other things will be physically demanding. I know through your years in my class that you are not naturally submissive and so I thought it best to inform you in more detail what I expect. My book gave you a general idea of the physical acts themselves, and to be honest I had thought that would be enough to scare you from making the decision to marry me. And so, you have an incomplete picture of what to expect. I hope to complete that picture at this time."

"Why now?"

"Because, once we are married, I expect you to submit to me without hesitation or struggle," he said and looked her straight in the eye. "If you are not prepared for what this entails, your adjustment to life with me will be much more difficult." He paused to judge her reaction. He knew she would be thinking about his agreement not to hurt her on their wedding night and so continued, "Now, just because I have agreed to hold off on some things which will be painful, does not mean that I will expect anything less than obedience and submission from you. Obedience will bring rewards, which you will enjoy, and disobedience will bring punishment, which you will not enjoy. I want you to know this now, and I want to hear from you that you will do your best to submit to me."

"Um...you did say this was supposed to be...well...fun at one point, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. Submission can be very enjoyable, and even fun, *if* you submit. However, if you enter into marriage with me with only the hope to endure, you will be in the wrong state of mind to find satisfaction. It may seem to you that I am placing excessive emphasis on what will be the physical aspects of our relationship?" he made it a question and raised his eyebrows in an open expression, inviting her to answer.

"Well, to be honest...I thought it was a bit much, yes." Hermione had actually wondered if Professor Snape was just a bit on the sex crazed side...or maybe it had just been too long for him.

"I do have good reason for this. We will not likely spend large amounts of time with each other. I will be busy with teaching and my research, and you will be busy with your schoolwork and friends. In the future I can see the possibility of collaborating on projects and eventually in raising a child together whenever you decide you are ready for that. But, in the immediate future much of our interaction will be of a sexual nature and because of that I think it is vital that you have a better understanding of what that will mean."

"Oh...well, that does make sense then."

"If you would like, I will give you a practical example of what I am talking about at this time. It is something more easily understood through experience than through explanation," he said, his voice had lowered slightly from his previous lecture-like quality.

"What kind of practical example are you talking about?" she asked firmly.

"A simple example of a task, a possible reward for achieving the task, and a possible punishment for failing the task, nothing extreme, I promise." He watched as Hermione thought about it. She looked skeptical. "Tell me Hermione, did you enjoy our kiss the other night?" he asked and moved his hand to brush her hair back from the side of her face, resulting in Hermione shivering slightly and closing her eyes momentarily.

"Um...yes, I did actually," she answered somewhat shyly, but also with desire.

"Then that can be the reward," he purred suggestively and moved his hand down to the nape of her neck, where he traced small circles.

"And the punishment?" she asked, forcing her voice to remain steady.

"Ten swats with my hand," he replied firmly.

"I see...and the task?"

Severus smirked at her. "If I told you the task before you have agreed to it, it wouldn't be much of a test would it?" he asked. "However, I will give you two conditions. First, it is nothing at all sexual. Second, it is not anything painful."

Hermione regarded the slightly amused expression on Severus's face for a few moments, mulling over the possibilities. What could this game be? And the reward was to kiss him? She thought it sounded a bit conceited on his part, but she remembered last Monday evening quite well. It really had been nice. On the other hand...she would be agreeing to a spanking if she was unable to accomplish the task he set for her. But, she'd experienced *that* as well, only last time he had been angry...this time it was a game, would it be different?

Finally, she said, "Okay...I agree."

She watched the glimmer in his eye as he reached into a pocket in his robes. Her heart began to pound as she watched his long, slender, fingers reaching to pluck out some mystery object. Soon enough, he pulled his hand out and held it before her face in a fist, hiding what was held within. She could hardly breathe as he turned his fist over and opened his hand to reveal the object in his palm.

Hermione blinked a few times in confusion. "A cherry?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, "a cherry. Allow me to demonstrate," he declared with flair and popped the cherry, stem and all, into his mouth. She watched as his jaw worked, shifting back and forth as he rolled it around, looking at her with glimmering eyes the entire time. After a short time, he parted his lips and on the tip of his tongue, which was protruding slightly past his lips, the cherry rested. She looked closer and saw that the stem was tied in two knots. With a deft flick of his tongue, he sent the cherry flipping through the air and caught it neatly in his palm. "Your task is to tie a knot in a cherry stem with your tongue."

"You've got to be kidding!"

"I assure you, Miss Granger, I am quite serious," he said in a low, breathy voice which sent chills up her arms. He reached into his pocket and withdrew another cherry. "Here you are. Place the cherry in your mouth, tie a knot in the stem, and receive your reward. Fail in your task, and accept your punishment."

Two minutes later Hermione withdrew the cherry from her mouth; sure that she had achieved her task. She had twisted and turned the cherry stem in her mouth and had finally had managed to bend and turn it enough that it should be knotted. However, when she withdrew it she was alarmed to see that she had not succeeded.

"You have failed, stand up now," Severus said with a smirk and stood up to glare down at her.

"Wait, I can do this, let me try again," Hermione said and began to put the cherry back into her mouth.

"NO. You may have another attempt *after* you have been punished. Now get up."

Hermione rose shakily to her feet, feeling absolutely ridiculous. What had possessed her to agree to this? She could see that her pervert of a fiancé looked absolutely elated at the thought of spanking her.

"Come here," he said and walked around to the back of the couch. She followed, stomach flopping erratically. "Place your hands on the back of the couch, Miss Granger. Do not speak, or I may have to increase your punishment."

Hermione gritted her teeth and moved to the back of the couch. She paused to still her breathing and to try to convince herself it wouldn't be that bad...really, just ten swats, she could deal with that, right? She bent over and placed her hands on the burgundy cloth of the couch and waited, growing more nervous by the second.

"No, this won't do at all," Severus said from behind her. "Your backside is covered in denim which is much too thick. Lower your trousers and knickers," he ordered.

Hermione shot up and turned around, eyes wide. "I didn't agree to that!"

"Yes, you did, though if you were of the mistaken impression that you could remain covered for your punishment then I apologize," he purred and sneered at her, sounding completely unapologetic. "Now, lower your trousers and knickers...it's nothing I won't see in two weeks anyway, don't be shy."

Hermione gritted her teeth and glared at him torn between doing as he said and refusing outright. She realized it must have been those fingers twirling on the back of her neck which had caused her to give in. Amazing what he could do with those fingers, really. The air seemed to crackle with tension as she worked through the problem. Yes, she had agreed to be punished, though it had been unfair of him to not mention anything about spanking her bare bottom. However, she was beginning to realize that these games would be quite a bit more than just enduring rough sex. Maybe it would be a good idea to have a preview, though it wouldn't be pleasant.

Sighing heavily she turned around again to face the couch and unbuttoned her jeans. Her fingers fumbled with the button and zipper but she carried on. Her thumbs hooked in the top of her jeans and she hesitated momentarily before swallowing her modesty and lowering her jeans. She hadn't gone far; the waistband of her jeans was still above the dip which marked the end of her bottom and the beginning of her thigh. Flushing hot with shame, she bent over slightly, just far enough to reach the top of the couch.

"That is not acceptable. Lower them at least another four inches."

Hermione bit her tongue and followed directions, clamping her thighs tight and attempting to bend as little as possible so as not to expose any more than just her bum.

"Bend over more, your back should be straight," he prompted. Hermione closed her eyes and straightened her back, causing the bend at her hips to sharpen. Hermione hoped she didn't look as exposed as she felt. He was certainly taking his time here too. He stood behind her, admiring the view. Though she had clamped her thighs together, he could still see just a peek of her nether lips above her jeans and cotton knickers which were bunched around her upper thighs. He paused to cast a silencing spell then stepped to her side and placed a hand on her lower back. He drew back with his other hand and brought it down on her round, firm bottom.

Hermione jumped slightly and let out a startled yelp. It stung...but was surprisingly not that painful. She gritted her teeth and waited for the second blow to fall. This one was on her other cheek and stung a bit more than the first, but she kept her lips clamped shut, not uttering a sound. His cock swelled and stiffened uncomfortably in his pants, he would have to take care of that once he was back in his quarters in a hot shower later.

Severus counted out ten swats on her backside...he wasn't hitting as hard as he could, but he arranged the blows to cover as full an area as possible, overlapping each blow slightly from the last. When he finished he was quite pleased to see ten discernable handprints in red and pink. He rested his palm over the top of where the handprints began and caressed the welts. "Very good, Hermione," he said softly as he stroked over the handprints. "You may get up now."

She reached down and grabbed the waistband of her jeans and cotton knickers and yanked them up, then zipped and buttoned them swiftly. Her heart was pounding and her bottom was tingling...it had hurt, but not badly...and she had shivered when he stroked her backside, the light pressure over the stinging skin had produced an entirely delicious sensation, much to her chagrin.

"Come sit with me again, Hermione," he said softly behind her ear. She marveled at what a flexible voice he had. It could be so commanding, it could strike someone cold with fear, or it could sound so seductive...so dangerous but so wonderful. She took a deep breath and walked around to the front of the couch. It had been embarrassing, she had felt exposed, slightly angry, though somewhere between the fifth and eighth blow she had realized how absurd it must look. Somewhere in there she realized that getting upset and ashamed about it was the wrong way to look at it. It was uncomfortable, it hurt a bit, but it was hardly dreadful. Really, the worst part had been waiting for it to happen.

She took a seat and Severus sat beside her, much closer this time. He observed her closely to see how she had reacted...she didn't seem horribly traumatized. He raised his hand to trace along her jaw line with an index finger, tilting her face up to look him in the eye. She was aware that the tingling in her bum had moved forward a bit, and her stomach was flip-flopping in a completely different way now. "I am willing to give you another chance to earn your reward," he muttered softly as he leant forward and brushed his lips against her ear, sending shivers down her spine. She swallowed briefly and tried to think as he nipped softly along her neck and down to her shoulder, producing a myriad of delicious sensations.

He moved back up her neck slowly, he was almost to that spot that felt so good and she moved her head aside to allow him better access, closing her eyes in anticipation. Just as he was almost there he pulled back. "So what do you say? Will you try again...or are the consequences of failure too much?" he asked with a smirk.

It was a dare, and she knew it. Normally, she wouldn't allow herself to be pulled into a dare, but this was different, her reaction to this would set the stage for her future and she was not going to let him think he scared her. Yes, it was a game...and yes, her attitude would make the difference. It would take quite a bit more than a simple spanking to scare Hermione Granger. Okay, so she might get a bruised bum once in a while...but really, she got hurt worse falling on her backside on hard-packed snow while skiing yet she still got back up and kept at it. She realized that there would likely be more painful things to come, but there was no sense in being afraid of it.

"Give me that cherry," she stated firmly, returning his smirk.

"I believe I must also teach you to address me with proper respect," he said in a warning tone.

"Please give me the cherry, *sir*," she corrected and lowered her head slightly in a display of submission. It was just a display, she told herself. These 'games' with Professor Snape...Severus...would require more involvement than she had previously thought, but it was rather fun...at least this was.

"You are a sharp student in more than just potions, I see," he said as he placed a fresh, deep red cherry between her lips. It was difficult to hold himself back as he watched her lips part and take the berry, but the rewards for his restraint now would be much better than taking her too quickly. Yes, allow her to enjoy a game here and soon enough she would be willing to do so much more.

Harry and Ron sat in the common room, wondering why Snape would be visiting Hermione in her room. They didn't like leaving early to make room for Snape, but they weren't going to stay there either and apparently Hermione wasn't going to ask Snape to leave. Harry thought it was a bad sign of things to come and sulked through two games of wizard chess with Ron.

"Maybe they're just getting to know each other better Harry? I mean, they will be married in two weeks...they'll have to...do it," he said with a wince.

"The last thing I want to think about is that git pawing all over Hermione," he said with a shudder of disgust. "He'd better not hurt her."

"Well, isn't the whole point for him to protect her? Dumbledore wouldn't have suggested he marry her if he thought he would hurt her, right?"

"Dumbledore doesn't know everything and I think he has a blind spot when it comes to Snape. I've got a bad feeling about him, Ron. Have you noticed how Hermione acts around him?"

"She seems a bit nervous, yeah. But, that's understandable."

"Did you see her when she came back from dinner with him last week? I've never seen her like that...she looked...well, like she'd been snogged. I'll bet he thinks this is just going to be a great way for him to get laid on a regular basis."

"Ewww, Harry...listen...I'd really rather not think about it alright!"

"I'll bet he's up there snogging her right now," he muttered angrily as he frowned at the chessboard, not really caring that he was losing by a long shot.

"Who is 'snogging' whom, Mr. Potter?"

Harry and Ron both looked up to see Professor McGonagall standing in the common room looking stern. "Uh, no one Professor McGonagall," Harry lied unconvincingly. Their head of house pinned them both with a glare.

"Actually, I don't think they're snogging...it's just that Snape dropped by to see Hermione. They're probably talking about more wedding plans," Ron said.

"And Professor Snape is up there now?" she asked sharply.

"Well, we left when he came in there about half an hour ago," Harry said.

"I see," she said and turned to head up the stairs to the Head Girl's room. Harry and Ron watched and exchanged worried glances. Both were surprised when they heard their head of house yell from the doorway of Hermione's rooms.

"SEVERUS SNAPE! GET YOUR HANDS OFF OF MISS GRANGER IMMEDIATELY!!"

The door slammed and Harry and Ron's eyes grew wide before they both exchanged disgusted looks. But Harry looked back to the doorway and his expression clouded with anger. There was something seriously wrong if Hermione would let that greasy git touch her before she absolutely had to, and he was going to find out what it was.

Hermione had succeeded on her second attempt and was enjoying her reward. She moaned softly into his mouth as his hands roamed up and down her back, clutching at her hip or shoulder at intervals. He broke away from time to time to nibble down her neck, and she had even experimented with some of the same techniques on him.

She'd experienced a few fumbling attempts at making out with Ron, but this was so different. He knew exactly what he was doing, and she was enjoying herself immensely. He was moving one hand down her shoulder and towards her breast...too caught up in the pleasure of the moment to be shy about her body she thrust upward into his hand and shuddered as his fingers brushed across her nipple through her blouse and bra. He shifted position, spreading his legs and moving one thigh to fall across hers, their legs dangling off the couch together. He made no move to direct her explorations, but she was more than eager to caress his shoulders and the hard planes of his chest. She began to think that it was really too bad he was wearing so many layers.

Hermione curiously explored lower, approaching his waistband but unsure if she should continue. "Go ahead, Hermione," he breathed heavily into her ear, prompting her to explore where she would. She reached past his waistband and down to where his erection was straining against the cloth, wrapping her hand around it and trying to measure his length and girth.

Just then, a noise at the door caused them both to snap their heads up as the door to her room was hastily opened. Hermione was horrified to see a very angry looking Professor McGonagall standing there.

"SEVERUS SNAPE! GET YOUR HANDS OFF OF MISS GRANGER IMMEDIATELY!!" she yelled and stepped into the room, slamming the door behind her.

"Professor McGonagall...I can explain," Hermione said and attempted to remove herself from the vicinity of her fiancé but he clamped the leg over her thigh down firmly, preventing her from moving.

"Hermione Jane Grange, I cannot think of anything that would explain *this*!" she exclaimed with barely contained fury.

"I'm sorry..." she began to speak but was cut off by Severus who had yet to unclamp her thigh and was still resting one hand on her shoulder.

"Hush, Hermione," he snapped at her before turning his attention to his colleague. "Minerva, is it not customary to knock before bursting through doors? I am sure I have heard you espouse the virtues of respecting the privacy of students within their dorms on a number of occasions."

Hermione didn't think it was possible for Professor McGonagall's eyes to get any bigger, but they did, and her jaw began to work, opening and closing as if she wanted to say something but it just wouldn't come out. Finally she found her voice. "Severus Snape, this has gone too far. How dare you come in here...and with a student...it is an outrage!"

"Minerva, my *fiancé* and I are simply becoming better acquainted," he said in a controlled, but impatient voice. Hermione turned from watching her head of house to look at Severus with astonishment that he didn't seem the least bit concerned about the position they had been found in. In one swift, smooth motion he rose to his full height and stepped forward to look down at McGonagall. "You know very well that I do not take advantage of students, and you also know very well that Miss Granger and I will be married in two weeks. You have no say here regarding relations between us, and you have no business attempting to make her feel that she has done anything wrong here."

"I certainly do have every right, I am responsible for the safety and well-being of students within my house," she hissed.

"And as her soon-to-be *husband* I am responsible for her safety and well-being. In fact, legally my authority overrides yours in this matter," he said venomously.

Hermione was quickly getting over her shock of having McGonagall walk in on her in the midst of very heated...well; it could possibly be considered foreplay though she wasn't sure where they might have been headed if they hadn't been interrupted. Now, she was quickly becoming annoyed that they were arguing about her as if she couldn't hear them. School by-laws were being quoted now, and it looked as if neither one of them was about to give up the argument. She stood up and walked over to stand to one side of the bickering pair.

"Excuse me please," she called to both of them. It seemed they had forgotten her presence in the midst of their arguing. "Professor McGonagall, I know you don't like this, but I am doing my best to adjust to the fact that I will be married in two weeks. There were some things I was concerned about and Severus was just helping me to adjust to what will be required by the ministry of magic once we are married."

"Hermione," she said, "I know you are to be married in two weeks, but Professor Snape should not be taking advantage of you because of that."

"He was not taking advantage of me. We were simply becoming better acquainted, just as he said," Hermione answered firmly, but politely. Severus smirked triumphantly.

McGonagall looked back and forth between the two of them distrustfully. "Was he trying to pressure you into anything, Miss Granger? Don't be afraid to answer me, girl," she said while casting suspicious glances towards Snape.

"Absolutely not, Professor. In fact, I'm afraid I may have been the one trying to pressure him into more than he thought appropriate at this time," Hermione said with a convincingly abashed expression.

"Well, I shouldn't have to remind the two of you that there are rules in this school and behaviors which are expected of staff and students, especially from the Head Girl. I do not want to walk in on another display like this again! Good evening," she said stiffly and turned and left.

Severus watched the door click shut with satisfaction. He was about to congratulate Hermione on her handling of the situation when he saw she was facing the door, he couldn't see her face, but her shoulders were shaking as if with suppressed sobbing. Likely the embarrassment of the situation was more than she was able to handle.

"Hermione?" he prodded gently. Her shoulders shook more...oh bugger, he did not want to deal with her crying over something like this. He was about to snap at her to suck it up when she turned to face him and he realized that she wasn't crying...far from it, she was barely containing her laughter. She let it burst forth from her lungs as she stumbled over to the couch to flop back ungracefully.

"Oh gods! The look on her face...it was priceless!" she gasped out between laughs.

"Yes, quite," he answered as he watched her.

"Really, I don't mean any disrespect to her...I've just always thought she needed to loosen up a bit." She laughed some more. "I wonder..." she mused.

"Wonder what?"

"What would have happened if she had walked in ten minutes ago?"

"I would likely have had to obliviate her of the memory," he drawled sardonically. He maintained his stiff expression as she looked up at him, trying to figure out if he was serious or not. He decided to let her remain unsure. His mission to both set her at ease, as well as set her up for ease of training had gone well this evening, he thought. She'd had the perfect opportunity to go crying to McGonagall about supposed abuses, and with the handprints which were still likely visible on her bottom, and the book he had loaned her she would have had ample evidence to have him under constant scrutiny regarding what went on in the privacy of their quarters and she had stepped forward to defend him and to diffuse the situation instead. Things were looking up, indeed.

The Day Arrives

Chapter 8 of 31

Draco returns to Hogwarts, but he doesn't react as they would have thought. Hermione and Severus get married and have the wedding night, Hermione wonders if she's done the right thing.

Hermione walked between Harry and Ron down to the dungeons for Monday morning's Double Potions class. Harry hadn't really spoken to her, and seemed distracted. She had noticed Ron glancing over to him and rolling his eyes, apparently Harry was being sullen about something again. No one had said anything to her yesterday about their Head of House yelling, but everyone had looked at her oddly. She was beginning to look forward to her wedding if for nothing else than the fact that she'd have her own space where the other Gryffindors would just quit *looking* all the time. It was downright unsettling.

They stood amongst the mingling students outside the potions classroom, waiting for time to enter. Hermione was arranging her book bag more comfortably when she saw Harry stiffen and his gaze narrow and focus to the other side of the gathered students.

"He's back," Harry said softly. Ron looked over and set his jaw, and Hermione turned to see Draco Malfoy standing in the hallway. Apparently, he had taken care of the immediate needs concerning his father's confinement in St. Mungo's. He didn't look up to see the scrutiny the trio was paying him, and oddly, his typical smirk was gone. His grey eyes seemed empty of the contempt he usually held and he looked down at the flagstones. Hermione glanced around to find his ever-present goon squad, and saw Crabbe and Goyle standing on the other side of the hallway, sharing confused looks and glancing back and forth between Malfoy and each other.

When the door opened for them to enter the class trailed in and quickly took their seats. As Draco Malfoy passed the place where Hermione sat he paused and looked at her. Hermione looked up, expecting him to insult her or rage, but instead he seemed almost contemplative. He scowled slightly and then moved on to his seat.

Hermione looked up to Professor Snape and saw the exchange had not gone unnoticed. His face was unreadable as usual, but throughout the class he observed the young Malfoy closely. Something had changed there, but what it was he could not be certain. Malfoy didn't look at him, rather he kept his eyes down and only glanced up when he needed to jot down the ingredients for the potion they were brewing on the board.

Professor Snape continued his scrutiny of Draco Malfoy over the next two weeks. The young man had changed, perhaps he was in shock, but he displayed none of the anger Snape had expected to see. However, he didn't underestimate him. Malfoy could simply be biding his time, waiting to find a way at revenge. On the other hand, Snape knew that the elder Malfoy ruled his son with an iron hand. He had spoiled him in material things, but was still overbearing. Perhaps Draco would come to the conclusion that he was better off with his father out of his life, and having his inheritance early.

He had shared his concerns with the staff, and made sure Hermione knew to stay clear of him and not to walk the corridors alone. Though Potter and Weasley were annoyances to him, he was at least confident that they could hold their own against Malfoy or Crabbe and Goyle. But, that was just one of a number of things on his mind lately. Hermione had moved all but her barest essentials into her room in his quarters, thanking him for the separate entrance. The Weasley girl had been helping her unpack and organize when he went to his quarters last Thursday evening. His first inclination had been to be upset about the invasion of his space; however, he'd reminded himself that he had agreed that she could have friends over. As long as they remained in her room, he wouldn't make a fuss.

Albus had made mention of the fact, in his personal offhand barmy-old-fart demeanor, that locking charms were good to apply when one wanted privacy...apparently McGonagall had gone straight to him about the scene she had walked in on. He would have loved to have been a fly on the wall at that confrontation, but apparently Albus had managed to calm the deputy Headmistress somewhat and she had settled on casting him dirty looks at the high table and in staff meetings.

He had accompanied Hermione to muggle London the weekend after purchasing their rings. They had visited three bookstores, and after each bookstore she had looked more perturbed. He knew what she was looking for, having looked over her shoulder as she looked up titles in the store computer registry, and while he admired the fact that she was eager to learn more, he had his reasons for not wanting her to pick up something like 'The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty' and its sequels.

Though he wasn't up to date on muggle publications (he was loath to call it literature), a previous liaison (who he had thought quite the twit, though she had been fun for a short time) had given him the books, claiming they had given her the ideas behind what it meant to submit. He had read the books and found the concepts within to be laughable for the most part, including a number of physically impossible acts, and a ridiculous social structure. That having been his only foray into what a muggle would write on the topic, and since he hadn't wanted to inflict himself with more trite garbage, he thought it best that she simply see none of it. And so, Hermione had been unable to find the books due to a few discreetly placed charms to misdirect her from them.

He had walked back to Gryffindor Tower with her after the trip, and had been pleasantly surprised that she invited him in for tea. When he declined, she had shyly mentioned that she was wondering if he might want to play another 'game' before they were married. He had replied in the negative, though it would have been fun, he wasn't going to have her getting used to setting the stage between them.

Severus was sitting in his quarters, it was Friday evening and they would be married on the morrow. He had pulled his wedding robes from his wardrobe. They were a deep green, representing new life and growth. The color suited him well, though he never wore anything but black.

Hermione's parents would be at Hogwarts as well for the wedding tomorrow. He wondered if he should seek them out, perhaps speak with her father again, but in the end decided not to. He was still a stranger to them, and they would likely want to spend time with Hermione tonight and may look on his presence as an intrusion.

Since he would be busy tomorrow he went ahead into his lab to brew the contraceptive potion for Hermione. It would be the monthly variety. He decided to teach her to brew it after this, it was a fairly complex potion, though not all the contraceptive potions were, this one was simply particularly effective.

The Wedding day was a flurry of activity. Molly Weasley had come to help with the wedding preparations, as well as to talk with Jane Granger. The Weasley's had taken it upon themselves to represent the wizarding world to Hermione's parents, and they had developed a friendship over the years as both Muggle and Wizard couples learned more about each other's worlds.

Fortunately, Molly Weasley had also been busy putting Jane's worries to rest, or at least subduing them as Hermione sat and had her hair done by Molly.

"Really Jane, this whole Marriage Law thing has been a surprise for everyone, but I'm sure Hermione will be just fine with Severus. I've known him for years...he's always been a bit withdrawn from most people, but he really has sacrificed so much. We would have never defeated Vo...you-know-who, without him."

"True, he did seem fairly nice when we had dinner with him last month. And Hermione tells me that they've been getting better acquainted since they've become engaged. I still have to worry about this kind of set-up though."

"Oh I understand being a muggle you probably haven't known many people from arranged marriages. It has been less common even in the Wizarding world for the last several decades, but I know many happy people who hadn't even seen each other before their wedding day...my parents for one."

"What about you and Arthur?"

"Oh we actually didn't have an arranged marriage. We married just after leaving Hogwarts, we just couldn't wait, you see."

"Ow..." Hermione exclaimed as Molly, who was distracted in reminiscing her youth, pulled a bit too hard on a lock of hair.

"Oh sorry dear," she said and returned her attention to the head of hair before her. "As I was saying Jane...Arthur and I got married right out of Hogwarts. But, still, at that time I had several close friends who were getting married to people their parents had arranged. I have learned from them that love isn't something you have to have right away...it grows over the years even between two strangers. Now Hermione dearie, I know this must seem strange to marry Severus Snape now, but mark my words, you won't regret it. I know I would have been more than happy to be preparing you to marry Ron today...but well, I know everything will work out anyway."

Hermione wondered why it was that people had such mixed reactions to her marriage. She had quite a bit of respect for Molly Weasley and Albus Dumbledore, who both seemed to think it was going to be wonderful. However, she also respected Professor McGonagall, and wondered why she would have been so opposed.

She could deal with her friends being upset, reasoning that they weren't thinking about long term stability or about the issues she was focused on. Harry's biggest concern seemed to be his suspicion that she had been influenced by a potion, and that she was going to have to sleep with someone he found repulsive. Really, quite shallow reasoning.

Her parents had taken the news better than she had thought they might overall, though they still had reservations. However, most of their reservations seemed to be about the sudden arranged marriage itself rather than who she was marrying. She did wonder briefly what they would have thought if they had met Kingsley Shacklebolt as well. While he was only a few years younger than Severus, he probably would have made a better impression overall simply through his easygoing, bright personality.

She moved through the rest of the afternoon in something of a surreal haze and with growing butterflies in her stomach. Memories of his hand on her throat that first night she had spoken to him about the possibility of marriage, the way he had spoken to her, completely unapologetic about what he would want from her. She reviewed the Arithmantic calculations in her head again, reminding herself that the future would be better according to the calculations...she would have the independence she wanted to study, she would have the choice on when to begin a family, and his assurance that outside the bedroom things would be equal between them.

But, when she thought back to the memory of hanging helplessly across his thigh, wondering what on earth could have possibly struck her as the slightest bit arousing about that, she wondered if it would be fine after all. And then two weeks ago, he had seemed to enjoy spanking her...when he'd left that night she had stolen a glance in the mirror, shocked that his handprints were still visible on her backside. If he'd enjoyed that, he would likely enjoy much more than that...but would she enjoy it?

Her attempt to find some books on the topic in muggle bookstores had proved fruitless...but the fact that books were available in which characters found themselves tied up and being punished in various ways seemed to hint that some people actually did enjoy it. So, would she learn to as well?

Severus Snape finished smoothing the green silk of his wedding robes...they were cut in much the same way as his typical frock coat, the eighteenth century style suited him, even if it wasn't black. He placed the wedding ring in his breast pocket and prepared to leave, casting one last glance in the mirror. His hair was in place, tied back at the nape of his neck.

There was a firm knock on his door...likely the headmaster coming to make sure he was going to show up for his own wedding. However, when he opened the door he was looking down at a rather determined looking Harry Potter.

"Potter, what do you want?" he snarled.

"I want to talk to you...about Hermione."

"What of her?"

"You had better treat her right. I'll know if you don't."

"Listen here Potter," he growled, "You have no place coming here to lecture me about how to treat my bride. Now go away."

"No, I'm not going to go away. You've done something to her, she should have picked Kingsley and she didn't and it's because you did something to her...what was it, a potion? And what the hell were you doing to her the other night in her room?"

Severus looked down at the petulant boy before him, quelling the urge to hex him. However, he smirked instead. "Actually, Potter, I have done nothing to influence her decision but answer her numerous questions. And as to what I was doing to her Saturday evening, I was simply giving her a foretaste of what she could expect when married to me," he drawled slowly, savoring the look of revulsion on Potter's face. "I suggest you stay out of my business, Potter...that includes what goes on between me and my wife. Twenty points from Gryffindor for disrespecting a teacher. Now GO!" Snape didn't wait for him to leave, but simply slammed the door in his face.

He wondered if the boy would give him any more troubles, and made a mental note to add a few more wards to his quarters. The Boy Who Lived had an annoying habit of sneaking into places he wasn't supposed to be, and Severus had a feeling that his latest obsession with Hermione's fate would lead him to trespass in search of evidence to use against him. Not that it would matter; really...he would just rather not have to worry about the Potter boy invading his space. He realized he would likely have to be more careful not to mark Hermione in places easily seen...that would have the boy up in arms faster than anything.

Hermione felt weak and slightly dizzy and held her father's arm tighter. They were standing before the doors of the Room of Requirement where she would be bound for life to her husband.

"Are you going to be ok?" Frank asked his daughter worriedly.

"Yes...let's go." Hermione steeled her resolve and firmly set her shoulders.

He led her in through the double doors...Hermione looked around amazed at what the room looked like. It had been transformed into a circle of standing stones, much like Stonehenge only this wasn't in ruins. Those who had been invited stood around the stones, facing the central altar where Albus Dumbledore stood along with another wizard she didn't recognize. To one side of the altar stood her betrothed dressed in sumptuous green formal robes.

She glanced around at those present as her father guided her to stand before the altar. Molly and Arthur Weasley stood with Ron, Harry and Ginny. Minerva McGonagall, Professor Sinistra, Professor Vector, and Professor Flitwick were the other Hogwarts staff in attendance. She returned the encouraging smile from Remus Lupin as she passed him...several others from the Order were in attendance as well...Tonks and Moody. No other students were there, but perhaps that was for the best. She focused back to Severus who was carefully watching her.

When she reached the altar Professor Dumbledore smiled kindly at her and began the ceremony.

"It is my honor and privilege to join these two in marriage. I have known Severus Snape for many years now, and count myself fortunate to call him a friend. And as to Hermione Granger, I have known her as a student who excelled at all she set out to achieve, and as one who had been true to her friends and who always has faced decisions with poise and forethought. I have the greatest confidence that the road ahead will be a happy one.

"Severus and Hermione, join hands now and know that as you hold each other through this first step in your lives together, you will hold each other through many years to come."

Hermione took a deep breath and reached forward with both her hands which were met and held by Severus's hands.

"Severus Snape, do you take Hermione Jane Granger to be your wife, to hold and protect, to support through times of trial, and to celebrate with in times of joy?"

"I do," he said in a voice which seemed to reverberate through her very bones.

"Hermione Granger, do you take Severus Marcus Aurelius Snape to be your husband, to hold and conform to, to support through times of trial, and to celebrate with in times of joy?"

"I do," she said, managing to hold her own voice steady and imbue it with a confidence she wasn't sure she really felt.

"Severus Snape, I bid you place the ring which holds your hopes and dreams of what may be achieved in your union on Hermione's finger," Dumbledore intoned. Hermione could hardly catch her breath as he reached into his breast pocket with one hand, while his other held her left hand ready for the ring. She looked at the ring with some surprise.

"Hermione Granger, I bid you place the ring which holds your hopes and dreams of what may be achieved in your union on Severus's finger." Hermione reached for the ring with shaking fingers and withdrew it from the small, nearly invisible pocket in her sleeve and raised it to Severus's waiting finger. When she looked up to his eyes she saw the glimmer there of surprise at her choice.

The rings were identical.

A one carat circular cut sapphire, representing serenity and peace, were the centerpieces for each ring, flanked by half carat rubies for passion, then peridots for protection, and finally, diamonds...a hope that love could be achieved. The outer stones were square cut but placed at a diagonal to the edge of the ring, both rings were brushed platinum. The only difference was that his ring had a squared band, and was larger and thicker, where hers was rounded and thinner, but still quite solid.

Dumbledore raised his wand and began to chant an incantation. A whirling energy started at the feet of both the bride and groom and whirled around and upwards, two figure eights swirling and rushing as the binding spell took effect. She gripped Severus's warm, large hands tightly as the tingling and rushing sensation pulsed through her body. She was peripherally aware that the ministry official was now casting his own spells and could feel another tingle. These would be the additional spells to ensure fidelity and a monitoring spell to ensure the couple was adhering to the weekly copulation requirements.

"I present Severus and Hermione Snape, now bound together through the rest of their natural lives. May they receive the support of friends and family in their new life together. Severus, you may now kiss your bride," he finally said as he beamed at the two.

Severus leant forward to kiss Hermione. Their lips met and it seemed to each of them that they were pulled together and held as a crackle of magical energy washed over them. They separated then, Hermione felt flushed and energized.

"And now," Dumbledore announced, "Let us eat and celebrate." He clapped his hands together and the Room of Requirement morphed from the outdoor Standing stones setting to a small ballroom, just the right size to hold the occupants comfortably, with a nice buffet to one side. She wasn't sure what to do next, and stood awkwardly, still holding her husband's hands. He took the initiative and tucked one of her hands into the crook of his arm as he turned.

The reception that followed was fairly quiet. Hermione stood with Severus through much of it, receiving the congratulations of the professors and Order members. She felt too nervous to eat, and after she had picked at her plate of cake and other bits of food Severus leaned over and whispered, "Eat up, wife; you'll need your strength."

Dumbledore seemed to be the only one who was truly happy with the arrangement. Harry hadn't spoken to her at all, but stood in one corner looking sullen, and casting occasional glares towards her and Severus.

After about half an hour of the reception, Severus Snape looked down at his bride. "Madam Snape," he intoned, "it is time we retire to our quarters." He offered his arm and she took it, her fingers clutching his arm firmly. He led her from the room of requirement and through the halls of Hogwarts to the dungeons. They said nothing as they walked; he kept his pace steady as he led her. He could feel her trembling nervously. And he was surprised to feel a tickling in his stomach, which he tried to pass off as too much sugar in the cake he had consumed.

They finally reached the dungeons, then their rooms. Once inside he glanced over to observe his wife. He could see the pulsing of an artery in her neck, it was rapid, as was her breathing which she was attempting to calm. Without preamble, he led her into the bedroom after he had re-set the wards.

It was dark when they walked in, but a muttered 'Lumos' lit the myriad of candles he had placed in there and cast a warm glow around the room. He led her to stand on a plush sheepskin rug on the floor and moved in front of her, resting a hand on each of her shoulders. Her eyes traced around the room, and across his green wedding robes, and eventually wound their way over his face and then met his eyes. She gave him a tentative smile and he gazed at her intensely.

"I...I'm not really sure what to do next," she admitted to him.

"You need not worry about that, Hermione; I will tell you what to do," he assured her in his rich, warm tone. "But for now, I am going to undress you."

He moved behind her, careful not to step on the train. It wasn't overly long, but he didn't want to get footprints on it. He traced his fingers over her shoulders and then moved down to the first button at the back of her dress. Slowly, he unbuttoned it to the waist, and then slipped his fingers underneath the dress to trace along the smooth skin of her back. She let out a breath and he realized she had been holding it all that time. He pushed the dress off her shoulders and guided its fall.

"Step out of the dress," he prompted. She moved to comply with shaky movements. She stood in her bra and panties, white satin and lace. He crossed the room to drape the dress over a chair and returned to her.

Hermione didn't feel the chill of the dungeon bedroom as much as she thought she would and wondered if he had placed a warming charm in the room. She tensed as his footsteps approached her again and she felt his fingertips tracing patterns along her shoulders and back, and then he gently pushed the straps of her bra from her shoulders and unclasped the back. He pulled the garment from her, leaving her feeling exposed and unsure. Next, he moved his hands down her sides, catching his fingers in the waistband of her lacy knickers and pulled them down her legs. She responded to his nudge of each foot and stepped out of the panties. He removed her shoes next,

leaving her naked.

She wasn't sure what to do with herself, and unconsciously hunched her shoulders a bit and moved to cross her arms over her chest...she had always been on the modest side, even when she shared a room through her first six years at Hogwarts with other girls, she always changed clothes in the bathroom or behind the curtains of her bed, even though the other girls showed no embarrassment at changing openly while chatting on about anything and everything.

"Do not cover yourself," Severus ordered, causing her to start a bit. "Put your hands at your sides. If you try to cover yourself again I will tie your hands so you cannot." His voice was low, and his demands spoken with an assurance that simultaneously frightened and comforted her. Perhaps it was comforting since it was her first time, and it was certainly easier to be told what to do rather than to have to take the initiative herself. When faced with sex for the first time, she didn't feel quite as bold as she did in other endeavors. She moved her hands to her sides and watched him as he walked around from behind her, looking at her appraisingly. He didn't touch her as he made his first circuit, he simply looked.

As he passed around her the second time he reached a hand to trace down her arm, then across her midriff, causing her to catch her breath again. His hand caressed her hip as he turned around her, and then cupped a buttock, his other hand sliding up her spine.

"I am looking forward to teaching you," he intoned in his best, luxurious voice into her ear. She trembled, both at the breath on her neck and the tone of his voice. Her stomach was churning with nervousness and excitement at the same time.

"Kneel," he said as he circled back to face her. She looked at him questioningly a moment and he clarified, "on your knees, sit back on your heels and keep your back straight."

Hermione sank to her knees and sat back. She wasn't sure what to do with her hands, and rested them on her thighs a moment before returning them to her sides. Her knees were together, and he moved a toe to wedge between them and said, "Spread your knees...wider...there." Hermione felt completely exposed now, her knees were spread as far as she could hold them comfortably while sitting back on her heels.

"Good, you are taking instruction well," he said and turned to walk to the bedside table where Hermione saw one potions vial filled with a white liquid, and two more potions vials which were empty on stands atop the nightstand. She was looking at them curiously as he brought the white potion to her. He bent over to grasp her jaw and tilted her head back.

"Drink this," he said as he tilted the vial and poured it into her mouth. It didn't taste bad, whatever it was. "Contraceptive potion," he explained. He returned to place the empty vial into the stand and then came back and stood before her. She looked up, wondering what would be next. She felt rather small, kneeling before him like this, naked, exposed, while he stood over her still completely clothed.

"Before we begin, I want to make sure you understand a few things. First and foremost, when we are in here, I am your master." He paused a moment as he walked around behind her. "You will obey me completely and without question. You may speak when I ask you a direct question, but otherwise you may not talk. When you do answer questions, you will use 'sir' in addressing me. Do you understand thus far?"

"Y-Yes, sir," Hermione stammered.

"Good. Secondly, your body is mine to do what I please, when I please. You are mine, Hermione. You had your chance to choose someone who would have been gentle with you, who would have likely been satisfied with maintaining the letter of the law, but you chose me. When you find yourself regretting that decision, and there will be times you regret it, remind yourself of the fact that you chose me knowing full well what I would expect. Do you understand?"

Hermione had a more difficult time answering. He was serious and she knew it. She realized he had stopped his slow circuit around her kneeling form and was looking down at her, waiting for her answer. She drew in a deep breath and answered shakily, "Yes, sir."

"Good. And now," he said, voice changing to a seductive, low purr, "I am going to teach you some of the delights your body can produce. I do believe I will take my time, and you will quite enjoy yourself." He smirked down at her for a moment, considering what to do next. "You may undress me now; start with my boots."

Hermione reached forward where he had lifted his right foot from the floor slightly and grasped the heel of his boot. She took a deep breath and pulled. His boots weren't too difficult to remove. She placed them side by side at the edge of the bed and wondered what she should do next. His foot lifting again prompted her to remove each of his socks. His feet were narrow, pale, and had a smattering of dark hair across the top. She looked up his body; she would have to remove the green robes next. She stood, knees protesting slightly from the time she had spent on them and reached up with trembling hands to the buttons at his collar. She certainly hadn't expected to undress him like this tonight, and especially not in this incredibly nerve-wracking way.

He simply watched her quietly, appraisingly. He saw her trembling movements, but noted that she was doing her best to hold steady. She had taken orders well so far, he thought. He'd had a small, niggling worry that she would suddenly realize what she had agreed to and succumb to tearful begging. She hadn't. She was nearly done with the buttons on his dress robe, which was a similar cut to his typical black frock coat. He held his arms away from his sides slightly to allow her to pull the garment from his shoulders.

"Place it with your gown," he said when she had removed it. He watched her walk to the chair and placed the robe neatly across the chair. He usually kept that chair closer to the bed, but had moved it in preparation for this evening. It was good to watch her cross the room, stepping down from the semi-circular dais as she walked away from him. He saw her self-consciousness as she turned, but she quelled the urge to try to cover herself again. Her body was near perfection and she stood at just the right height, the top of her head coming to just below his chin. Her hips were rounded delicately, her belly flat, yet slightly convex. Her breasts looked marvelous, not overly large, firm, and in need of little support. His eyes traced back down her body, to the soft triangle of neatly trimmed curls. He could see the red flush across her face and neck, likely shyness at his scrutiny.

Hermione reached up to his neck again to begin with his white shirt. When she had unbuttoned it, she pulled it gently from his pants and remembered his sleeve cuffs in time. She made another trip to the chair to drape the shirt across the clothing...only his pants were left. She glanced up to his face, and found he was watching her with gleaming eyes and a satisfied smirk. Her trembling fingers closed around the buttons of his trousers, and she unbuttoned them...he hadn't worn any underwear.

Her breathing increased in speed as she slid the pants down his thighs, trying to avert her gaze from his proudly jutting penis. Really, it was much more difficult to not look though, and she looked anyway. The smooth, pale skin of his shaft jutted from thick, black curls...she could see the small veins which wrapped around his shaft, which widened at the tip before tapering down to an opening which was rolling back, stretching as he grew more erect to reveal his glistening red glans.

He stepped out of the pants as she knelt before him and when she returned from draping them over the chair she looked at him fully. He was a bit on the thin side, but his muscled were well defined, with very little fat. He seemed to stand in a pose just as intimidating while naked as he did swathed in his black robes. His shoulders were held back and he had not a trace of shyness at his body. In fact, he seemed quite amused by her blushing.

His hands reached up, fingers tracing through her hair, guiding her head to tilt back as he claimed her mouth with his, plunging his tongue within, ravaging her mouth as he firmly gripped her buttocks. Wordlessly, he guided her to the bed and watched as she complied, moving towards the middle at his prompting and laying back. Her shy movements were enticing. The opportunity he had here was exhilarating. She was completely untouched; she had the theoretical knowledge, but no experience. He would be her only experience, and she would learn exactly what he liked in exactly the way he chose to teach her, to imprint her.

He climbed on the bed after her, amused as she closed her eyes in embarrassment. "Open your eyes, now," he reprimanded. "I want you to watch me," he purred and reached a hand out to her shoulder, caressing down her body, to the outside of her breast and down to her knee, producing a shiver and causing gooseflesh to rise over her arms and legs. He spent several minutes simply stroking her like that, along her arms, legs, and belly. When she relaxed to his touch Severus ran his fingers over both breasts, causing her to arch and gasp at the sensation. He rubbed the palms of his hands over her nipples for a moment before moving down to nudge her thighs apart.

He was watching her face for signs of resistance...she looked determined though, as if she were mentally preparing herself for an onslaught. "Relax," he intoned gently. "I

won't hurt you today any more than necessary." He watched with satisfaction as she nodded stiffly and took in a deep breath. He was kneeling between her legs, running his fingers lightly over her thighs until he moved one hand over her mons, pressing down and rubbing in a circular motion with the heel of his hand, stimulating her clitoris. He could feel a slight dampness from between her outer labia and slipped his thumb between them to run it over her damp folds. She closed her eyes and sighed deeply with pleasure.

"I told you not to close your eyes," he growled. Her eyes shot open and she settled on nervously chewing her lower lip. Severus leaned forward and engaged her mouth with his own to quell her nervous tic. Soon enough, he was nipping down her neck with Hermione writhing under him. He paused at her breasts for a few minutes to lave her nipples and then trailed nips and kisses down her body until he reached her glistening sex and buried his mouth and nose between her folds.

Hermione jumped and the sudden invasion and the waves of pleasure washing over her. This was much better than the descriptions she'd heard. It was difficult so far to quell her nervousness, but she was doing better. His tongue was lapping across her clitoris, causing her hips to jerk in time to his movements. Soon, the sensation seemed to overwhelm her and she wasn't sure how much more she could take. Without thinking, she reached down to try to push him away. "Too much...I can't...it's too much," she whimpered. He pulled away, and she felt a sudden surge of fear at the look on his face.

"You will *not* push me away," he hissed.

"Sorry...I couldn't help it, it was too much."

"I see then," he said and got out of bed. Hermione wasn't sure what he was doing, but her eyes widened in shock when he returned from the chest with a length of cotton rope.

"Since you can't keep your hands away, and I've promised to inflict no pain this evening, the only alternative is to tie your hands," he informed her smoothly. His hand shot out and grabbed first one, then the other wrist, wrapping the rope quickly about her wrists and bringing her hands over her head, where he tied the loose end of the rope through a strategically placed slot in the headboard.

Before she could react, he had returned to his previous position between her legs and was sucking at her clitoris. This time the sensation quickly overwhelmed her again...it was intense, shooting through her body like electric current. She gritted her teeth and tried to quell the intense feelings. Soon enough it stopped and she looked up to see Severus looming over her.

"I see you're not one who generally likes giving up control," he observed dryly. "This will go much easier if you relax, and I'm not going to stop until I make you come at least once."

As good as his word, he bent down and continued his ministrations. She tried to relax and deepen her breathing, focusing on accepting rather than resisting his touch and soon the sensations changed from the sharp, electric feel to something more like warm ripples of pleasure which grew to crashing waves. It was intense, and when he eased a finger inside her and began to move it around, curling up inside her she spread her legs further and moaned with pleasure as the warm waves intensified, causing her vision to blur and light to flash in her head. She cried out, thrashing under him and straining against the ropes around her wrists as the orgasm overtook her.

She was catching her breath when Severus moved up her body and bent to whisper in her ear, "See, much better when you relax, isn't it?" He nuzzled her neck for a moment before reaching up to untie her hands. "I hope I won't need to tie you again tonight," he said after her hands were free again.

Severus moved to the side of the bed and retrieved the two empty vials and placed them in the sheets within easier reach. Hermione found the prospect of potions vials in bed to be rather disturbing. "Um...what are those for?" she asked hesitantly.

"I'll be collecting the blood from your maidenhead," he explained, then raised an eyebrow, "and I'll let you get off with a warning this time for speaking to me without the proper address."

"Um...sorry...sir," Hermione stammered. Calling him 'sir' in bed seemed out of place, reminding her of being in class with him as her teacher, only now she was naked, and taking instruction of a totally different sort.

"That's better. You'll learn soon enough, and when you make mistakes, your punishments will serve as a reminder," he warned.

"Y-Yes, sir," Hermione answered. Her first sexual encounter thus far had been...strange. Enjoyable, yes...but still, strange.

"And now," he said, "I am willing to give you the opportunity for extra-credit on your test tomorrow."

"Extra credit, sir?" she asked.

"Yes. I will allow you to choose this. I can take your maidenhead gently and slowly, which will produce a minimal amount of bleeding," he said, stroking her thighs and stomach gently. "Or, I can take it quickly, which will produce more blood, but it will hurt more. Since maiden's blood is extremely rare, and nearly impossible to acquire, the latter choice would be preferable to me."

Hermione considered his statement. Her first sexual encounter had just gotten stranger. She was a bit worried about her test tomorrow, and extra credit would be nice...but at the same time, she had to wonder how much it would hurt to earn the extra credit. However, he was giving her a choice. "How many points are we talking about, sir?" she asked. A bit of clarification would be helpful.

"Ten points to start, but if I am able to fill both vials completely, I will grant twenty points." He continued stroking her thighs as she considered. His cock was aching to fill her, but self-control was important. Finally, she seemed ready to speak.

"I'll...um...I'll take the extra credit, sir," she said quietly. It wasn't just for the points. She knew the value of maidens' blood, and she knew some of the most powerful healing potions could be made with it. If he had it, then it would most likely end up being used for a good purpose. The pain would be more than worth the value if her blood went to help someone she knew.

"Good," he purred with a feral grin as he leaned forward and hooked both her knees over his forearms and positioned himself at her entrance which was well lubricated from his previous attention. "This will hurt, but if you breathe deeply it will help," he said and plunged into her.

Hermione cried out as he tore through her hymen, and felt the burning and the snap of tearing tissue as he filled her completely and continued to plunge into her. He stopped suddenly and withdrew as she shuddered with pain and tried to catch her breath. The control it had taken him to withdraw, when he wanted nothing more than to continue thrusting into her left him working to breathe normally as well.

"Get up on your knees," he ordered and reached out to grab a hand and assist her up. Once she was positioned, still wincing, he grabbed a vial and inserted it into her, not wanting to waste a single drop of the precious liquid. "Thank you, Hermione," he whispered softly to her and rubbed her back with circular movements to calm her. "I'll go gently with you once I've collected your blood."

Hermione leaned against his shoulder as she knelt with her knees spread. The vial had been cold, but was warm enough now. She felt a little dizzy when he removed it and she saw that it was filled with rich, red blood. He quickly inserted the second vial and continued to stroke her back. He hadn't expected her to take the second option, but he was glad she had. The second vial only filled up a third of the way before the bleeding slowed. He capped it and placed both in the rack and gently lowered her to her back again.

"That will be fifteen points in extra credit for you, wife," he purred as he repositioned himself at her entrance again.

When he entered her this time he went slowly. She winced at first as her bruised channel stretched, but the pain faded after a few moments and soon turned to pleasure.

She reached up to grasp his shoulders as he moved within her, filling her. She relaxed, letting her head rest and running her hands over the muscles of his shoulders and chest, focusing on enjoying the moment. His skin was slick with fresh beading sweat as he moved over her, pumping within and filling her.

He supported his weight with one arm while he moved the other across her body, stroking her breasts and tweaking her nipples. Soon she felt an orgasm building again, the waves washing over her in time with his thrusting, pounding movement. She arched her hips up to meet his thrusts and his pubic bone ground against her clitoris, sending her over the edge.

When she opened her eyes he was watching her, one corner of his mouth curled up in triumph. "Oh we're just getting started," he purred as he thrust into her. It had been a long time, and so he had prepared for this evening with a fortifying potion. Otherwise, he was sure he would have come when he first broke through her maidenhead. She was so tight, even with the assistance of the potion he was struggling to maintain control of his body.

Wrap your legs around me," he murmured and she moved to comply. The change of angle nearly drove him over the edge, but he gritted his teeth and lowered himself to his elbows. Her breasts skimmed across his chest, heightening awareness for them both and he reached down to stroke her clit with his thumb. She began clenching around him again, tossing her head back as she gasped and moaned and it sent him over the edge, gripping the sheets in his fist and growling as he emptied within her.

He rolled off to the side, collapsing and enjoying the blissful tingling which coursed through his body. He felt like drifting off to sleep, but he had to store the maiden's blood first. After a few minutes he heaved himself out of bed and collected the rack.

"I will return in a moment, remain where you are," he directed Hermione before walking out the door and to his private lab. He didn't bother getting dressed since he could reach the entrance from his quarters.

Hermione waited, pondering her situation. It really hadn't been bad...far from it. Once the pain had passed, she had enjoyed herself immensely. However, being told what to do would take some getting used to. She wanted to get up and take a bath; the squishy feeling between her legs was uncomfortable; she felt sore as well, and wondered how long that would last. She fiddled with her ring and brought her hand up to take a closer look. It was surprising that he would choose the same stones. Perhaps they were well suited after all?

"Yes, I did find that to be an interesting coincidence," Severus said from the doorway when he returned and observed her examining the ring.

"Me too," she answered as she propped herself up on one elbow, resisting the urge to pull the sheets over her nude form.

"Come here, Hermione. I believe a bath is in order." He turned and entered the bathroom, opening the large taps to fill the tub. It didn't take long to fill, and soon Hermione was easing into the tub, feeling self conscious as Severus watched her. Once she was settled, he entered the tub as well, straddling her knees and resting his hands behind her shoulders. The tub was large, with plenty of room for both of them to spread out, but he chose to hover over her.

He pulled his hand back, with a bar of soap which had been in the tray at the edge of the tub. "Take it," he said and drew himself up, the water level coming to the tops of his thighs as he knelt in the water, apparently waiting for her. Hermione held the bar of soap, and looked to him questioningly. "I should think it would be obvious," was his only directive.

Yes, obvious. Hermione lathered the soap between her hands and reached out to him, rubbing the lather over his chest and shoulders as he closed his eyes and breathed deeply, relaxing under her touch. She had mixed feelings about things so far...worry at what his expectations after tonight would be, and if she would be able to meet his demands. His previous words ran through her head, his declarations that her body was his had been disconcerting. It seemed he thought of this as a business arrangement, his protection and her freedom to pursue her studies and career as she wished in exchange for her servitude.

It did seem a ruthless arrangement, but she didn't feel that she was imposing upon him as she might have with Ron, who was offering to sacrifice his own hopes and future happiness to ensure her safety. No, she had something to give back in this arrangement. In a way, it reminded her of TANSTAFL...the phrase from one of her favorite books. The author was a strange sort of philosopher of human interaction, and had coined the acronym for 'There ain't no such thing as a free lunch'...it was a true statement, whatever you gained in life had to be paid for in one way or another, even things which were supposedly 'free' had a price. And in this case, she realized she was one step ahead of where she could be, as she already knew what that price was.

After his chest, shoulders and arms had been washed, she moved lower, over the flat plane of his stomach and down to the thatch of hair at his groin. She hesitated before reaching his half-erect cock, pausing as she noticed her blood still smeared across it. Rather than wait, he reached out and grabbed her hand, guiding her fingers to wrap around him and stroke up and down. He used his other hand to pull his foreskin back and guided her to wash his exposed glans. She took the silent commands of his hands, learning how to touch and stroke him, watching his face occasionally to see the responses she caused.

When he took the soap from her hand and washed her, she thought he seemed almost gentle...but there was something else about his touch kept her thinking, she couldn't quite place it. She decided to focus instead on enjoying the feel of his slippery hands working over her body, reminding herself that she needed to get over her shyness.

After they had toweled dry she started to leave the bedroom to get her comfortable flannel nightgown.

"Where are you going?" he asked as he slipped between the sheets.

"To get my nightgown, sir," she answered.

"No, you will sleep nude," he declared and pulled the sheets up to his chest.

Hermione stopped in the doorway, closing her eyes and wondering what to say. She had never slept nude before. However, she turned back to the bed, walking around to the far side and got between the sheets, all the while wondering if she could come up with a convincing reason she needed her nightgown. As she settled down to sleep on her side, the realization of how silly it seemed that she had to think about reasons to wear a nightgown, to justify being clothed in his presence struck her. Why should he be so bossy about such a minor issue? And really, it was a minor issue, at least as far as she thought.

As she mulled these thoughts over, Severus moved his hand up to rest on her hip, gripping slightly before relaxing and she realized what it was about his touch she hadn't been able to place before. Possession. His touch was decidedly possessive, claiming her as his with nearly every movement and gesture. And this was the man she had married, the man she was bound to for life.

Tests and Adjustments

Chapter 9 of 31

Hermione begins to adjust to life with Snape, but has some surprises.

A rhythmic, droning noise permeated her sleep. It was a rumbling sound of something like a rusty hinge, unused to movement, groaning its protests. Hermione shifted, rolling over...the unfamiliar feel of satiny sheets slipping against her bare skin woke her further. She raised her head in the mostly dark room...a single candle burned on the chest across the room, its flicker illuminating the unfamiliar room which she slept in. What was that noise? The rumbling repeated and she looked over to see her husband who was on his back, mouth agape, snoring loudly.

Quite loudly.

Hermione watched him for a moment, irritation rising. After he had told her he would have her sleep in the other room if she snored so as not to disturb his sleep, it turned out he snored. She eased back down onto her pillow, now completely awake. He seemed to get louder. Good grief, how was she going to sleep like this? She rolled over and shut her eyes, trying to block the sound out.

Ten minutes later she sat up in frustration. There was no way she could sleep through that noise. She scowled down at his sleeping form, noting how one arm hung off the bed; the other was flung up over his head. The various cures for snoring ran through her head, stories of wives elbowing a snoring husband in the side and telling him to roll over, tickling him on one side to cause him to roll over in his sleep...silencing charms. Somehow, she didn't think he would take kindly to any of the methods. But, she had to do something...she was tired.

Cautiously, she reached over to his far side and ran her fingers along his ribs lightly. She withdrew her hand quickly when he snorted and tossed his head, the arm hanging over the edge of the bed flung back to rub against his side. Just as she thought it had worked, his breathing had turned quiet for a moment and she lay down snuggling into her pillow and pulling the heavy, warm duvet over herself, he started again.

Sighing deeply, she went to the loo since she was up anyway and got a glass of water for herself. She could still hear him clearly in the bathroom. Well, nothing more could be done tonight, so she went into the living room and checked the clock...3:40...way too early. Her skin prickled into gooseflesh in the chilly room.

Instead of trying to get back to bed and sleep, Hermione entered her own room, rummaging in the wardrobe for some sweats. She looked over her books, hoping to find something for a good late night read, selection made, she settled down on the couch to read for a bit. After a while she was sure to be tired enough to sleep through the snoring.

Severus rolled over in bed, groping about to find his young bride for an early morning tryst. He smiled, realizing his life of celibacy and restraint had come to an end at long last. Being cooped up in Hogwarts left him little time to pursue personal matters. However, his hand found nothing but cold sheets and when he blearily opened his eyes he found his bed was empty. He frowned at the empty space where his wife should be and got out of bed.

He found Hermione, after a brief search, in her room, a book resting open on her chest as she slept on the couch in abysmally dumpy looking muggle clothing. He stood over her, crossing his arms and scowling. This was a situation which needed to be fixed, certainly. And so, he fixed his best Potions Master glare upon her face and cleared his throat.

Hermione stirred, stretching her arms out over her head and yawned deeply as she woke. She hadn't meant to fall asleep reading, but she was certainly feeling better now. She opened her eyes and yelped in surprise at what she saw. A penis...hanging just over a foot from her face...attached to a scowling, and completely naked, Severus Snape.

"Se...Severus! Um...hi," she stammered when she had recovered from the shock.

"Was the prospect of sleeping nude with me so horrid that you had to retreat to your own room to sleep?" he asked, smirking in amusement at her startled reaction.

"Um...I couldn't sleep," she answered, sitting up on the couch.

"You seemed to be sleeping just fine in here, Hermione."

"Well, yes, I was. It was quieter in here." Hermione looked away and decided to go put her book back on the shelf...carrying on a conversation with someone naked was distracting.

"Quieter? I've never had trouble sleeping in my room before." His eyebrows rose in question.

"Well, do you remember how you told me you would have a bed put in here if I snored?" she asked, changing her approach.

"Yes, but I was undisturbed last night, and so I can assume you do not snore. Therefore, I have no need for you to sleep in here."

"Well, funny you should say that, Severus. You see...you snore...loudly, in fact."

"I most certainly do not snore," he retorted firmly, frowning at her.

"Yes, you do." Hermione looked at him incredulously. Actually, she was surprised he hadn't woken himself up with the noise he'd made. And now, he was going to deny it completely.

"I am not going to continue this ridiculous conversation with you. I do not snore, and that is final," he finished firmly. He wasn't going to have her distract him from his purpose in seeking her out. He would have to get to the root of her reasoning behind the preposterous story she was using as an excuse for leaving his bed. "I was going to ask if you are feeling sore from last night."

"Oh...a bit, yes."

"I have a potion to ease the soreness. Remove your clothing and wait in bed for me. I will join you momentarily," he declared and turned on his heel and left the room.

'And the weirdness continues,' Hermione thought as she rolled her eyes and headed for the bedroom. There was still an hour yet before it was time for breakfast. The sheets were silky and smooth against her skin as she slid between them and propped two pillows up behind her back. It was less than a minute before Severus walked in and gave her a rather unsettling smile while holding up the small potion bottle.

"I do believe this will help," he purred as walked around the bed and pulled the covers from Hermione, sitting on the edge next to her. He glared at her a moment when he saw her knees were pressed firmly together. "This particular potion requires direct application to the affected areas," he explained, nearly patiently, and with a hint of amusement in his voice. He poured a dollop of the liquid over his fingers and reached down between her legs, which parted after another warning glare.

"Have you been studying for your test?" he asked lightly as he teased his fingers over her folds, applying the potion gently.

"Oh...um...I've been studying the pictures," she said nervously. His fingers were doing a good job of distracting her as he rubbed along her clit, teasingly dipping a finger inside and laving the potion over her slightly sore labia.

"That will be five lashes for forgetting the correct form of address," he informed her, smirking as her eyes flew wide. "Do you think simply watching a picture will be adequate preparation?" he continued, pouring another dollop of potion and inserting two fingers inside her.

"I don't know, sir," she answered hesitantly.

"I suppose you will find out." He finished applying the healing potion and got off the bed. "Come now, off the bed. Your punishment for incorrect address awaits."

Hermione took a deep breath and eased herself from the bed. She saw his cock twitch and begin to swell as she stood before him. 'Just a game,' she told herself. Really, just a game...she could learn the rules quickly.

"Bend over, rest your elbows on the bed," he directed. Hermione did so, unable to keep her heart from leaping into her throat as she did. She waited as he walked from the bedside to the wardrobe and watched as he reached inside and pulled out a whip. It had a handle of a foot in length and dozens of leather thongs attached. He chuckled when he saw her staring, wide-eyed and open-mouthed at what he held.

"That's right...you won't get off so easily this time," he told her as he walked back around the bed. "If you move or try to get away, your punishment will be tripled."

He brought the flogger down upon her buttocks, the force of the many strands spread from her upper thighs to her lower back and she yelped. Four more times he flogged her, increasing the force of the blow and adding a flick of his wrist to the last three to cause the ends of each of the straps to slap with more stinging force.

After the first blow, Hermione had bit down hard upon the insides of her cheeks, but was unable to stop from moaning with each stroke. After taking a deep, shuddering breath, Hermione began to straighten, but was stopped when Severus's hand clamped down on her shoulder. "I did not tell you to move." He rubbed his hands over her bottom and Hermione sighed as it seemed to soothe the stinging. He moved his hand lower, cupping the curve of her buttocks before slipping his long fingers within her again for a moment.

"Get on the bed now; kneel in the center as I had you do last night."

Hermione took a deep breath and moved to comply, nervous about what he was planning to do next. She spread her knees and sat back with her back straight, heart pounding and adrenaline coursing through her body. The bed shifted as Severus moved onto it to come behind her, pressing his body against hers, and spreading his own thighs around her hips. His hands came around her torso, pinning her arms to her sides, one lightly stroking down between her legs, while the other trailed upwards, circling her breasts and then higher to stroke up and down her throat. His lips descended on her neck and nibbled lightly in a trail up to her earlobe.

"Hands behind your back," he whispered in her ear. "Good girl," he said as she moved to comply. He shifted slightly to bring his erect member in contact with her hands. "Hold me," he directed.

Hermione felt him out, grasping his shaft in one hand, and closing the other around his glans. He moved one hand down her arm, gently removing her hand from the head of his shaft and guided her fingers around his sac, curling his hand around hers and squeezing gently. She took up the motion on her own, caressing and rolling his balls in her hand while her other hand stroked up and down his shaft. "Just like that, yes, that's good," he whispered softly, sending shivers down her body as he trailed his fingers back up her arm.

Hermione leaned her head back against his shoulder, arching her back as his palms slid across her nipples. He explored her body as she caressed his balls and inexpertly pumped his shaft. Despite the fact that she really didn't know what she was doing, it seemed to produce results if his gasps and muted moans were any indication. She would be lying if she told herself his attentions weren't having an effect on her. The nibbling at her neck and shoulders and his fingers moving over her body in light strokes caused her to arch into his touch.

"Turn around, Hermione...on your back," he whispered in her ear and pulled away. When she had done so he eased himself over her; his knees pushed her thighs apart and he brushed the tip of his cock against her mound teasingly. She looked up at him; his gaze was unflinching as he studied her, causing her to feel uneasy despite the tingling pleasure of his hand moving across her shoulder lightly. "I must say, I was disappointed to find you in your room this morning...I think this would be a nice way to wake up, even if just on the weekends, wouldn't you?"

Hermione was wondering how to answer that when he bent down to kiss her...it was long and slow and she melted into it, sliding her arms up his shoulders and along his back. He pulled away slightly and asked, "You want it, don't you?" as he shifted his hips, grazing his cock lightly between her labia and pulling away again. He nipped down her chest and captured a nipple in his mouth, suckling and biting lightly. Hermione arched up and tilted her pelvis to meet him. She really did want it, the tingling produced by his hands and mouth seemed to focus her need for him.

"Yes," she whispered, lost in bliss...she remembered just in time and added, "Yes, sir."

He answered with a chuckle before entering her, beginning to move slowly in a steady rhythm. Hermione met his strokes, closing her eyes and enjoying the feeling of having him inside...the soreness from last night was gone, leaving only pleasure as he moved...the rhythmic pleasure which built steadily, the gentle tingle of his hands on her body. When he reached between their bodies to add further stimulation she moaned and arched her body.

Afterwards, she felt sated and relaxed as she lay in the bed, it would be time to get to breakfast soon but for the moment, she was content to snuggle in the sheets while Severus showered and dressed. Ginny had been right, this was something she could enjoy. As Severus dressed, Hermione went to shower.

When Hermione emerged from the shower, she found the bedroom empty and the bed made up already. A piece of parchment was folded to stand upright on the closer edge and she walked over to see what it was.

Test tonight. 10pm. Do not be late.

-SS

Well then. Apparently there wouldn't be much of a honeymoon. Hermione went to her room and pulled out her jeans and a sweatshirt, aware of the slight tingle remaining in her nether-regions. It was a new, but not unpleasant feeling. Even the 'punishment' hadn't been all that bad...rather, it had focused her for the time, causing her arousal to build.

She pulled her hair back into a ponytail and left through her door. The halls had a few students heading for breakfast, and when she arrived she took a seat at her normal place. Harry, Ron and Ginny looked at her as she sat down.

"Morning guys," she said. Ginny smiled at her, and Hermione gave her a look which said 'talk about it later' and so Ginny quelled the questions which would be entirely inappropriate for the breakfast table in front of the boys.

"Morning 'Mione," Ron answered, smiling at her hesitantly as he gave her an evaluating look. He seemed satisfied that she was unharmed and went back to eating his kippers.

"So...are you alright?" Harry asked, brows furrowed as he watched her for any possible sign of discomfort.

"Yes...I'm fine. I'm married, not ill."

"Well, I mean...did Snape...was he..." Harry trailed off uncomfortably, obviously trying to ask if Snape had brutalized or distressed her.

"Harry," she began in a warning tone, "I'm fine, really. The vampire theories are false, no fangs, really. Now, I'm hungry," she said and reached for a muffin. The last thing she would do now is tell her friends she'd been flogged before breakfast. Besides, people had sex all the time, she was sure she had been nearly the last virgin in seventh year, so why did he seem to think it would be some horrible experience for her?

"Harry, get off her already," Ron said between mouthfuls of scrambled eggs. "It's not like he would tie her up and whip her or something, right 'Mione?"

"Yeah...right Ron," Hermione answered, wondering what Ron would think if he knew how close to the truth he was.

"I suppose you're right Ron." Harry nodded and went back to his own breakfast, but still cast evaluating glances in her direction. She didn't seem traumatized, but she didn't look like an elated newlywed either. However, considering what she'd had to do last night...he shuddered as an unwanted mental image crossed through his brain.

"Harry, you alright?" Ginny asked.

"Um, fine Ginny."

"Oh guys...I was thinking, maybe we should go over our Astronomy notes today...there's a test next week."

"Good grief...most people aren't thinking about Astronomy homework the day after they get married...we figured you'd give it a rest for a little while at least.

"Ron, really...our class schedules haven't changed, and we still have tests coming up to study for.

"We've got Quidditch practice today...we'll be too tired to study after that."

"Hermione," Ginny interjected, "I was wondering if you would mind helping me with my Muggle Studies report?"

"Yeah, that would be good."

"Why isn't Professor Snape at breakfast?" Ginny wondered, glancing up to the high table.

Hermione glanced up as well. "Don't know really," she said and shrugged as she picked up another strawberry from her plate and bit into it.

Severus spent his day in the usual pursuits, grading papers and reading up on Potions publications. His accustomed level of tension had been abated somewhat, though he was still holding back quite a bit. It wouldn't do to have Hermione running to breakfast in tears the day after her wedding. He would likely be holding back for a while though...too much too soon would break her, he knew. However, he felt confident that she would be up to handling his more...exuberant...attentions within a few months.

It truly was a marriage of convenience. Well, convenient for him anyway. Now that Lucius Malfoy was out of the picture, and his son Draco seemed to be disinclined to exact revenge, his role as protector would not require much attention. Of course, he would still remain aware of her movements and would continue to observe Draco Malfoy for any signs he may still be contemplating harm to Hermione, but for the most part he would continue with his life as usual, with a few added benefits.

The day turned out to be a fairly typical Saturday for Hermione. She spent a few hours helping Ginny with her report and then went down to the Quidditch pitch to watch the Gryffindor team practicing. That evening they sat in the common room, performing the typical activities.

Back in her own room at 9pm Hermione went to retrieve the book Severus had loaned her. He hadn't asked for it back, and so it was on her shelves. She was a bit nervous...testing on fellatio seemed a bit silly, but after watching the moving picture on page 93 for a while, she felt confident that it wouldn't be all that difficult. She was a bit nervous about what might happen if she messed up, but with the added fifteen bonus points from last night, she figured she couldn't do that bad a job at it.

And so, after she had observed the picture for a while and thought about the best sequence of events, she pulled out her potions homework. An essay was due on Monday and she wanted to read over her assignment once more to be sure everything was presented correctly.

At fifteen 'til ten a knock sounded on the door between her room and the living room of Severus's quarters. But, really, she corrected herself, it was their quarters now, despite the fact that all her stuff was in one room.

"Yes?" she called out. The door opened and Snape stood there with a look of mild impatience.

"You do realize that your test is to begin in fifteen minutes, do you not?" he asked.

"Yes, I realize that. I was just finishing up some homework," she answered.

He nodded and turned to go to the bedroom. She undressed, feeling a bit self-conscious about being naked, but did her best not to allow it to show. He wasn't in the bedroom when she entered, and the sound of the shower came through from the bathroom.

She waited for a few minutes on the edge of the bed, wondering how this evening would go, when she came to a conclusion. Perhaps, it would be best to take a little bit of initiative here. After all, he had said he wanted her 'active participation' and if she took a step forward here, she didn't think it would feel the same as simply waiting for his next command. She had never been one to simply sit idly by and wait for something to happen to her. The last several weeks had been tumultuous, filled with life-changing events which had been completely out of her control for the most part; though she had made the best decision to retain the most control of her future, in doing so she'd given up control of herself. Now, perhaps it would be a good time to reestablish her typical approach to life.

"Sir?" she called, standing outside the shower door.

"What is it Hermione?"

"Would you mind if I join you, sir?" she asked. There were several moments of silence, and she wondered if she had overstepped her bounds.

"Yes, you may," he finally answered and opened the shower door, evaluating her as she stepped inside the chamber. Hermione stood for a moment in the steam-filled shower and gave him a small smile.

"On your knees, *now*," he growled.

Hermione obeyed, surprised by his sudden command. She watched as he looked down at her and then went back to his shower, using the bar of soap through his hair. That certainly answered the shampoo or no shampoo question. No wonder his hair looked like that. Still, she felt a bit put off that he would have her come in just to kneel on the hard shower floor and watch him.

"Take the soap and wash my feet. If you want to be in here you will make yourself of use to me," he said as he handed her the bar of soap and sat on the bench along the side wall of the shower.

Hermione began lathering the soap in her hands and began washing his feet. It certainly wasn't what she'd had in mind when she came in here. This wasn't the romantic, steamy shower scene Lavender had talked about for sure. Of course, this was Snape too.

"That is sufficient, wash my cock now," he said as she finished washing between his toes. He moved forward slightly to sit on the edge of the shower bench. Hermione scooted forward between his spread legs, lathering the bar of soap once more between her hands. She began washing him as she had last night, taking the opportunity to note how he grew and stiffened under her hands.

"You know, your father insinuated when he came to confront me a month ago that I might find this marriage law to be *convenient*. Of course, I told him I thought it was deplorable...I really do, in fact. But, I have to say that I believe now that it is quite convenient for me."

Hermione stopped her movement and looked up to him in shock.

"I didn't tell you to stop," he said. "Don't look so shocked, girl. Yes, this is quite convenient; for now you don't appreciate the situation as I do, but you will grow accustomed to it, do not fear," he purred. He leaned forward and placed his fingertips on her shoulders, tracing down to circle her breasts, watching as the shower spray trickled down her body, running in little rivulets off her nipples.

Hermione closed her eyes as his fingers traced to her nipples and he pinched them both between thumb and forefinger, lightly at first and then firmer.

"Open your eyes...look at me," he commanded, squeezing more firmly for emphasis. "Does this hurt?" he asked lightly as he pinched and rolled her nipples...not too hard, but enough to cause some pain.

"Yes sir," Hermione answered, biting her lip and resisting the urge to pull away.

He increased the pressure, smiling as she winced. "That hurts more, doesn't it?"

"Yes sir...please..." she gasped, feeling embarrassed at his handling of her body and the way he asked of her pain as if it were a matter of nothing more significant than the weather.

"Please what? Please stop?"

"Yes sir...please stop,"

"I think not," he replied and twisted his fingers, causing pain to lance through her body. "You see Hermione," he said, his voice lowering to a whisper as he bent down to graze his lips across her ear, "your pain is my pleasure." He pulled back, observing her face and the flash of anger and fear that crossed her features. "Perhaps now you begin to understand what I meant? Remember, you agreed to this..." he trailed off as he bent forward to claim her mouth in a kiss, invading her with his tongue roughly thrusting between her lips as he tugged her towards him by her breasts.

He pulled away after a moment and stood up, rinsing the remaining suds from his body and then turning the water flow off. "Come, we will see how quickly you can learn from pictures."

Hermione took a deep breath and leaned forward, resting her hands on the shower bench before her. Her nipples still ached, but his kiss had started her entire body thrumming with desire. She stood, wincing as her stiff knees straightened. She toweled off and went to the bedroom, where Severus was sitting on the edge of the bed, arms crossed, watching her with a smirk as she tried not to look at his jutting penis. Hermione forced herself to walk forward, and when he snapped his fingers and pointed to the floor, she knelt. At least the rug was here so her knees weren't against the cold, stone floor.

"I believe you have all the equipment ready for your exam, you may begin," he announced. It was the same phrase and the same tone he used to announce the beginning of a practical Potions exam.

Hermione's eyes dropped from his face and to the object of her test. She closed her eyes, recalling the methods she'd seen in the book and she leaned forward, meeting the tip of his cock with her tongue. With one hand, she grasped the base of his cock and with the other, caressed his sac lightly. She circled with her tongue and decided to take him in her mouth. It was large enough that she had to stretch her jaws to accommodate his girth and sucked lightly, and was glad when she heard a sharp intake of breath. Deciding she was off to a good start she began to bob her head up and down. However, she didn't hear any more from him, and so, when he announced; "Five points off for a limp tongue," she was dismayed.

She began again, this time applying her tongue to his length as he was in her mouth, swiping it back and forth. However, her jaws soon began to ache and she pulled away and used her hand to stroke him for a moment and close her mouth to ease the soreness.

"Five points off for taking your mouth off of me before you are finished," he said. Ten points already off...at least she had the fifteen points extra-credit from last night. But still, he couldn't expect her to be an expert on her first try, could he? Hermione plunged down upon him again, taking him quickly in her mouth and she heard a sharp intake of breath as his shaft scraped against her teeth.

Through clenched teeth he hissed, "Ten points off for attempting to flay me with your teeth."

Hermione cringed; this really wasn't as easy as it looked in the picture. She tightened her lips over her teeth so as not to scrape him again and tried to simply imagine what had gone on in the picture and focus on her task, the feel of his skin sliding under her lips and tongue, the soft feel of his skin over the hard flesh underneath...she found a comfortable rhythm again, using her hand in conjunction with her mouth and decided to take him deeper. He slid to the back of her mouth, but as soon as he touched the tip of her throat she gagged and had to pull quickly away to keep from biting down on him.

"Five points off..." he intoned.

Hermione began again, starting to worry now that she was doomed to be terrible at fellatio. Maybe it was like broomstick riding, which she was terrible at. She'd never had this many points off of a test in her life and she worried that she could be in danger of having to experience some of the 'punishments' for the lower grades he'd described in his note. However, she already had a pretty good idea of what she shouldn't do. Her jaws were aching after a few more minutes and this time, instead of pulling away, she moved him out of her mouth to lick up and down his shaft and then to circle the head. Remembering a particular move, she pulled his foreskin forward and slid her tongue between the skin and his glans...which actually seemed to produce a positive response.

And so, she seemed to get it down...she would take ten strokes with his mouth, and then pull back to circle around the tip of his cock with her tongue. This kept her jaws from getting tired too quickly and after a while longer of repeating this she felt his testicles draw up and heard his breathing go ragged as his hips began to thrust slightly.

When he finally ejaculated, she tried to ready herself...but when his semen hit the back of her throat, the salty substance burned and she choked. However, she was able to recover herself for the most part, and managed to swallow a portion of his seed, the rest trailed from her mouth, dripping from her chin and onto her chest.

"Not too bad for a first try, however, that will be ten points off for not swallowing and another five for choking. Now, tell me your score." He crossed his arms and glared down at her, waiting for her answer.

"Um..." she began, feeling absolutely ridiculous; his semen dripping down her body felt disgusting and she wanted nothing more than to wash herself right now, but she tried to remember the points he'd taken off as she wiped her chin with the back of her hand. "Um....does that include the extra credit I earned last night?" she asked.

"Yes, it does."

"Then...seventy-five," she said quietly.

"That's right, seventy-five points even with your fifteen extra-credit points from yesterday. That is most certainly a C minus. And, as you forgot to address me appropriately, not once but twice, you will receive an additional three lashes for your forgetfulness," he said as he stood and walked over to the wardrobe. "Assume the position," he barked as he pulled a very wide paddle from within the wardrobe.

Hermione sat stunned for a moment, but a warning eyebrow raised and she unsteadily stood and leaned over, arms shaking with anxiety as she rested them on the side of the bed.

"You will count out each stroke after it is delivered," Snape said and positioned himself to one side of Hermione and drew the leather paddle back, swinging from a high arc

to connect with her buttocks. She heard it before she felt it...a 'whoosh' as the paddle cut through the air. Though she had tried to brace herself, she couldn't hold in the shout of pain when it connected and caused her to jump.

"One," she gasped. Each successive stroke seemed more painful than the last...it wasn't like the spanking he'd delivered by his hand, or like the flogger she'd experienced that morning. It was like fire, stinging and burning, much more than she would have thought. By the time he'd finished, she was barely able to choke out; "Six" through her sobs which she was trying desperately to rein in.

This didn't feel like a game anymore.

"You know, your backside turns a lovely shade of red when paddled," Severus said as he stroked over her red, burning buttocks with his hand.

For Hermione, it was the last straw. She felt absolutely humiliated and couldn't hold the tears back any longer.

"Stand up," Severus directed as he pulled lightly on her shoulder to guide her to a standing position. Hermione tried to sniff quietly and started to raise her hands to wipe her tears away but was stopped. "No, no...don't wipe your tears Hermione," he said as he moved to stand in front of her. He pulled her face up towards him with a finger under her chin, observing her reddened eyes and nose and the way she was biting her lower lip, her body shaking with uneven breathing. Her eyes were lowered as far as possible without actually being closed and she held her body stiffly in humiliation. He raised a finger to her face, gently tracing the path of her tears down her cheeks, and the splattering of his semen down her neck and chest. He caught the way her nose wrinkled slightly in disgust as he did this.

"Don't be ashamed," said softly. "I'm the only one who will see you like this, and it pleases me. Look at me."

She did, grinding her teeth as she looked into his eyes. She didn't like anyone to see her cry...and she had never had anyone simply observe her like this. The feeling of exposure caused more tears to well up in her eyes and spill out over her cheeks; she was mortified when he really did seem pleased at that. She knew she was going to have to learn to control her reactions better...she couldn't give in like this simply for his amusement.

"You do know you've pleased me, don't you? Answer me..." he said with a start of warning in his tone.

"Yes, sir," she answered, but he knew that tone, she really didn't like this at all.

"Let's try this again, this time I will direct you. Come now," he said gently as he sat back on the bed. Hermione knelt between his legs, surprised to see he was erect again so soon.

The week following her wedding was mostly back to normal for Hermione. Potions class had been much the same, though Snape was the only one who had changed immediately to addressing her as 'Madam Snape'. It had produced a few snickers, resulting in a few lost house points for the Slytherins in the class who had decided this was funny. Other than the form of address, his behavior hadn't changed one whit in class. He still ignored her when she raised her hand for questions, and the times he didn't ignore her were much the same as before they were married. Though now, she knew what was under all those layers of black wool.

She still spent most evenings in Gryffindor Tower assisting her friends with homework and would return to her room in Severus's quarters before curfew. Other than at nighttime, she didn't see Severus alone. He was usually gone when she woke in the mornings, occasionally he would be at his place at the high table for breakfast, but sometimes not, and she didn't see him again until she entered the bedroom late in the evening.

She was also getting used to sex on a regular basis. He hadn't pulled any more paddles or floggers out, but had used ropes several times to tie her hands to a bedpost or behind her back. He was rather rough, and she spent most of the week with sore muscles from their activities, but nothing more extreme than what she would get from the skiing or horseback riding she did on her summer and winter vacations from school. Her nipples continued to be sore as he seemed to take special pleasure in pinching and twisting them, but she found that when he did so while pleasuring her with his tongue she really didn't mind all that much.

The humiliation she'd felt after her test was waning with time. She set her logical mind to the task of sorting it out, and while it was true that she wouldn't want anyone to see her as Severus had, he really was the only one who would be seeing her like that, and since he was the one to produce that situation she concluded it wouldn't do much good to spend emotional energy feeling dejected and embarrassed around him because of it. However, she had determined to not allow him to reduce her to tears again. She would retain at least some level of control.

Harry, fortunately, had decided to keep his opinions about Snape to himself for the week. However, Hermione still noticed he watched her closely, and would glare at Snape when he was present for meals in the Great Hall.

Ron had returned to acting oblivious, which Hermione found the most comforting. It was life back to normal. However, Hermione realized he wasn't really oblivious. There were times when Harry would begin to brood again and Ron would find a way to pull him out of it through a joke or prank. In a way, it reminded her of a lesser version of how Headmaster Dumbledore used his somewhat barmy act to defuse tense situations.

Ginny, on the other hand, seemed determined to get details. Hermione had shyly avoided her questions, but had said that she was enjoying herself, which wasn't a lie. She really was...sex was fun, even if she was being told what to do and when to do it. Severus produced reactions with her body she hadn't thought possible. The rough nature of their coupling seemed a perfect tension release, and she found it easy to drift to sleep afterwards, which was nice since she could fall asleep before he started snoring. It still woke her up a few times a night, but she was finding it easier to fall asleep afterwards.

Friday evening came quickly and Hermione decided to spend the evening in her room to do her homework alone for a change. She liked helping her friends, but most of the time they held her back and she was currently studying beyond the curriculum. She was glad for the added privacy of her room in the dungeons; no one bothered her here. When she had been immersed in a few texts on potions for about an hour there was a knock on her door, the one connecting to the living room.

"It's not locked, come in," she called.

Severus opened the door and walked over. "Potions homework?" he asked.

"Partly...I've got the assignments for the next several weeks done already; I just wanted to study the effects of the blood lily further," she explained.

"And what have you found thus far?" he asked.

"The blood lily offers a substitute for vampires who need to drink blood, but it doesn't have properties of blood when used in potions at all. I'm trying to learn why that is..."

"An admirable pursuit, if you would like, I have a few books in my private collection you may find helpful on the subject," he offered.

"Yes, that would be nice, thank you."

"However, you would have to earn them," he said, his voice dropping as he trailed a finger up her neck, causing her to shudder with chills.

"Earn them?" Hermione asked, knowing what he meant, and wondering exactly what he would be doing to her.

"Yes, put this aside for now, I wish to have some time with you. You may have use of the books after tomorrow. Disrobe, and come with me." Severus watched as she pursed her lips. She had a rebellious streak which would take time to work out; she followed his directives while she resisted with her mind. He could see the thoughts which flashed so perceptibly across her face...her irritation, apprehension, even embarrassment. It was delightful to watch her internal struggle to maintain control. He wasn't going to go all out tonight, but she was still in for a long night.

When she had removed her clothes and placed them in the hamper he turned and walked to the bedroom where he had already set his preparations. He was standing in the open space in the room, near the chain hanging from the ceiling when she walked in and took in the chains and ropes, the flogger and paddle and other sundry shiny instruments with wide eyes and a sharp intake of breath. He smirked as he picked up a rope and motioned for her to come. "Do you need to visit the lavatory before we begin?" he asked.

"Y-yes, sir," she answered. In the very least, she needed another moment to steady her heart rate and breathing.

"Go ahead then." He waited for a few moments and after hearing the flushing of the toilet and the running of the sink she cautiously returned. He pulled her arms in front of her, holding her wrists together. "Tonight," he said as he twisted the rope around her shaking forearms, "you will be learning quite a bit."

The Serenity to accept the things I cannot change...

Chapter 10 of 31

Hermione is surprised to see a gentler side of Severus...but is it all just an act?

Hermione wondered, as she struggled to support her weight on shaking legs, if it was possible to pass out from too many orgasms. She had lost track of time, partially hanging as her legs would barely support her any longer, arms stretched over her head by the chain suspended from the ceiling. She had imagined all sorts of horrid tortures when she stepped into the bedroom, but nothing like this. After the first three she thought this might not be so bad at all. He had used the flogger on her for a while, but not with full force. It was enough to sting a bit, and had left a warm, tingling glow over her back, shoulders, buttocks and thighs. He had used a levitation charm at times as he pleased her with his mouth or hands to make her easier to move. She wasn't heavy, but he seemed to prefer lifting her by one hand at times.

Her whole body was quivering...muscles burning with lactic acid and exhaustion. Severus had tossed his frock coat onto the bed after a while and rolled his sleeves up and unbuttoned the top of his white shirt as he grew warm through his own activity. She watched through half-closed eyes as his eyes roamed over her body, wondering what would be next. He perused the items on the bed for a moment, a hand drifting over the various objects there. Every time he did this Hermione held her breath in anticipation...not knowing what he would take next and dreading it being something truly painful. After a moment he made his decision and then reached out for a small, shiny object Hermione couldn't make out. He looked down at her when he approached and held the thing in front of her to see. It was some kind of clip. He knelt and took one of her legs and propped it up over his shoulder and Hermione realized what he was about to do as he spread her wide with his fingers.

Hermione wanted to protest, beg him to stop, but she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of hearing her beg. She was determined to hold on to some level of self control. Hermione hissed as he applied the clamp...the pressure was highly uncomfortable, and accentuated the throbbing in her sex, focusing her attention to that nub which had turned sore with too much attention as he coaxed her flesh to respond again and again.

"Spread your legs," he muttered when he stood again.

Shakily, Hermione hitched her legs apart, just past shoulder width. Any modesty she had felt when he started was long gone. The clamp exerted a strong pressure as she moved her legs apart, but fortunately wasn't painful as she had feared when he'd shown it to her.

"Good girl," he said and caressed her body with the palms of his hands, moving over the tingling flesh. Hermione sighed...it felt good, it really did. Why did it have to feel so good? After a few minutes of his hands caressing her arms and back, pressing his body against her from the front, he moved one hand down her stomach to lightly tap the clitoral clamp, causing her to jump. He smirked at her and moved his hands to cup her breasts, slowly rubbing his palms across her nipples. The clamp seemed to hum on her clitoris as he did this, causing Hermione to moan and arch against him. She felt her body wasn't her own anymore...she felt what went on, but it was as if she had no control of her reactions.

Severus went back to the bed, aware of how closely he was watched. He really didn't plan on using everything he'd set out here...and some of the things, such as the body hooks, he would never use on her...but he knew every time he surveyed the tools her anticipation would build. He knew she was trying to figure out what most of the things were and how on earth he would be using them. He picked up the flogger again and walked around her, circling as he observed. Her body was covered in a fine sheen of sweat...he'd cast a warming charm in the room so it was a bit warmer than he usually kept it in here. He was sweating a bit himself. He could see her legs shaking with exhaustion, her breathing was uneven, but she still maintained that determined glint in her eyes.

He was aching with need to take her finally, and would soon. It had only been a little over half an hour, but for her it was long enough. Soon she would succumb to sensory overload...he'd chosen to torture her with pleasure this evening. He'd made sure, in the last week, that she enjoyed herself. He had been a bit rough, always applying a small amount of pain with the pleasure so the association between the two could be built on a firm foundation. But tonight, he was driving her into a frenzy with sexual pleasure, stimulating her to the edge of her tolerance levels and then allowing her to rest. The flogger became a relief after a while...he wasn't hitting her hard with it, he didn't want her to dread this, rather this exercise was to slowly build her tolerance to pain, while learning that a small amount of pain wasn't a bad thing.

After a few moments of circling her, allowing her tension to build, he began again, striking diagonally across her back, again across her buttocks, then around to face her, striking across the front of her thighs. He fell into a rhythm, circling and striking, listening to her gasps and muffled groans as she clamped her lips shut, not wanting to make any noise.

Her legs would give out soon, he could tell. He picked his wand up from the chest and cast a levitation spell on her body again as he had done at regular intervals to prevent her from straining her shoulders too much. He had disguised this purpose by making it appear he had been doing it for his own ease. He pulled his trousers open and walked back to her; grabbing her hips from behind and positioning her at a good angle, and drove into her. She was slick and tight and hot, her channel pulsed around him as he thrust into her quickly. She was approaching orgasm again, but the clip he had attached to her clitoris wouldn't allow her to climax. He kept pounding, thrusting until there was nothing but the rhythm and the building pressure for them both and when he could hold out no longer he reached around and removed the clip.

Hermione felt the rush of blood as he removed the clip and it was as if he had unleashed a dam of pleasure which came crashing through her body like a tsunami. She cried out and saw flashes of light and pulled on the ropes, completely suspended between the rope and his hands, her legs curled up behind him unconsciously as she writhed in the throes of her climax. She felt dizzy, lightheaded and Hermione felt the pulsing and tingling overtake her, and she slumped over, unable to support herself any longer as he finished. With a single pull he undid the quick-release knot attached to the chain she fell, drifting into unawareness just as she was aware of being lifted by his strong arms.

Severus reached forward to catch her quickly as she fell and hefted her up. She was limp in his arms as he moved to the bed and gently laid her down. She had fainted from the exertion and stimulation, but was fine otherwise. He went to the bathroom and opened the taps; the tub filled quickly with warm water and he went back to her, removing his clothes and gently lifting her and carrying her to the tub, where he immersed her into the warm water and sat back against the edge, one hand supporting her head as her body floated, his other softly washing and soothing her skin with a lathered washcloth.

He had been surprised that she hadn't resorted to begging him to stop...he really thought she would. At several points he could tell she was considering it, but then her

determination would reassert and he could see the defiance in her face, even in the way she held herself. He knew she was struggling within herself with the concept of submission; he would need to find a way to lead her to overcome that soon.

Hermione stirred, and took a deep breath, surprised to find herself in the bathtub, supported by Severus and being soothingly washed. He reached to the side of the tub and handed her a vial of white liquid.

"Drink this; it's to prevent sore muscles. You're not used to that level of physical activity and would probably be quite stiff tomorrow," he explained.

Stunned by his change in demeanor, Hermione took the vial and tipped its contents back. She was a bit stiff already, acutely aware of the soreness in her shoulders and legs especially.

"Come here," he prompted, reaching out for her hand and pulling her to rest back against his chest. Now was the time to pull her close...he knew if he didn't she would want to withdraw from him and that could cause a destructive downward cycle for her. Once he had settled his arms around her waist, and tucked his chin over her head he spoke again. "You're quite a bit more durable than I had thought, Hermione; you held up longer than I would have expected for a first time at that level," he said conversationally, nearly gently.

"Um...what time is it, sir?" Hermione asked, still stunned and dazed.

"Just past eight, you fainted at the end, but it was about forty-five minutes from the time I put the ropes on you," he said and moved a hand down her arm, lifting it from the water. There were still slight red marks, but the indentations in her skin had evened out. "It doesn't look like you'll mark from the ropes," he observed. He felt Hermione stiffen a bit in his arms and prompted her to turn around and straddle his thighs in the tub and to look at him as he traced her hairline with his long fingers.

"I want you to know you handled yourself quite well," he said. "But you might have lasted longer if you hadn't been resisting so much."

Hermione looked down, unsure what to feel at the moment. The evening had been difficult, he had been stern and unyielding and seemingly uncaring and now he was holding her, offering her potions to ease her soreness and speaking softly to her. And why was he now praising her...what had she done but endure his attentions?

Severus moved out from beneath her and grabbed the bottle of shampoo at the side of the tub, drifting around behind her. "Relax, Hermione..." he purred when she started to turn around as his hands worked through her hair. "Let me do this, you're exhausted." He washed her hair; pleased that she was relaxed by the time he dipped her back to rinse the shampoo from her curls.

"Come with me, Hermione...I have tea waiting in the living room." He stood in the tub and helped her to her feet, surprising her further by toweling her dry and pulling a bathrobe around her shoulders. After he had wrapped his own bathrobe around himself she walked with him to the living room, sitting on the couch. Her body protested the movement...she felt weak and unsteady still, but she could also feel the potion strengthening her body as it seeped into her system. She took the proffered cup of steaming tea, watching him in puzzlement. He took a seat beside her and sipped his own tea for a moment.

"I expect you would have never thought there could be such a thing as too many orgasms," he said. Hermione looked at him, seeing the slight glint of amusement in his eyes and the corners of his lips upturned...not quite a smile, but close enough for him.

"Well..." she began, realizing he had brought her in here to speak freely with her. "Yes...you're right there." She sipped her tea again, slowly gathering her thoughts. "Are you going to want to...be that extreme all the time now?"

"No, that would be too much for you. As I told you before, I'm not going to push you past what you are able to handle, and I want you to learn to enjoy it as well. You will find that in time your endurance will grow, but while you have studies I will confine the more strenuous activity to the weekends when it won't interfere with your studies or other activities."

Hermione nodded and sipped her tea again. She was beginning to understand that watching a picture and experiencing something were two entirely different things. She'd had some idea before, of course. She wasn't stupid...flying a broom looked easy until she tried it. Before, she thought it would be a simple matter to simply tolerate the pain, he'd told her he wouldn't do her real harm, but the experience was different. There was so much more than pain...she hadn't expected the exhaustion, the fear, the feeling of helplessness. While he hadn't been brutal, she had soon found that her body was like putty in his hands. There was nothing she could do to stop him if she wanted to.

"Hermione, how are you feeling now? Be honest," he said, watching her carefully for her reaction.

She looked back at him, seeing his interest. "Tired," she answered first. "A bit overwhelmed, actually. I was...worried, at times, about all those things you had out," she said and licked her lips, taking in a breath. He seemed to be waiting for her to say more, listening attentively, so she continued; "I was...concerned...that you would hurt me," she finished, looking him in the eye...challenging him.

"But I didn't," he said simply, offering it as a fact and an assurance as one. After another moment he said, "I'm not going to do anything which would cause you injury, Hermione. I mean that."

Hermione reached for one of the chocolate biscuits on the tea tray, munching on it as she thought in silence. She felt tired, and a yawn overtook her before she could hold it back.

"What are your plans for tomorrow?" he asked.

"Well...I'm not sure...why do you ask?"

"I thought you might like to study the blood lily further. I have a few articles in addition to several books you will find helpful. I used to brew the blood-substitute for a vampire; perhaps you would be interested in my own research notes?"

"Oh...yes," she said, yawning again, "I don't know why I feel so tired."

"You feel tired because you've been over stimulated and your muscles have been worked past what you are accustomed to, Hermione. I would be astonished if you weren't tired. We can continue our discussion tomorrow, you should go ahead to bed, I'll bring out my notes and books for you tomorrow," he said and stood, reaching a hand to assist her again.

Hermione took his hand, muttering her thanks but still confused at his change in attitude as she went to bed. She fell asleep almost immediately, feeling both comforted and perplexed.

Severus watched as her eyelids closed and her breathing turned to a deep, steady rhythm almost immediately. He had included a sleeping potion along with the healing potion he'd given her earlier, knowing she might have difficulty sleeping with her nerves still overwrought. Her body would need a full nights sleep to recover fully, he didn't want her to experience discomfort to a level which would leave her exceedingly apprehensive about future activity.

He would have a few more sessions similar to what he'd done that evening before stepping up the intensity. First, he had to work her through the fear. Despite what he'd told her, she had been worried that he really was going to harm her, and he wanted her to have some level of trust before he did more. He was pleased...though she had been uncomfortable at first, she had been able to speak to him openly. This was essential...he wasn't going to have her cowering in fear whenever he spoke to her.

Severus was grading papers of the seventh years the next morning at his desk in the living room. Hermione was still asleep, and he'd had breakfast delivered via Floo and had it waiting under a warming charm for her. It was nearly ten, and he wondered if he should wake her, or simply allow her to sleep in. He really had no idea how long she

liked to sleep in on the weekends, but the fact that she imbibed a sleeping potion likely was a partial cause for her to sleep late. There was a knock at the door as he wrote a few well worded insults on one paper and he went to answer it, annoyed at the interruption.

"What do you want Potter?" he asked tersely when he opened the door and Potter stood there, frowning at him.

"Hermione wasn't at breakfast," he said.

"No, she wasn't."

"Where is she?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"She is sleeping in this morning. I am sure she would be happy to talk to you at another time, but I am not going to stand here and answer your demands," he said impatiently. "Go away," he snarled and slammed the door.

Hermione woke and stretched broadly, unable to remember the last time she'd felt so rested. She got out of bed, and after a stop in the bathroom she pulled her bathrobe on. In the living room she found Severus at his desk with a pile of papers. He looked up when she came in. "I was beginning to wonder if I should wake you."

"Good grief," Hermione said as she looked at the clock, "I slept over twelve hours."

"And you likely needed it; breakfast is on the end table," he said, nodding to the tray on the couch-side table.

"Thanks Severus," she said. She was still wondering about how he would act today. They had been married a week and really hadn't spent any time together out of the bedroom. As she ate, Hermione cast occasional glances towards Severus, who seemed intent on his grading.

"Are you experiencing any soreness today?" he asked after a moment.

"No, I feel fine. But, I wonder if I really needed a healing potion..."

"It wasn't a necessity, but I thought it best that you not be too uncomfortable today. If you hadn't taken the potion last night you would probably have very sore muscles, but nothing more than that."

"Oh." Hermione took a sip of coffee, but felt rested enough she didn't really need to drink it today.

"Your friend Potter came by this morning," He said, not looking up from his papers.

"Oh...did he say why he was here?"

"He seemed concerned that you weren't at breakfast, I didn't pursue his desires further as he was intent on interrogating me."

"Well, Harry is still a bit upset that I chose you over Kingsley."

"And what do you think now; do you believe you would have been better off with Shackbolt?" he asked.

"I'm not sure yet..." Hermione answered absently and bit into a muffin.

"Really...perhaps I should change my approach? Let's copulate once a week for five minutes and get started on a family right away, I'm sure we could have ten children within as many years and you can spend your days changing nappies and washing dishes and children."

Hermione looked at him with narrowed eyes, but caught the quirk of his lips and the way his eyes were crinkled slightly at the corners. He was actually joking. "That is *not* funny," she said firmly.

"It's not? Are you still unsure about your decision?"

"Well...good point I suppose," Hermione muttered and took a drink of her coffee. She wondered why he would remind her of her reasons this morning; perhaps he thought she was regretting her decision now...regret was the wrong word, really. Concerned...yes, she was concerned that she had gotten into more than she could handle. However, she felt wonderful today...but she did wonder how she would feel without the healing potion he had given her.

Now, in the light of day, her experiences were easier to examine rationally. There were times last night that she had really wanted him to stop, times she was really scared...but at the same time, she could now recognize that she hadn't actually been hurt. Really, the worst part was the muscle fatigue. Even the flogger (he hadn't actually used the paddle) hadn't hurt all that much. If it hadn't been for the fact that she was tied up and halfway hanging from a chain on the ceiling and rather frightened, it wasn't all that different from a fairly intense massage she'd had last summer at a resort in which they had used herbal plants flayed over her body in much the same way...and people paid money for that.

Of course, the uncontrollable orgasms had become too much after a while. She'd become familiar with them over the last week, which really seemed amazing...it felt like more than a week in some ways. But, while it had been pleasurable at first, the overwhelming intensity had been almost too much to tolerate...really, she'd fainted from the overload so perhaps it really was too much?

"The books and journals for the blood lily are on the coffee table. Let me know when you've covered the material, I also have some samples of the substitute blood potion. I have notes about the comparisons between that and live blood, but you obtain a clearer understanding by an actual comparison of the two."

"Oh...thanks," Hermione said and noticed the pile of books and papers on the table before her. He was more than making good on his promise from last night. "Severus, I was wondering something..."

"What is that?"

"Is it normal to faint during...well..."

"It can happen from time to time. It's not something that would be a consistent occurrence, but you fainted last night from a combination of factors," he said, beginning to move into his lecturing tone as he leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "First, you experienced muscle fatigue. It was apparent that the lactic-acid build up in your muscles would have caused a collapse at some point, but you also had the added factor of orgasmic overload. An orgasm causes a spike in blood pressure, heart rate, breathing, and releases several hormones, so that, coupled with the adrenaline already in your system from your reaction to the setting was likely quite a bit more than your body was accustomed to handling."

"You make it sound so...clinical," Hermione observed after a bite

"You asked about a physiological response to last night's activity, which would seem to require an answer in kind," he stated and then returned to his grading, apparently considering the matter explained well enough.

Of course, it was an adequate explanation for her collapse last night, but the one thing she couldn't really figure out was why he would want to do something so strenuous it could result in that. Why did her pain bring him pleasure? He'd been quite clear that he enjoyed inflicting pain and discomfort and in being in control...but why? She tried

to imagine inflicting pain on someone, and really couldn't see how it could be enjoyable...even to do to a hated enemy. But, that was one thing that seemed to be a constant in his approach to life. He was cruel in his teaching methods and harsh even around colleagues. But at the same time, he had been fairly nice to her during their brief engagement, and now that they were married he wasn't unkind, except when it came to sex sometimes. Even then he always made sure she enjoyed herself. Well, he had said that being married to a miserable bride would be tedious for him. So, that was likely his only reason for being nice to her, he didn't want her to be unhappy. But, when it came down to it, she didn't think that one small factor of her life would have the potential to make her miserable. And really, it was one small factor. She still had her friends, and she would lead her life much as she had planned previously with a few minor adjustments. He had also taken care of her last night, the bath had been puzzling, and he had been gentle. Did he feel the need to make up for what he'd done? Or was that yet another manipulation?

But, she realized that line of thought was going in circles. If this really was only one small portion of her life, she didn't need to expend so much mental energy picking it apart. She had better things to do with her time...like continuing the research he'd interrupted last night. And so, she went to her room and changed into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, and then went back to the living room to read his research journals. While she could simply go to her own room and close the door, she thought that would seem too much like retreating, hiding from him and she wasn't going to do that.

And so, they both sat in silence for the next several hours in their own pursuits.

"So, 'Ermione...how goes things with you now? Adjustin' alrigh to Pr'fessr Snape?"

"It's not bad. I've got my own room and we really don't even see each other much. He's usually busy grading papers and I'm usually busy with my schoolwork and friends. So really, not too much of a change," Hermione answered while pretending to sip at the substance in the large, chipped teacup which Hagrid believed to be tea.

"Oh yeah, she's been hanging out with us just as much as before, really. It's like she's not even married," joked Ron, earning a dark scowl from Harry who was still put-out that Hermione had missed breakfast in the Great hall the day before.

But, Hermione wasn't going to let Harry bother her today; she was enjoying their usual Sunday afternoon tea with Hagrid. Of course, it wasn't the tea and rock-cakes which kept them coming back, for the sake of friendship, they pretended to eat the rock-cakes and drink the tea. Fortunately, Hagrid wasn't observant and in the years that this had been their Sunday ritual, he'd never seemed to notice no one ate his treats.

For Hermione, this served to help her realize that though her life had changed drastically in some ways, in many of the important ways, it was the same. Her name had changed, and she still had to be called twice when her professors addressed her as 'Madam Snape' rather than 'Miss Granger', but otherwise she was the same. She would have the same goals, she would hang out with her friends, she would eat too much chocolate at Honeydukes on Hogsmeade weekends and she would pretend to nibble Hagrid's horrid rock-cake and enjoy it.

Hermione stalked to the dungeons and into Potions class, completely incensed. She couldn't believe Professor McGonagall. It was demeaning, as if the entire marriage law wasn't demeaning enough. She walked up to the desk...struck by the oddity that she wasn't sure how to address him. She called him 'Professor Snape' anytime she was required to address him in the classroom setting, but now, class wasn't in session.

'Oh hell,' she thought. It was ridiculous.

"Professor McGonagall has informed me that you, as my '*official guardian as my spouse*', should be the one to sign my Hogsmeade permission form, never mind the fact that I'm technically an adult and old enough to be married," she said, somewhat ranting and placed the permission form on his desk.

He didn't say anything. He simply paused momentarily from marking tests, signed the paper, and slid it back across the desk.

Of course he would do that. Why had she been worried? He had told her he wouldn't interfere with her social life...and now that Lucius Malfoy was out of commission, there was no reason for her not to go to Hogsmeade. She left the dungeons and went to deliver her permission form to her head of house, wondering if she was the one allowing the bedroom games to affect her in outside life. Really though, it was no small wonder. The only time they really interacted was in the bedroom or the classroom. They occasionally shared the same space as they read. Could it be that her initial worries that he would want to dominate her outside the bedroom after they married were all of her own fabrication.

She had been prepared to argue her point, to stand up for her rights and he had simply signed the damned paper and handed it over. She wasn't sure if she should be relieved or irritated.

"Albus, is there something in particular which brings you to the dungeons?" Snape asked as he stood aside for the Headmaster to enter his quarters.

"Oh, I was just on a walk and thought I would stop in and see how you have been, Severus."

"Much as usual," Severus muttered, wishing he would get to the point. Dumbledore never was just 'on a walk' through the dungeons.

"And how has Hermione been?"

"Delightfully absent much of the time," he snapped.

"Yes, I just passed Hermione with her friends; she was on her way to Hagrid's for tea, something of a regular tradition with her on Sunday afternoons."

"Get to the point, Albus."

"Oh, it just seems to me, that perhaps you should spend some time with your wife, wouldn't you agree, Severus?"

"My relationship or lack thereof with my wife is not your concern. You have done quite well in your meddling to bring us together. The original purpose for our marriage was to protect her from Lucius Malfoy. Now that he is out of the picture, there is little need for me to look after her beyond making sure that young Mr. Malfoy doesn't decide to exact revenge on behalf of his father."

"Ah, of course. However, there is another matter which brings me here, Severus. I need you to do me a favor. There is an old acquaintance I was to meet, but I'm afraid another pressing matter has come up and I cannot attend. He has an item to deliver, if you would be so kind as to meet him and accept the item in my stead, I would be grateful."

"I suppose I could be bothered, when and where?" he asked tersely. It was no use trying to protest, he'd learned long ago that when the Headmaster wanted something done, it would be done, best really to just get it out of the way.

"A theatre in Newbern in two weeks time; I have two tickets here for you, and I'm sure Hermione would love to accompany you. I also have reservations at a cozy little French restaurant, quite romantic setting I might add, and a lovely bed and breakfast which is a stone's throw from Hadrian's Wall," Albus beamed.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream? Albus, are you out of your mind? This is a Muggle play and a Muggle bed and breakfast," he said, glaring at the tickets in his hand.

"Think of it as a one month anniversary celebration. Have fun," he said, twinkling as he left.

"These essays were appallingly horrific," Professor Snape snapped at the class of seventh year Gryffindor and Slytherin double Potions. "I do hope your end-of-term projects will show more thought than this rubbish. Unfortunate, that only one essay was up to standards in this entire class. Is Madam Snape the only student who bothers to open a textbook outside this classroom?" he asked rhetorically as he sent her a significant glance. "Too bad really, that her study habits could not rub off on her fellow Gryffindors," he said, this time eying Harry and Ron before glaring at several other students who's grade had been more deplorable than the class average.

Hermione looked up in surprise. Could it be possible that he was actually praising her work in class? Yes, it was a backhanded comment to the rest of the class, but in his own way, it was a compliment. But, she heard Blaise Zabini a few rows over hiss loudly to Gregory Goyle, "Yeah, but we know how she gets her grades now." The boys snickered, as did several other Slytherins around the classroom.

Most of the class heard the comment, including Professor Snape, who spun and pinned Zabini with a cold glare. "Mr. Zabini. You have a thought which is so important you must interrupt my class to share it? Pray tell, what gem of information was necessary, in your so astute opinion, to share?" he growled.

"Uh...well, nothing, sir." Blaise tried to look down at his assignment meekly but Snape stalked to tower over him.

"Say it, now, or you'll find yourself in detention with Filch for the remainder of the term."

"Err...um...just that we know how she gets her grades..." he mumbled.

"I see. So, you believe that because Madam Snape is my wife, she receives special treatment in regards to her grades? I assure you, the Board of Governors would likely be interested in that nugget of information if you had sufficient evidence to support such an accusation of impropriety on my part. There would be an investigation, of course, including an evaluation of all of Madam Snape's grades, and perhaps even those of all my students. I am quite sure they would see fit to correct any *undeserved* marks. Some students may even find their grades dropping, if, perhaps I may have made an error in the past in my grading scale. Do you wish to pursue this, Mr. Zabini?" he asked, his voice at a dangerously threatening near-whisper.

"No, sir, sorry, sir."

"Is there anyone else in here who wishes to make accusations regarding Madam Snape's grades and how she earned them? Not one?" he asked, pacing around the classroom, pinning students with his glare intermittently. "Good, now if that is settled, turn to page three-hundred sixty-two in your textbook..."

Hermione, along with the rest of the class, followed directions. The only sound was the rustling and thumping of books being opened. Hermione shrugged at the astonished looks Harry and Ron gave her. Even a few of the other Gryffindors looked to her questioningly. He had made it quite clear he would treat her no differently in class, but, he had actually defended her...well, himself too...in front of the entire class.

After class, Harry asked her in the hallway. "So, are things really going alright with you and Snape?"

"Oh, getting along as well as can be expected, I guess."

"Well, the way he defended you today...I just wouldn't have expected it..." Harry stammered. "I know I've been, well, a prat about all this, but maybe it's not as bad as I thought, Hermione."

"I'm glad you have finally decided to get over it...now come on or we'll be late for transfigurations," Hermione snapped, wondering why it was that her friends were finally accepting what she had been telling them to while her own doubts were growing.

"Severus, thanks for today...in Potions class. I appreciated that," Hermione said that evening.

"It was not for your benefit, but my own. I will not have allegations that I am showing favoritism. However, since it did have the secondary effect of protecting your reputation, you are welcome," Snape said dryly, not looking up from his book.

"Oh, alright then..." Hermione sighed and went back to her room, depositing her books on her desk and pulling out a chocolate bar to nibble while she studied. There was a test in Arithmancy tomorrow. Though she had kept up on her studies, she had been giving less time than she previously did to them. She could afford to slack off a bit really, she'd been at the top of her class since her first year, but she really needed to study. She had also started her period today...normally; this was a source of irritation. It still was. But, now she couldn't help but wonder if he would want sex...probably not, that was gross, right? But he was kinky...

For now, she would study. Late. Really Late.

It was midnight when she finally pulled herself from her textbooks, rubbing her eyes. She had covered the material for the test thrice over, and read ahead again in her Arithmancy book. Of course she read all her books completely by the third week of classes, but once in a while a refresher was a good idea.

Yawning, she undressed and headed for bed. Staying up this late had been a two fold purpose. She had to study, but she also wanted to find out how he would react if she simply didn't go to bed. Usually, she would get all her studying out of the way before coming back from Gryffindor tower and the times she did study in their quarters were usually on the weekends in the morning before spending the rest of the day with her friends.

After she had visited the bathroom for a quick shower and slid between the sheets beside a quietly sleeping Severus, she wondered why she felt like she was trying to come up with excuses for a late homework assignment. Of course, he hadn't given her a schedule of events or anything like that, and despite the fact that he had laid out the terms of their relationship fairly clearly, there were still fuzzy areas she was trying to define.

Severus rolled over and wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her against him firmly as he rested his head at the crook of her neck. Hermione waited to see what would happen next, but his breathing regulated again and she eventually fell asleep with his warm breath falling rhythmically across her neck.

The next evening, she decided to address the subject of sex during her monthly in the living room. The problem was to do it in a way in which she could address the fact that she found it...well, ikky, without making it sound like she was refusing him. Of course, she knew she couldn't refuse him, and she reminded herself again of the practical reasons she had chosen to marry him...she found herself doing that often.

"Severus, I thought I should let you know...since it would affect sex...that I started my cycle," Hermione stated frankly as she crossed the living room to return one of the books he'd given her use of to research the blood lily.

"Yes, I know," he said as he looked up from his grading.

"Oh...ok then. How did you know?"

"You've been eating chocolate for the last three evenings and you've been retaining water weight for the last week. But, as to the effect on sexual relations, I don't see that it makes any difference."

"But...that's..." she made a face of unease.

"Perfectly natural, if a bit messier than usual. Besides, you'll find that sex during your menses can help alleviate cramping, if you have difficulties with that." He looked down as he scrawled another insulting remark across a parchment.

"Oh...I see." Hermione said simply and turned back to her room to get her homework done.

"Hermione, the weekend after next, do you have any plans?"

"No, why?" Hermione asked, somewhat suspicious in the doorway to her room.

"The Headmaster has seen fit to send me on an errand to pick up an item from an acquaintance of his. However, it seems picking up a small item also includes the necessity for two tickets to see 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', reservations for two at a French restaurant, followed by a stay at a bed and breakfast," he said, scowling. "If you are busy do not feel compelled to accept."

"Actually, that sounds quite nice," she responded. He didn't sound all that pleased about going to see a muggle play and eating dinner out. Well, if he had extended the invitation she certainly wasn't going to pass it up. She reminded herself to thank the Headmaster later on...but wondered if his attempt to push a little romance into her marriage would actually work. As she bit into her chocolate bar, the fact that he had actually noticed her very slight water retention and the fact that she was eating chocolate every evening for the last several days made her realize he didn't ignore her like she thought he did. Really, the water weight she had before her cycle started was only a slight puffiness under her chin and in her fingers. He was really very observant if he noticed that.

She discovered later that night that, indeed, sex reduced cramping.

Severus groaned loudly as he came, twisting his hands in Hermione's hair as she knelt between his legs. The lessons had more than paid off.

"Good gods, girl, you do learn fast," he panted as he collapsed back onto his pillow, breathing heavy and ragged. Hermione smiled as she sat back on her heels in the bed, rather elated that she'd caused this reaction. It seemed even here she was a fast learner, and for Severus to offer such unguarded praise...well, it was a rarity. But, her elation was short-lived. She frowned as she moved back to her side of the bed, wondering if she was allowing him to manipulate her feelings now. Why should she feel triumph at this accomplishment? Her first experience had been humiliating, nearly disgusting...and the times after that had been more like taking a class, attempting to follow directions as he spoke to her, instructing her in the movements which produced the most pleasure and the methods to open her throat and relax and breathe in the correct rhythm as she took him past her tonsils. Had it really only been just over three weeks ago?

"I do believe," Severus said, turning to her with a feral grin, "you have earned a reward." He rolled over her and pinned her wrists against the bed and nibbled a trail from her neck to a breast, where he took a nipple in his mouth and sucked and bit lightly. Usually, this elicited a response, but Hermione lay somewhat limply instead, lost in thought, disturbed by her feelings.

She'd actually been happy to have pleased him for a moment. Over the last three weeks she had been on a roller-coaster of emotion...sometimes backing away from the emotional implications with logical reasoning, other times angry, or feeling used, while at other times simply tolerant to the inevitable, telling herself this was the price she paid for a normal life since the Ministry of Magic had seen fit to ruin any real chance for normalcy, and reminding herself that it could be worse. But, this was the first time she had actually felt happy about one of the sexual games since that cherry stem game in her quarters a little over a month before. Had she allowed him to manipulate her so thoroughly that she was now responding to his 'Good girl' comments like a praised puppy?

Hermione realized that Severus had stopped his progress down her body and was now over her, watching her face intently. She tried to school her features into passivity, but he scowled at her. "Hermione, what are you sulking about?"

"Nothing, sir," she answered.

"That certainly seems to be a lot of 'nothing' you're contemplating," he observed.

Hermione put up the Occlumency walls she had read about, hoping he wasn't attempting to read her mind and hoping that this was not another thing which seemed easier in theory than practice.

"No girl, I'm not using Legilimency," he sighed and moved to sit beside her on the bed. "I don't need to be inside your head to know what you're thinking. Your thoughts are quite apparently displayed for anyone who knows what to look for." He knew just what it was too. She was resistant at almost every level. Someone who was experienced at being a sexual submissive would have taken his complement and reward in stride, happy at the accomplishment. But, Hermione couldn't do that...no, she had to analyze it and dissect it, stir it up and pick apart every feeling and thought and urge until she confused herself beyond recovery. Oddly enough, he could identify with that, even if it did make his task more difficult. Ever since he was a child he had watched and analyzed people. It paid to know what people were feeling and how they would react. As a spy this ability had saved his life on numerous occasions. And now, in his marriage, he would have to apply his knowledge in a different way.

He knew she had been trying to figure him out ever since their first meeting after the Marriage Law was passed. He knew she had been searching for answers about her role in their marriage, and so far was finding acceptance difficult. He had even held back further the last two weekends, slowing her conditioning to accept pain and submission because of that. But now, he had to do something about it.

"Hermione, what is it?" he asked, infusing a tone of empathy in his voice.

"Nothing, sir...really," she insisted, clenching her jaw and not meeting his eyes.

"I'll tell you what I think then, since you won't. You found, for the first time, that you really did feel happy having satisfied me, right?"

Hermione simply glared.

"And then," he continued, "You started thinking about how terrible it was that you were allowing yourself to get caught up in a game like this." He looked down at her, seeing he had hit close enough to the mark.

"Come here," he said, getting out of bed, "if you won't talk to me in here, we'll talk in the living room." He pulled the plush blanket from the bed and waited.

Reluctantly, Hermione got up out of bed, not really wanting to have a long talk now. However, his desire to speak in the living room meant that he wasn't going to punish her over anything...he wanted for her to speak with him equally. Well, it still wouldn't really be equally, but she wasn't required to call him 'sir' outside the bedroom. Gently, yet firmly, he guided her to sit in the middle of the couch. He placed the blanket beside her and went to the liquor cabinet where he withdrew a bottle of wine and two glasses. He sat beside her and pulled the coffee table closer to place the wine and glasses there and pulled the cork and poured the wine before he turned sideways. He reached for her shoulders and guided her to lie against his chest, and after tucking the blanket around her body and his legs which were on either side of hers he handed her a glass of wine and took one himself.

"It's time we took care of a few issues Hermione. We are going to talk about this until I am satisfied you understand the situation."

"Is the wine really necessary?" Hermione asked, evading the topic as long as possible.

"Yes, I want you to relax, and I want to relax as well," he said and took a long draw from his glass. He settled his free arm across her upper chest, enforcing the fact that she was going to remain until the matter was settled. He waited for a while before speaking, and when Hermione gulped her wine down in a few swallows, and he had refilled her glass, he began.

"I wondered how easily you would deal with marriage to me. I did warn you, quite clearly of what to expect once we were married. You didn't have to choose me. But, since you did, you are going to have to live with reality," he stated in reasoned tones. "I told you I would expect not only your physical submission, but your active participation, and yet, over the last three weeks, you have resisted me at every turn."

"No, I don't think I have, Severus," Hermione stated firmly. She was feeling a bit angry now, being forced into a 'talk'

"Oh you've given your body over to me, very reluctantly. I had hoped your mental resistance to me would ease, but it seems to have grown stronger. Why do you think that is?"

*'Because if I give myself over to you, I'll be letting you win...I'll lose myself in what you desire, I'll be weak...I wouldn't **be** anymore.'* "I don't know," she answered aloud and took a sip of her wine.

Severus bent forward, twisting slightly to tuck his head near hers and allow his lips to graze her temple as he spoke. "You're afraid," he said softly. "You're afraid of me, and afraid of what will happen if you ever do submit to me."

His words, though soft, struck her with force. He was right. She could feel her heart beating faster, and knowing he could likely feel it too she wanted to be away from him, away from this intimate gesture, a parody of a lovers embrace which seemed like more of a violation than anything he could do to her physically. His warm, strong arms invited her to fall back and revel in the close feeling, to cuddle and hold him close. But that would be wrong somehow...he wasn't like that, she couldn't do that with him...no, they had sex...they fucked...this intimacy was too close. She tried to sit up, but his arm tightened around her again, holding her firmly to his chest.

"Let me go, please," she said, ashamed that it came out almost strangled sounding.

"No," he whispered, following his gentle admonishment with an equally gentle kiss to her temple.

Hermione closed her eyes, feeling hot tears behind her eyelids which she would *not* allow him to see. And so they sat for several quiet, but intense moments, his lips pressed to her temple, and his other hand, now free of the wine glass reached up to stroke her hair. After a few moments he reached down her arm, removed the wine glass from her left hand drew it up so she could see the light glinting from the jewels in her ring, arranging his own ring close by.

"I have wondered why you chose the stones you did, Hermione. The Sapphire, peace and serenity; the Ruby, passion; why would these be your first two stones? Can you imagine achieving peace with me if you fight me? Can you imagine passion if you won't allow yourself to feel?"

"I didn't think you cared about those things," Hermione bit back, allowing him to hear her anger and frustration.

"I don't want you to be unhappy, I've told you that several times now. Answer this: What do you think of when you hear the word 'Serenity'?" he asked, thinking a bit of word-association might help break through her barriers...he needed something more to work with.

The plaques in her grandmother's house were the first things she thought of. And she immediately stiffened, knowing how that would play out.

"Tell me, you did think of something, what is it?" he prompted. "You are tempting me to employ Veritaserum," he warned after another moment of silence.

"Plaques...in my grandmother's house, she had lots of them, as well as knick-knacks with 'The Prayer of Serenity' on them. It was from AA."

"And what is 'AA'?" he asked, patiently.

"Alcoholics Anonymous...it's a muggle support group for recovering alcoholics," she said...maybe if she bored him with inanities he would be distracted.

"And your grandmother was an alcoholic?" he asked...not judgmentally, simply curiously.

"No, actually she wasn't...she lived in a small town where the main social activity was drinking at the pub, or talking about not drinking at the AA support group. She didn't like to drink, so she went to the AA meetings instead. She still holds the longest running record for sobriety in her group," Hermione explained with a slight chuckle.

"I see...I won't pretend to understand Muggles. So then, back to the point...what is the prayer of Serenity?"

Hermione took a deep breath and sighed...there was no way to evade the question any longer so she may as well get it over with. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference," she recited blandly.

"Poignant, don't you think?" he asked.

"I suppose," she said noncommittally.

"And how might that apply to your situation?" he asked. He could, of course, simply tell her. But if she had to make the connections and acknowledge the solution aloud to him, she wouldn't be able to evade it any longer.

"I suppose," she began, "It means that I should accept what I can't change."

"And...?"

"And since I'm in a situation I can't change, it would be better to accept that than to fight against it."

"Precisely. You can't change the fact that we are married, nor can you change the things which go along with being married to me. You haven't been accepting that, you've been fighting it. Hermione, I don't want you to feel used and miserable...and I know that's how you have felt. But, I did tell you before we married what I would expect. If you keep resisting me like this, you'll make yourself miserable."

"It's not what I expected it to be," Hermione admitted, relaxing somewhat, in spite of herself, into his embrace. "I mean, I knew there would be some discomfort involved...but not..." she trailed off, unsure of how to phrase it, not really wanting to voice the way she'd felt.

"Earlier, you were actually satisfied for a moment," Severus said, turning the conversation. "There was no reason for you not to be pleased, and yet you seemed to think that was wrong of you, am I right?"

"Yes, you're right," she sighed.

"And why would you think that was wrong?"

"Because...I...well..." really, anything else she could have put into coherent thought, but she couldn't seem to say what she wanted in a way which would come out right.

"Hermione, there was absolutely *nothing* wrong with feeling pleased. There was absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. You did exactly as I wanted you to, you were perfection. I believe I would have given extra credit had I been grading you," he said, chuckling slightly on the last bit. "The time that we are together is something completely separate from the rest of your life. In my bed, you can let go of everything because ultimately, what happens is up to me. You can't change it, you can only choose to accept it or not. There is nothing to be gained by resisting, absolutely nothing. And there is nothing to lose by giving yourself to me freely. Do you understand this Hermione?"

"I...I guess so," she answered hesitantly.

"I want you to try it, really try now, to accept that you are mine. I will never do anything to injure you; you can trust that you will never be truly harmed with me. Can you do that?"

"I'll try," Hermione said, wondering if he was right. Could it simply be her resistance that was making her unhappy with the situation?

"Good girl," he whispered. "Come with me now; give yourself over...remember that whatever happens, I am in control. If I choose to reward you, accept that without guilt." He stood; disentangling his legs from where he'd wrapped them around her hips, and took her hand, leading her back to the bedroom where he directed her to lay back.

"That's right, Hermione...no guilt," he muttered as he climbed over her and kissed her. He reached to the bedpost, where the silk cords held the bed curtains back and unwrapped it from the curtain. Next, he grasped her arms, not forcefully, but with confidence, meeting her eyes as he tied her wrists.

She decided to try, really try to accept it...his long, slow kiss, his tongue caressing her own, his hands roaming her body, the cords around her wrists. They weren't tight, if she wanted she could easily remove them, it was a symbolic binding.

If it were true that there was nothing to gain from resistance, maybe it was best. She worked on relaxing, pushing thoughts of her life from her mind, not thinking about her next exam or her friends and their plans, for the moment, she would try to think only of the here and now, of his lips moving down her neck, placing gentle kisses between her breasts, his firm hands gripping her hips and lifting them as he knelt between her legs. She arched her back, taking his silent direction to place her feet on the bed behind him and support her weight.

"In here, while I am with you, you are mine, Hermione...mine," he said, as he moved up between her legs, slowly entering her. Neither closed their eyes or looked away, but instead, cinnamon and obsidian locked together, truly connecting for the first time. "There is no shame in accepting that. Whatever happens here, you don't need to worry, your hands are tied...trust me," he murmured as he thrust into her.

Something changed...something significant. She was aware on some level that perhaps he was just saying all those things to make it easier for him. But, whatever his reasons were, his words were truth. She would gain nothing through resistance, and would lose nothing through acceptance.

"That's right, Hermione," he said seductively as he moved an arm under her back to leave his other hand free to reach up and grasp a breast. "Accept it," he whispered as he took a nipple between thumb and forefinger and pinched.

Hermione winced at the pain, but drove away any anger she would have normally felt...she breathed deeply, allowing herself to simply feel, for this moment she could lose herself in him and would find herself again and be who she had always been, Hermione Granger...now Hermione Snape, the bossy girl who told her friends to do their homework, the girl who could punch Draco Malfoy, who could turn an evil woman over to a herd of angry centaurs, who wouldn't allow the Ministry of Magic to ruin her future, but for now, and only while she was in here with him, she could give it all up, not worry about what would happen next, what decision had to be made, or which of her friends needed prodding to study. He pinched harder, and once more she quelled her resistance and simply felt as she gazed into his eyes, seeing the sparkle of lust, the way he pulled his lips back to reveal his crooked teeth in a feral grimace of pleasure.

He rose up, once more grasping both her hips firmly, heaving her up as he increased his tempo, pounding into her forcefully. Hermione closed her eyes, wrapped her legs around his back and focused on the moment, feeling him pounding deep inside her, wrenching her hips with the force and driving her back against the headboard where she placed her bound hands to keep from hitting her head. She cried out as she climaxed powerfully, lost in the feeling of his body and her body writhing together, pounding, hearing his growl as he came soon after she had, the power of his climax driving her into another orgasm.

He collapsed over her, supporting his weight on his elbows, panting loudly. After a moment, when they had both caught their breath he asked, "Do you see now?"

Hermione looked into his eyes and answered, "Yes...I see now, sir." And she did. Something had changed, really, it was her attitude, but it made such a difference. Their...coupling...she wasn't sure if she would ever be able to call sex between them making love...it had been different, there had been something else, an understanding. For the first time she had truly allowed him to take the lead, to guide her without mental protest.

"Good," he said and kissed her again and she let him know through her kiss that she accepted his lead, focusing on forming herself to his desire as he claimed her while still ignoring the small, giggling voice in the back of her mind which protested...the part of her that always wanted to take charge of a situation. She could accept surrender, at least here.

Severus pulled away and watched Hermione who gave him a small smile. He allowed the corners of his mouth to tug upwards as well and lay back on the bed. He pulled her bound wrists to his chest and slowly unwrapped them before releasing her and lying down.

She had been succumbing to fits of melancholy over the last two weeks, often after sex, and sometimes even during. It was quite distracting. And although Hermione would require much more work than a temporary relationship, in the end, she would prove much more satisfactory. Now that she was over the first hurdle, he would be able to safely demand more of her. He would be gradual, her state of mind at this time was still precarious, it wouldn't take much to send her back to being afraid and ashamed, but if she were handled carefully she would do quite well.

He had made definite progress with her tonight. He'd known the time would come for that talk and had carefully prepared what he would say and how he would say it...finding the right balance of reassurance and the stating of fact. Hermione had a sharp mind, so he couldn't be careless with her; nor could he lie to her because when she discovered his falsehoods it would be worse than if he had said nothing at all, and so he had carefully presented her with the truth in just the right amounts to lead her to the conclusion he wanted her to find.

Just as he was drifting off to sleep, the thought that he could identify with her need to analyze emotions and people's motivations crossed through his mind. He hadn't expected to find anything in common with her. But, it was a fleeting thought as sleep overtook him.

A/N: There is a wonderful artist out there by the name of Le Devine Marquis who does beautiful Snape drawings. She has one which fits the last scene in this story very well, go check it out! http://www.blackcat-creations.com/dd/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=13&PN=1 the particular picture is about halfway down the page.

New Ideas

Chapter 11 of 31

Hermione asserts herself outside the bedroom, gets used to submission in the bedroom, and then thinks of a plan to get the marriage law repealed. And of course, more kinky smut.

And, very, very big thanks to my wonderful new beta Nakhash Mekashefah who beta'd this chapter.

Snape sat at the High Table at dinner Thursday evening, glowering at Albus Dumbledore who had decided to let his colleagues know that he and Hermione would be going to see Shakespeare, together. McGonagall had finally stopped glaring at him for the first time since he had received the betrothal certificate from the Ministry of Magic. He glanced over the tables of students, pausing slightly to note that Hermione was carrying on an animated conversation with young Miss Weasley.

It had been three days since their talk about her lack of submission, three days of watching her sort through her feelings, though he could tell she was making a concerted effort to put herself in the right mindset. Of course, the fact that she was still in school put a damper on what he could do with her. She really didn't have much in the way of spare time between studying and social life, but he had to admit he couldn't really complain...he'd had sex nearly every day in the last month and felt sated, at least on a physical level, for the first time in far too many years. He was sleeping better as a result, and didn't feel quite so on edge as he usually did.

As he glanced back over the tables, he noticed that Hermione and Miss Weasley were both watching him, though they looked away quickly and giggled, turning to whisper to each other. He gritted his teeth and shot a sharp scowl to Hermione...if he were the subject of 'girl talk' he would be very...well, what would he be? His expression changed to one of thoughtfulness, which wasn't too different from his scowl in reality, and Hermione wasn't looking his direction so glaring at her wouldn't do much good at the moment. What on earth would she possibly be telling her friends? If Hermione were perhaps discussing his...endowments...he had no reason to be ashamed; but, at the same time, if Ginevra Weasley, no...she couldn't possibly be discussing him like *that* with Miss Weasley. Hermione was practically a prude in comparison to most of the other girls. But, just to be sure, he would bring up the subject that night before they retired to the bedroom.

"You know, Severus," McGonagall said, "I was worried about Hermione when she decided to marry you, but it doesn't seem you've harmed the girl."

"Of course not," he spat. "The entire reason Albus had me petition was to protect her from harm. You've had to wait two months to figure that out?" he asked, incensed.

"Severus, now, there's no need to get upset..." McGonagall began.

"No, of course not," he bit back, and left the table, quickly exiting through the staff entrance. That woman had given him nothing but grief over Hermione but now that Albus had twinkled and mentioned they were going to see a Muggle play, she thought it was wonderful. If Albus continued to play the barmy old matchmaker, he might consider tendering his resignation early. Snape didn't want to be the brunt of jokes...though he knew most of his colleagues held him in some level of disdain, even after his work with spying on Voldemort and playing an integral role in his defeat, the humor they found now in his possibly becoming romantic in some way, aggravated him far beyond being held at arm's length and seen as something of a necessary evil.

He passed through the entrance hall and spied Draco Malfoy watching him closely from near the doors of the Great Hall, glaring at Snape as if he wished to cast an Unforgivable.

"Mr. Malfoy, is there a reason you are gaping at me?"

"Yeah...just wondering if the Mudblood whore is the reason you don't seem so cranky, anymore. Really too bad you got her...my Father would have put her to much better use than you ever would have. And then, you went and put him in St. Mungo's. We used to think you could be trusted, Snape. I hope your Mudblood sucking your prick is enough consolation for a traitor."

"Fifty points from Slytherin, Mr. Malfoy, for your disrespect," he hissed, and quickly crossed the hall to tower over the boy. "And if you ever say anything like that about my wife again, you'll find yourself joining your father in St. Mungo's. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Malfoy?"

Malfoy set his mouth in a hard line and glared at Snape. "Yes...perfectly, Professor Snape."

Snape glared at Malfoy as he quickly went down the stairs to the dungeons, likely on his way to the Slytherin common room. It seemed young Mr. Malfoy would be someone to look out for, now, as well. He hoped his reactive response to Malfoy's statements had made the boy see it would be unwise to touch the girl. While some would have seen his defense of his wife as an act of love, or of at least strong feelings, most half-intelligent Slytherins would know it for what it was. Hermione was his, and no one was going to harm, or insult, anyone who belonged to him.

"So, he's really taking you to see a play?" Ginny asked.

"Yes, but it's only because Professor Dumbledore bought tickets and is sending him on an errand to pick up something from someone...apparently, the Headmaster thinks we should spend some time together."

"That's so funny," Ginny said, giggling. "Snape at a play...like it's a regular date!" Hermione laughed, as well, and they both glanced up at the High Table and quickly away again, not wanting to be caught giggling and looking at Severus.

"Well, I'll be gone most of the weekend since we also have reservations for a bed and breakfast."

"Hey, at least it's this weekend. You'll still be able to make it to Hogsmeade for next weekend. Are you going to be in Gryffindor Tower, tonight?"

"No...I want to catch up on my homework. And really, Harry keeps asking about how things are going with Severus; I'm getting a little tired of that and of the others whispering around me. Hey, why don't you come hang out with me? I've got a separate room with my own entrance and I haven't had anyone over yet. Besides, we can have more privacy than in the common room."

Severus could still hear them talking when he settled back in the living room after a hot bath, and contemplated placing a silencing charm on Hermione's door. Here was definitely a drawback of being married to a teenager...she acted like one at times. Giggling. Really, he had to listen to giggling in his quarters. It was wrong. Yet, he didn't cast the silencing charm...on some level, he did find it interesting. He glanced over to the clock...it was nearly curfew, time to send Miss Weasley on her way. Placing his book back in its place on the shelf, he walked to Hermione's door and knocked. She called out for him to enter and he opened the door, looking back and forth between the two girls.

"Yes, Severus?" Hermione asked.

"Curfew is in ten minutes. I felt Miss Weasley should be informed, in case the two of you had lost track of time," he said.

"Oh, yes sir," Ginny muttered, jumping up and grabbing her books and papers. "See you at breakfast?" she asked quietly, as she passed Hermione.

"Okay, Ginny. See you at breakfast," Hermione said, giving Ginny a reassuring smile. Hopefully, her friends wouldn't be frightened of him for too long. His mere presence would be enough to dampen moods.

Once Ginny left, Hermione turned to Severus and said "I'm actually surprised you didn't wait until after curfew so you could deduct house points from Gryffindor."

"Next time, I may do just that. However, I wanted to speak with you about something."

"What's that?"

"I would not like to find that I have been the subject of matters which girls are wont to speak of amongst themselves," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"You mean girl talk?" Hermione asked, with a bit of a smile.

"Yes...if that is what you call it. I am a private person, Hermione. Matters of a *personal* nature should be kept private. I only ask that you maintain discretion, is that understood?"

"So, you're trying to tell me what to talk about when I'm with my friends?" Hermione asked after a moment, sounding somewhat offended.

"Hermione, you try my patience," he said in an agitated tone. "You know perfectly well what I mean. I will not be the subject of gossip within Hogwarts from the mouth of my own wife. I've been teaching for as long as you have been alive. As Head of Slytherin House I've been in a position to overhear many conversations between female classmates. I know very well that girls are much more candid and explicit in the sharing of information than are boys. I will not be spoken of in that way. Is that understood?" he asked firmly, crossing his arms and setting his face in a firm scowl. Hermione failed to be impressed...seeing someone in the throes of climax had a tendency to make him seem a bit less intimidating.

"You've probably just heard Slytherin girls talking; what makes you think Gryffindors would talk like that?" she retorted archly.

"I've always thought the biggest failing of Gryffindors is that they believe in the innate nobility of their own house, blindly. Can you honestly tell me you have never heard the other girls in Gryffindor speaking of their boyfriends and their intimate encounters?"

"Well, no..." she admitted. In fact, sometimes she had wondered if she were the only non sex-crazed girl amongst the sixth and seventh years.

"Then you are aware of what I mean. I'm not telling you how to behave around your friends. I simply value my privacy. However, I know you do have some discretion; you aren't known as a gossip."

"All right, I see what you mean," Hermione agreed. She realized that if she were going to try to argue with him on something, it would be best to make sure she had a proverbial leg to stand on in the argument. She had been so eager to squelch any possible attempt to stifle her that she'd failed to think before rushing to the defensive.

"Good. And, I need to know if you have arranged to visit your parents this Christmas break? I'll need to make the appropriate arrangements to my schedule."

"I usually do, I was hoping this year wouldn't be much different. I figure, with Lucius Malfoy out of the picture, though, you wouldn't have to come with me if you didn't want to." She wasn't exactly saying she didn't want him along, but she had a feeling it would make for an awkward Christmas.

"Lucius may be out of the picture, but Draco is not. I have reason to believe it is not over with him, and it would be best not to leave you unprotected over the holidays."

"Oh...well, wouldn't that be taking you away from what you usually do during the holidays?"

"No. During the holidays I catch up on my grading. I can do that just as well in your parents' home as I can here."

"So then, why would you need to make changes to your schedule?" Hermione asked. Really, he needed to make plans for where he was going to work on his grading?

"Hermione, stop asking so many damned questions," he said in an exasperated tone, and exited her room.

Hermione sighed and propped her head on her hands, looking down at her homework on her desk. He'd certainly been right about there being no romance. She spent the next hour checking over her homework and, once she was satisfied that everything due for the next two weeks was finished and properly organized, she made her way to the shower.

Of course, Snape's bathroom was even better than her Head Girl's bathroom had been...four showerheads certainly did make for a thorough shower. She stood in the center, after a thorough scrub, reveling in the feeling of the water buffeting her body from all sides. She felt tense after bending over her work for so long and brought a hand up to knead at the cords of muscles at the base of her neck, determining that one of the first things she would do when she got home for Christmas break would be to make an appointment with a massage therapist. Only...it wasn't really 'home' anymore...this was her home now.

She brought her other hand up and crossed her arms across her chest, kneading at her shoulders and then slowly moving downward. She paused as she passed over her breasts...it had been a long time since she'd last tried masturbating. It wasn't that she was uncomfortable with it; she'd just never been able to produce enough of a reaction to really make her feel it was worth the effort. But now, her body felt alive, her senses heightened and her nipples stiffened as she rubbed her palms over them. Curious, and encouraged by her success so far, she ran one hand down between her legs and experimentally brushed against herself. She'd learned a lot about her own body from Severus, something she hadn't thought would happen, and now she could produce reactions for herself that she hadn't been able to before. Her hips tilted and her head fell back as she rubbed herself, biting her lip in pleasure. Just as she felt she was nearing climax, she felt something hard and cold against her throat.

"Hermione, taking a long time in the shower, aren't you?" Severus whispered in her ear, as he pressed his body up against hers.

Hermione jumped, the feel of cold steel on her throat sending adrenaline coursing through her body.

"I thought I should like to join you...you seem so tense. Don't be scared, I'm not going to hurt you...much." He chuckled softly as he spoke. "Move over this way...that's it, now turn around and sit," he directed. Now facing him as she sat on the bench at the back of the shower, for he had moved with her and rested on his knees before her, he was only a few inches above eye level now. "Scoot forward, Hermione," he said, and she did, her knees parted and rested on either side of his thighs. He pulled his hand back from her throat and she could see he was holding his straight razor, the one he actually shaved with...only, he'd been holding the rounded, dull side to her. She sighed in relief when she saw this.

"Hermione," he said, sounding softly chiding, "You should know better than to think I would slit your throat with a razor, by now." He leaned forward to kiss her, and then back to nibble her ear and neck. Hermione moaned...she had been so close before he came in, and now the adrenaline gave her arousal a new edge. He ran the dull side of the blade over her body before pausing between her open legs and moving away, reaching for a jar on the floor of the shower.

Hermione watched as he scooped some gooey green substance from the jar and spread it over her mons, working it through her thatch of curls. It tingled slightly as he worked it in. Her eyes grew wide as he brought the razor to the top of her hairline and she scooted quickly back against the wall, snapping her knees together. He looked at her sharply. "Get back to the edge of the bench or you will be punished," he threatened.

Slowly, Hermione scooted her hips forward again, spreading her knees wide as his hands directed. She held her breath as he once again brought the razor to the top of her hairline and began to shave her.

"If you hold perfectly still," he said, carefully watching what he was doing, "you won't get cut." Of course, he wasn't about to tell her that was his special shaving gel potion...getting a nick, or even razor rash, while using it was nearly impossible. But, it was certainly nice to see her hold perfectly still for him, barely even daring to breathe.

Hermione held herself stiffly as the razor scraped her pubic hair away in little movements. She watched as his deft fingers stretched and pulled at her skin to give him a straight surface...the way he shielded her delicate inner labia, with his fingers, from the blade. She looked at his face and saw he was focused quite firmly on his task, and so was surprised as he slipped two fingers inside her and curled them in slow movements against her inner walls, while he continued using the razor in the other hand. Hermione leaned back against the stone wall of the shower, relaxing and focusing on enjoying herself as she watched his progress with the straight razor.

It looked...different. He was nearly done and, a few swipes later, pulled away and turned one of the showerheads to direct a spray of water over her torso.

"Much better," he commented approvingly. He'd been toying with the idea of telling her to shave or doing it for her the first time. He'd decided, just tonight, he would enjoy her reactions to a blade in his hand. "Perhaps, I'll shave soon, as well; you'll find the sensations produced that way are quite enjoyable," he said.

Hermione raised an eyebrow and glanced down at his crotch, trying to imagine it hairless. She smiled and looked back up to him, noting his own amused expression.

They exited the shower and dried themselves before moving to the bedroom. Severus turned to look at her and smiled lightly. Hermione waited for his instruction, a light smile playing on her lips as well. Already, the feel of cool air against her skin was building a reaction. She wondered what he would want to do tonight...usually the longer sessions he saved for the weekends, but he was considering something. He nodded to himself and sat on the bed, moving gracefully away from the edge, one foot tucked under his other leg, which he stretched out on the bedspread. "Come here." Hermione moved onto the bed and he took her by the shoulders and bent her over his thighs, positioning her so her pubis rested on his knee. One arm lay across her upper back, pressing her into the bed. "Spread your legs, Hermione," he instructed.

Her body quivered in anticipation and she jerked slightly when his hand came to rest on her bottom. "I'm going to spank you," he declared. Hermione automatically tensed, pulling her pelvis forward and found that his knee ground against her in a most pleasant way. He began, striking her buttocks alternately in a steady rhythm...not too hard, but enough to sting. Hermione bit her lip, holding in her cries as she did her best to remain still, but couldn't help rocking her hips slightly. He stopped after a moment, resting his hand on her heated backside, and asked, "Why are you so quiet when I spank you?"

"I...I...um...don't know...sir?" Hermione answered when she'd recovered her breath. She had always made a point not to cry out; though there were times she couldn't help it. Up until their conversation three days ago, she'd done so because she didn't want him thinking she was weak, and didn't want him to gain any satisfaction in that. But now, she had promised to try and submit, yet the automatic reaction to bite her lip and hold her breath continued.

"Don't try to suppress your natural reactions," he said, as he moved his hand between her legs and dipped his fingers between her labia. She sighed in pleasure as he did; the feeling was different, but quite nice since she was shaved. He pulled his hand back and continued spanking her, enjoying the growing redness of her buttocks and the way her hips writhed against his knee...she was very wet now. It hadn't taken too long at all for her to associate a small amount of pain with pleasure. Soon enough, he would be free to explore more intense relations without worry of traumatizing her. He was satisfied when she stopped holding her breath and let out little moans with each swat. Severus increased the force of his blows and, soon enough, she was shaking and writhing and sobbing. He stopped and moved his hand between her legs again, resting his fingers lightly over her clitoris, knowing it would drive her to move.

Hermione caught her breath gradually as the sting subsided. In a way, she felt she'd completely lost control...once she had let go and allowed herself to give voice to the pain, she couldn't stop. Tears flowed freely from her eyes and she realized she had been grinding against his knee during the spanking; it was nearly embarrassing. She had actually neared climax and now her body was humming with arousal. His fingers resting gently on her clitoris were driving her mad; she wanted him to *move* and she couldn't help but begin to writhe against his fingers to produce sensation.

"No, no, Hermione, I didn't tell you to move," he purred, amused. She was like a strung bow under his hands, tight and ready, poised to release with force. "I'll have to punish you for that," he chided, smirking as she let out a shuddering breath at his words. "You will keep your legs apart. If you bring them together, I will be forced to be more...creative...with your punishment."

Hermione expected more of the same sort of spanking, and so when he pulled away and brought his open hand down on her bare mound, she gasped in surprise as she fought the natural urge to snap her legs together. Each burst of stinging pain also brought intense jolts of pleasure as he repeatedly struck her sensitive flesh. By the time she had counted twelve strikes, silently, it hurt enough to cause her to jerk her hips and cry out, nearly screaming.

He stopped, after a short while, and allowed her to catch her breath, once more, then nudged her to get up and to sit back on her heels. She was still breathing raggedly and had tears streaming down her cheeks. He raised a hand to cup her face and she closed her eyes and leaned into his touch.

"Very good, Hermione," he said softly, as he brushed his lips over hers. "Don't ever conceal your reactions from me. I want to see and hear what I do to you; it pleases me." He paused a moment before tilting her chin up; when she opened her eyes, he said, "These tears are nothing to be ashamed of." Though his voice was soft, he spoke firmly, and she believed him. It had felt good, in a way, to release that tension. It was almost relaxing to know that she had a time at which she didn't have to hide her feelings and hold her reactions in check. Hermione nodded slightly and he pushed her to lie back on the bed.

He took her swiftly, pinning her arms to the bed. But, as he neared completion, he brought one hand to her throat, pressing lightly. Hermione's eyes grew wide, and he decided not to do that, just yet. Instead, he kept his hand over her throat lightly, not pressing against her like he wanted to. Soon enough, she would be ready to enjoy that too.

The next morning, when Hermione awoke, she discovered Severus was sitting in the living room, which was odd; he was usually gone when she got up in the mornings. She mumbled, "Morning, Severus," as she went to her room and dressed and gathered her things. Before she left, he came into her room.

"Wait, I will walk with you to the Great Hall, this morning," he said. "As I told you last night, I have reason to believe Draco may be planning something, and I don't want you walking in the halls alone, especially this close to the Slytherin common room."

"Did something happen last night with him?" she asked.

"We had...words," he answered vaguely. "Tell me, are Potter and Weasley on the same schedule as you are?" he asked.

"No, but we do have a lot of classes together. They don't have Arithmancy with me, which is Tuesdays and Thursdays, and they also don't have Ancient Runes, which is Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons."

"What time is your Ancient Runes class, today?"

"Two o'clock."

"I will escort you, then, as well. In the meantime, do not walk the halls alone. When possible, remain with Potter...Draco may not be incredibly smart, but he knows better than to take on someone who defeated the Dark Lord."

As they walked through the halls, Hermione reflected on how many different faces her husband had. In his school robes he was formal for the most part, cruel to his students, and often rude. She had never been able to see him as a sexual being before...he had seemed so, well, above that. But, she was beginning to wonder what part of him she saw in the bedroom. He was still formal in his own way, demanding and strict, yet at times she felt she saw something almost resembling...tenderness. Well, not really tenderness, no...but it was something, and the only time she had seen it was after he had thoroughly exerted his will upon her, and even then only occasionally. She still wasn't sure if that was his way of easing her into learning her role in the bedroom, or if it was something more about him. And even then, why would the only times that she saw anything even slightly soft about him be directly after he had inflicted pain upon her?

She wanted to figure him out. If she was going to have any hope of possibly influencing him, she had to figure out why he did what he did. Why would he enjoy spanking her until she cried? She still hadn't figured that one out, though she was learning to accept that it was a fact and that she could handle it. Really, she was a Gryffindor; she couldn't be scared of a bit of spanking. So, he got off on turning her bum red; it was almost funny when she thought of it like that.

Why on earth, Hermione wondered, had Dumbledore picked *this* play. It was horrid. Well, no, it wasn't a horrid play...but it was the last thing she would want to have to think about. If only her problem could be so easily solved by Puck distributing love potions. She hadn't thought about the possibility of actual love much, lately. For now, she only wanted to focus on the freedoms she had remaining. She wanted to do well in her schoolwork, spend time with her friends, and carry on much as she had before marriage.

But, the story of a young woman being forced to marry a man she did not love, by her father; and, a society which would enforce this decision, brought her own situation to

the forefront.

She had noticed, out of the corner of her eye, when a man had approached Severus and passed a small box to him, but other than that had remained focused on the happenings of the stage. It was evening when they exited the theatre and walked a few blocks to the restaurant Dumbledore had arranged reservations at.

Hermione looked over her menu and, just as she was about to inform the waiter of her decision, Severus spoke.

"My wife and I will have the Bavette Farcie, and a bottle of your house red."

"Very good, sir," the waiter said, and moved to take their menus.

"No," Hermione declared, eliciting surprised glances from the waiter and her husband. "I will have the roast chicken and grilled vegetables on the side, thank you." She folded her menu and handed it to the waiter. "I would like a glass of your house white to go with that, as well," she said, smiling stiffly to the waiter who nodded and left them.

"Severus, I am perfectly capable of ordering my own food in a restaurant."

"Yes, apparently so," he replied blandly. It appeared that his approach, on the few occasions he'd had to dine with a woman over the years, was not appreciated by his wife. They sat in awkward silence for a moment as Hermione thought about the play some more.

"Dumbledore does have a knack for finding the worst way to make a point," Severus observed, after some time.

"Oh?" Hermione asked, not quite making the connection. "Oh...yes, he does," she said again, when she made the connection with the play. "But, what point was he trying to make?"

"Likely, he thought to meddle and give us both hints of what he thinks we should be doing. I wouldn't take Shakespeare too seriously, if I were you, Hermione. For that matter, I wouldn't take Dumbledore seriously on certain matters," he said.

"I can't help but wonder if things would be simpler with a few love potions," Hermione said quietly, as she took a sip of her water.

"They're illegal for good reason."

"Yes...just like contraceptive potions practically are."

"So, do you think a love potion would make things easier for you? For either of us?"

Hermione looked up at him, seriously contemplating it. Would it be easier? "No," she answered. "A feeling without reason would be empty. But still...I do wonder..." she trailed off and looked down, distracting herself by taking a drink of water.

"Best not to wonder about what cannot, or should not, be. Love is overrated," he declared.

"You really think so?" Hermione asked disbelievingly.

"Yes, people do foolish things when they are in love. Much better to handle life without those sorts of complications, I believe."

Hermione thought of responding to that...but really couldn't think of what to say. She was married to a man who thought love was 'overrated', of all things. Soon enough, their dinner arrived and they both ate in silence for a while.

Severus realized his thoughts on love may have depressed his wife. Likely, the girl was hoping to find something like love with him. He was going to have words with Albus when they returned to Hogwarts regarding his dismal choice in entertainment. What did the man think he was playing at? Hermione needed to face reality, not be led to unrealistic expectations which would only cause disappointment.

"Hermione, perhaps my previous words were not...prudent. I understand you had hoped to marry for love, one day. Unfortunately, reality rarely matches our hopes. Still, it is quite possible to be content without finding some kind of fairy tale notion of 'true love'."

Hermione looked up to him, wondering if he actually thought he was being comforting, in some way. She nodded and pursed her lips. After a moment she asked, "Are you content?"

He frowned, considering her question. "In some ways, yes. However, there are things I would like to change about my life."

"Such as?"

"Teaching; I grow weary of it. I no longer need to remain at Hogwarts to fulfill my role as a spy. Though I had thought to remain for another five years, I have been thinking recently that it would be good to find another place of employment."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at his announcement. Would he want to leave Hogwarts so soon? She had hoped to stay there for another few years, at least...it was familiar; she had friends, mentors there. "Oh?" she asked, trying to sound neutral. "How soon were you thinking of quitting?"

"I would stay for the end of this year, at least...but I'm not sure if I will remain after this year. It would not be difficult to find another job in my field. But, have you thought about your plans after graduation?"

"I'm mostly focusing on studying for my NEWT's, now. But, I have been considering lobbying to get the marriage law repealed once I graduate."

"There are already many people working on that who have years of experience with that sort of thing. I would think you would rather put your efforts towards a career. You have potential in Arithmancy, and even in Potions, should you so desire."

"I was thinking about that before, but now I'm not so sure. It doesn't seem right not to be working on ending the marriage law."

"The law is weak, as it is. It would be highly unlikely to stand for more than another five years, anyway...that is time you should be putting to your own life."

Hermione paused to take a bite of her chicken. Things seemed to be spiraling out of control. She couldn't tell what he was saying, exactly; she did worry, still, that he would try to take his controlling mannerisms and apply them to other areas of her life. But, at the same time, if she reacted by immediately jumping to the wrong conclusion, it wouldn't help with the somewhat amicable rapport they had developed. Finally, she settled on a fairly neutral way to figure out what he was getting at. "Either way, that's something I'll decide when I come to it."

"Of course. I'm not trying to tell you what to do, Hermione," Severus said evenly, giving her a pointed gaze. "I was offering my opinion, which you may take or leave." She seemed to be satisfied with that. He went back to his stuffed flank steak. He knew repealing the law was something to work towards, and while he wasn't exactly opposed to Hermione working towards that goal, he did think it was best that she work on her education and career first. Those who were already married would not be able to dissolve their unions, even if the law were repealed, anyway.

When they had finished their dinner and left the restaurant, Hermione requested to walk to the B&B they would be staying at rather than Apparating. It was a nice night; the stars were clear and the air crisp. There was snow on the ground, dampening sound and adding to the peaceful feeling.

They came to the bed and breakfast, having walked in silence for nearly twenty minutes. The reservations were in order, and they were ushered in and directed to a room by an elderly lady who was unable to climb the stairs. They thanked her and quickly retired before the woman could expound in more depth about her hip replacement surgery.

Hermione entered the bedroom and flipped the light switch. The room was shockingly floral, but of a decent size, with a queen sized bed and a small sitting area with two somewhat worn overstuffed chairs arranged on one side. The door closed and she heard Severus placing wards, including a strong silencing charm.

"Stand in the center of the rug," he ordered, when he had finished.

Hermione moved to the rug, which was placed about six feet from the two armchairs, and waited as Severus walked across the room and seated himself in one, directly facing her. She felt the prickle of anticipation begin as he leaned back and observed her for a moment. "Remove your clothing...slowly," he directed.

Hermione began by slipping her shoes from her feet and positioning them together at the side of the oval rug. Next, she removed her blouse...slowly. She watched him as he watched her, growing excited seeing the glimmer in his eyes as she followed his directions. He was enjoying this, and after their talk she felt much better about that. She allowed her blouse to slip to the floor behind her and unbuttoned her skirt, slowly sliding it down and revealing her body. When she had removed her bra and panties, he pulled his wand out and 'Accio'd' her lacy black knickers Hermione watched, slightly stunned, as he brought them to his nose and drew in a deep breath...that was certainly...different. But, so were a lot of things about him.

"Kneel," he intoned softly, still clutching her knickers in his hand.

Hermione knelt, spreading her knees wide, and waited. Her breathing increased under his dark, steady gaze as she waited for her next instruction. He reached into a pocket and withdrew an obsidian pestle...something she'd used countless times to grind herbs or other potions ingredients. He whispered an incantation and then levitated it over to her. "Take the pestle," he instructed. Hermione did, and gasped when she held it...it was vibrating and seemed to send tingles of pleasure even in her fingertips. "Now, pleasure yourself."

Tentatively, Hermione eased the pestle down to her bare mons and teased the smooth stone over her labia and clitoris, already slick from her anticipation. Her body reacted almost immediately, now, to his commanding voice in the bedroom. She closed her eyes and began rubbing the humming, tingling instrument against her clitoris and, within a few moments, was reaching orgasm.

"Stop!" Snape commanded.

Startled, she did.

"Good, you may continue," he said. Hesitating only a moment, as she got over the interruption, she began again and soon she felt the pleasure building and, in only a moment, she was sure she would...

"Stop," he commanded again. Hermione stopped, but couldn't hide her disappointment. He allowed her to continue again; and again, he ordered her to stop. It didn't take long before Hermione was quivering with need. When he told her to continue once more, after being interrupted, she sighed, knowing he would only make her stop again.

"Are you growing weary of our game, Hermione? Would you like to be allowed to finish?" he asked huskily.

"Yes, please," she answered.

He stood and walked to stand before her, looking down with a smirk at her on the floor in front of him. "Of course, if I am going to allow you to climax early, you'll have to accept a penalty, first. Would you like to continue our game; or would you rather take your punishment and be allowed to climax, directly afterwards?"

"I...I'll take the punishment, sir," Hermione responded, hardly believing she was answering like that.

"Very well, remove my belt," he directed.

With shaking hands, Hermione reached up to his leather belt and slowly unbuckled it. She was actually unbuckling his belt, and he was going to use it on her. A month ago she wouldn't have thought it possible, but now, she was willing, and she was working on accepting his instruction. Slowly, she pulled the belt from around his waist, sliding it from the loops in his charcoal slacks. Once it was free, she placed it into his waiting hand. She was shaking now, a strange mixture of anticipation and arousal and a bit of fear that seemed to focus and throb in her lower regions.

"I will give you ten strokes with my belt. After that, you may pleasure yourself to completion. Bend over; rest your head on the floor." He paused a moment and then squatted to whisper in her ear. "There *is* a silencing charm on the room," he said, reminding her of the previous evening's instruction.

Hermione bent over, placing one hand on the floor to rest her forehead upon and clutching the humming obsidian pestle in her other hand. She was acutely aware of his footsteps as he walked around to her side. She heard the whoosh of leather through the air and the sudden sting against her backside caused her to jerk halfway up and yelp. She felt Severus's hand come down on the back of her neck and push her quickly back to the floor. The blows came in a predictable rhythm after that, each one marking a stripe of burning fire across her buttocks, pain lancing through her body; and she did scream out for the last four, and was sobbing by the time he finished.

"You may continue now, Hermione," he purred, and knelt down beside her to rub the welts he'd made, as she brought the pestle back to her clitoris and worked it over her slick, swollen flesh with a shaking hand, while her breath still came in halting hitches and muffled sobs. The fire in her buttocks seemed to concentrate and spread as her orgasm built again, but she felt relieved knowing that she could continue, this time. Just as she was nearing completion, he pulled his hand away and began spanking her again, this time using his open hand; but instead of driving her orgasm away, it heightened and she climaxed, unabashedly rocking her hips to move against the vibrating stone and to meet his hand as it fell repeatedly.

She stilled and caught her breath after a few minutes.

"Give me the pestle," Severus said. Hermione handed it to him, still kneeling on the floor. He took it and moved behind her, unbuttoning his trousers and releasing his hard cock, resting it at her entrance. Hermione tilted her hips and started to move back, but his hand gripping her firmly stopped her. She held still, waiting for him to plunge inside her, but he only remained where he was. After a moment, she felt the pestle at her entrance, as well, and moaned as he dipped it inside her. He removed it and trailed it up and rested it against her anus, causing her to clench her buttocks together in reflex. He chuckled at her reaction.

"I suppose we'll have to work on that reaction another time," he observed, before forcefully plunging into her. Hermione cried out as he moved within her, roughly using her hips to pull her against him, increasing the force of his thrusts. He wanted it to last, to pummel her until she was begging him to stop. He closed his eyes and recited the list of ingredients for Wolfsbane; the sight of his cock pummeling Hermione, with her bright red striped backside, would drive him over the edge too soon. Of course, reciting the ingredients for Wolfsbane made him think of Lupin, and that was enough to drive down the oncoming climax, for the moment.

Hermione's knees felt raw on the carpet, and her breasts were beginning to chafe with her movement against the floor. She wasn't thinking much of that, though, her attention was focused on his hands and his hips and his cock. His scrotum slapped heavily against her clit and she was going to come again, soon. She cried out as he pounded her and then pulled away abruptly; he still hadn't finished.

"Turn around, now," he snapped breathlessly. Hermione moved around and he grabbed her by the hair at the nape of her neck and pulled her over to his glistening cock. "Suck me. I want to come in your mouth," he ordered. Hermione complied, barely hesitating at her own taste and smell on him. He didn't seem to think it was bad, after all. His hands gripped her hair as she worked up and down on him, but he never did more than nudge her slightly to indicate the rhythm or depth he desired. She'd heard enough from other girls in Gryffindor to know that was better than how many guys acted over being fellated.

She swallowed quickly as he came, this time without second thoughts worrying her. She smirked slightly at him as he fell back, bracing himself with his hands behind him on the floor. It really was something to see the stiff and formal Potions Master panting for breath, post-coitus, with his trousers around his knees.

"And what are you smiling about," he growled, when he opened his eyes and saw her.

"Nothing, sir," she answered demurely.

"Good, because if you were taking humor from this I would have to chastise you accordingly," he warned her.

"Yes, sir," she agreed, working to keep her features straight.

"Now, I do believe there is a bathroom in this suite. Would you care to see if your Transfiguration skills are up to enlarging a bathtub to an appropriate size?" he asked, with an arched eyebrow, dignity firmly back in place as he kicked off his shoes and stood to undress.

"Yes, sir," Hermione answered, and fumbled through her previously discarded skirt to find her wand. The tub transfiguration went well enough.

When Severus entered the bathroom, the tub was filled. It took only a raised eyebrow and a pointed glance at the soap for Hermione to attend him. He relaxed as she scrubbed his body, watching as she moved gracefully, without the shy awkwardness of their wedding night. He noted her bum would likely be bruised...tonight was the first time he had used enough force to leave bruises, and she seemed fine. Soon enough, a few marks wouldn't be enough to cause her worry.

When she had finished with him, he lay back in the water and watched as she bathed herself. He had to wonder if someone else would have taken to him as well as she had, if he'd had to 'rescue' some other Muggle-born from Lucius Malfoy. Hermione was intelligent at least, much more than most of her classmates. She kept to her own pursuits most of the time and, when they did share company, she was not onerous. Physically she was comely, not necessarily beautiful, but pretty enough despite the way her hair stuck out in all directions in the mornings. He would have to work on her bad habit of wearing rather unattractive Muggle clothing, though. She was healthy and had proved resilient enough thus far, not so skinny that he had to worry about bruising her bones with a paddle or other instruments.

He did hope she wouldn't become depressed concerning ideas of love. He wasn't really sure why people got so worked up about the idea. He had seen otherwise intelligent men and women do things, which no one in their right mind would do, all because of love. It was a ridiculous notion in all, completely irrelevant to life and decision-making. Hermione could be content without it if people like Albus bloody Dumbledore weren't constantly shoving reminders under her nose.

When they settled under the sheets to sleep, Severus pulled Hermione against him, wrapping one arm under her head and cupping a breast in his other hand and nestling his hips against hers. Sleep came quickly for both of them.

Hermione decided to relax with a book on Sunday. She hadn't had a lazy day in far too long and after the long walk along Hadrian's Wall yesterday, she felt she deserved a lie-in. Her studies were caught up, and so she lounged in her room, glad the couch was comfortable, with her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, barefoot, and in comfortable sweats. She was reading of Lazarus Long telling his life story on the planet Segunda as he recovered from near-death. The often-casual sex in Heinlein's works had seemed unrealistic in many ways, to her, but at the same time, she could see from a vantage of cultural difference how those attitudes could develop.

His cultural attitudes also make her think about the difference in Muggle and Wizard culture. Apparently, he thought "rubbing blue mud into your belly-button" (if that's what the local custom is) is just as much a survival skill as anything else. This reminded her of her folly during her fifth year at Hogwarts in rushing into attempting to change deeply ingrained cultural traditions with the house-elves. It hadn't done any good. However, there had to be a better way to change things and still stick with the cultural traditions.

She read through the story of "The Man Who Was Too Lazy to Fail" and thought the protagonist would have done well in Slytherin. Later, she was intrigued by the genetic explanations of the 'Mirror Twins' Lazarus had bought on one stop on his trade run through the galaxy when he became enraged at the female of the pair having been mistreated by means of a too-tight chastity belt and had taken it upon himself to rescue the pair of twin slaves and teach them to be independent...if only her own fight to free the house-elves could have worked so well. It was a touching story and, of course, the genetic elements reminded her of the problems the Wizarding world was facing with inbreeding. It seemed this was Heinlein's genetic treatise; almost every story within seemed to have something to do with it, including the dangers of inbreeding. It wasn't until late that evening, when she was reading about the early formation of the Howard Families Foundation, that an idea came upon her. Yes, it was fictional...but it was so simple...it could work!

Immediately, she set to work: outlining a plan, possible ways to present it both to the Wizengamot and to the general public, how to finance it, along with a few basic, but promising, Arithmancy calculations. It might take a while, she knew that, but this could solve the problem of inbreeding and do away with forced marriages at the same time. It still wasn't a perfect solution; the ethics were still ambiguous; no problem really had a perfect solution but this would be much better. Why on earth hadn't they thought of doing something like that, instead? Damned wizards and their traditions.

By the time Severus entered their quarters an hour later, Hermione had outlined her plan. She heard him come in and went to the living room.

"Severus, I've got it. I think I've got a way to repeal the Marriage Law!"

"Do you?" he asked, raising his brows in surprise at her ecstatic pronouncement.

"Yes, here, take a look," she said, and thrust the pile of parchments into his hands. "I got the idea while reading about a fictional eugenics project...while fictional, I think it could work. It's only a matter of solving the issue of getting people to go along with the plan, and then they could repeal it!"

Severus furrowed his brows as he read her outline. It wasn't a bad idea. There were problems, of course...but overall, it was a better solution than the one currently in use. After reading her notes, and many footnotes indicating a need for further research, he looked back to her and said, "It's not a bad start. In fact, with some adjustments and the proper presentation, I think it would work. Let's go see the headmaster, he would want to see this and get the Order to work on it," he said, and then looked her up and down with an expression of distaste. "You *are* going to change before we go?"

Hermione realized she wasn't really presentable, though she didn't think that excused his rude comment. But she went back to pull out some better clothing and brushed her hair, hearing him mutter something about 'atrocious Muggle clothing' on her way. She decided he was going to have to get used to 'atrocious Muggle clothing'...she wasn't about to start dressing formally when she wanted to relax, just to cater to his idea of aesthetics.

Once in the corridors on the way to the Headmaster's office, Severus said, "You do realize, even if the marriage law is rescinded, those who have already been married will have to remain so."

"Yes, I'm not doing this for me. Well, not directly anyway. It's wrong to force people to get married and to practically force them to procreate. It's just as wrong as condemning your descendants to genetic disease through inbreeding. Just because I can't get out of this law, doesn't mean I'm not going to do what I can to make sure others aren't subjected to it when there is a viable alternative to this problem."

"Ahh yes, Gryffindor nobility..." Snape muttered.

"Oh, do stop it with the Gryffindor insults," Hermione snapped, as they approached the gargoyles to the Headmaster's office. She went up the stairs first, and so missed Severus's amused smirk in her direction.

...The Courage to Change the Things I Can...

Chapter 12 of 31

Plans are set in motion to repeal the Marriage Law. Snape and Hermione go shopping. Smut, and Hermione and Severus get ready to visit the Grangers? for Christmas Break.

And once again, big thanks to Nakhash Mekashefeh, deliverer of many commas, and other sundry punctuation, beta extraordinaire.

Hermione tacked the last flyer to the wall in the Leaky Cauldron. Six hundred fliers in all, over the last few days, had been spread out over: Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley, and even within the halls of The Ministry of Magic by members of the Order. Since she had first come up with the idea nearly a week ago, Albus Dumbledore had put the execution of this plan at top priority for the Order of the Phoenix. Everyone had come together to plan and implement the idea and to get a campaign started.

The idea was first public education. The MOM wouldn't be able to stand against a vast public outcry. The fliers were simple enough to fit on one page, and to be understood by the average witch or wizard. Basically, they outlined a potential program, which would match voluntary participants based on genetic and personality compatibility. The decision to marry would also be voluntary. Rewards were available based on the needs of the participants for having and then providing those children with a stable home. For some, the rewards would be financial, for others, recognition, such as medals of Honour.

They were actually lucky that the Marriage Law had passed in such a hurry with so little preparation. It really was a badly written law, poorly thought out in terms of social viability. If they had actually taken the time to work out a foolproof law, it would be much harder to overthrow. As it was, most wizards and witches could see the unfairness of the law, and even if they were not directly affected, they resented the fact that the Ministry of Magic would take such sweeping totalitarian actions in secrecy.

Hermione was still uncomfortable with parts of their solution. It still reminded her in some ways of Hitler's breeding program in which women had been given awards for bearing strong, healthy, German babies of pure blood. But, it had to be better than forcing Muggle-born witches into marriage. And, they were out to save a way of life...it was right. But still, Hermione knew that had been the goal of Hitler as well...to save the Aryan race from the Jews and Gypsies and others of 'impure' breeding. Only now, they were trying to save a way of life by 'polluting' previously 'pure' bloodlines.

Playing around with eugenics was sticky business. It would be so easy to slip down that slope of questionable ethics...if this plan did go through, the committee which performed the genetic screening must be above bar. There must be safeguards in place to protect against bribery. Likely, the purebloods wouldn't like it...at least the ones who wanted to remain 'pure'. She didn't want to think of it, but there would probably have to be restrictive laws still in place forbidding unions between purebloods who did not pass a genetic screening. And then, there would be the protest against Muggle science intruding in the ancient and noble Wizarding world.

It was a mess.

She had also looked over the statistics of those who had already been married under the law. It was just under eighty new marriages with Muggle-born brides and pureblood suitors. Surprising, really, considering how many eligible single Muggle-born women were available between the ages of eighteen and fifty and how many single pureblood men, of any age, were out there.

The next order of business would be to contact each of these Muggle-born brides. Something would have to be done to help them, too, and Hermione was still at a loss as to how to go about it. For the time being, she just hoped to find out if any were actually in abusive relationships and do what could be done to stop it. They could get to work next on the restrictions against employment and holding bank accounts for the Muggle-born brides. That would at least be one step in the right direction. Next, would be to put a stop to the monitoring of the coitus requirements of the law. She didn't like thinking about that one. That meant there was someone checking in on how often...well, she did wonder if she and Severus were setting any kind of record.

"Are you quite done?" Severus asked, tired from trudging up and down Diagon Alley with Hermione most of the afternoon as she put fliers up and even answered questions of passersby. He'd spent the entire time in a heightened state of alert, wary of nearly everyone on the street, and longed to simply get back to Hogwarts and take a hot bath. They would have to hurry to get dinner in the Great Hall.

"Yes, done for today. Thank you, Severus. I do appreciate your help," Hermione said, wishing he didn't have to be so terse. But, a little politeness could go a long way, in most cases.

Severus grunted. "Now, if that is finished, we should head back to Hogwarts."

"If you don't mind, I need to get some Christmas shopping done. I can Apparate back later; after all, Draco is at Hogwarts this weekend, right? I don't think he'll attack me in the middle of Diagon Alley."

"No, but he is not without resources. He does have money and could easily hire someone to take care of his dirty work. Twenty minutes, Hermione, no more. Let's not waste time."

As they exited the Leaky Cauldron and went through the brick wall, Severus commented, "The main flaw of this plan is that most purebloods are highly unlikely to submit to genetic screening."

"I'm sure once they see the reasons behind it, they will understand. Besides, the genetic screening can even allow them to marry other purebloods in some cases, if they're genetically compatible," Hermione stated. She knew it would be a problem, but for now she didn't want Severus's pessimism to bring her down.

Hermione swiftly walked through Diagon Alley, leaving trails in the several inches of snow which had fallen to the street. Garlands and fairy lights decorated windows of shops, it was quite picturesque. She had a list planned, and would hurry. Usually, she had all her Christmas shopping out of the way by November. She'd been able to pick up a few things the previous weekend at Hogsmeade. Severus had told her to stay with Harry and Ron the entire time, though, so she hadn't been able to get away to get their presents. She understood he was looking out for her, but still, the bossiness got to her sometimes. And, she still wasn't sure if he expected her to get him something for Christmas, or if he planned to get her something, or what. But, she figured it was best to do so, since they were married after all. It seemed like it was simply what one should do for their spouse. Of course, he liked books. She could always get him a book. He might even appreciate it.

Fortunately, he didn't hang over her shoulder in Flourish and Blotts so she was able to find a new release on potions for him. It wasn't too pricey and she supposed she should get him something else before Christmas, but would think on it a bit more. Her savings for the year were running low and she knew she would have to get a job as soon as she got out of Hogwarts. Her parents had money set aside if she wanted to attend a Muggle university and she was still considering the possibility, but a Muggle university would be purely academic. Her future was in the Wizarding world, but maybe she would study something that could have a crossover application. They left Flourish and Blotts half an hour later, each with packages.

"I should like to make one more stop, since we've missed dinner anyway. It won't take long, this way," he said and they walked together to Knockturn alley. It was dark and

dank and, where Diagon Alley had looked picturesque in its Victorian post-card appeal with snow on the streets and windowsills, Knockturn Alley simply looked dank and miserable with puddles of dirty, slushy snow piled against the buildings on either side of the narrow alley.

"What could you need down here?" Hermione asked, warily eying the less than upstanding people in the alley.

Severus turned and gave her an amused smirk, "Oh, you'll see," he purred, and continued walking. Hermione followed him quickly down several twists and turns until finally he entered a small store. It had an odd assortment of books and bottles of mysterious substances, but Severus didn't stop to look at any of them. Instead, he spoke with the proprietor for a moment in hushed tones. The man turned and fired a spell at the back wall and Severus tilted his head as a signal to follow. They walked through the wall and Hermione gasped at what she saw.

Rows of whips, manacles, masks, chains and shelves of small clips and other sundry instruments lined the walls. Eyes wide, she stood in place, taking in the contents of the room...finally, she turned back to Severus who was watching her with no small amount of amusement. "I thought we could use a few more toys. I have found my personal collection to be quite - lacking - of late."

"Lacking?" Hermione asked.

Severus chuckled, "Yes, lacking. You've only had a very small taste of things so far, Hermione. In fact, I'm feeling generous today," he said, almost smiling. "You may pick any item on this wall," he declared, making a sweeping gesture toward the wall of whips, floggers, and crops.

"You...want me to...pick a whip?" Hermione asked, eyeing the wall with concern.

"Yes, pick one, now." He didn't sound so generous that time. Hermione looked over the selection, feeling like a child sent to cut their own willow-switch to be punished with...well, what she imagined that would feel like since she'd never had that happen as a child. However, if she was going to pick something, might as well make it something that wouldn't hurt much. That meant the bullwhips were right out. Hermione took a step closer to the wall and perused the various instruments...she recognized a flogger which Severus had used on her many times now. It didn't hurt sharply...but it probably wouldn't do to simply get another. There were crops of various sizes. She picked one up; flexed it and imagined it falling on her backside...she was surprised when a flood of warmth settled in her lower regions.

She placed the crop back on its hook and looked over the other items. One looked particularly gentle, it was the length of the flogger, but it was horsehair bound together in a handle. She picked it up and ran her fingers through the coarse strands. After a moment, she placed it back on the wall to survey the other items for sale.

"Any one of these can be a gentle caress or can produce agonising pain, depending on how they are wielded," Severus murmured in her ear. "Don't choose something just because you think it won't hurt much. Where's that Gryffindor courage, Hermione? What here tempts you? I know something does, you're aroused already. Here," he said, and reached out to pull a long, coiled, single-tail whip from the wall. "Feel it," he said as he uncoiled it and ran the plaited leather across her hands. It was smooth and heavy and felt like a snake, firm yet yielding. Despite herself, Hermione imagined it falling across her skin...she imagined it would hurt, but she wondered how the whip would hit her...would it wrap around her body, would it cut through her skin...

"This looks...well, like it would hurt a lot," Hermione observed.

"Yes, that is a possibility," Severus agreed. "But, I can be so...creative...with a real whip like this one," he purred seductively, sending chills of arousal down Hermione's spine. She closed her eyes and leaned back slightly where he was nearly pressed against her. It felt totally surreal, standing in some back room of a shop in Knockturn Alley, shopping for whips...and she was actually aroused.

"Well, it seems like it would leave marks," she reasoned.

"Hermione," Severus drawled, sounding somewhat exasperated, "you seem to forget how effective my potions are."

Well, yes, there was that, too. He bent down and nibbled on her ear and then purred, "Come now, Hermione, don't tell me you're afraid of a bit of leather."

"I'm not afraid," she stated. No...she wasn't afraid...merely, apprehensive.

"Prove it," he dared.

He was doing it again. She knew it...he probably knew she knew it, too. Goading her, trying to push her buttons...he was having fun. But, she wondered if this were a new challenge. The only time he let go of his stiff, formal demeanour was directly after sex...usually directly after very rough sex. However, she did wonder if she could use that as a start, someplace from which to begin to learn about her husband. Pleasing him seemed to help too...a pleased and sated Severus was a more open Severus. However, she wouldn't be swayed by a simple dare. She turned and faced him, thoughtfully considering his words.

"And why do I get the feeling that whatever I pick, you would still get this one in addition?" Hermione asked, after a moment.

Severus's eyebrows raised slightly in surprise before he smiled. "Because, you are apparently learning to be perceptive, Hermione," he granted.

Draco Malfoy watched as Professor Snape, the traitor, and Hermione Snape, the Mudblood, returned to Hogwarts. His father had meant to use her to get revenge on Potter, as well as Granger for the assistance she'd given Potter in defeating Voldemort. How like a coward she had been, hiding in back rooms in the dead of night formulating Arithmancy projections, of all things...a shame to Gryffindor, really. If she had been out on the battlefield she could have been killed, Potter could have been distracted, and the Dark Lord could have been victorious.

And then there was Snape. He had spent years deceiving the Dark Lord and his followers. And now, he walked side by side with a Mudblood as his wife. Snape even seemed to treat her as an equal, not the Mudblood slave she should be. She should be his inferior, yet he'd even held the door for her as they entered the castle. Apparently, he had taken her shopping; they both carried shopping bags. Snape was the worst kind of Muggle-lover. Draco shook his head as he watched them descend the stairs to the dungeons.

They would both pay for what his father had become. He had visited his father, now a mindless idiot, in St. Mungo's. It had been humiliating to see his sire, formerly proud and well kept, smiling idiotically at the others in the ward. His previously long hair, which had been proudly kept and worn long, was now cut unevenly and not combed properly. Snape had even stripped that dignity from him in the duel. Draco had ordered the nurses to take care of it and had given them a handful of Galleons with instructions to get him some better clothing, too.

He'd also hired two Healers privately, specifically to find a treatment to help his father. His last visit had shown little improvement, but at least Lucius Malfoy retained the ability to read and speak. With that intact, Draco was certain his father could be brought back. He wanted to be there, too, when his father took his revenge. He had contemplated simply doing it himself, but it would be so much better for his father to take back his own life. Of course, he would never consciously remember his former life, but he could be taught about who he had been...that would be enough. Lucius Malfoy had kept journals and Draco was sure there were a few hidden Pensieves in the manor. Between those, and Draco's own instruction, he was sure his father would once again rise to his former glory.

"I think I lost count of how many fliers I put up today," Hermione sighed, as she flopped down on the worn, red couch in the Gryffindor common room.

"Well, let's hope it works," Ron said, with a look of concern.

"So, Hermione...if the law is overturned, what will you do?" Harry asked.

"Not much different from my previous plans, really. I just won't be working on getting the law repealed, anymore. I'm planning on going into Arithmancy."

"No, I mean...with being married to Snape."

"Harry, that can't change. Did you miss the binding ceremony? It's for life, you know."

"Oh...sorry. Well, how is it going with him anyway?"

"Well...it's going. Not sure what to say, really. He's not romantic or anything..." she trailed off, shrugging. "Anyway, are you two done with your mid-term essays yet?"

"Don't you ever give it a rest, 'Mione?" Ron sighed.

"No, I don't. They're due in less than a week; come on, bring them out. I'll look them over and let you know where you need to revise.

The boys groaned but complied. It was the same at every mid-term and final. Hermione got bossy and demanded to see their papers. While they made the usual protests, Harry was glad to see this. He was worried about her, and her new tendency to sleep in on Saturday mornings and even Sunday mornings had him a bit concerned. But, she was still the same old Hermione.

"So, do you boss Snape around as bad as you do us?" Ron asked, as he handed his incomplete essays over to Hermione.

"Oh, yes, Ron," Hermione said sarcastically. "Behind closed doors; Professor Snape is a complete kitten and does whatever I tell him to."

"Watch it, you're starting to sound like him," Ginny, who was sitting off in one corner reading, quipped.

Harry and Ron escorted Hermione back to the dungeons a while after curfew. Severus had; amazingly, given Harry and Ron passes to be out after curfew for those times Hermione stayed late in Gryffindor Tower as he was sometimes disposed in handling matters to do with Slytherin and his other duties at Hogwarts. Hermione would be glad when the year was over. The heightened security and caution with Draco Malfoy were tiring. But still, she had to wonder how much longer they would need to be so careful. What kind of a life could she have when she was constantly looking over her shoulder for an enemy?

"Thanks, guys," Hermione said, as she opened her door. "I'll see you tomorrow at lunch."

"Hey, I was wondering about that, Hermione. Why are you sleeping late on weekends now?"

"Sometimes it's nice to have a lie-in. Besides, I usually have breakfast with Severus weekend mornings."

"Oh...well, all right. I've just never known you to be a late sleeper is all."

"Don't worry, Harry; my sleeping late isn't the end of the world. Now, goodnight, see you tomorrow."

After taking a few minutes to put her things in place and straighten her room, Hermione undressed and went to the bedroom. She wondered if he'd use the horsehair flogger she'd picked out or the long whip he'd picked, tonight. She had been thinking about it all evening as she helped Harry and Ron with their papers and had a humming sense of anticipation and nervousness.

Friday nights were intense. The rest of the week was tame in comparison, quite nice, but tame. But, she didn't know what to expect as she walked through the living room and entered the bedroom. Would there be a chain hanging from the ceiling? Ropes coiled and waiting on the bed? But, when she entered the bedroom, Severus was already asleep and snoring. Which seemed odd...his snoring hadn't been bothering her lately. So, she went to shower, casting a silencing spell on the bathroom door so as not to disturb him. He had been doing the same for his morning showers, since he woke more than an hour before she needed to be awake.

After a shower, she slid between the sheets. He was still loud. Why hadn't she heard him snoring lately, anyway? By now, she wasn't scared of doing something about it, though. And so, lying on her side facing away from him, she reached back and elbowed him softly in the ribs. If he got upset, that could be blamed on her tossing in her sleep. When he didn't react, she reached back and trailed her fingers lightly over his ribs.

That got a reaction. Only, not quite what she was expecting. With a groan, Severus rolled over, tossing a leg and an arm around Hermione and nestling his face into the crook of her neck. She stiffened at first, but he stilled quickly, still asleep. And then she realized he wasn't snoring, anymore. Well, that explained it. Hermione adjusted herself to a slightly more comfortable position and settled down to sleep. His breath on her neck was comfortable, really. His arm lay across her breasts and his leg was thrown over her hip as if she was some kind of body pillow. His skin was warm and felt nice after moving through the cold room. She'd never thought he would be a cuddler...well, he didn't actually cuddle in the traditional sense of the word, but he did seem to like holding her while he slept.

So, apparently there would be no whips and chains that night. When she was halfway asleep, Hermione realized she was slightly disappointed. She had been worked up for something, and so when he turned out to be asleep, felt a bit let down.

Severus woke the next morning at his usual time. He didn't remember Hermione coming to bed, but he held her tightly now. She was warm and soft and just the right size. He realized he might have been missing something before with women. He had never actually spent the night with a woman before he was married. His previous relationships were nothing more than casual sexual encounters...to him, anyway. Spending the night simply never came up. But, waking up holding Hermione was pleasant. He wondered if that was also why he'd been sleeping better. Being sexually sated helped, certainly, but he'd still never slept well previously, even after sex.

He thought about waking her, but decided to let her sleep a bit longer. She needed more sleep than he did; it wouldn't do to wear her out. He also wondered about the upcoming holiday as he lay awake. Hermione's parents had been reasonable, though understandably upset about the circumstances, but he wondered if spending nearly three weeks with them would go well. As a guest, it would be rude to simply spend his time alone. He could hold civil discourse with people in formal social settings, well enough; he could even be pleasant at times. But he had the feeling, based on what he'd observed of Hermione, that they would be rather casual and close.

He wondered if they would spend large amounts of time watching a television. He'd heard of them, and had seen them before, but they seemed pointless. Or, what if they had a fascination with board games? Would they expect him to participate in a Muggle board game? He knew that he couldn't upset Hermione's parents and would have to play along with expected things. Despite spending most of her time at Hogwarts, Hermione was close to her parents. So, if he wanted Hermione to be content with him, he would have to appease her parents. He wondered if he would break under the strain of acting nice for such a long period of time. At least Hermione already knew he was rude, she could deal with that, he wasn't about to spend all his time putting on a nice act. Christmas break would be strain enough.

He also wondered if her parents would expect them to sleep in separate rooms. They would probably assume that he and Hermione were simply performing to the requirements of the marriage law. Either that, or they probably didn't want to think about it at all. So, he prepared for the possibility of spending his holiday without Hermione in his bed. He didn't like that possibility.

After a while, physical needs forced him from the bed to the bathroom. He stalled for time with a shower and shave before getting back in bed with Hermione. Deciding she'd slept long enough, he softly nudged her to roll to her back and climbed over her, and gently took a nipple in his mouth and suckled. Hermione stirred with a moan and her hands came up to grasp his head, fingers gripping his hair and urging him against her breast more firmly.

He glanced up at her face, her eyes were still closed and she had a smile on her face. He increased the force of his ministrations, much to her apparent delight, as he reached behind his head to untangle her hands from his hair and brought them together, holding her wrists above her head firmly and teasing her with light suckling and

blowing air across her wet nipples. She groaned in protest and writhed, trying to arch up against him and pulled her arms slightly against his grip.

"Eager this morning?" he asked her. She responded with an affirmative groan. He chuckled and went back to teasing her for a few moments before he reached for the bed-curtain tie and swiftly secured her wrists to the headboard. Once she was tied, he took her mouth in a possessive kiss, reaching down with one hand to tease at her clitoris for a moment. Severus moved between her legs and thrust inside swiftly. Her legs wrapped around his waist and he revelled in the feeling of her flesh under his, her tight channel around his cock and her tongue slithering against his, inside her mouth. He thrust with a steady, firm rhythm until she came and then took her more forcefully, groaning loudly as he came with Hermione climaxing into a second orgasm with him.

"Tonight," he purred in her ear, "tonight, I will test you, thoroughly."

Hermione emerged from the shower and walked through the living room, entered her room to gather her clothes, choosing jeans and a jumper, and then took a seat on the couch. She grabbed a blueberry muffin from the breakfast tray Severus had waiting and looked over at him, already buttoned up in his frock coat and sitting in his favourite wingback green leather chair. His hair was tucked back behind his ear on one side to keep it out of his face while he wrote. She speculated at his ability to alternately soothe, frighten, and arouse her and yet still be so distant. Would he always be so remote?

She had to wonder if the man had any emotions beyond annoyance, anger, and lust. She'd seen his annoyance at students ever since her first year...she'd seen his anger on a few occasions; he was downright scary, then. But, his lust she'd only known about since their first discussion on marriage. And, she was the only one at Hogwarts who knew him like that...at least she hoped so. He thought love was overrated, at best...had he even experienced love? Hermione had only experienced platonic love; she loved her parents, she loved her friends, but she'd never been *in love*. She'd had a few crushes...Lockhart in her second year, which she now refused to acknowledge ever happened, Remus Lupin in third year...and even beyond that, she would have had no qualms at marrying him if he had been eligible. She still wondered about him, but that would never happen now.

So, focusing on what was real, she tried examining her feelings for Severus. She would be with him for a long time. While she had grown comfortable with him on some levels, she still remained wary. He liked to goad her, tease her, and she had to be careful not to fall into his verbal traps. And, when it came to sex, she had to concede he was certainly an expert there. She hadn't thought sex could be so good. Even getting tied up this morning hadn't been bad at all, she'd enjoyed thrashing against the cords around her wrists as he rode her. Of course, his last words to her before he'd untied her and left the bedroom were cause for concern.

"So, what did you mean about testing me thoroughly tonight?" she asked, after she'd finished her muffin and was drinking her milk.

He looked up from his work and smirked, "I think I'll be testing out yesterday's purchases." He looked thoughtful for a moment and stood, going to the bookshelf and pulling out a text. "There's actually something else," he said, as he thumbed through the pages until he came to his goal, marked the page with a slip of parchment, and then walked to where Hermione was sitting and handed her the book.

"The Guide to Medical Spells and Charms for the Medi-Witch or Wizard?" Hermione asked.

"Turn to the marked page, I should like for you to prepare for tonight using the Charm indicated," he explained, as he went back to his chair.

She looked confused for a moment, but turned to the marked page and began to read, eyes growing wide and mouth gaping open as she realized what he wanted her to do. "You can't mean..." she said, trailing off in shock as she looked at him and saw he was completely serious. "But that's...eeww," she exclaimed, looking back down at the page with a grimace of disgust.

"You can perform the charm or I can do it for you," he said with finality. "I'm certain you would rather do this yourself and I really have no desire to attend to this for you. But, if it helps your concerns," he continued in a lighter tone, "performing a regular colonic is quite healthy."

Hermione read through the rest of the text on the "Fundamundic" Charm, attempting to quell her unease. After reading through the text on the indications for its use, she realized that, in fact, it was quite healthy. However...if he wanted for her to do that to 'prepare' for that evening that meant he would want to...oh. "Um...I guess this means you want to...um..." she stammered, blushing.

Severus looked over to her, amused by her reaction. He would have to appreciate that while it lasted, he didn't think he would be able to make her blush like that much longer. "If by 'um' you mean anal intercourse, you would be correct," he said. "Do not be concerned; it is highly pleasurable when done correctly."

"Oh," she said simply. She looked over the wand motions and the incantation; they were fairly simple to remember. Once sure she could perform the charm adequately, she closed the book and placed it back on the shelf and then went to her room, pulling her books out and settling down to spend the day studying.

Severus left their quarters, likely to spend time checking up on Slytherin House, and didn't return until just before lunchtime to escort her to the Great Hall.

As they walked, he asked: "When have you arranged to visit with your parents?"

"The day school lets out, next Saturday. How long would we be able to stay?"

"I need to be back the day before classes resume. So, within that time frame it is up to you."

"All right," she said, nodding. "Oh, thought you might want to know...the Weasleys will be visiting while we're there, too."

"Thank you for informing me," he muttered grumpily. "Is there a library in your parents' home in which I might find solitude during the incursion?"

"Well, no...it's not really a big house."

Severus made a noncommittal grunt as they approached the doors of the Great Hall and went their separate ways. She spent the afternoon studying in the Gryffindor common room. For some reason, a few of the Gryffindors seemed to think she should have some special information concerning what would be on the Potions test.

"But you live with him, Hermione. Wouldn't you see what he's putting on the test?" Parvati Patil asked.

"No, Parvati. I don't look through his things or even pay much attention to what he's working on. I have no idea what's on the test and even if I did, it wouldn't be fair to tell you about it. That would be cheating," she lectured.

"Come on, Hermione, what about House spirit? Couldn't you take a little peek and see?" Lavender whined.

"Absolutely not! What do you think we are - Slytherins? That is cheating and cheating is wrong," she ranted, appalled that her fellow Gryffindors would even contemplate cheating, or contemplate using her to cheat. She ended up leaving the study group early; she could study more effectively on her own anyway.

Just after seven o'clock that evening, Hermione exited the bathroom, having just performed the Fundamundic spell. It had been awful. Still, she was most certainly clean...very, thoroughly, intimately, clean. Severus looked up from his grading as she walked through the living room, noting the stunned expression on her face.

"You'll get used to it. First time is quite uncomfortable, it becomes easier with time."

"Oh," she said simply, and went back to her studies. A little while later she frowned, wondering how he would know it became easier with time. Deciding she probably didn't

really want to know, she went back to reading. All her essays were done, so she simply went through her class notes and did some re-reading of the materials covered so far that year. She had a growing feeling of anticipation regarding what would happen later, an odd mix of fear and giddiness. She was looking forward to it, even if her stomach was in knots.

And so, about nine, she put her books away, stripped, and went to the bedroom. Walking about nude had seemed very odd and embarrassing at first, but now, after standing before him unclothed or under him in bed on so many occasions, she didn't feel exposed. Severus placed his book down and followed. She waited for instruction when she heard his boot steps behind her. He walked slowly to stand in front of her then handed her a leather thong. "Put your hair up tightly, no loose strands," he instructed.

When she had bound her hair in a neat braid and tucked the length up in a knot, he spoke again. "Very good. Your obedience of late has been pleasing. And so," he said, unbuttoning his frock coat, "tonight you may have a few choices as to the order of events." He laid his frock coat over the edge of the bedside chair and began unbuttoning his white, linen shirt next. Hermione watched in anticipation, wondering what it was she was going to be able to choose, as he peeled his shirt off and placed it over the back of the chair, as well. He walked to the wardrobe and withdrew yesterday's purchases, the horsehair flogger and the long whip, along with a rope and the long chain and hook. He used his wand to levitate the chain to the hook in the ceiling and motioned for her to come.

He coiled the rope around her wrists in a secure set of twists and knots and then pulled her arms up and attached the rope to the chain. His eyes looked down into hers intensely, and she caught the nearly imperceptible flair of his nostrils, belying his calm exterior. "Now, for your choice: the flogger you picked, the paddle, or the whip?" he asked.

"The...flogger, sir," Hermione answered with a shaky voice.

"Manners, Hermione...what's the magic word?" he mocked.

"Please, sir. Use the flogger, please, sir," Hermione stammered, quite aware of the irony of asking politely to be whipped.

"Better," he said, and went to retrieve the horsehair flogger. Hermione had picked that one after she knew he would pick the long whip, anyway, and as he strode towards her, his wiry pectoral muscles flexing with the instrument in his hand, she wondered how it would feel.

A moment later, she discovered it was quite stingy as the coarse hair whipped across her back. She hissed with each stroke as he strode around her, striking in a swift cadence. Her skin soon tingled all over as he spared not an inch of skin between her shoulders and knees. Hermione had been aware, before, that there were certain areas he did not strike with his strap or paddle. Her buttocks usually bore the brunt of most of his attentions, but the horsehair was light enough not to injure her when used over a wider area. He came to a stop in front of her, pinning her with an intense glare. Suddenly, he whipped the flogger back and forth across her breasts repeatedly, leaving her gasping. He stepped back and regarded her reddened skin. "Was that to your satisfaction?" he asked.

"Ahh...yes," Hermione gasped, trying to remember her manners, "thank you, sir."

"You are quite welcome," he purred, stepping close to her and pressing his body against hers. She could feel his erection through his trousers. "We're only getting started," he whispered, and grabbed her by her coiled hair and took her mouth in a fierce kiss, plunging his tongue deep into her mouth and biting her lip as he pulled away. He reached up and untied her hands.

"Now, Madam Snape, kneel on the rug, put your head down," he ordered.

Hermione moved to obey, being addressed as 'Madam Snape' gave her an odd thrill. Once she had taken three quick steps to the rug and knelt, lowering her body until her cheek rested against the soft wool, she was grateful he had ordered her to kneel on the rug. The stone floor was cold and hard, but this was nice.

"Reach back and spread your arse for me," he ordered next.

Cheeks flaming, Hermione reached back and placed her hands around her upper thighs and began to pull them apart, but her hand was slapped sharply.

"No, higher," he directed, physically grasping her hands and placing them on the curve of her buttocks, "spread yourself for me."

Hermione thought she had ceased to feel exposed before him, but this was a new level of exposure. She slowly pulled her arse cheeks apart, painfully aware of what he was looking at. She jumped slightly when she felt his hand come down to her cleft, slick with what felt like oil, lightly tracing her crevice all the way to her anus, where he applied pressure with two fingers. "Open for me," he commanded evenly.

Hermione wasn't sure what to do, or what exactly he meant. She thought quickly...he apparently wanted her to open...*there*, but she hadn't the slightest idea how.

"I said, open for me, now," he growled. He applied slightly more firm pressure at her rear entrance, sending a jolt of pleasure through her body along with the mortification she felt at not being able to do what he requested. She tensed, causing her anus to pucker even more tightly. "Madam Snape, if you continue with this direct disobedience you will be punished," he warned fiercely.

Hermione felt somewhat panicked and completely frustrated. His fingers at her entrance only caused her to tighten in automatic reflex. She thought for a moment, realizing he wouldn't tell her to do something that was impossible...therefore, it was only a matter of concentrating on the right movement and she could do it. But, thinking about what usually happened when *that* opened only caused her to cringe and tighten further.

"Apparently, you will need more incentive to obey. Hands down on the rug, now," he said. Hermione moved her hands down and placed them on either side of her face, stomach roiling, as she knew she was about to be punished. He used his hand, swiftly giving her ten very firm, stinging swats, which brought tears to her eyes. "Spread yourself again," he intoned. Hermione reached back to her stinging arse cheeks and pulled them apart swiftly to keep from incurring further punishment. His fingers returned to their previous location and Hermione fought the impulse to tense again. "Open, Hermione...now."

She forced herself to ignore the embarrassment she felt, reminding herself that she was perfectly clean thanks to the Fundamundic charm. She concentrated her attention to relaxing and allowing his fingers entrance. She felt him slip one oiled finger into her tight anus and immediately tensed. His finger remained for the moment, though, and she focused again on relaxing...a decidedly odd feeling, but apparently she succeeded as his finger slipped further inside her. She gasped at the sensation, which felt like it extended all the way through her clitoris and then down into her toes as he worked his finger in and out slowly.

"Good girl," he praised. "You've earned a reward," he said, and with his other hand, reached between her legs, working at her clitoris. The combined sensations were nearly overwhelming and soon she was screaming out in a most intense, and unusual, orgasm, which nearly caused her feet to cramp as her toes curled. He continued working his finger in her anus for a moment longer and then withdrew. She heard a clink and then felt something cold on her clitoris...the clamp...which he attached firmly, causing Hermione to groan at the combination of pleasure and pain it brought. "Kneel up," he ordered, and she pushed herself up from the rug, holding her back as straight as possible.

His arms reached around her shoulders, pulling her back against his bare chest as he knelt behind her. His wool-clad hips ground against her, and she could feel his erection, straining and hard through the cloth. He took her earlobe between his teeth and pulled slightly as he ran his hands down her chest. Hermione arched and cried out as she felt a sharp pinch on each of her nipples. She looked down at the clips he'd attached, making her hyper-aware of every breath which shook her breasts. He continued nibbling at her earlobe. "Do they hurt?" he asked softly.

"Yes, sir," Hermione answered truthfully.

"Tell me, in detail, what you're feeling now," he urged, nearly tenderly.

"I...my nipples hurt, sir. And...and, the other clamp hurts, too..." she said hesitantly. He reached back down to her breasts and flicked each clamp, causing her to arch her back and hiss in pain. His hands then caressed down her sides and then came together between her legs, one hand searching further to slip two fingers between her folds and inside where he searched out the sensitive spot inside and curled his fingers against her inner walls.

"Now, Hermione, what do you feel?" he purred.

"Ohh...it feels good," she answered, resting her head back against his shoulder.

"What else...tell me more," he said, as he continued working his fingers, driving her nearly to the point of orgasm.

"Now...oh, um, I feel like I'm going to climax...but it hurts too, it feels like my nipples are burning now...and...oh, gods...a lot of pressure..." she babbled, nearly incoherent, but trying to do as he asked. His other hand slid around her hip and behind her, where he pressed against her anus again, working a slick finger against her entrance in a pulsing motion.

"Open for me," he whispered in her ear. When she relaxed the tight ring of muscle, he slipped a finger inside, working it in opposing rhythm to his other hand. Hermione began to rock her hips to accentuate the growing sensation, hands fluttering at her sides, seeking to grab something and hang on. She nearly squealed at the multitude of feelings. "Now! Tell me, Hermione. I want to hear about it all...how does it hurt?"

"OooohHHhhh...it...ahh...it...it feels like...aahhmmm...like my breasts...are...like they're attached...to where your hands...ohhh gods..." Hermione could barely speak, much less give a synopsis of the sensations she felt.

"Keep talking," he hissed, and then bit down on her neck.

Hermione grabbed his thighs to support herself and tried to form a coherent word as she writhed against him. "Oh...gods, it hurts," she cried, as his teeth clamped down on her neck, "it hurts and I'm going to...oh, I'm gonna..." she trailed off and let forth with a scream as she climaxed, bucking against his hips in the throes of her climax.

"Good girl, well...for the most part," he said, when she leaned limply back against his chest. He then removed the clips from her nipples and clitoris. "You neglected to address me properly five times. Tell me, what do you think an appropriate punishment would be for someone who forgets such a supposedly well-known rule?"

Hermione realized what he was telling her as she rested, limp and spent against his chest. She couldn't believe she'd forgotten something so simple. And was he actually asking her to tell him how to punish her? "Um...I don't know, sir?" she stammered, hoping he wouldn't ask her again.

"That is not a valid answer. Stand up, now," he ordered, as he stood behind her and hauled her to her feet, tightly gripping her arms. He dragged her over to where the chain hung and quickly bound her wrists and attached them to the hook above her head. "Now, you will answer. In fact, I'll make it easy for you," he said, and retrieved the long whip. He smirked at her, watching as her eyes followed the whip as it dragged behind him. With a flick of his wrist, he sent the leather to coil gently around her knees. "How many lashes, with this whip, do you think your infraction warrants? I do warn you, though; if you answer incorrectly, I shall double the amount I believe it warrants."

Hermione stared down at the whip coiled around her knees and then up its length to Severus's hand and then up his arm, to his face, which was a stern mask. Her stomach clenched as she thought. He said she hadn't addressed him properly five times. She was almost tempted to say 'one lash' but for his warning to double whatever number he was thinking. The whip looked like it would hurt...a lot. So, it would be a harsh punishment. The lighter floggers he had used on her multiple times for a single infraction, but they were much less severe. Finally, hoping her answer was right, she answered, quietly but steadily: "Five, sir." She watched his face closely, waiting for him to speak.

"You have answered correctly. Prepare for your punishment," he said, and with a flick of his wrist, uncoiled the whip from her knees and strode around behind her. Hermione focused on relaxing, knowing by now tension only made the pain worse, but the anticipation and even excitement made it difficult to relax. She heard the whip whistle through the air and screamed as it fell across her back, arching forward as far as she could. Each successive stroke felt like fire lancing across her back. She was sobbing when he finished with the fifth stroke, hanging nearly limp from the bonds around her wrists. He came in front of her and wrapped one arm around her waist while he untied her with his free hand and guided her to the bed.

"Hands and knees," he directed. With shaking, but gradually steadying, breath, Hermione moved to the centre of the bed and waited. She sighed when he had climbed onto the bed behind her, after pulling off his boots and trousers. His hand moved to rub along her wet centre, fingers dipping inside and then spreading her moisture back to lubricate her prepared entrance. Hermione dropped to her elbows as his hand pressed down between her shoulders and arched her back when she felt his cock brush against her thigh, gasping with pleasure as he finally filled her and pounded into her, hands grasping her hips firmly, pulling her back against him.

Severus pulled out before he could come and repositioned himself to take her arse. He pressed lightly against her and then commanded: "Let me in." She had learned well in the quick lesson on muscle control and he sheathed himself fully, glad to hear her cry in pleasure as he did so. He pounded to completion, quickly, knowing she wouldn't be able to take a long duration her first time. He fell over her as he came, gasping for breath.

Half an hour later, Hermione felt she was nearly ready to fall asleep in the huge tub, with her head leaning back against Severus's chest. His fingers rubbed along her arms languidly. However, if she stayed in much longer she would turn into a prune. So, she stretched broadly and then moved away, turning to face him as she stepped out of the tub. He was sprawled back against the edge, looking utterly relaxed. She thought she saw him smile a moment before he said, "I'll get my skin crème out for you. You were right, it did leave marks."

Hermione turned to check her back out in the mirror, somewhat shocked to see five long, red welts criss-crossing her upper back.

"Go lie down in bed; I will be there in a moment," he said, as he rose from the water, towelling himself dry. Hermione nodded and did as he said. He didn't take long, and soon was straddling her thighs and rubbing her back in long strokes, expertly massaging her muscles as he rubbed the healing crème into her skin. She sighed as he leaned down over her and placed a single kiss at the back of her neck.

"You're doing very well, Hermione. You've pleased me greatly tonight."

Hermione smiled as he moved off her, pulling the covers over them and then pulling her tightly against his chest. She snuggled deeply into his comfortable embrace, wondering how she'd ever slept well alone. He was so comfortable, his longer body curling around hers just right as they lay on their sides together.

She had received an owl earlier that week from her mother, who had asked, very carefully and diplomatically, about their sleeping arrangements. After all, with such a marriage of convenience they may easily have separate rooms to sleep in. Hermione had responded to let her know that the guest bedroom would not be needed. She had very briefly worried about what her parents would think of them sleeping together. But, since they were married, it wasn't like he was some boyfriend staying over. If that were the case, she was sure her mother wouldn't have even asked: he would have been relegated to the guest bedroom politely but firmly. She wondered if she should have asked Severus his opinion first, but she was sure he would prefer to sleep with her than to sleep alone, too.

The week before Christmas break was hectic. Every class had a major test and she was worried. She'd spent time she usually devoted to extra study the week before mid-terms to work on the project to repeal the Marriage Law. She didn't actually have to do that...she could have just turned the plan over to the Order and let them deal with it, but she wanted to be involved, she wanted to take a proactive stance to work against it.

So, the week of finals saw Hermione spending nearly every evening with her nose in her books, reading over material to make sure she caught everything that might be on a test. Wednesday night at eleven, Severus stopped in her room.

"Hermione, do you realize there is such a thing as studying too much?" he asked.

"No. My friends tell me that, but I wouldn't expect you to," she responded.

"Your friends are mostly on the neglectful end of the spectrum when it comes to studies. But, if you insist on studying materials you already know over sleeping when you need to it is more likely to have a detrimental affect on your tests."

"I have to make sure I know all this," Hermione insisted with a yawn. "I've got a History of Magic final tomorrow as well as the practical final in your class."

"Very well, but falling asleep over your cauldron will not help your grade," he warned, and went to bed. He wasn't sure why he was offering her study advice. He should just leave her to sink or float on her own; she obviously didn't want his guidance, anyway. She should, though. He already knew these things; he knew that she would most likely make the same test scores if she only studied for a little while, or practically killed herself studying for ridiculously long hours.

The next day in Potions class, Professor Snape announced: "Today, you lot will be brewing your fate. This is the last major test before N.E.W.T.'s and by now I should hope that most of you have perhaps absorbed at least some of my instruction. Unfortunately, most of you aren't worth the bother to teach. You have your assignments: begin. As per usual, there will be no talking between classmates. This is a test, if you cannot perform on your own, you will receive the dreadful grade you deserve."

He spent the class time stalking between tables, glaring at students who were nervously measuring out ingredients and chopping and stirring. He made his way past the area where Hermione sat between Potter and Weasley. Both the boys fidgeted nervously under his gaze, glancing up and quickly moving back to their potions. Hermione, however, kept at her potion-brewing, unaffected by his presence. He moved on, but frowned as he noticed the slight shadows under her eyes and that her skin was a shade too pale. Her attention to her potion didn't seem to be affected by her lack of sleep, at any rate. He did hope she would be up to her typical standards...for some reason, he didn't think he'd find enjoyment in giving her a lower grade.

"See you on Boxing Day," Harry said, embracing her. He then hefted his bag to his shoulder and joined the queue of students headed for the train depot. He would be spending Christmas with the Weasleys; fortunately, he didn't have to stay holed up in Hogwarts at every break, anymore, now that Voldemort was gone.

"Later then," Hermione called to Harry, Ron, and Ginny, as she exited the great hall. When they were gone, she walked swiftly back to the dungeons to run down her checklist. She had already owled presents to the Burrow and so she only needed to make sure her presents for her parents and Severus were in place. She wondered if he would give her one, too...it might seem a little strange to her parents, if he didn't, but she didn't expect one from him.

Just as she finished reducing the last of her Muggle clothing and had packed them away, Severus came through her open door.

"I trust you are ready to leave?" he asked.

"Yes, I've got everything here," she answered. "Aren't you going to change into Muggle clothes?" she asked.

"I hadn't thought to. We will be Apparating to your parents' back garden, so I see no need for Muggle clothes at this time," he explained.

"Well, I guess we're all ready then," she said, as she picked up her bag of reduced luggage. He gave her a curt nod and they left the dungeons, warding and locking doors behind them as they walked back up the stairs and out the entrance hall. Hermione wondered what this would be like...her first Christmas home with her husband. Strange. It still seemed strange to think of having a husband. But, she did. They Apparated nearly simultaneously and both appeared with loud cracks in the Grangers' back garden.

A/N: Special thanks to LadyOfTheMasque for her permission to use the 'Fundamundic' charm (which is from her story, "For Someone Special" that can be found at the Restricted Section)

And, a big thank you to everyone who has reviewed. :-)

Home for Christmas

Chapter 13 of 31

Christmas at the Grangers. Things aren't always as they seem.

Thanks to my wonderful beta Nakhash Mekashefah. She said this chapter was really unusual, and I hope it carries across my intended meaning and the progression of the relationship as I imagine it.

It was just like every Christmas she could remember, Hermione thought, when they Apparated into the back garden of her childhood home. Snow covered the ground in a thick blanket - except for the back - where the large fir tree stood next to the brick garden wall. The sounds of automobiles could be heard, along with several dogs in the suburban neighborhood. The swing still hung from the now bare ash tree, snow piled on the seat.

The back kitchen door opened as Hermione stepped onto the porch and her mother stood there, smiling broadly. "Hermione, dear," she exclaimed, stepping outside to give her daughter a welcoming hug. "Oh, and Severus, I'm glad you could come as well," Jane said in a friendly, but uncertain tone.

"Mrs. Granger," Severus greeted.

"Please, I told you already to call me Jane. We're not too formal here," she explained, smiling.

"We'll just take our stuff upstairs," Hermione said, and started for the stairs. "I need to show Severus where things are, as well."

"Come back down when you have things settled," Jane called as Hermione and Severus walked through the kitchen, into the living room, which had a large Christmas tree along the side of the stairs, and up the stairs.

"Well, the decoration isn't your style, I'm sure," Hermione said, as they entered her old bedroom. Severus looked around at the room, which seemed rather anachronistic for Hermione, a child's bedroom, really. There was white wainscoting along the walls and subtle floral wallpaper above it. Children's books and a set of encyclopedias were in the bookshelf on one wall, the top of which was lined with various trophies and award ribbons. Severus placed his bag on the nightstand, one piece of a matched set of whitewashed pine furniture.

"I had thought your parents might see fit to give us separate rooms," he commented, as he opened his bag and began unpacking his few items into the nightstand. His clothing remained in his bag, which he placed neatly under the bed.

"Well, actually...mum wrote me about that last week to ask what our arrangements were. I told her there wasn't a need for a separate room for you, that is...unless you'd rather have the guest room...sir?" Hermione said...almost forgetting to address him correctly in her childhood environment.

"No, I would not. I prefer this arrangement," he said, giving her a smirk. Hermione nodded and moved to unpack her things, now a swift and simple undertaking with a few swishes and flicks of her wand.

"One moment, Hermione. Since we will have little privacy while here, I will not be holding you to the usual standard. Speak freely with me while we are alone in here. Once we get back to Hogwarts the standard will return to normal."

Hermione raised her eyebrows slightly in surprise. However, it did make sense; they wouldn't have a chance to talk alone anywhere but in the bedroom. "Okay, Severus. Well, mum has tea ready."

Once the three were seated in the living room, Hermione asked, "So, where's dad?"

"Oh, he had to go take care of some things at the office, but it looks like we should both be home for the next three weeks."

Severus sipped his tea, not wanting to think about what on earth these Muggles did to their teeth. What little he knew, was more than enough, that he didn't want to know any more.

"Mum, you got my owl about the new project we're working on?"

"You mean about the genetics project? Yes, and it sounds wonderful. I do hope they can put an end to that outrageous law," Jane said with vehemence. "Have there been many more Muggle-borns who had to marry so quickly like you? What could they be going through now?"

"That's the next step we're working on," Hermione interjected. "I've already been able to get a hold of the records of all the marriages performed within the Muggle-born law so far. We'll be starting a letter-writing campaign next to contact each of the Muggle-born brides and also to keep up with them."

"Oh yes, that sounds like a good start," Jane said, nodding.

"The only other problem is; I'd like to find some way to help anyone having problems. Did you know there aren't any Wizarding marriage counselors? I'm thinking a support group would be a good start, but it would also be good to have some help that could handle a bit more."

Severus sat in silence listening to his wife and mother-in-law brainstorming about ideas to help the unfortunate Muggle bride victims of the Marriage Law. They seemed content to leave him out of the conversation, for which he was relieved. From what he could tell, it seemed Hermione planned to be quite busy with this new battle. At least she was putting her efforts to something worthy, unlike her fight for the house-elves in years previous.

Monday morning found Severus sitting in the Grangers' living room, fully dressed in his typical black robes, his quill scratching furiously as he graded. The stack of finished essays was small and it would likely take the rest of the week to get through them. He had managed the weekend with the Grangers so far, having little trouble with sharing polite small talk, despite a bit of awkwardness. They were just as casual as he had feared, but so far there was little television watching and no board games. However, he discovered his wife had an affinity for a computer, a contraption quite similar to a television, though it did at least seem to have some practical merit. She had mentioned that this was one of the things she missed at Hogwarts, where electronics would not work in the presence of so much magical energy.

He hadn't thought much of how her Muggle heritage would affect their future. But, he now thought it likely that she would want to live in a home with electricity when they did move from Hogwarts. Perhaps they would find a place in the country. He didn't want to live closely amongst Muggles in a neighborhood such as the Grangers lived in, but he could be content with a home in the country where it was quiet. He would speak to her when the time came, and that time would likely be sooner than he had originally told her. Each day of teaching seemed to grow worse. The large amount of red ink across the essays he was grading was testament to his futile attempt to teach students who, for the most part, had no desire to learn from him. If a large enough portion had Hermione's dedication to studies, he doubted teaching would be such a chore. But, as it was, he didn't see the point in continuing much longer, especially considering his services as a spy were done.

He looked up as Frank Granger entered the living room with his tea and newspaper. "Good morning," he said, offering a polite nod and going back to his grading. Thus far, they had exchanged little more than polite small talk, Hermione having done well at engaging her parents' attention.

"Morning, Severus," Frank answered. He began reading his paper, but cast occasional glances towards his son-in-law. After several moments, he placed his paper down on the couch. "So, Severus. Hermione told us you were a spy during the war."

"Yes, I was," Severus answered, looking up from his grading. "Fortunately, that time has passed."

"So, is that part of the reason Dumbledore seemed to think you were a good choice for our daughter?"

"My experience does give me some qualifications when dealing with dangerous people. You need not worry for Hermione's safety."

"Yes," Frank said, running a hand over the sparse hairs of his cranium and frowning as he thought. "There's a lot more to safety when it comes to marriage, you know. I would hope that you and Hermione are getting along well. After all, she's not going to have anyone else."

"Yes, that is true. I am confident that Hermione and I are adjusting well to life together. Your daughter is studious and dedicated. I'm sure that we will be content," Severus said with confidence.

They sat in silence several moments longer, Frank Granger continuing to scowl at his book and glance intermittently at his son-in-law, and Severus scratching away at the essays with his quill, hoping his father-in-law would decide not to speak on whatever was apparently troubling him. However, his hopes proved to be unfulfilled.

"How well did you know Hermione before you became engaged?" Frank finally asked.

"Only slightly better than I knew most of my students, but only then because of her involvement with the Order. I have never made it a habit to speak with my students about anything other than what pertains directly to their studies."

"And how well would you say you know her now?" he pried further.

Severus paused, looking over to the man. "We have only been married for two months and for much of that time we have both been busy with school business. However, I do not find her company objectionable. She is tidy enough that cohabitation hasn't been a strain."

Granger nodded, pursing his lips slightly. "I don't think you see what I'm getting at, Severus. I want Hermione to be happy. Before the Ministry passed that inane law, that

meant that she would have probably met a nice man close to her age in another three to five years...or more. She would have married someone she knew she was compatible with," he explained, gaining momentum and volume as he spoke. "But now she's married to you, and she's stuck with you. I want to know that you are going to do what it takes to make her happy," Frank finished firmly, with an edge to his voice.

"I am not going to do anything to purposely make her unhappy," Severus replied slowly, evenly.

"Since you are her husband, as much as I hate it, her happiness is your responsibility and I intend to hold you to that," Frank countered.

Severus thought for a moment, carefully weighing his words before speaking. He didn't want to anger Hermione's father, but he did want to be clear about certain things. "I am afraid I must disagree; Hermione is responsible for her own happiness. There is no reason marriage to me should interfere with her life beyond a few inconveniences, inconveniences which I also share in being married to her. As I said, I believe we can be content together; but her happiness, or the lack thereof, is her own concern."

Frank looked taken aback by his words. "I don't know where you wizards learn your ideas on marriage, but that has to be the most despicable approach to a relationship I've ever heard!" he exclaimed, rising from his chair in anger.

"Mr. Granger," Severus began in a soft, yet firm tone. "Please consider that many wizards and witches are accustomed to arranged marriages. One does not enter into such a union with dreams of true love...or romance; unrealistic hopes can be just as damaging as intentionally being difficult to your spouse. From what I have observed thus far, it seems Muggles often view marriage as a union of souls. You should try to see it from the perspective of an alliance of two people whose purpose is to further their goals. Contentment in such an alliance is reasonable to expect."

Hermione checked herself in the mirror before heading down the stairs, still not quite satisfied with her hair but it was neat enough. She and her mother would be shopping to pick up some items from the grocer and to look for some last minute Christmas gifts. If it weren't for the secrecy restrictions, she would have purchased something magical for her parents, but would have to brave the crowded shopping centers instead. She tucked her wand into the sleeve pocket of her woolen jumper and then headed down the stairs swiftly. Severus and her father both looked at her as she entered, she sensed the tension there. Severus had parchments and his red grading quill balanced on a large book in his lap, while her father stood, frowning.

"Good morning," Hermione said, hoping they weren't about to fight or something. While Severus had seemed quite the composed entertainer while in his own territory the first time he had interacted with her parents, the weekend had seemed awkward so far.

"Morning Hermione," Frank said tightly. "You and your mother off to shop now?"

"Yes, she's still getting ready, I think."

"You do have the amulet?" Severus asked, referring to the amulet he'd given her just after their engagement.

"Yes, I'm wearing it."

"And your wand?"

"Of course, Severus. I never go anywhere without it," she answered, trying not to feel affronted. How could he think she would forget something so essential?

Severus scowled. "Perhaps I should accompany you," he said. Frank turned and narrowed his eyes at Severus.

"No, we'll be fine. I can't spend the rest of my life hiding from Malfoy. Besides, I don't think he would be running around looking for me in Muggle shops."

"Who's this Malfoy?" Jane said, entering the living room from the stairs.

"Oh, no one important...just someone who might hold a grudge against me."

"Are you safe?" Jane asked.

"I'm sure we'll be fine, he doesn't like Muggles and wouldn't be out around them over the holiday," she reassured her mother.

"You would be wise not to underestimate an adversary, Hermione," Severus advised, standing to walk over to her. "Remain wary. Your amulet will give me some indication of your location should you run into any danger," he said, giving her a stern look which did not go unnoticed by Hermione's parents.

"Don't worry, I'll keep an eye out," Hermione replied, trying to lighten his intense mood.

Once Hermione and her mother were in the car, Jane asked "What was all that about? I thought you said you didn't have to worry about that man anymore?"

"Lucius Malfoy I don't have to worry about...Severus is worried that Draco Malfoy, his son, is out to do something. His dad is still in St. Mungo's after his duel with Severus and will be there for a long time."

"That is just so barbaric, dueling in the streets."

"It's not done much, but it's a traditional way to solve issues. I'm so glad Severus won...if he hadn't..." Hermione trailed off with a shudder. She then fastened her seatbelt as the car started and her mother pulled out into the road.

"They would have made you marry that other man?"

"Yes...which is why Severus wouldn't let me go anywhere alone. He even gave Harry and Ron passes to stay with me if I get out of Gryffindor Tower late from studying. I'm sure I'm safe now, but he also gave me something that will let him know if I'm in danger."

"And then he comes to the rescue if you are?"

"Yeah, something like that," Hermione said, her thoughts drifting back to the horrid fight between him and Malfoy in Diagon Alley.

"So, are you really doing as well with Severus as you've said in your letters?" Jane asked after a few moments. "He just seems...distant."

"Yes, he is. But, I think we're getting along fine, all things considered," Hermione answered.

"I've been worried about you, love. He may have been the practical choice in your situation but I wanted for you to find someone who would care for you...and who you could enjoy being with." Jane paused a moment, and then said, "I know according to the law you're required to, well, have sex once a week. Can I assume that you're getting along with him on that well enough since you're sharing a room?"

"Mum!" Hermione exclaimed, blushing.

"Well, he just seems so restrained...I'd hate to think you're not at least enjoying one aspect of marriage. I know, talking about your sex life with your mum may seem strange, but I really hope you're not looking at it as a chore or something, or that he doesn't make it seem like a chore. He doesn't, does he?" Jane asked, concerned.

"No...he doesn't make it seem like a chore," Hermione stammered, looking out the window. It was the truth, really.

"I've got some books on the subject, if you'd like to borrow them, Hermione," Jane offered gently.

"Um...I've got some too...that's okay." Hermione thought a moment, trying to realize her mum just wanted to help and was probably hoping for some assurance that he was treating her well. "Actually...um...that's about the only time he's not restrained," she managed to admit, blushing furiously.

"Just a little advice, Hermione; most men are very amiable after sex. I know it may seem wrong to use sex like that but, honestly, it works. And really, if you're enjoying it, there's no reason not to."

"Mum!" Hermione exclaimed again, groaning and covering her face with her hands, trying not to think about the fact that if she was getting this advice from her mum, then that obviously meant she had experience on the subject...which brought up images she -- really -- didn't want to think about.

"No, I'm absolutely serious...you'll need to use every advantage you can being married to a near stranger. And if that's the only time he doesn't act like he's got a stick up his bum, use it."

Hermione grimaced...it was strange hearing her mum talk like that. "Yeah, he kind of does act like that," she agreed.

"That was one of the best things my mother told me, among other things. I should have had a chance to have this talk with you before all this but it happened so fast and it was so troubling at the time I wasn't thinking straight. And since we're on the subject, there are a few more things you need to know..."

Severus watched Hermione and her mother drive away, frowning. The amulet he'd given her would give him some idea of her location if she was in danger and he would be alerted automatically, with no need for her to activate it. He couldn't trail after her everywhere, true. Her mother, being a Muggle, would be unable to protect her in the case of Draco waiting to ambush them but that was highly unlikely. Draco would probably be visiting his father and taking care of other concerns over the holiday. Hermione should be safe. At least once they were back at Hogwarts, he could entrust her care partially to Potter. Although he loathed the boy, he did know he would do whatever it took to protect Hermione, and Potter was quite a bit more powerful than Draco and several of his sycophants put together.

"You really are worried for her, aren't you?" Frank asked, observing the black-clad man.

"Of course I am concerned for her safety," Severus replied as if it should be obvious.

"Just moments ago you acted as if she was a burden to you and now you act as if you care more for her than just some 'alliance'," Frank said.

"Is my *duty* as her husband to protect her."

Frank watched Severus for several tense moments before asking in an accusing tone: "And just what do you think her duties to you are? Sharing a room now, you two are, when you don't have to."

Severus glared at the other man. Several crude remarks went through his head but, no, he wouldn't say them. "Mr. Granger," he began, giving his voice a hard edge, "It seems I was mistaken in thinking that we had an understanding when Hermione and I first became betrothed. I thought you were a reasonable man, then. Hermione may be your daughter but she is my *wife* and what goes on between my wife and I is no one else's concern. Perhaps, you have been looking at her and seeing the little girl you sent away to school seven years ago. She is not that little girl; she is a capable adult witch and does not need your interference."

They stared at one another for several moments before Frank turned and pulled his jacket off the coat rack and walked out the door. Hermione had mentioned her father's tendency to take a long walk when troubled. Severus observed him through the window as he hastily stalked along the roadside path. He scowled for a moment, gritting his teeth, before returning to his grading. There was only so far he would go to create a good impression for Hermione and seeming to give in to her parents in surrender was one thing he would not do. The man would simply have to get used to the idea of having him as a son-in-law, and all that entailed.

The rest of the week and a half before Christmas passed quickly for Hermione and the small pile of presents under the tree grew to a respectably moderate pile. Hermione had pulled her list of the contracted unions of the Marriage Law out and had magically copied a form letter she was planning on sending out to all the Muggle-born brides. She filled in the name for each woman on her list and was going to turn it over to the Order to divide the workload of organizing a possible support group. The fliers that had been spread about were having an effect; there had even been a large article in the *Daily Prophet* about the Marriage Law and the public outcry against it. So far, so good. The Ministry of Magic continued to insist that the Marriage Law was the only way to solve their problems but, as they were unable to bring up facts that this particular method was the best way, their arguments were weak.

When she wasn't working on homework, she spent a lot of time with her mother in the kitchen making candies and cakes. She was aware of the tension between Severus and her father but figured it was just that they didn't know each other well. Her mother seemed to take to him much better, though Hermione still blushed when thinking about their conversation the previous Monday. She had to wonder how her mother would react to exactly what her sex life was like but it seemed she was reasonable about the fact that yes, she was having sex with Severus. She still thought he acted like he had a stick up his bum.

The night after her talk with her mum, as she ran her fingers through Severus's oily locks while he kissed her following their heated coupling, she had thought about her mother's admonition "*You're going to have to do something about that hair of his, Hermione.*" It had nearly caused her to laugh right there. It had certainly been interesting to hear her mother's ideas on how a wife should care for her husband; first and foremost was that a wife should never let her husband go out with nose and ear hair sticking out. Fortunately, Severus didn't have nose and ear hair sticking out. He had greasy hair instead, but she still couldn't imagine forcing shampoo upon him. It might be interesting to try next time they shared a bath back at Hogwarts, though.

Hermione was also thinking about all the other little nuggets of advice her mother had imparted. She had never realized that so much effort and thought would go into settling differences; her parents had always just seemed to get along so well and she had previously figured they didn't have differences or arguments. They had differences but didn't *fight* about them...that was the key. That sounded reasonable, just like what Severus had said about discussing differences as adults. She wondered what it would have been like had she married Ron instead of Severus. They still fought, not frequently, but she could imagine that it would have been worse if they were married. Ron had become much more reasonable, over the last two years, about things and hadn't been volatile about her marriage to Snape; he had even calmed Harry down about his concerns. She was glad to have him as a friend.

Hermione took the opportunity, while her parents were away shopping, to get online. It seemed everywhere she looked on the Internet there was something about sex, maybe she could find something about Severus's particular tastes. However, most of her searches only came up with a few pornography websites. She put her search off for later. She wished she had more time for it but her parents had only gotten a computer and Internet access a year before. And so, she had found many interesting things online during the summer before her seventh year.

"Are you going to want to have one of those when we leave Hogwarts?" Severus asked as she stood and started for the stairs.

Hermione turned to see him setting his papers aside and standing from the couch. "It would be good...but Wizarding villages don't have electricity."

"I wouldn't want to live in a village of either the Wizarding or Muggle sort. A home in the country could have electricity, if you would like that."

"Oh," Hermione said, blinking. "Yes...that would be very nice, Severus."

Severus nodded briskly and continued to the kitchen, leaving a puzzled Hermione to turn and go upstairs.

Christmas morning, Hermione awoke to the sound of music playing loudly enough to be heard upstairs. It was the Manheim Steamroller Christmas music collection, one of her favorites. Aside from the fact that she woke nude, with Severus's arm tucked around her waist, it was just like every Christmas morning she had spent at home from the time she was a small child. The smell of cookies wafted upstairs and she pulled out from Severus's grip as he woke, pulling on her clothes quickly.

"Come on, time for presents," she prodded, smiling brightly. Something about his dark, rumpled head scowling at her in her flowery bed seemed funny. He'd enjoyed a respite from rising early over the holiday.

"I'll be down after a shower," he declared. Hermione shrugged and left the bedroom.

Severus sighed and pulled himself from the bed, which had become increasingly uncomfortable. It was an old mattress, lumpy in all the wrong places. He pulled on one of his outer robes as a covering, gathered his full set of clothing, and went to the bathroom...a dismal bathroom. He stood under the nearly inadequate shower-spray and washed, wondering how this would go. His own family Christmases hadn't been much to speak of; a drab tree his mother insisted on putting up and decorating with a few scraps of charmed ribbon, transfigured to appear more glamorous than they actually were. Gifts were few...and then, following the gifts, an equally dismal Christmas dinner awaited.

He gritted his teeth as he pulled his clothes on. He didn't want to think about that and had succeeded, for the most part, in forgetting over the last twenty-some odd years. So Hermione had a happy time at Christmas. He found them all in the living room, Hermione kneeling before the tree, smiling up at him brightly. She looked so...young.

"I was starting to wonder how long it would take...here," she said, picking up a box, "this one's for you. Happy Christmas, Severus."

Gift opening passed fairly quickly. The Grangers didn't seem too extravagant on gifts, favoring the simpler, more practical, choices. From her parents, Hermione received several books on genetics and the history of Eugenics. Snape had given her father a bottle of Old Ogden's and her mother a figurine. He thought it was appropriate; impersonal and generic enough not to assume more of a familial relationship than actually existed. She'd placed the crystal figurine on a shelf, complimenting the gift. Severus had been surprised that Hermione's parents had both bought him gifts, as well. He'd raised an eyebrow at the irony of receiving a bottle of Glen Livet single-malt from Frank and a packet of linen handkerchiefs from Jane. Hermione had showed some thought in her gift and had purchased for him a recent Potions publication he hadn't yet added to his large library.

Hermione had given him an amused look at his first gift to her, several casual robes in muted natural colors, which would complement her skin tone. He had responded with a slight smirk, knowing she would pick up on the hint but unsure if she would actually take it and stop wearing her Muggle loungewear in favor of the more attractive alternative he'd provided. She seemed genuinely pleased with his second gift, a recent advanced publication on Arithmancy.

Frank and Jane withdrew to the kitchen following the gifting to prepare the Christmas dinner, leaving Hermione and Severus to gather their gifts and take them upstairs.

"Thank you, Severus," Hermione said as she placed the books on the top of her bookshelf. "I didn't expect anything from you...and for my parents, too."

"It would be inappropriate to not bring gifts. The book is nice, thank you," he said, surprising Hermione.

Hermione turned to him, smiling. "Maybe we're a better match than I had thought..." she trailed off, turning away. "Well, you know...I hope we are," she muttered, hoping she hadn't been too forward.

"I must agree. Being coerced into marriage with some of your fellow students could have been much worse. For the most part, I've found you acceptable."

"Acceptable, that's all?" she asked, crossing her arms and smirking.

Severus smirked and walked up to her, running a finger along her jaw line. "In some ways, *quite* acceptable." He looked down into her eyes. "You aren't too wearisome and your obedience has been very...satisfying."

Hermione blushed and smiled, chewing her lip nervously at the compliment. "Thanks..." she muttered. She supposed that was the best she could hope for...from anyone else it wouldn't have seemed a compliment, but from him it was generous. She was surprised when his hand moved around to the nape of her neck and he pulled her close, nipping at, and driving his tongue between, her parted lips. She surrendered herself to him, relishing the feelings he could elicit from her.

"Attend me, wife," he whispered heatedly as he drew away slightly, giving her a slight nudge to kneel before him. Hermione knelt and swiftly unbuttoned his trousers, releasing his length and taking it quickly in her mouth. She held fast to his hips, thumbs rubbing lightly over his hipbones as his hands rested on the top of her head.

Severus watched her, arousal quickly building to a crescendo by the sight of her lips stretched around his cock and the way she so expertly took his entire length, burying her nose in his dark thatch of hair on the deeper strokes. Yes, Hermione was quite an acceptable wife, despite a few of her annoying habits. She brought him quickly to completion; the sight of her throat working as she swallowed his seed was exquisite. Her open, vulnerable expression as she looked up to him when she pulled away, cheeks slightly flushed and lips swollen, pleased him. He hoped she would always retain that slight innocence, that touch of purity, which made her all the more desirable. Most of his previous sexual partners had been beyond jaded...often approaching vulgar. While they had been accomplished sexually, their attitudes had been unappealing. After tucking himself back into his trousers, he squatted down and kissed her again, thoroughly.

"I believe we should go downstairs, now," he said softly, pulling back and giving her a slight smile.

"Yeah...probably," Hermione answered, regaining her breath as she smiled back at him.

Boxing Day came next and, just after noon, the Grangers' home was inundated with Weasleys, along with Harry. Hermione was happy to see her friends and greeted them with hugs and kisses before they started exchanging thanks for their gifts. Arthur and Molly Weasley smiled at him and greeted him but the children all tried to keep their distance, after a brief 'Happy Christmas, Professor'.

The noise level in the living room was high and Severus retreated to the back porch to get some air and solitude. He was counting down the days...and it was with no small amount of relief that he realized they would return to Hogwarts in only five days. Of course that would mean a return of the students as well, but staying at his wife's parents' home was quickly becoming monotonous. He had passed his mornings grading papers and had even begun working on another project unrelated to grading, just to have something with which to busy himself. Perhaps next Christmas, Hermione wouldn't want such a long visit with her parents. The idea of having several uninterrupted days to enjoy her was something he'd been hoping for. But, Easter break might provide that opportunity.

He looked over as the back door squeaked slightly on its hinges and Frank Granger walked out. He nodded stiffly to the man and then resumed his observation of the wrens in the bare ash tree. If he had something to say, he would say it, Severus presumed. They hadn't spoken a word other than a few stiff greetings since their discussion nearly two weeks previous. His presumption proved correct, after a moment, as Frank cleared his throat.

"It seems," he began hesitantly; "I owe you an apology. Hermione does seem to be doing well. If you'd been unkind to her, I don't think she would be so happy."

"Apology accepted. I understand that this may be a difficult transition for you."

"Yes...yes, it has been," Frank sighed. Another moment of silence passed while the sounds of laughing and talking filtered through to the backyard and he spoke again. "It's good to see her so happy around all her friends. Jane and I have been so proud of her, especially since she started at Hogwarts. The Magical world all seemed so

wonderful and perfect before this Marriage Law business came up."

"The Wizarding world has its share of evil amongst the good. Magic, in and of itself, does not make a perfect world."

"Too true. But, for the longest time, we were so happy for Hermione. She wrote us all the time about all her friends and the things she was learning. You may not have known this, but when Hermione was in primary school, she had a very hard time making friends. Jane and I worried for her and we were so relieved that she had finally found a place she could fit in..."

Severus raised his eyebrows in surprise, wondering how long Hermione had been misleading her parents this way. They still had only a vague idea of the serious nature of the dangers in the Wizarding world and apparently believed Hermione to be a popular student. He wasn't going to shatter their image and tell them that Hermione had alienated herself quickly at Hogwarts by acting the biggest know-it-all ever to walk its halls. Had it not been for her arrogance as a first-year, thinking she could take on a Mountain Troll alone, and had Potter and Weasley not gone to the rescue, she probably wouldn't have ever made any friends...and would quite likely have died. That incident had given her a firm place as a friend of the two boys but she still had few other friends to speak of.

"...but what's done is done. We're trying not to see it as a tragedy."

"But, it is a tragedy. However, the blame should lie firmly at the feet of the Ministry of Magic and Cornelius Fudge."

"Yes, it should. I can only imagine...every pureblood wizard must be sending out contracts right and left, now..."

"Actually, there have been far fewer contracted unions than you might think."

"Is that so?"

"The few who are taking advantage of the law are likely men who cannot find wives the usual way," Snape muttered in disgust. "Additionally, if the Ministry of Magic is willing to restrict the freedom of purebloods to marry one another and then to force Muggle-borns into marriage, what might they do to everyone else? The populace is at least perceptive enough to see the implications. The law is weak, poorly planned, and widely disliked. It won't hold for long. Hermione's life probably wouldn't have been disrupted at all had it not been for Malfoy. There haven't been any other Muggle-born students of age to receive a contract, she was the only one."

"Our Hermione..." Frank sighed.

Snape waited several moments more before speaking again. "You might not think me ideal but, I assure you, I am far more desirable than Malfoy. The man was a monster."

"Was? I thought he was still alive."

"Alive...yes. But, he has been relieved of his permanent memory. He might be able to live as a functional person again but he won't ever be the same as he was. In effect, Lucius Malfoy is dead and will trouble Hermione no longer."

The silence stretched out again but this time it contained less strain. "Thank you, Severus," Frank said, extending a hand. Severus looked down and then took it, accepting the handshake. "You're doing a good job protecting Hermione. I'll try to see that, even if you aren't quite who I'd imagined Hermione ending up with."

Frank stepped back again, looking inside. "So, I'll be getting back inside then."

Severus nodded his acknowledgement and resumed watching the wrens in the tree. At least the holiday hadn't been a complete waste.

"Severus...looks like you've had a lot of grading to do," Jane Granger observed over dinner the Tuesday evening after Christmas. They had chosen to take a break from all the cooking, and then the Christmas Dinner leftovers, and had ordered curry.

"Yes, mid-year essays. While the students receive a vacation, teachers spend the duration of most vacations working," Severus answered, hiding a scowl as he bit into a large cardamom seed.

"Did you grade the seventh years yet?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, I have," he answered distractedly, delicately removing the remaining cardamom seeds from his rice.

"So...what did I make?" Hermione asked, between bites of curry.

Severus paused a moment, pursing his lips and considering his answer. "You will discover your grade along with the rest of your class, Hermione," he said, hoping she would drop the subject. He wasn't about to start giving her information like that and he resented her asking at the dinner table with her parents present.

"But, you already know my grade...would it really hurt to tell me now?" Hermione persisted.

Severus clenched his jaw and shot her a stern glance. The Grangers noticed his tension and an awkward silence descended around the table. "It would be...inappropriate...for me to show you favoritism. After all, you wouldn't want Mr. Zabini's allegations to be given any merit, would you?" he said carefully, evenly, following his statement with a slight smile, though his eyes remained cold as he glared at Hermione across the table. She returned his stare for a moment and then nodded and returned his stiff smile, which didn't reach her eyes.

"Of course...you're right, Severus," she said stiffly and went back to her dinner.

"Well," Jane Granger began, "I think it would be a good idea after dinner to break out a game...don't you think, Hermione? We haven't played a game together in such a long time...how about Scrabble? I think Severus might enjoy that as well, no Muggle trivia involved...what do you think, Severus?" She smiled brightly around the table, hoping to dissolve the tension.

Severus inwardly cringed...board games...they played board games. Next he would be watching football on the television. This holiday couldn't end soon enough for him.

"Yes, I would enjoy that, Jane. Thank you. Perhaps after dinner Hermione would be able to give me some brief instruction as to the *rules* of the game. Hermione?"

"Oh...yes, yes. I'll do that then."

When everyone had finished dinner ten minutes later, Hermione and Severus excused themselves and headed for the living room to pull out the Scrabble game and go over the rules. Jane and Frank looked at each other sadly. "I wish I knew what to do to help her," Jane sighed.

"I know," Frank agreed. "But, I think Severus is a reasonable man, even if he seems a bit harsh."

"Well, I've had a long talk with Hermione, too, on how to handle things...I hope it will be enough."

"You will *not* attempt to use me to gain premature knowledge of your grade like that again," Severus hissed venomously, as they approached the shelves in the living room where the board games were kept. "Especially not in front of your parents. I will make no exceptions regarding schoolwork with you just because you are my wife. You

knew that was wrong and, the fact that you would ask over dinner, hiding behind your parents, shows you knew it."

"I wasn't hiding behind my parents," Hermione disagreed. "I really didn't think it would hurt to know what my grade was."

"When it comes to addressing me in the capacity as your Potions Professor, don't think of me as your husband. Would you have asked for your grade early at the beginning of term, when I was nothing more than Professor Snape to you?"

"Well...no. But, you *are* my husband now...I just thought..."

"No, you didn't think. From now on, I suggest you do think about things before you open your mouth. Understood?" He was angry that she'd done that and had thought she would have known better. He wanted to make it clear that he wouldn't tolerate her trying anything of the sort again.

"Severus, I asked a little question that was maybe just a little out of line," Hermione retorted in a hiss nearly equal in venom to his. "There is really no need to act like this about it. I didn't mean it as a personal affront, I was just curious. I'm sorry if you thought I wanted you to play favorites but you could stand to at least try to be a little nice once in a while."

"I have restrained myself quite well over our stay here, or hadn't you noticed?"

"Yes, I do find that curious, how you can act like such *nice* guy around my parents," Hermione stated hotly, still keeping her voice down as she opened the lower cabinet of she shelves and pulled out the Scrabble box.

"I am *trying* to be considerate of your relationship with them. But, you know very well that I'm not nice and I have never made claim to be so. I thought you would appreciate my efforts to help your parents adjust to the situation."

"So, you're misleading them to make them think I'm married to a considerate person?"

"Hermione," Severus growled, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration. "I think I've been very considerate of you throughout all this. But, this is not the time to discuss it. We should get on with this...game" he spat, gesturing to the box she held, "...and we will speak of it later."

"Fine," Hermione hissed, pulling out the game rules and preparing to read them to Severus, but he grabbed the booklet from her.

"I am perfectly capable of reading, and understanding, simple directions. It's a Muggle game, how complicated could it be?"

Two hours later, they had a board covered with letter tiles. Severus had proven adept in the game, so far. Jane was in the lead, followed closely by Severus, and then Hermione, and then Frank.

"And just what is that?" Frank asked, as Severus placed the last letter of his word on the 'triple word score' square at the top right corner of the board.

"It's a bezoar...a stone which is found in the stomach of a goat and is most often used in antidotes for poisoning," Severus answered curtly.

"You're not making words up, are you now?" Frank asked in mock seriousness. "Hermione, is he making that up?"

Severus clenched his jaw and bit back a retort. That was the third time he'd been asked about making words up...and every time, they had asked Hermione to confirm the validity of a word. Playing a Muggle board game was bad enough but to be teased, it was...undignified. He and Frank had come to a truce but, if being at truce meant the man was going to act like this, he would prefer to go back to stony silence.

"No, Dad, he's not making it up," Hermione answered, scratching his score down on the pad of paper. Severus was now in the lead...with only a few tiles left, the game was quickly coming to a close.

"That's all well and good, Severus, but I'm afraid it can't beat this..." Jane said, as she began laying tiles out, her word began at the opposite 'triple word score' square.

"Does he always do that?" Severus sighed, after placing a silencing charm on the bedroom. After the game had finally ended, they had all shared a bottle of wine and Severus had attempted to engage in small talk. Or, at the very least, not insult Hermione's father, who he found increasingly annoying.

"Do what, play Scrabble?" Hermione asked.

"No...does he always accuse guests of making up words?" he clarified, and began unbuttoning his frock coat, which he still insisted on wearing, even amongst Muggles.

"Yeah, most of the time," Hermione answered, amused. "He doesn't mean anything by it...really. He's just teasing a bit, Severus. That's a good sign, it means he likes you."

"I see," he growled, though he obviously didn't. He pulled off his shirt and then sat on the bed and began removing his boots.

"Um, Severus...about what we were *discussing* earlier," Hermione began, crossing her arms and knitting her brows. "I suppose you are trying to be nice. But, I really don't like the way you jump to conclusions about my intentions. It wouldn't hurt to take a moment to ask me about something, rather than just yelling at me. You said we could discuss possible disagreements like adults but you're not acting like that all the time."

Severus froze with his pants around his knees, one leg poised in the air, and glared at her. "You're accusing me of not acting like an adult?" he demanded.

"See? There you go, jumping to conclusions and getting mad at me. We're married; you can't keep treating me like I'm your student, all the time. I've tried very hard to get along with you and I think I've accepted quite a lot in being married to you. It is not unreasonable to expect a husband to treat his wife like an equal person," Hermione declared firmly. She'd been rehearsing her speech throughout the game. She could handle doing what he told her when it came to sex but she wasn't going to stand for being trodden on the rest of the time, any longer. She waited for an answer as he finished undressing. He laid his pants across the chair in the corner of the room and turned around to face her again.

Severus crossed his arms and stood before her, giving her a light smirk as she pulled her eyes back up to meet his. "I haven't been treating you like a student, Hermione. I put up with quite a bit more from you than I would a student."

"But that's the thing," Hermione answered; she'd known that retort would be coming. "It's not about 'putting up with' me. I'm your wife; I shouldn't be a burden to 'put up with'. We're going to be together a long time; if you're thinking of just putting up with me, we aren't going to get along very well at all."

"I see, then how do you suggest we approach it?" he asked, eyebrows raised.

Hermione thought quickly...she hadn't expected him to turn it back around on her so soon. "Well, for starters, you could take a moment to ask about something before jumping to conclusions. And for another thing, you shouldn't try to decide things for me. You've been doing that a lot, and I don't appreciate it. I can make up my own mind about things and I can decide for myself how long I need to study," she stated firmly, watching him as he considered her words.

"Hermione, I am not accustomed to consulting another person regarding decisions. Perhaps, you are correct. However, there are things in which I am more experienced than you. It would behoove you to acknowledge that fact and accept that I will know better how to handle some things," he reasoned.

"That may be true, but the way you say it makes a big difference. You don't say it like it's a suggestion, you say it like it's an order. Like, when we went to the bookstore...you told me no more than twenty minutes, like I was a student or a child or something. If you would have said 'Hermione, I'm tired and I would appreciate it if you were to shop quickly', then that would have been different. But, you made it an order. I've agreed to take your orders in the bedroom, not to take them everywhere and at every time. I think you forget that sometimes."

Severus scowled at her. "Hermione, you would do well to grow a thicker skin. I am not in the habit of curbing my comments and, if you would pay attention, you would realize that I am not insulting or controlling you at every turn." He got into bed as he spoke and pulled the covers up to his chest as he lay back. He closed his eyes in exhaustion and then looked back at Hermione when he didn't hear anything for a short while. She was standing by the bed, still dressed and crossing her arms at him. "Are you going to stand there all night gaping at me or are you going to get some sleep?"

She turned around and began undressing, slipping between the sheets and up against him in the bed, which was rather smaller than what they shared at Hogwarts. He quickly assumed his normal position of tucking her closely against his body. The irritation she'd been feeling was waning with the physical contact...why was it harder to stay mad when his half-erect cock was nestled so comfortably between the tops of her thighs and his nose rested, just touching the base of her neck? Her tension at their argument subsided mostly, after several minutes.

"Severus?" Hermione asked, after it became clear that Severus was planning to simply go to sleep.

"Hmm?" he intoned

"I did the Fundemundic charm earlier today..." she said quietly, figuring this might be a good time to see if he became more amiable after sex, especially if it was a little out of the ordinary. And she had enjoyed it last time, despite the fact that she thought it would be gross, prior to trying it out. He hadn't asked her to do the charm again since that night, so she figured it would be a good time to give him a little hint. "I thought, maybe..."

"Liked that, did you?" he asked in a low voice in her ear. He turned away from her and leaned over to the nightstand, opening the top drawer, where he had a small bottle of oil put away. He'd planned to just go to sleep but the fact that Hermione had dealt with something rather uncomfortable of her own volition, to please him, tended to make him inclined to favor her.

Friday, two days after New Years, Hermione waved goodbye to her parents as they rushed out the door. They had received a call from a patient who had apparently not followed the aftercare instructions after having a wisdom tooth pulled and had eaten some fruitcake Christmas day, causing a terrible infection. It was their last day and Hermione had already packed her things and reduced them. They would be Apparating back to Hogwarts that evening.

Watching her parents over the holiday, Hermione had paid closer attention to their interactions together. Of course, she had always known her parents loved each other but had never really thought about it much before. It was simply a fact, married people were in love and she would someday marry someone she loved. But, that hadn't happened. She and Severus got along fairly well enough for roommates who had nothing to do with each other besides sex - that is. Hoping for more than that seemed unrealistic but she wished she could have something like what her parents had. They were a team in many things together: their dentistry practice, keeping a home, the cooking and housework were fairly equally divided between them and, through everything, they shared smiles and light touches, a hand on a shoulder here, a look and a smile there, which spoke volumes to Hermione, now.

Severus was distant and cold much of the time. He easily showed annoyance more than any other emotion. She had to wonder if he had an emotional range of more than lust, anger, and annoyance. However, she knew there was something more there than that. She'd seen it several times, a glimmer of something more in his eyes, even if it was only infrequently. He'd been right; expecting him to suddenly change would be unrealistic. Still, she couldn't imagine someone could be completely incapable of love.

Hermione went to the computer and signed online again. Once the connection was established, she searched again for information. Perhaps she could learn something more about Severus...he seemed to take sex very seriously, perhaps learning more about his particular tastes could give her some information about him as a person. Nearly an hour passed as she finally began to find articles, and not just pornography, on the subject. The more she read, the more troubled she became. She came across one article in particular, which was very alarming...he'd been doing it all wrong! She hit the print button and went in search of more articles.

Severus looked up from his book as Hermione rose suddenly from the computer desk, glared at him, and then pulled a stack of papers out of the machine which had been disturbing him with racket for the last half hour. She crossed the living room to stand before him, holding the stack of papers, before she slapped them down firmly atop his open book.

"You've lied to me!" she declared, crossing her arms.

Severus frowned at her in irritation and some confusion, and then looked down at the stack of papers, on the top of which was the title: *Safewords: The why's and wherefores of their absolute necessity in BDSM.*

"And just what is this?" he asked, glaring up at her.

"Articles, I found them on the Internet. You've been doing it all wrong."

Severus looked back down at the papers, eyes narrowing as he read the first paragraph...safewords...oh, really. "Whatever it is you think you've found, you are quite mistaken in thinking I've been doing it wrong," he said lowly. "This nonsense has nothing to do with us."

"Yes it does, I've read the descriptions...punishments, sadomasochism, bondage...it's all there; you've just been doing it wrong. I'm actually supposed to be the one in charge, according to that," Hermione insisted. She stepped back as Severus stood, placing his book and her freshly printed articles on the end table by the couch. "I didn't know what I was agreeing to...I didn't know about all this and you haven't told me about it," she continued, growing nervous and backing away slowly as he stalked towards her, an indiscernible look on his face.

"I have told you exactly what you needed to know," he intoned firmly. "You would do well to forget whatever you have read. There are certain things which I will not compromise on, this is one of them."

"Severus, I think..."

"I have not lied to you," he hissed. Hermione caught herself unconsciously backing away and stood firm as Severus came to stand just before her, looking down his long nose at her. "I told you I expected complete obedience and submission. I gave you information about what I expected and I've been very patient with you, as you've learned. I did not lie."

"Then why would I find those articles?" she retorted.

"Those articles have nothing to do with me, or our agreement. I have heard of these *safewords*; and I will not accept using them. You can trust that you will never need to use them."

"But what if you do something dangerous...something that can really hurt me? I should be able..."

"Stop...stop it now," he growled and swiftly shot his hand around, grabbing her by the thick pony tail her hair was pulled into, wrenching her head back. "Think, Hermione. You have a brain, use it. Think...have you ever been in *real* danger with me?" he asked, pulling Hermione up against his body firmly.

Hermione thought...trying to come up with something, and stay focused with her head wrenched back to look up at him. "The whip you used was dangerous..." she finally

stammered.

"In the hands of an unskilled person, yes, it could be very dangerous," he purred, now grazing his lips over her ear, "Have you ever suffered lingering affects from my attentions, beyond a few sore muscles or minor bruises?"

He waited several moments for her answer, pulling away to watch her face as she tried to remember something - anything - to use in her case. "The answer would be no, you have not. I have been exceedingly careful with you and exceedingly patient. But, this I will not tolerate. If you have any questions regarding the nature of our sexual relationship, you will ask me, and you will accept my answers. Dubious outside sources will not have any bearing on this. Do you understand me?" He waited several moments longer as Hermione chewed her lip. Thinking she had decided to drop the subject he pulled away, releasing her, and turned to go back to his seat. Perhaps her articles would prove entertaining at least.

"No," Hermione said, firmly. Incredulous, he turned around and saw she had her chin lifted in defiance, her eyes daring him to do something about it. "No," she repeated. "I don't understand that at all. I've read some of those articles I gave you and they have a lot of things that make sense to me. I can agree to make some compromises on it."

"Compromise? You have nothing with which to compromise; you are mine to do with as I please, I've been very clear on that."

Hermione gaped at him, stunned a moment, before regaining her bearings. "I didn't know about these things before...now that I know about it, you can't keep doing it wrong," she reasoned.

He regarded her for a moment, thinking about the best way to punish her for this outburst and defiance. However, noting her stance, the tension she held in her body, her fists clenched at her sides, he decided another form of punishment would work best. "I see you are not ready to submit fully. Very well then," he said simply, and turned back to his chair, ignoring her as he sat, setting the papers aside and resuming his reading.

Hermione stood, somewhat bewildered at his sudden capitulation. It wasn't what she'd expected at all. "Um...there's a contract in there," she said, crossing the room and picking up the papers, riffling through them. "Here," she said, handing him one of the two copies she had made. It was a list of various acts - she could check off those things she was willing to do, or try, and then he could look them over. He looked over at the contract...a glance to scan it was all he needed before he turned away. Hermione, upon seeing this, had the suspicion that he hadn't actually given in, and it left her with a twisted feeling in her stomach. Still, she wasn't going to back down, and she wasn't going to let him intimidate her.

"Do what you will with it," he said, turning back to his reading. She could do what she would with it but he would have nothing to do with it. She would discover that soon enough. He was angry -- and rather disappointed -- that her record of obedience should take such a turn now. He watched peripherally as she went back to the noisy machine, pulling another stack of papers from it, glancing nervously in his direction. Perhaps these computers weren't such a beneficial thing after all.

A/N: Mannheim Steamroller is an instrumental group that does wonderful music of all kinds, and their Christmas collections are beautiful.

Impasse

Chapter 14 of 31

Hermione and Severus find themselves at an impasse back at Hogwarts. And, Hermione begins her plan to help the other Muggle-born victims of the Marriage Law, and gets a little help along the way.

Thanks to my wonderful beta: Nakhash Mekashefah, who cleans my grammar and punctuation up with exacting standards.

"Father, as soon as I'm out of Hogwarts, I will take you back home," Draco said.

"Home?"

"Yes, Malfoy Manor. I will have healers there; they will start visiting with you next week. I've been told you can still read, right?"

"Yes...yes, I can read. Healer Gatsby gave me a nice book to read this week..."

"Never mind what she gave you to read. I'm going to bring you some things...you need to get ready, and learn about everything I bring you. I can't tell you everything now, but there's something important you will have to do when you leave here, do you understand, Father?"

"What do you mean, Darren...?"

"Draco...Father, my name is Draco...Draconis, actually. Call me Draco," he sighed in exasperation at his father.

"Yes, yes, Draco then. What will I have to do?"

"I can't tell you now, but you have to get ready...it's important, do you understand? And you need to work on getting better. Here," he said, pulling some books out of his bag. "I've brought you some picture albums; I labeled them so you can learn about your life. You have to learn about who you are."

"Okay, Draco," Lucius said, taking the books.

"Goodbye, Father. I will return when I can, in the meantime, I will write you. Your new healers will be here next week, and will come once a week," he explained again as he stood and put the chair back in its place against the wall.

Lucius frowned as Draco left the ward, which was mostly lit by glittering garlands strung about the walls and on the footboards of the beds. He wasn't sure what to think. He didn't like the boy. If that really was his son, how could he not like him? Lucius looked over to the bed next to him where a young woman had been brought in the day before. She was wincing in her sleep and whimpering slightly with pain. He was going to call a nurse, but she woke up, swiftly sitting up in bed, eyes wide and breath ragged from her nightmare.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly. She looked over to him, startled, and then nodded, her blond hair fell across her face in lank strands, damp with sweat.

"Just...just a bad dream," she said.

"I understand," he said, nodding. Though he remembered nothing of his life, he knew only that he was plagued by nightmares...faces and places he didn't know, and he had woken up screaming on a number of occasions in the time he had lived in the hospital, the only place he knew at all. He stood; placing the albums Draco had brought on the bedside table, and stepped across the space between their beds and sat gently on the side of the young woman's bed, looking with concern at the bruises, which were now fading on her face. "Would you like to talk about it?" he asked gently, purposely trying to put on the air of calm caring, as the nurses had done for him during his own night terrors.

She pursed her lips and shook her head, not wanting to relive the nightmare. "No...but thanks for asking. I just need to stay awake for a while; I didn't mean to bother you."

"No bother at all," he said. "If you would like, I can keep you company while you stay awake," he offered, giving her a smile. "I have them too...nightmares, that is."

"Why are you here?" she asked after a moment.

"Memory loss...I don't know who I am...or who I was. It's all very confusing really. I have a son, he tells me it was a curse and he's going to get some people to make me better..." he trailed off with a shrug.

"I'm sorry to hear that. It must be awful not to know who you are," she sympathized.

"I'll survive," he stated with assurance, though he didn't understand why he felt so confident. Perhaps it was all the caring people who surrounded him every day, the healers and nurses were all lovely, helpful people, and, while he still had some trouble remembering names, the familiar faces around him were comforting.

Hermione and Severus Apparated simultaneously back to the gates of Hogwarts. They'd gone out for dinner with her parents before leaving, and Hermione was relieved that the tension between Severus and her Dad was finally abating...they seemed to have settled whatever it was.

Hermione had found several more articles on the topic of sadomasochism, and, since she hadn't had time to read them all, she had printed them out to read back at Hogwarts. Severus had been closed off with her since that morning, barely speaking to her, and she was starting to worry. Her worry grew as they approached the front door of Hogwarts and he shot her an evaluating glance, scowled, and then continued walking.

"Is something wrong, Severus?" she asked as they entered the Great Hall.

"We will discuss it later," he said tightly.

Just as they reached the other side of the Great Hall, they heard Professor Dumbledore call out. "Ahh, Hermione, Severus, how was your holiday?"

"Hello, Headmaster," Hermione said, smiling. "It was good, and yours?"

"Oh, fine, fine. You completed the letters I assume?"

"Yes," Hermione answered, pulling her bag around. "I've got them here," she said, opening her bag and pulling out the stack of parchments."

"Good, I'll have the school owls deliver them. Severus, was it good to finally get away for the Christmas holiday?"

"It was...productive," he answered.

"I hope you didn't spend the entire time grading, Severus," Dumbledore said, chuckling. "If you don't mind, I need to borrow Hermione for a while," he said, and then turned to Hermione. "I hope you might be able to help the Order out on some of our campaign," he said.

"Oh, yes, I'd love to help," Hermione answered.

"Good evening then, Headmaster," Severus murmured, then turned and walked down the steps to the dungeons.

Once Hermione was seated in the Headmaster's office with a cup of tea, Dumbledore began. "It is fortunate, thus far, that there haven't been as many marriages under duress as there could have been. I have been thinking over your idea for a support group for the Muggle-born brides, and I believe that is an excellent suggestion. I am willing to rent the upstairs meeting hall of Madam Rosmerta's pub for bi-weekly meetings, and I would like to ask you to organize these meetings. That is, if you have time between your school work and your Head Girl duties?"

"Oh, yes, I can do that, thank you, Headmaster."

"You're quite welcome, Hermione. Lemon Drop?" he asked.

"No, thanks, sir."

"Very well, more for me," he said, smiling as he plopped a candy in his mouth. "Are you and Severus getting on well, Hermione?" he asked.

"Well enough, I think. It's only been a bit over two months..." she said, shrugging.

"I'd hoped your getaway last month would have been an opportunity for the two of you to spend some quality time together," he said. "Did you have a good time at Hadrian's Wall?"

"Oh...yes...it was nice. Severus found some potions ingredients and herbs he needed on our hike; it was good to get out."

"Perhaps next time I should think of someplace that won't be so rich in potions ingredients..." he said thoughtfully.

"Headmaster...I appreciate it, but really, there's no need to do that," Hermione protested.

"Severus hasn't had a holiday in many years, Hermione. It really is good to see him getting out, and, I must say, he has seemed less prickly for some time now. I just want to be sure that this union is agreeable for the both of you, and I will do what I need to in order to help you along. Remember, Hermione...if ever you need to talk to me about anything, I'm here for you, and I'll understand whatever it is," he said, gazing at her intently.

"Thank you, Headmaster. I appreciate it...everything is fine, I'm sure," she assured the man, hoping it was true. "Well, if that's all, I need to get back and unpack."

"Very well, I will have the owls deliver the return letters to you, and if you need any assistance in organizing, let me know. We do have several members of the Order who would be willing to volunteer to assisting you. Don't take on more than what you can handle."

"Don't worry, I'll let you know if I need help, good evening, Headmaster," she said, her smile turning into an expression of worry as she descended the spiral staircase. She had a bad feeling about something...and she was sure it was to do with Severus and their talk. But, she couldn't avoid the inevitable. She decided to enter her bedroom entrance instead of the living room entrance so she could unpack and take some time to read her articles. After that, she would be more prepared to continue their discussion. It was time to put her foot down...she had entered into a marriage she didn't want, and had agreed to conditions she wasn't fully informed about. Even if she had enjoyed it after a while, that didn't make it right.

The dungeons seemed especially dark and dank, for some reason. And, as she walked down the last corridor to the entrance of their quarters, her stomach quavered in

nervousness. Lowering her wards, and unlocking her door, she stepped inside. Once the door was closed and locked behind her, she turned and stopped cold at what she saw.

A bed...in her room.

It was a double size bed placed between the back wall and the window. The bed curtains were plain white, as were the coverings. With a sick feeling, Hermione dropped her bag and walked over to the bed slowly, wondering why he would do this. She saw a parchment folded on the coverlet and picked it up, turning it over to read.

Hermione,

You have accused me of lying to you, I did not. You accused me of misleading you, I have not. When you are prepared to withdraw your accusations, and accept certain conditions, which I will explain to you when you come to me and request to know those conditions, you may return to my bed.

In the interim, you will sleep in your room. We can fulfill the weekly coitus requirements anywhere except for my room. I have made an extra door for you to access the bath.

Hermione crumpled the note in her hands angrily and threw it across the room. "When you can accept certain conditions," indeed.

Severus sat, sipping his Glen Livet. It was a very nice gift from Hermione's father, smooth and well-aged single malt. He wondered how long it would take Hermione to get back from her meeting with the meddlesome Dumbledore. She would be in for a surprise, indeed.

When she had slapped the papers down on his book that morning, and followed that with accusations that he'd lied to her, he had seriously considered bringing her back and whipping her until she proclaimed he was, indeed, her master. However, that wouldn't have worked. Such a blatant exercise of his power over her would only serve to fuel her determination to rebel. So, he would simply wait for her to come back to him. He could wait; he'd had years at a time of celibacy. Hermione, however, had only recently learned of the joys of the flesh. She was young and her hormones would fuel her newfound desires. She had little experience in resisting lust...all points in his favor.

It was simply a question of time.

He was sure it wouldn't take too terribly long for her to finally submit. Perhaps it would be a few weeks...perhaps a few months if she was especially determined. It was only a minor setback. In the long run, a few months of restraint would be more than worth it. He quickly schooled his thoughts away from the image of his young wife, tied beneath him, and instead made his way to the bookshelf, where he withdrew a text. After reading for several moments, the sound of a muffled thump caused him to smirk...yes; she had arrived, and, apparently had been so shocked, she'd dropped something.

Hermione paced her room, trying to figure out what to do, growing angrier with each passing minute. He'd kicked her out! It was unthinkable, inconceivable. How could the man go on and on about how she was his to do with as he pleased, and then ban her from his bed? She laughed after a moment, realizing two could play at that game. He was the one who wanted sex; he was the one who had some strange compulsion to spank her, even if she had enjoyed it too; he obviously thought she would come crawling back, calling him 'Master' and simply allowing things to proceed as they had when she had been ignorant of the rules of their sexual games...rules apparently that others recognized and held to, but he hadn't informed her of.

She made a quick trip to the bathroom, checking first to be sure Severus wasn't in there. The new door had been magically installed along the back wall of her room. When she returned to her room, she unpacked her things, angrily thrusting the new robes Severus had given her into the back of her unused drawer. The book, however, deserved better treatment, and so it went on her shelf. She then sat down on her couch with the stack of articles. She would read them, and then would be able to better argue her position. Maybe she'd been a bit hasty in presenting it to him that morning, but the anger and betrayal had seemed too much. She really had trusted him.

The first of the articles was fairly straightforward, presenting the fact that it was the Submissive partner who was actually in control, despite the fact that the Dominant partner seemed to wield the power. The submissive should be able to stop something which was uncomfortable or too painful. That was the first of his infractions; he'd never given her a way out.

The second article was of a similar nature, but seemed to focus more on parties...Hermione was surprised people actually got together at parties to play out fantasies, and wondered if he would have wanted to do that? Would he have taken her somewhere and whipped her in front of other people? She shuddered as she read, realizing how much power she'd given him, and how much power he demanded. Did he really think she wouldn't research and learn? However, she later came to the conclusion that Severus wasn't really one for parties of any sort...so maybe that was a bit out there to worry about.

However, after several more articles, she reached one that was very, very different. She read with a mixture of fascination and horror as one lady described her relationship...and there weren't any safewords...there wasn't a way out. He not only controlled their sexual encounters, but micro-managed everything in her life, and she liked it! Hermione shook her head, unable to fathom that sort of thing...whippings for not doing the laundry on time, or for not asking permission to make a phone call, or not performing the required amount of exercise? She'd even had to ask permission to write the article. Unthinkable...

Later that evening, nearly time for bed, Hermione still sat on her couch, her room door still closed. She hadn't heard from Severus at all, and wondered if she should go talk to him, at least. Words from her mother came back to her,

"Never go to bed angry...always work out whatever it is before you go to sleep, no matter how late it is. If you allow an argument to fester in silence, it will always get worse with time..."

"If you have a disagreement, never make accusations...you have to understand his position, just as you try to make your position understood. If you fight in anger, it will only drive a wedge between you, and then it will be much harder to fix..."

She'd forgotten completely about that advice and had gone into the argument making accusations and demands, not even listening to what he had to say, nor trying to understand him.

The problem was, his position was so uncompromising, and so incomprehensible to her. She couldn't fathom why he had to be in complete control. She had no idea of why he enjoyed inflicting pain. She had no way to see his point of view. Hermione thought back to those times she had caused others pain...she hadn't enjoyed it out of pleasure, she'd enjoyed it out of a sense of justice and revenge. Rita Skeeter had *deserved* to be locked up in that jar for a summer. It was a justified action on her part, and not done for pleasure, but for a purpose. Delores Umbridge *deserved* what she got at the hands of the Centaurs, that evil, cruel, bigoted...well, she got what was coming to her, and Hermione had felt a sense of satisfaction in giving it to her...that surge of power that came with wielding justice...

Hermione sat up, wondering if she'd just come across something. She had enjoyed other's pain before, after all. Just not in a sexual way...but still, it wasn't the same with Severus. He didn't hurt her for any kind of justice...at least, she didn't think so...she couldn't imagine it was any kind of revenge for the various infractions she'd done over the years of her school career. He hurt her simply for his pleasure, and that she didn't understand. She couldn't imagine hurting a friend or someone who was supposed to be close out of pleasure...that would be terrible. And he didn't seem to dislike her either...maybe at their first meeting he had shown dislike, but now, she was sure that he at least had some interest in her.

Hermione looked over to the door of her room, wondering if Severus was out there, wondering if she should go and try to talk to him. She didn't want to give in though...if she went out there now, she would seem weak. But what was the alternative?

Her mother's advice may have been good for a conventional marriage, but Hermione decided that her mother couldn't understand this situation. It was totally different. She would wait...maybe he would be easier to deal with after a few days.

First, she decided to take a shower. Making sure the bathroom was empty; she quickly scrubbed herself and her hair, but stopped as she picked up her razor from its shelf. If he was going to ignore her, then she thought it only fair that she take a break from shaving, if only for a few days. Besides, shaving her pubes took more time than it should, and it would serve him right to have to deal with stubble. She knew they'd have to sleep together because of the coitus clause, but she didn't have to do any more than that. He liked her shaved, so she decided not to. Back in her room, she smiled, realizing she could take this opportunity to wear her pajamas...if Severus thought he was punishing her by giving her a bed and privacy, he was wrong. Feeling a bit giddy, she pulled her warm, flannel pajamas out of the drawer in which they had sat, unused, since her wedding night. Once she'd pulled them on, she got into bed, and closed her eyes, ready to go to sleep.

Severus had heard the shower start, and, though he'd been tempted, he didn't enter the bathroom. She needed time to stew, and she would have it. After his own shower, he went to bed. He lay there for a long time, turning over, trying to find a comfortable position. Time drew on as he tossed and turned. Finally, he grabbed a pillow from Hermione's side and held it to his chest, just as he'd held her over the last few months.

A while later, frustrated, he sat up. He couldn't sleep. He wondered momentarily if Hermione was having the same difficulties. However, he was a Potions Master, there was no reason he shouldn't sleep just fine. He got out of bed and pulled on his bathrobe and quickly exited his quarters to the private entrance to his lab. Finding the sleeping draught, he swallowed it and went back to bed, falling quickly into sleep.

Hermione turned over again, and adjusted her pillow. It had been two hours and she still couldn't sleep. Her pajamas, at one time comfortable, seemed to twist and bunch around her. Frustrated, she jumped out of bed and pulled them off, flinging them to the floor and then getting back between the sheets, naked. That was a little better. She settled on her side and closed her eyes, waiting for sleep to come.

Fifteen minutes later, she tossed onto her back and sighed deeply. Something was missing, and she knew what it was. Every night for just over two months, she'd gone to sleep with Severus's arms wrapped around her, his breath on her neck, his hand often cupping a breast as he slept. His chest was always warm against her back, and she had enjoyed the feeling of his body against hers. Usually, she also had a nice, tingly, post-coital glow to help lull her to sleep. But, she wasn't going to let it bother her...she'd slept alone just fine for eighteen years, she could do so again.

At breakfast the next morning, Severus looked across the table where Hermione sat, pointedly ignoring him. Her face was puffy and her eyes had dark rings under them...she hadn't slept well at all last night. McGonagall had glanced at her, concerned, and then turned back to give him a questioning look, but he'd ignored her. He finished eating just as Hermione excused herself from the table, and rose from his place and followed her out of the Great Hall.

"Hermione," he called, noting the way she stiffened and then turned to him, trying to place a mask of indifference on her face, but failing.

"What?" she asked tersely.

"I was wondering if you might want to assist me in brewing some potions today," he said.

Hermione looked puzzled, and frowned at him, wondering why he would ask her this. "I have other things to work on today, Severus," she finally answered stiffly.

"Very well. The students will return tomorrow, as you know. When Draco is back, I don't want you in the halls alone; don't forget that he is dangerous."

"I won't," she answered. She paused; she had been planning on heading to her room, but didn't want to walk with Severus now. So, she changed her mind. Hagrid had left early from breakfast to go take care of some of his magical creatures early from breakfast, and she decided to go outside and see what he was up to. With a curt, "I'm going to see how Hagrid is doing," she turned and walked back across the entrance hall, and outside.

Severus chuckled at her. He'd noticed as she opened the door, how she had cringed at the cold. She wasn't dressed for it. Hagrid wouldn't let her freeze, and she had enough sense to seek a warm place soon enough, before she ended up with frostbite. It would have been a good opportunity to tease her as they brewed together, but he would find other opportunities for that in the near enough future. And so, he turned and went back to the dungeons. Hermione was going to be stubborn, that was expected. It would only make her eventual surrender that much more pleasing.

Hermione sat beside Harry in Potions class Monday morning, pointedly examining her Potions text, rather than watching Severus at the front of the classroom.

"While you dunderheads were having a leisure vacation, I was bound to the task of grading some truly abysmal essays. How most of you lot managed to make it this far into NEWT's level is a mystery to me," he said, glaring at each of the students in turn. He then began stalking between the desks, handing out the essays.

Hermione continued to act as if she were busy as Severus stood in front of her desk, having just handed Harry's essay to him. He held the stack of parchments in front of her, and she ignored him, waiting for him to drop it on her desk.

"Madam Snape," he hissed. "If you could be bothered to keep your attention on the happenings of the class, perhaps?"

Hermione scowled up at him, angry at the scattered giggles from a few of the Slytherins. He still held the essay out for her, and so she reached for it, knowing he would only make a bigger scene if she refused to cooperate. As she did, he used the cover of the parchments to stroke his fingers along her hand, his thin lips quirked up at her. She pulled the parchments away, pretending she hadn't felt anything. Looking down at her essay, she saw '110 %' scratched across the top.

Tuesday, she still ignored him, and, when she returned to her room early that day, instead of going to Gryffindor Tower, she wondered if she should break the silence and go talk to him. However, she decided she couldn't seem like she was giving in so soon. Still, she hated not talking to him. She lay back on her bed, staring up at the white canopy as she thought. Did it really have to be such a big issue? And why did feeling shut away from him bother her so much? She didn't want to care, or worry. Had it really been that bad before, though? She really had enjoyed being with him...and most of the time; he didn't even pull out the paddles or ropes or other accoutrements. He still gave her directions, but, really, maybe it hadn't been all that bad?

But on the other hand, she didn't want to feel like she was being walked on. He always told her what to do...in class she had no choice, unless she wanted a detention or something...she had to wonder how that would go...detention with her husband. Maybe he'd spank her instead of making her scrub cauldrons, wandless? She laughed, but she decided it would be best not to do something to get detention, especially from Severus; that would just be embarrassing. There wasn't any need to give the Slytherins fuel for their taunts, and that would certainly be fuel.

Hermione glanced over to the clock; it was just after four...dinner would be in an hour. She decided for an early bath...she'd been arranging her shower times to avoid Severus, as well. She went to the bathroom and ran a bath, deciding she wanted to relax for a change, instead of showering. She frowned at her prickly legs once she was in the tub...maybe prickly legs weren't the best protest piece; it wasn't like he was going to notice anyway.

Severus returned to his quarters. His last class of dunderheads was through. Normally, he would prowls the halls, looking for students to relieve of house points, but today, he wanted to relax in a bath. His nerves were fraught, and he'd had to take a sleeping potion every night since they'd returned to Hogwarts. Once in his room, he undressed

hastily, and then opened the door to the bathroom.

Hermione spun around in the bath when the door opened, and saw Severus there, naked. She closed her eyes and turned back around, pulling her knees up and preparing to stand. So it had been a short bath.

Just as she stood and began to leave the tub, Severus spoke. "No need to leave, Hermione."

"I'm done," she said.

"Wouldn't you like for me to wash your back?" he offered, stepping into the tub behind her. He reached forward, skimming his fingertips down her dripping back. She shivered, taking in a deep breath as he did. "Or maybe, you'd like something more?"

"No, I'm done," she said firmly and swiftly stepped out of the tub, grabbing a towel and entering her room before even bothering to dry herself. She closed the door before wrapping the towel around herself. She hadn't expected him to come in...and when he did, she didn't know what to do. She closed her eyes and relived the feeling of his fingers over her back, drifting down...

Hermione groaned in frustration, realizing that the brief contact had left her thoroughly stimulated. She distracted herself in preparing for dinner, and determined to spend the rest of the evening in Gryffindor Tower.

Severus scowled at the door after it slammed closed. That hadn't gone as well as he'd hoped.

He eased down into the water, which was still quite warm. Apparently, Hermione hadn't been in the bath for very long. He wished she had stayed, talked, something. But, it had only been four days...Hermione's stubborn streak might take a bit longer than four days to wear down. His anger had abated over the last four days, however. He had brewed up a fresh supply of sleeping potion, but hoped he wouldn't have to keep using it much longer. Odd, how quickly he had become accustomed to Hermione's presence in his bed. He wanted her, and he'd have her again that Friday, but not in the way he wanted to. It wouldn't be in the way she wanted, either. She was going to have to learn that he would not compromise. He'd already compromised quite a lot with her. He'd played a blasted, bloody, board game for her. He devoted time to ensure her safety, when he should be free to relax and enjoy the fact that the Dark Lord was gone for good. No...he wouldn't compromise.

Lucius Malfoy looked through the picture album again, memorizing names. There were many of him, and a thin woman who had hair of the same color. 'Narcissa' the label on the picture said. There were also pictures of his son, from the time he was a baby, on up through a picture of him with other boys in green and silver robes, all holding sleek broomsticks. 'Slytherin Quidditch Team' the label said. He frowned again, and turned back to the picture at the front. It was of himself, many years ago. He was smiling, and had his arm thrown over the shoulder of a young man next to him who had black hair, a long nose, and deep-set black eyes, and who was scowling. Looking down at the label, he read 'Severus Snape: The Traitor'.

Wednesday, owls began arriving from the letters to the other Muggle-born brides who'd been forced into marriage. She read them over; finally glad to have something productive and meaningful to take her mind off of her issues. The responses were mostly brief notes saying they would make it out. However, one letter in particular was encouraging. It was from a Treva Bulstrode (Hermione wondered if there were any relation to Millicent Bulstrode). She'd had training at a Muggle university as a counselor, and offered to help out where she could. Relieved, Hermione wrote back, telling her she would love some help.

Hermione did her best to ignore the door, which seemed to be calling to her. She wanted to talk to him, straighten out the problem, and get on with things. Instead, she pushed herself into schoolwork, and spending time with Harry, Ron, and Ginny in Gryffindor Tower. If they noticed her spending more time with them, they didn't say anything.

By Friday, she had received fifty-eight responses out of the hundred fifty letters she sent. She informed the Headmaster, just after the weekly meeting with prefects, and he told her he would arrange for the meeting room in Hogsmeade for the following Saturday. And so, Hermione made another batch of form letters, informing all one-hundred thirty-three (three more weddings had been performed in the week since she'd sent the original letters), Muggle-born brides of the time and place of the meeting, hoping that they could make it. She wasn't sure how to go about it, and was starting to wonder if she'd gotten in over her head. There could be some serious issues to deal with here...but she figured having a support group of people all dealing with a similar situation would be good.

When she entered her room after classes that day, she found another note on her bed.

Hermione,

As you are probably aware, we are still required to have intercourse once a week. I will come to see you tonight, or you may join me in the living room for a drink before we get on to business."

How like him, she thought. She could just sit and wait, catch up on her homework, and do other things. But, she wasn't sorted into Gryffindor for nothing.

Determined, she rose and strode to the door separating her room from the rest of his quarters. She placed her hand on the knob, going over what she would say, and turned. The living room was lit with a few candles and the light from the hearth glowing warmly, and casting long, dancing shadows. She saw him, sitting in his fireside chair, sipping a drink. She left her door open, and slowly walked around the couch.

For Severus, the week passed slowly. He allowed her to ignore him, and let her stew. He ignored her in class, and let her think he didn't keep track of her whereabouts. However, he always knew when she came back from Gryffindor Tower in the evenings, and he always knew when she was in her room. The week also allowed him to cool his anger, somewhat. He had acted in anger when he put the bed in her room. His temper was his weak point, and he usually did his best to exercise control over that aspect of himself. He'd come to realize he wanted her in his bed more than he'd thought previously. Still, he wasn't going to give in. He couldn't now.

He'd left a note on her bed that afternoon, knowing she'd find it when she got back. The weekly coitus requirements would work to his advantage for more than one reason. He hoped that after a week, she would be ready to talk about things sensibly. He felt finally able to talk sensibly, as well. He planned to get her drunk enough that she would speak freely...she'd spent too long bottling her feelings up around him, trying to put on airs that she was fine, and that marriage wasn't bothering her. In some ways, she was fine, but he'd read through her articles during one of his free periods while she was in class, and so better understood why she had reacted so strongly. He supposed reading about people who died while under the attentions of a professional dominatrix would scare her. And then, he'd come across a few truly disgusting things ...no wonder she'd been so upset. The things some people do...he shuddered, trying not to think about it.

If she didn't come out to see him, then he would go to her later. He hoped she would come to him, though. He was rather glad, then, when he heard the door click open and saw her walk into the living room. Just like any Gryffindor, she'd girded herself for battle as blatantly as could be possible.

"Good evening, Hermione. I wondered how long you would pout in your room. Would you care for a drink? Your father's gift is nice, but, if you'd prefer something milder, there is wine and sherry," he offered.

"No, thank you," Hermione said stiffly. "I was going to see if you might be ready to compromise on certain things."

"Certain things..." he drawled thoughtfully. "Which 'certain things', Hermione?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean."

"If you are incapable of saying it aloud, then perhaps it is you who are unable to see the situation for what it is." He stood and walked to her, noting how she steeled herself, standing uncomfortably before him. Such a sudden change in only a week, he mused. She had been smiling and laughing around him before, even going so far as to flirt on occasion. He said nothing as he stood before her and reached out a hand, running it up her arm to her shoulder, and then back down her back, where he rested his hand on her waist. "Would you prefer to take care of our marital obligations in here, or in your room?" he asked. "We won't be going into my room until you've decided to end this silliness."

"It's not 'silliness'," Hermione insisted, trying to ignore how good his hand felt, rubbing in small circles on her hip.

"It most certainly is," he murmured, leaning forward to breathe her scent at the base of her throat. He followed that by nipping a line up the prominent muscle of her neck towards her ear, satisfied when she swayed slightly. He saw her catch her hand, which had gone up to grab his shoulder, by fisting it mid-air and returning it to her side. "You want me," he said.

"Severus...why can't we just talk about this?" Hermione managed to ask. "I mean, you've been pretty reasonable about most other stuff..." she was trying not to be distracted by his hands, and mouth, which was now nipping a line just around her collar.

"I'm not being unreasonable...I expect nothing more than what I informed you of well before you had to make a decision," he said lowly as he began unbuttoning her shirt, crouching before her.

"Then why bother giving me my own bed? You could just chain me to yours," she said, exasperated.

Severus stopped his progress and looked up at her, piercing her with her gaze. "Yes, I could," he admitted. "But, I don't want for there to ever be any further misunderstandings...I'm giving you time to see the error of your judgment."

"And why is it always me that's wrong?" Hermione asked, stepping back out of his reach. "I just don't see why we can't do it like normal people."

"I see," he muttered, rising to his full height. "And what, in your vast experience, is normal?"

"That's uncalled for," Hermione said back, in a voice, which was much calmer than what she felt.

"And accusing me of falsehood was not?" he asked. They stood a moment glaring at one another before Severus spoke again. "I won't continue this discussion if you're going to act like this. We have to complete the requirements of the coitus clause tonight, if you wish to make this a pleasant undertaking it would be appreciated."

"Let's just get this over with," Hermione hissed back, not sure where the venom she felt was coming from.

"Very well," Severus replied. He reached out, grabbing her by both shoulders and spun her around, swiftly positioning her over the arm of the couch. He began moving her clothing out of the way, and then his own, only enough to complete the deed. Hermione remained stiff and unresponsive, her shoulders held stiffly, but he knew she'd wanted more, her body was more than ready for him when he plunged into her.

When he finished several moments later, Hermione stood upright, and walked back to her room, not even glancing back in his direction.

The week following the less-than-enthusiastic encounter was a long one for Hermione. She avoided Severus, even taking advantage of the Prefects bathroom from time to time so as not to encounter him. She spent most of her time in Gryffindor Tower. Not once did she venture into the living room with Severus, where only a month before she had felt perfectly at ease sitting back on the couch with a book.

Each night, she got back to her room late, doubly glad that Harry and Ron had been given passes to escort her. However, she sensed they were becoming tired of the obligation. They hadn't said anything directly, but Ron had wondered aloud at one point if Snape did his rounds around curfew time, if he would be able to drop by Gryffindor Tower in the process.

Thursday evening, Hermione climbed into bed after studying and working on several assignments for a while after she'd returned to her room. She was tired enough that she hoped sleep would come quickly. It took a long time to fall asleep, and when she finally did, she awakened not long after, trying to remember snatches of a troubling dream, which was quickly fading.

Severus looked at the potion in the phial...he didn't want to have to take it, but it would be the best way for her to learn. This particular potion was often used as a prank, slipped into the drink of young men by practical joking friends before a special event with a significant other. The results proved embarrassing for the unfortunate brunt of the joke. However, he would have no need for embarrassment at this; he was doing it for a purpose. It was Friday evening; time to fulfill the requirements of the coitus clause. He drank the potion, and then knocked on her door. She sullenly called for him to enter, and he did.

The walk to Hogsmeade for the first meeting of the Muggle-born witches affected by the law was awkward, as Severus had insisted on accompanying her to keep her safe. Hermione had protested before they left that she didn't need him to come with her. He'd countered that, telling her that since it was his job to protect her; he wasn't going to leave her on her own, as it was also a Hogsmeade weekend, and Draco could possibly take this opportunity to hurt her.

"I will remain downstairs; you need not worry that I'll be hanging over your shoulder," he had told her in their quarters.

Their encounter the previous night had left Hermione frustrated and angry. He hadn't taken any time to make sure she enjoyed it. He'd simply teased her enough that she was well prepared for him, and then entered her, finishing in less than three strokes. She'd been surprised; he'd never had the problem she'd heard other girls complain of before. Severus had left her room without a word afterwards. Her surprise quickly turned to resentment as she realized he'd done it on purpose.

Her determination to simply wait him out was ebbing. She tried to push away thoughts of the previous evening as they walked through the snow. It was a beautiful day, and she wanted to enjoy it. While cold, the sun was shining, and the landscape was a beautiful study of glistening surfaces, soft whiteness covering the hills, and icicles hanging from the trees along the path, and snow piling in the crooks of branches, and clustering in fluffy tufts over the fir trees.

Most of the students were already in Hogsmeade. Hermione had needed to prepare for the meeting. In the week since she sent out the announcement of the meeting, she had received fifty-eight responses from women who would be able to make it. She wondered about the others who hadn't responded at all. However, Professor Dumbledore had turned those names over to another within the Order who would investigate them. If they were in an abusive situation and couldn't respond, they would do what they could to take action. Dumbledore had assured her she didn't need to worry about it, that she was busy enough between her Head Girl duties, schoolwork, and organizing the support group for those Muggle-born brides who could attend.

She hoped the room would be large enough...if fifty-eight people would be a lot.

They reached The Three Broomsticks quickly enough, and Hermione and Severus entered the pub. It was busy, with wizards and witches crowded around tables and along the bar. "I'll wait here for you," Severus announced, leaving her side and picking a table near the door where he could observe those who arrived. He pulled a stack of papers from his satchel...more grading.

Hermione saw Rosmerta serving a group of wizards and started across the crowded pub. Rosmerta sighted her, and called out, "It's all set up for you, go on upstairs." Hermione headed for the stairs; she hadn't been in the upstairs meeting room of the pub before, and she hoped it would be enough. When she arrived, she was sure magic must have been used to expand it. There was a long table of drinks and refreshments along one wall, and there were comfortable chairs arranged in an oval...quite a lot of chairs, Hermione noted nervously. She had taken on this responsibility and would have to speak in front of them all.

She'd prepared a statement of purpose for the group, and hoped that it would be adequate. Treva had written her back and said she would arrive early to talk to her before the meeting and give some suggestions. She tried to imagine...some of the people she would be speaking to would have had no choice in their partner...not that she'd had much choice, but, still, she'd had a choice.

She took a look at the table of refreshments; Dumbledore had thought of everything, it seemed. She strolled around the room a few times...the meeting time had been announced to begin in an hour; Hermione wanted to be early to greet people as they arrived. And so, she took a seat, and pulled out her statement, thinking that reading it over a few more times would ease her nervousness.

After about twenty minutes, a tall lady with long brown hair, and an air of confidence walked in. She smiled warmly at Hermione. "You must be Hermione Snape; I'm Treva Bulstrode, formerly McGoodwin. Both my parents are psychologists. If I hadn't been a witch, I probably would have gone into psychology as well, but I did go ahead and go to Muggle University after leaving Hogwarts. I don't have current credentials to practice in the Muggle world, but I have had some training in running support groups."

"That's great, I really could use some help, Treva. I'm so glad you offered to help."

"I've wanted to do something, and I've seen the fliers around Diagon Alley. When I got your letter, I knew this was the place for me to do what I can to help out. So, you've had to get married as well, and you're still in school, right?" Treva asked, coming to sit beside Hermione, crossing her long legs.

"Yes, I'll be graduating this spring."

"So, Snape...as in Professor Severus Snape?" Treva asked, with guarded curiosity.

"Yes...I had another offer originally, which would have been a truly horrible situation, and Severus was kind enough to give me another option."

"I see...well, I hope things are going well with that then," she answered distractedly, before returning her attention to Hermione. "I'm in a similar arrangement, actually. My husband, Barius Bulstrode, was a friend of mine when we went to Hogwarts. I believe he has a cousin currently attending Hogwarts."

"Oh...yes, Millicent Bulstrode?"

"Yes, that would be her. But, as I was saying, I had an offer...can't really call it an offer, more of a requirement... for marriage, at first, to some man who was old enough to be my great-grandfather." Treva shuddered slightly, and Hermione smiled at her exaggerated expression of disgust. "So, I got back in touch with Barius, and he agreed to help me out. It hasn't been too bad for me, all things considered. I hadn't planned on getting married, so soon. We've both seen the fliers that have been put up in Diagon Alley, and I hope this ends soon. From what I've heard, most pure-bloods aren't too happy with this new law, either. But, whatever is happening, I would like to help out where I can. May I ask what you had planned for today?"

"Well, I have this," Hermione said, holding her prepared statement out.

Treva took it, and sat in the chair beside Hermione, skimming the statement. "This is a good start," she offered after a moment. "Would you mind if I suggest a few things?"

"I would love a few suggestions, actually." Hermione was more than relieved. She would have forged ahead on her own, but, now, she felt much better knowing someone would be there to help.

"Okay, I would start out by..."

Hermione listened to Treva for the next half hour as she detailed the typical workings of a support group. First, she learned that a support group should not be too large, and so the first order of business should be to divide the large group into smaller groups who's situations were most similar. Today the best way to begin would be to do brief introductions, and then determine what range of situations was present. The group could be divided into anywhere from four to eight sub-groups from that point, each group arranging their meeting times independently. The main issues they could focus on, to start, would be forced marriage, and what the husbands of the forced partners were like. Next, would be a focus on the family of the Muggle-born bride.

By the time women began arriving, Hermione was much more at ease. She mingled with the group, exchanging introductions and seeing a few familiar faces. She saw the girl she'd met in the Bridal Dress shop, Sarah Pearson, and she went over.

"Sarah, hi, how have you been?"

"Oh, hello, Hermione. Well, not too bad, actually. Alex...you remember, Alexander Brudnell, well, we're getting along pretty well. He didn't really understand why I wanted to come here tonight, though. How has it been with you and Professor Snape?"

"Not bad...he came with me to visit my parents over the Christmas holiday; he's not always like he is in class."

"That's good...kind of hard to imagine...I'm sorry, just, he made me so nervous in class. I saw him downstairs when I came in..." Sarah looked questioningly at Hermione. Hermione felt odd, knowing Sarah would think Severus was keeping after her.

"My situation is a little complicated...there's still someone who's upset over who I chose."

"I remember the duel that day, in Diagon Alley, between Professor Snape and Lucius Malfoy...is he still...?"

"Actually, Severus is worried about Draco, so he's keeping an eye out to make sure I'm safe."

"Oh, ok...well, that's good. I would imagine that would make you feel safer."

"Yes, it does. Well, it looks like everyone is here and it's time to start..." she observed, looking around the room. It was five past three, and she should have called the meeting to order at three.

Hermione found a seat, and stood before it, and finally called the meeting to order. When she sat, with over fifty pairs of eyes watching her, she felt uncomfortable, realizing she was the youngest there, and wondering if others would resent someone so much younger running the meeting. She began speaking. "Hi...I'm glad you could all come today. We're all in a similar situation, having been forced to marry by the Ministry of Magic; and this support group is to help everyone adjust to the situation, and to help with any problems anyone might be having. So...if we can begin with introductions and a basic overview...I'll start. I'm Hermione Snape, and I got married nearly three months ago. I had three offers, and was able to choose among the three. I'm still attending Hogwarts, and will be graduating this spring." She looked to her left, where another young woman sat. Hermione recognized her as someone who had been a seventh-year Gryffindor during her first year.

"I'm Trisha Green...erm, I mean, Wood. I had one offer initially...from some guy old enough to be my great-grandfather, and then my friend, Oliver Wood, who is a pure-blood, was able to help me out." Hermione was surprised; she didn't know what had happened to Oliver Wood after graduation.

The introductions continued...out of the first thirty, twenty-three all mentioned a man old enough to be their great-grandfather. Finally, someone asked, "Was that Harold Geiger?" and the answer was affirmative. It was revealed that Harold Geiger had petitioned nearly every woman there. Fortunately, everyone had a friend or acquaintance of pure-blood status, or at least another offer from a more appealing stranger, which had been able to help them out of that possibility.

Introductions had gone three quarters of the way around the circle, when a small, mousy-looking young woman stood; she seemed familiar to Hermione...who placed her after a moment as someone who had been at Hogwarts in Hufflepuff, but Hermione couldn't remember how many years ahead she had been. She cleared her throat and spoke nervously. "I'm...um...Sally Geiger...I didn't have any pure-blood friends..." she broke off, glancing around nervously. She earned many looks of sympathy, while others looked away, embarrassed that they had been discussing her husband in rather unkind terms only moments before. "Well...at least...at least he hasn't been terrible to me..." she trailed off, looking down at her hands.

Hermione didn't know what to say; she knew that something should be said. Fortunately, Treva spoke up. "It's all right, Sally. We're here to support each other. I am confident in saying no one here is in a marriage completely of their choosing. Even those of us who had some degree of choice were still mandated. You're not alone in your situation."

After that, the meeting took on a more somber feel. When introductions were finished, Hermione passed around the questionnaires that Treva had helped her come up with. She had also volunteered to help sort and categorize the questionnaires to form smaller groups. After the questionnaires had been returned, everyone was asked how things were going, and, for the most part, everyone seemed to be doing fairly well. Hermione was surprised, but, after the meeting broke up, and everyone had left, Treva stayed to talk with her.

"I'm really surprised everyone seems to be doing so well," Hermione observed.

"Don't be so quick to think that. They may say they're doing well, and, if they were able to get here, it's probably not too terrible, but, how many letters did you send out?"

"A hundred fifty-three..." Hermione answered, realization dawning.

"And there were only about sixty here today. That's nearly a hundred who didn't come, for whatever reason."

"Professor Dumbledore said he has someone investigating the others..."

"Which is good. Just keep in mind that what we saw today is the best of these marriages. And even then, it's not great. That one girl, Sally...and several others, I could tell, are having bigger problems than they've let on," Treva said, giving Hermione a significant look. "Most people will want to say things are better than what they are."

Hermione shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, I see what you're saying. Thanks. I appreciate your help with this... we should sort these now; I can get the letters written telling people about who they're sharing their group with when I get back to Hogwarts this evening."

"I'm not busy, and I know Professor Snape is waiting downstairs for you. If it's not an imposition, I can walk back with you to Hogwarts, and we can go over it there. I'd also like to talk to Professor Dumbledore, if he's available while I'm there."

"That would be good, yes. Let's go, then," Hermione said, rising and grabbing her book bag, where she stuffed the questionnaires. Treva followed her down the stairs and up to Severus's table.

"Are you ready to go, then?" Severus asked when he saw her approach.

"Yes. This is Treva Bulstrode, she's going to be helping me with the support group," Hermione said.

Severus glanced behind Hermione, eyebrows rising. "Ahh, yes, formerly Miss McGoodwin; Ravenclaw, class of '85, finished with 'acceptable' in Potions. Best of luck to you in sorting out this mess the Ministry has inflicted on the population."

"Thank you, Professor Snape," Treva responded with an eyebrow raised at him. Hermione glanced between the two, feeling as if she was missing something.

"Well, Treva will be coming back to Hogwarts with me so we can go over some things. We can go ahead and walk back if you'd like to stay a while longer."

"Will she?" Severus asked in a monotone, giving her a suspicious glance. "I am more than ready to return as well, Hermione. We can go now," he said, rising from his place and picking up his satchel, which he shrank and placed in a pocket. He rose from the table and opened the door, standing aside to allow Hermione and Treva to exit before him.

Treva and Hermione talked on the way back, covering school subjects before moving on to plans for repealing the Marriage Law. Hermione filled her in on what was being done already; and Treva seemed eager to join in the fight. Severus remained silent as they walked into Hogwarts and down to the dungeons. When Hermione started to invite Treva into her room, Severus finally spoke.

"It is nearly time for dinner. Madam Bulstrode, would you care to join us?"

Hermione frowned at him, wondering where this hospitality to a former student was coming from.

"If you're sure it's no imposition, Professor Snape."

"Not at all," Severus replied, opening the door to their quarters. The three settled in the living room, Hermione and Treva on the couch. Severus Flooed the kitchens, and ordered a dinner for three to be delivered. As it was supper supertime anyway, a tray was quickly delivered, and the three began eating. Hermione pulled out the questionnaires, and began discussing them with Treva. Severus remained silent, but watchful. Hermione thought he would leave when dinner was finished, but he remained, and moved to his desk, where he found something to work on. Hermione was aware of his scrutiny as she and Treva planned for the division of the groups.

"I think this is as far as we can get tonight. I'm going to contact my parents, they know about the law, and I'll see if they might be willing to offer their services on a pro bono basis for this. And," Treva said, looking at the clock on the mantle, "I think it may be a bit late to see the Headmaster now."

"I will Floo him for you, Madam Bulstrode," Severus said, rising from behind his desk and approaching the fireplace. Hermione was a bit shocked at his affability with her guest. Treva seemed not to be surprised, however.

She and Hermione said their goodbyes, and arranged to meet the Sunday after next. Severus informed her that the Headmaster was able to meet with her. Treva politely refused his offer to accompany her to his office, and bade them goodbye. When she'd left, Severus returned to his desk and grading, seeming to ignore Hermione.

"What was that about?" she asked, after a moment.

Severus looked up, regarding her for a moment before explaining. "I am merely trying to ensure that a person who seemed capable of assisting you in this endeavor would feel welcome." When she frowned at him, he continued. "There is more at stake here than you, Hermione. If you're going to protest my involving myself in your activities too much, consider that."

He had a point, so Hermione didn't bother trying to argue. She watched him for several moments as he worked, wondering if she should take the opportunity to say something, do something. However, despite the niggling voice in the back of her head, which sounded awfully like her mother, she turned and went back to her room. She would let him stew; let him wonder. He was sure to come to her soon enough. After a while, he would see the advantage in compromise. She decided it would be best to get ready for bed.

Hermione stood in a drizzle-soaked meadow, feeling lost. She found a shovel in her hand, and had the urge to dig; and so she did. It was a tiring process, but the shovel seemed light enough, and, soon, she was standing in a hole, waist deep, still digging.

It began to rain, and each shovel-full of dirt she brought out of the hole caused a slurping sound in the mud, which enveloped her feet and came to her ankles. Still, she dug. After some time, she knew not how long, the hole was above her head, yet, still, she dug, flinging great clods of mud out of the hole as the rain fell down around her.

After what seemed like hours, she realized she was trapped. She looked up at the cloudy sky, pushing her rain-drenched hair back from her face, and then resumed digging. Worms and grubs wriggled out of the earth around her and she moved still deeper.

Looking up again, she saw a black shape against the grey clouds. He pushed the hood of his cloak back, and she saw it was Severus. He said nothing, but simply watched her. She turned back to the ground and continued digging, working her way deeper into the pit. She started to panic, and looked up, where Severus was still watching, and she saw him pull something out from under his cloak. It was a rope, and he lowered it to her. He had come to help her. She reached out to grasp the thick rope, but the instant she touched her hands to it, it turned into a long snake, hissing at her.

Hermione recoiled, frightened, and looked back up, her glare accusing him of betrayal.

"The snake won't bite, Hermione," he called. "Take it, and you can come out."

She backed away until she met the muddy earth behind her. She couldn't do it, and so, she did the only thing available. Taking the shovel in hand once more, she dug.

Draco's Mistake

Chapter 15 of 31

Draco makes an error in judgement. (this is part one of the chapter, which turned out to be too long to fit in one chapter).

Big thanks to my beta, Nakhash Mekashefah. This chapter is part one.

And, for posting here at the Petulant Poetess, I'd like to thank my readers...yes, both of you.

Severus stirred the simmering cauldron thrice before moving away from his personal worktable to stalk through his classroom. It was his seventh year class, and all were busy with their projects. Hermione was still ignoring him. They were due to perform their 'marital requirements' that night, and she was also due to take her monthly potion, which was what was simmering on his worktable. Perhaps, he mused, he should take some time with her tonight; give her a reminder of what she was missing.

"Mr. Zabini, are you not supposed to be brewing the Property Binding potion?" he asked.

"Yes sir," the stringy young man answered.

"Then what, is that?"

"Um...the Property Binding potion?"

"I see after seven years in my class, you still cannot answer a question appropriately." Snape reached out, taking the ladle from Mr. Zabini and allowing the substance to fall back into the cauldron. "Tell me, what colour should this potion be?"

"Um...purple...sir."

"This is a most creative rendition of the colour purple, is it not?"

Zabini just clenched his jaw and waited, not saying anything.

"In fact...it is such a creative version of the colour purple, that some would even say it was...orange." Snape dropped the ladle in the potion, pointed his wand and muttered "*Evanesco*." He fixed the young man with a glare and said, "Three feet of parchment due Monday on the correct brewing procedures of the binding potion, as well as an analysis of what could possibly result in an orange potion, Mr. Zabini."

Snape stalked back to the second row, checking on the various potions in progress. For the most part, everyone had brewed their potions adequately. He reached Malfoy, whose potion was perfect, and started to move past him, but stopped when the boy looked at him, a haughty smirk on his face. Snape glared at him suspiciously. Malfoy had grown more and more confident over the last month. Snape wished he could simply get rid of him. He moved on to the back row and glared down at Harry Potter's cauldron.

"Mr. Potter, I wonder if remedial Potions would be in order for you...again...this term," he said. "*Evanesco*," he muttered, causing Potter's potion to disappear. Potter glared at him angrily, and Snape sneered back at him, daring him to say something. "Five feet of parchment, Mr. Potter, on the properties of the Dragon's Breath potion, due on Monday, and five points from Gryffindor."

Hermione stiffened slightly as he moved in front of her desk and looked down at her potion. It was, as always, perfect. "I need you to remain after class," he said lowly. He waited for a response, but received none, and so he continued on, then back to the front of the class where he added another ingredient to the contraceptive potion and stirred.

The bell rang ten minutes later, and his students packed their things. They already had their assignment for the weekend. Hermione remained behind, but made no effort to initiate conversation.

"Come here...I've completed your contraceptive potion, you may as well take your dose now."

Hermione got up and walked to the front of the classroom, where she took the proffered phial and tipped its contents back, swallowing thickly. Severus watched her, waiting for any sign she was going to say something, but she merely handed the phial back to him and turned to leave. He reached out, placing a hand on her shoulder, and moved forward, pressing against her body.

"Hermione," he whispered in her ear, "there's no need for this." His hands roamed down her body, moving down, then across her abdomen, pulling her back against

himself. He heard her breath hitch, and he nibbled her ear. "Are you afraid of me now?" he questioned in a soft whisper.

"No...I'm not," Hermione said. "I just don't want..." she trailed off as his lips found that spot just under her ear. "What happened to treating me as a student in the classroom?" she demanded.

"Class isn't in session now," he reasoned, and then resumed nuzzling her neck, her hair tickled his nose. He ignored the fact that it did feel decidedly odd to touch her in the classroom while she was dressed as a student. He'd spent so many years ignoring students in that way. Still, she was his Hermione, his wife, under her robes. "You will come back to my bed, Hermione. I know you want to; I know you're just as tired of this act as I am."

"Not until you can make some compromises." She stepped away from him, back held straight as she walked towards the classroom door.

"I have the recipe for the potion here...and it will be in the workroom adjacent to the living room. I do believe there are enough ingredients for a large batch...perhaps even sixty doses," he said before she could get too far. She stopped and turned back at him, a look of surprise on her face. It was time to begin negotiating. A full month of silence, glares, and pouting...and nearly no sex, was enough. She was obviously stubborn enough that she wasn't going to take the first step in returning to him, and so it would be up to him to make that first step.

"Why?" she asked him after a moment.

"Surely, you should know that the thought of dozens of women becoming pregnant because of the Ministry's laws, when a solution is easily available, would be undesirable. Be careful...while it is not strictly contraband, it wouldn't do to be caught."

Hermione gave him a single nod and then left. Severus watched her go, glad, at least, that she hadn't simply ignored him. When he had started his plan of punishing her, he hadn't thought she would be so stubborn. He'd also begun to wonder what it was about her that made her so reluctant to give in...she had been doing so well, before. Perhaps, he thought, she was trying to make some point with her stubbornness. He knew he affected her...during their copulation the previous week she hadn't been able to keep from grasping at his shoulders, wrapping her legs about his hips as he thrust into her...it was brief, and he had seen her agitation and disappointment when he pulled away. She was frustrated...in more than one way. He wondered if she'd begun taking care of herself in that department.

Severus put away the last of the supplies and then scanned the classroom for anything out of place before placing his grade book back into the top drawer of his desk. It was time for lunch, and on Fridays he didn't have any classes after noon. He would have been looking forward to spending the weekend with Hermione wrapped around him...and he wondered again if he was going about convincing her to submit to him in the best way. Still, he was agitated with her. He'd been quite clear about what he wanted...what he *required of her*; there should have been no room for misinterpretation on her part, even considering what she thought she'd found. He knew that most importantly, he couldn't give in...whatever occurred now between them would set the stage for the rest of their relationship...this was the time to be firm.

Just as he was about to lock up the classroom, he felt a tingling in his wand...it was the signal he had set up with Hermione's amulet to alert him if she was in danger. He cursed as he realised she had left alone; he should have made her wait until he was ready to leave, as well. With haste, he snapped the wand from his sleeve and rushed from the classroom at a near run, his wand acting as a guide to point him in the direction she was.

Hermione left the classroom trying to ignore the arousal she felt. It was a weakness that she enjoyed his touch so much, that she longed to return to being with him in his bed. She wasn't going to allow her body's urges to dictate her decisions, though. Besides, if she gave in now, she knew that he would think her a pushover...she knew it was best to set her limits now, to make a point now, because it would make a difference on how things worked between them for the rest of their lives.

Hermione was surprised that he'd made such an offer on helping with the other women trapped in forced marriages. The support group had discussed birth control methods at the last meeting; Treva had suggested they start on something practical while they got to know one another and developed a rapport. There was another meeting set with the smaller sub-group that Hermione was going to be in, that weekend, which was composed of a good number of the women who had married friends or acquaintances to avoid a possibly worse marriage.

Actually, several of the women had already solved the problem through Muggle methods. Many of them were in marriages of convenience (or as convenient as you could get under the circumstances) and their spouses weren't opposed to using condoms to prevent pregnancy. However, one woman had tried that route and had discovered a latex allergy, making that method impossible. Still, condoms were faulty; they could slip, or leak. And so, it would be best to use a good birth-control potion. And although she didn't need to depend on him, the ingredients were hard to find. It had been very nice of him to offer...so she would go to the meeting tomorrow loaded down with contraceptive potions.

As Hermione rounded the corner to the corridor leading to the stairs to go to lunch, she was grabbed and knocked against the wall. Her head hit the stone with a dull thud, and she was stunned into immobility for a few seconds.

"Finally you're brave enough, or stupid enough, to walk alone, Mudblood," Draco Malfoy spat. "Think you're so smart, do you...marrying that traitor to get away from me and my father?"

"Get off me!" Hermione shouted and kicked at him, attempting to use her knee to connect with someplace sensitive, but he was too close to her, she couldn't get at him. She pushed and fought for a moment, before he shook her, slamming her head against the wall of the dungeon again.

"You should learn your place...I thought Snape would put you in your place. I had a chance to find some old *memories* back home over the holiday that my father had put away. Turns out Snape and my father used to share their playthings. He likes it rough...maybe you like that...do you, Mudblood?"

Hermione's eyes widened at his words before she tried striking out at him again, but he was too strong. He was taller than her by a good six inches, and years of playing Quidditch had left him with a strong, lean body...which he was now pressing up against her. She felt sick as she felt his erection straining against her abdomen, and saw the cruel gleam in his eye.

"I want my father to have a chance to get you...but why should I pass up the opportunity when it's right here in front of me? That traitor Snape isn't here to protect you now."

Hermione renewed her struggles, somehow managing to wrench an arm free. She got hold of her wand, not even pulling it from her robes but merely grabbing the handle in her pocket, and blasted Malfoy with 'Stupefy'. She gasped to regain her breath, pulling her wand from her robes and pointing it down at the prone form of Draco Malfoy. She then saw a great black shape moving swiftly down the dimly lit corridor...it was Severus.

The spell hadn't been very strong because it wasn't aimed squarely at Malfoy. He was merely stunned, and was trying to rise from the floor just as Snape swept down upon him, grabbed him by the front of his robes and hefted him up against the dungeon wall.

"How dare you touch her!" Severus bellowed. He then pointed his wand and muttered a spell; Hermione jumped as she heard Malfoy's high-pitched shriek of pain, as Severus alternately muttered hexes and slammed him repeatedly against the wall.

"Wait! Stop!" Hermione yelled, rushing up to them. She just knew Severus was going to kill Malfoy...she'd never seen him like that...his lips were pulled back from his teeth in a snarl and he radiated fury. "Stop!" Hermione repeated. "Severus...you can't...don't...we should call the Aurors," Hermione said. Somehow cool reasoning had taken over and she realised that, despite the circumstances, Severus would be in deep trouble for killing a student.

She waited for several tense seconds as Severus stiffly resisted pummeling the shaking youth. He then turned to her, taking her appearance in with a sweeping glance over her form.

"Did he hurt you?" he finally asked.

"I'll be fine...it's nothing serious," Hermione answered. Her head throbbed where he'd slammed her against the wall and her arms and shoulders burned, but it was barely noticeable in the rush of adrenaline.

"Go wait in our quarters," he snapped and then pulled Malfoy away from the wall and began dragging him down the corridor, heading for the entrance hall.

"No...I'm coming with you. If you're going to call the Aurors then I should be there...I'm the one he was trying to hurt."

Severus turned and regarded her, his eyebrows drawn together as he scowled at her, then his face relaxed and he nodded slightly. "Very well then, come along."

Malfoy tried begging and pleading as he was dragged to the Headmaster's office, but it was to no avail, as Severus ignored him completely. Groups of students on their way to lunch stopped and stared, wide-eyed at them. Malfoy stumbled and tripped up the steps to Dumbledore's office, as Severus wouldn't release him, instead dragging him practically sideways; he had no option but to try and keep up.

Dumbledore looked up as the three entered his office, and Severus threw the boy in a chair, casting a spell to bind him with magical ropes to it.

"He attacked Hermione," Severus spat as explanation. "Luckily for him, she insisted we call the Aurors. I don't know what possessed him to do this. Tell me boy, you've never been that stupid, why?"

Dumbledore looked sternly at the blond young man, who was now darting his eyes around at the three of them nervously. The Headmaster then rose from his chair and walked with purpose to the Floo, tossing in a handful of Floo powder. Hermione felt weak, and suddenly the office rushed around her as she sank to the floor, barely hearing or seeing anything. She was caught by strong arms and then lifted and placed in a nearby chair. She opened her eyes to see Severus looking at her closely.

"You should go to the hospital wing," he said intently. "Where are you hurt?"

"Um...my head," Hermione answered, her voice sounding far away.

"Headmaster, I will be in the hospital wing with Hermione," he said, not looking at the older man who nodded his assent as he rose from the fireplace. He began to lift Hermione, but she stopped him.

"No...I can walk," she protested.

Despite her protest, Severus did insist on supporting her as she walked down the stairs and to the hospital wing, glaring at any student who looked at them in confusion as he walked through the entrance hall, which was filled with students mingling as they made their way to lunch. He stayed quiet, still churning with anger. One small mistake...one small lapse in vigilance...one small distraction had led to this. He cursed himself for his folly...it was his duty to protect her and had it not been for the amulet he had given her, it could have been much worse. He wanted to kill Malfoy...but he was thankful for Hermione's cooler head. Had he killed him, he would have ended up in Azkaban...teachers did not kill their students. However, Malfoy wouldn't be his student much longer. There was at least some good in the situation; he was going to move to expel him now that he finally had a concrete reason.

They arrived at the hospital wing, Severus walking slowly as Hermione's steps became slower. Once inside, Pomfrey rushed over, asking what was wrong.

"She was assaulted by Malfoy in the dungeon corridor...she is experiencing head pain."

"Well then, get her over here," Pomfrey instructed, bustling beside the young witch who was now pale and sweating.

Severus eased her down on a nearby cot, watching her closely. He surmised, from her pallor and the way her eyes tracked around, that she might have a concussion, and he cursed himself again for not thinking of her when he came upon her. He had been so focused on Malfoy that he had barely given her a second glance. She was standing upright, and so he had assumed she wasn't too badly hurt. She was probably just riding the adrenaline.

Hermione watched him with a confused look as Pomfrey cast several diagnostic charms and then instructed her to remove her outer robe. Slowly, she complied, and saw Severus's eyes track to her upper arms. She looked down and saw the bruises, slowly darkening, where Malfoy had held her.

"She has a concussion and a few bruises. I have a potion for the concussion," Pomfrey said in her clipped tone and then walked away, returning with a phial. "Drink this, Miss Granger," she said, not realising her mistake in names.

Severus scowled at her but said nothing, as Pomfrey checked Hermione over, using several incantations to check for further damage.

"I'll need for her to stay here for the next hour, then you can take her back to your quarters if her condition doesn't worsen. She'll need to rest, but it would be best for her to remain upright, just in case. Observe her for signs of dizziness, and make sure she doesn't move around too much. Is that understood?" she demanded sternly, giving Professor Snape a no-nonsense look.

"Yes," he muttered.

"I'll be down to check on her tomorrow, and she may need to be excused from her classes Monday, as well." Pomfrey bustled off to fill out some forms, and after several moments, Headmaster Dumbledore entered the hospital wing, followed closely by two wizards in Aurors' robes. One was Kingsley Shacklebolt.

They were informed that Draco Malfoy had been taken into custody for assault, and was being treated for his injuries at St. Mungo's before being taken to a holding facility at the Ministry of Magic. They took a brief statement from Hermione, but as she was feeling dizzy, Severus insisted they could continue with that at a later time when she was feeling better. He then answered their questions and gave his own statement.

After just over an hour, the Aurors left. Hermione had dozed a bit, propped up on about four pillows, as they had talked quietly just outside. When Severus returned to her, she sat up.

"Madam Pomfrey says I don't have to stay here."

"Come then, I will walk back with you," Severus said, reaching out a hand to help her up. Hermione looked at him a moment and then took his hand, walking with him slowly to the dungeons.

Hermione thought over what had just happened; she still felt dizzy and her thoughts were muddled. She realised that Severus could truly be scary. When he'd attacked Malfoy, she'd seen pure rage...it reminded her of the time near the end of her third year when he'd been so angry when Sirius Black had escaped...it scared her that he was capable of such violence, such rage. And this was the man she supposedly should trust not to harm her in such dangerous games? However, his arm supporting hers was firm, his stride slow and measured to match her own. He said nothing, but she was aware of his scrutiny as they descended the stairs.

Severus placed the tray of food on the side table next to the couch. She had made a trip to the loo, but otherwise had remained on the couch, pretending to read a book for the last several hours. Dumbledore had come to their quarters to discuss the incident and had then left them alone. "You should eat," he said. He watched her as she looked over to the tray; he'd chosen light food for her: a broth soup and bread. Having had a few concussions over the years, he knew she wouldn't feel like eating much.

"Severus...it's Friday..." she said. "We have to..."

"Yes, it is. You've a concussion, though," he said, scowling at her preposterous suggestion. She could barely walk a straight line or move without wincing. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some potions to brew. I'll be in my workroom, the doors will remain open. If you need anything, call me," he instructed. Just before he turned to leave,

there was a knock on the door, and he went to answer it.

He scowled down at Ginny Weasley, Harry Potter, and Ron Weasley.

"We heard what happened," Harry said, "and came to see if Hermione is okay." The three stood their ground warily, trying to affect a firm, yet respectful tone. Severus thought a moment, Hermione was in the living room, not her room, but it wouldn't be good to move her.

"Enter," he finally conceded. With wide eyes, the three walked in. "*Touch nothing*. If Hermione is too tired, show yourselves out. I will be in the next room, understood?" He glared as the three nodded their assent and then he turned to Hermione, who was giving him an amused smile. He scowled at her and then left to brew the large batch of contraceptive potion. He was only doing it because Hermione couldn't at the moment, he reasoned. She wouldn't be able to go to the support group meeting, either, and so he resolved to owl her partner in the endeavour to distribute the potions to any who had not found birth control through other means. And perhaps, if Hermione saw that he was willing to help her out in certain things, she might be more willing to put aside her current silliness and get back into his bed where she belonged.

Hermione smiled at her friends as they walked in. Ginny sat beside her on the couch, and Harry and Ron took the two green wingback chairs perpendicular to the couch. They looked rather uncomfortable, sitting stiffly and looking around warily. They'd only ever been in her room when visiting, which was quite different. The living room held no trace of her influence, and was a nearly clichéd masculine library in style, all leather and wood and ancient tomes.

"Hermione...I'm really sorry, I should have waited for you after Potions class," Harry said guiltily after a moment.

"It's okay, Harry...I'm fine. Besides, you should have seen the look on his face when I Stupefied him," Hermione said, smiling weakly. Her head really hurt, despite the potion.

"Is it true he's going to be expelled?" Ginny asked.

"Yes...he was arrested, too."

"Well, that's one good thing, at least," Ron interjected.

"Yes..." Hermione said. She leaned her head back against the couch, wincing. "Malfoy Sr. and now Malfoy Jr. are out of the picture...finally."

"So you can relax now," Ron said brightly. He then dropped his voice conspiratorially, "And while you're getting better, Snape has to wait on you." Hermione laughed in spite of the pain. Severus actually was being nice...very nice...she felt a surge of melancholy. He really could be nice sometimes...maybe not like most people perceived it, but there were times she had really had a good time with him. Why did he have to be so stubborn over such a little thing? Maybe if he got over it, they could go back to having a good time sometimes. She still hadn't talked to him at all about what he was going to require of her before returning to his bed...it had been a month. A long very month, of ignoring and avoiding him, of strange dreams of snakes and ropes and pits, and she was getting tired of it. But, she knew thinking about problems when she felt so tired only made them seem worse; it wouldn't seem so bad when she felt better, she surmised.

"Hermione, you okay?" Ginny asked.

"Oh...fine Ginny, just a bit distracted is all."

"If you need to rest, we can go...we just wanted to check and see how you're doing. We can come by tomorrow if that would be better."

"Yeah...I think I need to sleep now. The potion is making me tired. You guys come by tomorrow, okay?"

"Yeah...we'll be back." The three then got up, Ginny and Ron headed for the door, while Harry stayed behind, standing close to Hermione. "Snape is helping you, right?" he asked with concern.

"Yes Harry, he is. Don't worry...it's fine." Harry nodded, smiling tightly. She could see the guilt on his face and knew he still blamed himself. "Harry, it was bound to happen sooner or later. He's gone now and so I'll be safer. It could have been worse, really, don't blame yourself."

"All right," he said, but she knew he still did.

After they left, Hermione returned her attention to her cold soup and bread, which was going stale. She halfheartedly dipped the bread into the soup and took a listless bite before placing the bread back on the tray. She didn't really feel like eating.

Hermione yawned widely and then looked back at the book in her lap. Her vision was a little blurred, and it was too much work trying to focus on the pages. Instead, she rested her head gingerly against the couch and drifted off to sleep.

Severus finished with the potion and walked into the living room, pausing to look at Hermione, who was now asleep on the couch, the open book on her chest. He withdrew his wand and cast a calming spell around her, then removed the book from her grasp, placing it on the table beside her. He rose, intending to leave, but when he saw her pull her arms up about her torso, decided she was probably cold. He turned, and lit the logs in the fireplace with his wand and then summoned the coverlet from her bed, placing it over her.

Satisfied that she wouldn't wake for a while, he left their quarters and walked down the hall to the Slytherin common room. The process of brewing had helped him clear his head from the anger he felt against Malfoy, and now it was time to address the rest of his house. It was nearly curfew, and the students should all be in their dorms or in the common room.

He stopped at the portrait and muttered the password. It swung open and he stepped inside. Several students were in the midst of talking, and they all looked at him attentively when he walked in. He saw Pansy Parkinson sitting over in one corner, though, with a very dissatisfied look on her face.

"Zabini, Goyle, Bulstrode, and Parkinson. Go check the dorms; I wish to address the Slytherin house call everyone to gather in the common room."

They looked at him curiously, but moved to comply quickly enough. Parkinson attempted to wipe the scowl from her face, but did shoot him a look before she disappeared into the hall of the girls' dorm. He waited at the top of the steps as the students trickled in, taking seats in the old leather couches, standing behind them, or standing against the walls. When all were gathered, he spoke.

"As some of you may have heard, Draco Malfoy was taken into custody by Aurors today, and he will be expelled from Hogwarts." He paused, waiting for the news to sink in. "He attacked another student not only did he attack another student he attacked my wife, Hermione Snape. I am going to be very plain...I will not tolerate anyone taking action against my wife...any actions taken against her will be considered a personal affront by me and will be treated as such. Is that understood?"

He glared at them, especially the seventh and sixth years who had known Hermione the longest, through her school years. The younger students, whom he wasn't too concerned about, nodded their assent, and waited for him to continue, as they checked to see how the elder Slytherins reacted. He noticed, however, that the sixth and seventh year Slytherins were attempting to cover their reactions of distaste and disapproval.

"Is that understood?" he repeated, in a biting tone.

He received a number of affirmative murmurs and head nods. "Good. Mr. Malfoy apparently thought his place in Slytherin, and my wife's lineage, would mean I might overlook his transgression against me. He will not be achieving much from a prison cell, will he? Let's not allow the misconceptions about the house of Slytherin to be given merit. Our house has a long tradition of achievement, despite recent history of less than worthy members who think to achieve greatness through brute force and threats. Remember that, and think of that when about your business. Getting caught in underhandedness will gain you nothing, nor will trying to forcibly attack those you hold grudges against." He allowed them all to absorb that and then turned swiftly and strode from the Slytherin common room.

Once in the corridor, he tapped the wall in a pattern, on the bricks, with his wand. Checking again to be sure there were no students in the corridor, he stepped through the bricks, which had become as an illusion, making it appear he was stepping into the very stones.

He walked along the small tunnel and made two sharp turns, before he came to a stop at a balcony-like enclosure. He took a seat and looked down on the Slytherin common room. He could hear everyone easily, as well as observe them. The balcony appeared to simply be a wall from the inside.

Most of the younger students were returning to their rooms, readying themselves for bed, or were immersed in their studies. However, Millicent Bulstrode, Pansy Parkinson, and Blaise Zabini were huddled together just below where Severus sat.

"Why did Malfoy do that?" Bulstrode was asking. "It doesn't seem like him."

"Goyle said he was hexing his pillow this morning...Hey, Goyle, over here," the stringy Slytherin boy called. The large young man ambled over to them and leaned up against the wall, directly under Severus.

"Yeah? What is it?" he asked.

"You said Malfoy was hexing his pillow this morning...what would he go and attack Granger for? Did he just lose his mind?"

"Don't know," Goyle said, shrugging. "He's just been acting strange the last few months...I think what happened to his dad may have something to do with it."

"I almost didn't believe it when I heard Snape had done that to Lucius Malfoy. My mother said they were friends for a long time," Parkinson said.

"Well, if he's going to betray the Dark Lord and then betray his blood-kind by marrying a Mudblood, why wouldn't he betray any one of us?" Zabini pointed out.

"Can you believe he married a Mudblood?" Bulstrode asked.

"Probably the only way he could find someone to suck his prick," mocked Parkinson. Severus felt his shoulders tightening. For some reason, the usual things he heard students say of him seemed somehow more biting than before.

"My cousin married a Mudblood, too...my grandfather wrote him out of his will. It was some twit he went to school with; she went crying to him when someone petitioned her under the new Marriage Law. I think he just felt so sorry for her he went ahead. He never was very good at passing up a pity story," Bulstrode said, sounding disgusted with her cousin.

Severus doubted sincerely that Treva Bulstrode, nee McGoodwin, had gone crying to anyone or that she had elicited pity, either unintentionally or on purpose. But if that was the only way Miss Bulstrode could think of her cousin with a Muggle-born, then that was what she would think.

"Well, I'll say this...I'm not going to get married at all if I have to marry a Mudblood," Zabini declared firmly.

"Yeah...me either," echoed Goyle. At least one good point, Severus thought. The only way that lump would get a wife was if she had no choice in the matter. Fortunately, the predominant distaste for Muggle-borns kept many of the purebloods from taking advantage of the Marriage Law.

"I'm just glad they didn't make it so Mudblood boys could petition for pureblood women...that would be awful. Getting married to some bloke you don't know..."

Severus saw a small, blond Slytherin boy, first year, listening on the edges of the conversation. He moved over to stand next to the other students and then spoke up. "Don't you think the Muggle Mudblood girls don't like getting married to men they don't know?"

"What would you know? Besides, they're Mudbloods...there used to be a time when they knew their place was to serve their betters. I think it'll put them in their place, personally," Parkinson said haughtily. The boy, trying to hide his feelings of chastisement, edged back to the desk he had been studying at.

"Yeah," Zabini chimed in, laughing, "You think Snape has put Granger in her place by now?"

"Well, you don't see her waving her hand around in his class anymore, do you?"

Severus scowled, as they laughed and started theorising on what happened in his bed with his wife. He would have liked to hex the little buggers. There was a time when one could take pride in being Slytherin. However, he had some hope that the younger Slytherins, in the time that the Dark Lord was vanquished for good, could be influenced to bring his house back to its former glory. It wasn't for nothing that Slytherin had won the house cup for so many years before Potter came to Hogwarts. Despite his frustration at teaching, he wondered if it might be better to remain, if only to see Slytherin return to power...but perhaps Sinistra might make a better Head of House. His reputation as a former Death Eater might be influential in the wrong way; at least Sinistra didn't have that hanging over her head.

When the topic changed and, eventually, the group broke up to go their separate ways, he left his observation point and went back to his quarters. He had been gone long enough, Hermione was probably fine, but it would be best to be certain.

She wasn't sure how much later it was when she felt a gentle prodding at her shoulder. Opening her eyes, she saw Severus standing over her. He then sat beside her on the couch. "Here, I have another potion for you. This should be more effective for the pain than what Pomfrey gave you earlier." She took the proffered phial and drank. She was surprised to find a blanket draped over her legs; he must have put it there.

"Thank you," she said.

"You are welcome. Are you still feeling dizzy?" he asked.

"A bit. Oh shoot," she groaned. "I was going to -"

"Make the contraceptive potions? It is done."

Hermione turned to look at him, surprised. "Um...thanks, you didn't have to..."

"You were in no condition to do so," he said with finality.

"Okay."

The silence stretched out, Severus staring into the fire, and Hermione doing the same. She wanted to say something...their argument...impasse, whatever it was, couldn't keep going on. It was so silly, too. How long would it keep up? One of them had to say something.

"Severus, can we talk?" she finally asked.

"If you wish, yes."

"Last month...at my parents' house...when I found those articles. I may have overreacted a bit."

"Yes, you did," he agreed.

"Don't you think you overreacted a bit, too?" she asked, hoping he would admit to it.

"No."

Hermione took a deep breath, exasperated. At least the pain in her head was clearing. "Why is that such a big deal to you?"

"I informed you before we married of what I would expect; you agreed. You then went back on that agreement. I never lied to you about what I desired, Hermione," he said evenly.

"It was a lie of omission; you should have told me about all that other stuff," Hermione insisted.

"No, it was not. What you found that day had absolutely nothing to do with what is between us. I told you exactly what I wanted and exactly what I expected. If someone else has similar desires, that is of no concern to me or you if they invent different ways of carrying it out."

"Can't you even compromise on one little thing?"

Severus turned and regarded her thoughtfully; Hermione met his eyes, not flinching away or trying to avoid him as she had been.

"Perhaps," he finally conceded.

"So you'd be willing to go over the safeword and contract thing?"

"No."

"I'm going to bed," Hermione sighed, fed up with him. A bit faster than she should have, she got up from the couch and took three steps before dizziness threatened to overwhelm her. Severus was behind her in a flash, one arm around her waist.

"Silly girl," he muttered. "You can't move around like that with a concussion."

Hermione gritted her teeth as he walked with her into her room, and eased her to sit on the edge of her bed. Just as Hermione was about to lie down, eyes closed, she felt his hands at her collar, unfastening her robes.

"Stop..." she complained.

"You don't need to sleep in the clothes you've been wearing all day," he said, and continued, first removing her robe and then slowly unbuttoning her shirt. She drew back from him, bringing her hand up to clutch her shirt closed. "Now you're just being ridiculous. Do you think I've forgotten what your body looks like?" She was too tired to protest, and so settled on giving him a grumpy sigh as he undressed her.

"I suppose you like this then."

"What do you mean?" he asked, having removed her shirt, and now was unfastening her skirt.

"You like pain..."

"Hermione," Severus said, one corner of his mouth quirked up in amusement, "there is absolutely nothing arousing about a concussion." His hands drifted up her arms and then to her back, where he unfastened her bra and removed it. "Now...have you taken the opportunity of exile to your room to resume wearing night clothes?" he asked.

Hermione scowled at him. "No," she admitted. Severus looked slightly triumphant, then moved to adjust her pillows and draw back her covers.

"Why are you being so..." she couldn't quite think of a word to describe how he was acting.

He looked down at her, frowning in thought. "You wouldn't be in this position had I remained wary," he said quietly. His gaze sharpened, his eyes glinting as she watched. "Malfoy shouldn't have even had the opportunity to touch you. He won't get that chance again," he said firmly and then turned to leave.

"Severus?" Hermione called. He turned to face her.

"So...let me get this straight...a concussion is bad...but whipping me is arousing?"

He paused for a moment, an eyebrow cocked up, and then answered, "Immensely." He then left the room, leaving her door open when he exited.

Hermione didn't want to think at the moment...and so she closed her eyes. Just as she was drifting to sleep, Malfoy's words came back to her.

"I thought Snape would put you in your place. I had a chance to find some old memories back home over the holiday that my father had put away. Turns out Snape and my father used to share their playthings. He likes it rough..."

What had that meant? She decided it was another of many things she wanted to clear up with him.

Conversations

Chapter 16 of 31

Hermione and Severus have another conversation, and they both get unexpected news.

Severus packed up the last of the potions phials in the padded stand, then placed it in a box which was charmed to prevent breakage. Walking back into the living room,

he placed it on his desk. He looked towards Hermione's room and decided to check on her. When he entered he discovered she wasn't in there, and the bed was empty. The sound of a flushing toilet from the bathroom explained that, though. Hermione emerged from the bathroom, already dressed, and her hair pulled back in a loose bun.

"Thanks for letting me sleep in," she said stiffly.

Just as he was about to reply, he heard a knock on his door and went to answer it. He opened it; Treva Bulstrode stood there. "Madam Bulstrode, I have the package ready. One moment," he said stiffly. He didn't want to invite her in, but when he reached his desk, and started to pick up the package, he heard Hermione.

"Treva...what are you doing here? Come on in."

"Hi Hermione...are you okay? I heard about what happened. Professor Snape said he had something you wouldn't be able to bring today and that I should come to gather it."

"Oh...I'm fine, I'll be there."

Severus turned, facing Hermione. "You have a concussion; you most certainly are not going anywhere today."

He saw Treva purse her lips together, almost hiding the smile that threatened to come across her face. He turned to address her. "Hermione will be unable to attend today, she should not move around too much in her present condition." He then turned to Hermione, giving her a stern look.

She clenched her jaws angrily. "I feel fine," she said.

"Do you then? Very well, the potions you need are in this box; I'm sure the two of you will want to discuss preparations for whatever it is you're doing today." He stood by the desk, not moving to give her the box. With a huff, Hermione crossed the room, picking the box up off the desk. She managed to get halfway across the room before her steps faltered.

Treva stepped forward to take the box from her as Severus grabbed her by an arm to support her. "Yes, you're perfectly fine," he said sarcastically.

"Hermione, really, it will be fine. You should rest. I can take care of things today," Treva assured her.

There was a knock on the open doorframe and the three looked towards the door to see Albus Dumbledore. "Good morning," he greeted. "Since the two of you didn't come to breakfast, the morning post owls left your mail with me and I thought I should come down and see how you were doing, Hermione."

"Fine," Hermione answered, pulling her arm slightly. Severus let her go and took the proffered scroll from the Headmaster, frowning at the Ministry seal on it. Hermione also took hers, and decided, wisely, to go have a seat on the couch to read it.

"Thank you, Headmaster. All is well," Severus said. He then looked down at the scroll, crossing to his desk, as the Headmaster greeted Treva, asking her how she was doing. He opened the scroll and had to resist the sudden urge to rip it to shreds at what he saw.

Greetings from the Ministry of Magic, Department of the Muggle-born Marriage Act, copulation enforcement division.

It has come to our attention through the monitoring spell on your marital binding that you have failed to perform to the weekly coitus requirements. We wish to remind you that under the terms of the law, weekly coitus is required, though we do encourage more frequency. As this is your first offence, a fine of ten galleons will be imposed. Further failure to adhere to the law will result in further fines and possible action taken to ensure compliance. Remember, the Wizarding world is counting on you to do your part to provide a healthy future!"

"Oh, hello, Madam Pomfrey." The Headmaster's greeting caused Severus to snap his head up, and he saw the Matron standing in the doorframe, which was still opened.

"Good morning, Headmaster, oh...and I see the two of you have a guest, Professor Snape." Pomfrey looked around the room curiously and then to Hermione, who had taken a seat on the couch and was just about to open her scroll. "What is she doing out of bed? I released her from the hospital wing yesterday only because I thought you would take care of her," she said accusingly.

"Madam Pomfrey..." Severus began, but they were interrupted by another knock on the doorjamb. Severus repressed a snarl as he saw Minerva McGonagall in the doorway. She looked around at the gathered people and then, apparently deciding his abode was a social gathering place, stepped inside.

"Oh, I had hoped you were awake, Madam Snape," she said, crossing the room to the sitting area. "I wanted to see how you're doing."

Severus returned his attention to the Matron. "I am perfectly capable of making sure my wife is properly taken care of. Now, if you would excuse us..."

Another knock came at the door, and he saw Potter's head peeking in. He looked around, then spotted Hermione. "Hermione?"

"Oh, Harry, hi."

"Um, a few of us wanted to come by and see how you were doing. We got something for you, too," he added, smiling.

"Come in," she invited. Severus gritted his teeth and shot her a glare, and was astonished to see that she actually was smiling at him tightly, an amused, yet challenging gleam in her eyes. He looked back to the doorway and Potter, Weasley, Longbottom of all people...Ginevra Weasley, and Creevey all entered. Creevey was carrying a package wrapped in bright, shiny red wrapping paper with a huge gold bow on top. They hurried over to where Hermione was sitting, the blond Gryffindor casting him wary glances.

"Here, Hermione, all the Gryffindors pitched in for this!" Creevey said brightly. Minerva was looking on the display proudly. He closed his eyes momentarily as the sound of tearing wrapping paper filled the room.

Hermione chatted amiably with her friends and Head of House; Headmaster Dumbledore and Treva Bulstrode were now in an involved conversation near Hermione's door...which he was glad now she had closed when she came out. The fact that she had a bed in her room wasn't something he wanted to be widely known. Pomfrey was now asking Hermione about any symptoms, as Hermione tried to assure the older witch that she felt fine. He noticed the scroll from the Ministry was unopened and sitting on the couch beside her. At least she hadn't seen that yet, and he hoped she would refrain from opening it for the moment.

And then, there was another knock on the doorframe. He crumpled the paper from the Ministry and threw it on his desk, stalking to the doorway.

"What?" he spat. "Oh, it's you. Well, what news, Shacklebolt?"

"May I come in?" he asked, peering over Severus's shoulder and seeing the crowded room.

"We can speak in the corridor. There will be more privacy there," he explained sardonically. He would finish whatever business there would be with Shacklebolt and then get everyone out of his quarters. He was a bit shaken, actually...before Hermione had come into his life, the only person to step foot into his quarters had been Albus Dumbledore, and even then that was only on a few occasions.

They moved out into the corridor. "Well," Shacklebolt began, "he's being held, and there is a hearing scheduled for February 20th. At this time, the statements we've gathered are good, but for the hearing it would strengthen the case to have a Pensieve memory of the event from Hermione."

"Very well, I will inform her," he said, nodding. "Is there anything else?"

"Malfoy is attempting to press charges against you for assault...but I don't think there will be much trouble there."

"I should think not...I was defending my wife from him."

"That's how we think they'll see it, so like I said, it shouldn't be a problem."

"Contact me if there is any further business to deal with then," he said. He was already wondering if it would be worth it to prosecute Malfoy. It had been a minor attack in the scheme of things...it could have been worse, but they wouldn't be likely to put him away for a long time, if at all. A well placed poison would certainly put him out of the picture permanently...he wouldn't ever touch Hermione again if he were dead.

He turned to re-enter his quarters, but Shackbolt called out, "Snape...wait."

"Yes?"

"I was wondering...how are things with you and Hermione?"

Snape frowned at Shackbolt, rather put out by the question. "I don't see what concern that is of yours."

"No offence meant, you know. It's just...well, I was concerned for her. Harry always talked about her a lot, and I didn't really get to know her very well when the Headmaster asked if I'd be willing to marry her to keep her safe, then she picked you instead."

"Yes, she did. She is doing well."

"Well, good luck...maybe you'll have a little Snape on the way soon, eh?" he asked cheerfully, with a wink at Severus.

Severus didn't answer, deciding in this case that what he had to say would be academic, no matter how much satisfaction it might bring him, and instead turned and walked back into his crowded quarters. Ignoring everyone for the moment, he walked to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a stiff drink. What did it matter that it was only ten am? He scowled down at the crowd of Gryffindors; Creevey had decided his coffee table was a chair and was sitting on it.

"Mr. Creevey!" he barked. "If I wanted your backside to polish my table, I would assign it for you to perform for a detention."

"Y-Yes sir...sorry," he answered, snapping up to his feet.

Pomfrey had finished checking Hermione over and was now in a conversation with Minerva; they had chosen to sit in his green wingback chairs. No one sat in his chairs. Finally, he'd had enough. He slammed his empty tumbler down on the fireplace mantle with a resounding crack, and all heads turned to look at him.

"As much as I have been so longing to hold a gala in my home...my wife is recovering from a rather nasty bump, and I'm afraid the party will have to be postponed for another time. Now...if you please, I have work to do, and Hermione needs her rest." He glared in turn at everyone. Minerva looked slightly offended; Pomfrey looked surprised; the Gryffindors looked cowed, except for Potter, who glared back at him...Treva was suppressing a smile, but pointedly looked away from him; and Dumbledore was twinkling...damn him!

Slowly, with goodbyes and promises to see Hermione later, everyone filed out...everyone that is, except for Hermione's partner in her endeavour.

"Professor Snape," she said, "I don't mean to take up much more of your time, but I just wanted to ask you about something."

He stood waiting, and she motioned her head slightly to indicate she wanted to speak outside. Hermione, curious, craned her head around to look at Treva.

"Whatever it is, feel free to ask me now," he said coolly.

"Oh...I was just wondering if you had used the monthly recipe for the potion or if it was one which needed to be taken with more frequency?"

"As I said in my letter, it is the monthly variety. Is there anything else, Madam Bulstrode?"

"No...no, that's all. Thank you," she said. "I'll see you next weekend, Hermione, okay?" She smiled warmly at Hermione, then her smile stiffened slightly when she looked back to him.

When she exited, he shut the door behind her and let out a deep sigh. "That...is not an experience I wish to repeat again."

"What?" Hermione asked.

"That...invasion," he snarled.

"You call that an invasion?"

"I am not a social person, Hermione. Surely, you know this by now."

"True. It was a bit much for me, too, actually." She drew up the object she held in her lap, looking down at it awkwardly as she realised she wasn't supposed to be on speaking terms with him. He looked down at it as he walked around to stand in front of the couch.

"What is that?" he asked with disdain. It was brown and fluffy and somewhat resembled a canine.

"A gift...it has a calming charm on it. The Gryffindors all pitched in and bought it for me."

"And your condition?"

"Still a bit dizzy, and my head still hurts."

He nodded and left the living room, taking the side door leading to his private lab. He found the potion he was looking for and brought it to her. "Here...this will help."

"Thanks," she said, as she handed the empty phial back to him. "Severus..." she began uncomfortably. "Um...there was something I wanted to ask you about."

"What is that?"

"Something Malfoy said to me yesterday..." she glanced up at him, and he gave an expression of waiting. "Well...he told me...he said that he found some of his father's...erm, memories...and you..." he saw her fidget and blush, and then realised just what Malfoy might have said.

"Whatever he said, it is none of your concern," he said, cutting her off. He wondered if Malfoy Manor was currently well guarded...perhaps a trip to find and destroy some Pensieves wouldn't be amiss.

"Of course not," she said angrily, voice rising. "Nothing you do, or have done, or will do, is my concern...yet, everything about me is apparently your concern." She winced as her loud voice hurt her head. Scowling, and deciding to ignore him for the moment, she picked up the scroll and opened it. Severus watched as her eyes grew wide.

"They... idiots ... those ...invasion of my privacy...copulation...bastards!" she spat in a string of incoherence and then wadded the parchment up and hurled it into the fireplace.

"I quite agree with your sentiments," Severus murmured, as Hermione clutched her new present tightly in her lap, her fists pulling at the fur.

"We could have taken care of that last night," Hermione said angrily, glaring at him.

"You were in no condition to do so."

"The way it's been lately it's not as if it would have been any strain! I'd have laid there and you would have been finished in two seconds!" she declared. Groaning, she brought her hands up to her face, rubbing her eyes and then running her hands through her hair. "Severus...I don't want it to be like this anymore."

"If that is true, you may return to my bed if you are willing to accept my conditions." He looked down at her, arms crossed.

"And just what are those conditions?" she asked, though she didn't sound as if she cared one way or another.

"First," he began, walking to stand before her and crouching down at her level, "you will never question my authority, judgment, or truthfulness with you in regards to what you've agreed to, again. Secondly," he said, bringing one hand up to stroke her cheek...she didn't flinch away from him, but did clench her jaw, "you will be punished for your disobedience. Oh no," he said as her eyes widened, "you didn't think I was going to allow that to go unpunished, did you? Yes...you will be punished, Hermione," he repeated, leaning in closer to her. "You're going to accept it, and you're going apologise for calling me a liar."

"And what if I don't want to accept that? What if I just decide to stay in my room?" she challenged.

"Do you really want that?" he asked, bringing his fingers down her jaw, tracing down her neck and to her shoulder, and leaning in to whisper in her ear. "You want me...and you aren't satisfied with things as they are now. You won't be satisfied until you return to my bed, I assure you of that."

Hermione swallowed thickly, trying to keep her breath regular as her pulse raced. She wondered if this was how he would always be...always demanding his way, never willing to compromise...if she allowed it, then yes, it would be. "Severus, I can't do that until I have some kind of assurance from you...and until you can compromise on something, and stop trying to run my life in everything else. You're still doing it...you're still trying to tell me what to do..." she was silenced as his lips descended on hers.

She was shocked for a moment. His fingers traced small circles on the back of her neck, his other hand rested on her thigh. His lips on hers, demanding and yet careful...weren't pushing too hard, he was being careful of her and she could tell. It felt too good, and she returned his kiss, not a kiss of love or understanding but of desire and need and wanting and frustration. His tongue darted between her lips, caressing back along her tongue and, in a sudden surge of frustration, a desire to take something from him for herself, she bit down.

He didn't pull away, though...instead, he moaned into her mouth, one hand clamping down on her thigh, his fingers gripping her flesh tightly. He pulled back after a moment, eyes glimmering as he breathed heavily. He claimed her mouth again, this time Hermione tried to control the kiss, fueled by her frustration at being deprived of his attention; she slipped her tongue into his mouth, grabbing a fistful of greasy hair and, clenching her fist, pulling him against her. She knew she was pulling hard enough it might hurt him, but she had a sudden daring feeling that she didn't care, damn the consequences. He nipped lightly at her lips as he pulled back, moving his hips slightly to bring his straining erection against her knee.

"You do want me," he whispered, his breath felt hot on her cheek. "Stop fighting it."

"It's not about wanting you or not, Severus. If that's all you think it is, you just don't get it at all."

"No, I suppose I don't. But perhaps, I think one should honour their agreements."

A moment passed in which they both breathed heavily, coming down from the volatile feelings they both experienced. Hermione decided to go back to her first question.

"So what did Malfoy mean when he said you and his father used to share playthings?" she asked.

"Do you really want to know? Do you think maybe there are some things I keep from you because knowing would do nothing to help you?"

"I need to know what you might want from me...I didn't know anything when I got into all this."

"You knew just as much as you needed to know, and you learned very well along the way, as I taught you."

"Yes, just like you wanted," Hermione retorted sardonically. "I was going to be your perfect little bed slave, right?"

"You still will be, and yes, you were turning into the perfect bed slave, and you were enjoying it too," he said in a fierce whisper. "Can you deny that, Hermione? Can you? Tell me now; tell me you didn't enjoy it; tell me you didn't want it...if you didn't, who was it just a month ago, rutting on my knee and screaming as she came while I spanked her soundly? Who then screamed my name when I took her? Was that not you, Hermione? Wasn't it?"

Hermione's nostrils flared as he spoke, bringing into the light of day their last truly enjoyable encounter that last night at her parents' home. It was embarrassing to think of just how she could act with him. "Tell me," Hermione repeated firmly, "what did Malfoy mean?"

"Very well, then. Lucius and I were friends at one time. We shared similar desires in some areas and would sometimes share the objects of our desires. Lucius liked viewing some of his more *enjoyable* moments from time to time in a Pensieve, and I assume that Draco must have found an old Pensieve of his tucked away with one of those memories. Now, does that satisfy you?"

Hermione's stomach dropped as he revealed what, to her, was very disturbing. "And would you ever want to do that to me?"

"What if I did?"

"No, absolutely not..."

"The Ministry has already seen to that with their damned spells. Don't worry, even if I wanted to, we couldn't. Unless..." he trailed off, eyebrows furrowed together for a moment before he smiled at her.

"Unless what?" she asked suspiciously.

"Nothing," he said. "But...back to the subject at hand. There is one thing I might be willing to compromise on if you will resume your place; I found I rather liked hearing you scream my name. And, while at your parents home, I discovered that you aren't generally overly tedious when you speak with me. I would be willing to allow you to speak freely most of the time."

"How magnanimous of you," Hermione replied sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

"Do remember that. Am I not merciful?"

"Hardly." Hermione chose to ignore the rather outlandish historical reference of his words.

"Oh, Hermione...I don't think you've been in a position yet to truly understand mercy. But...while we're here, do you think you're up to taking care of our unfinished

business? For now, there's nothing we can do but pay the fine; I'll take care of it."

"I would have been fine last night, and I'm fine now. As I said...it's not as if you've been much strain lately."

Severus parted her thighs and pushed her robes up, finding jeans underneath. "Damned Muggle clothes...why do you wear these things?"

"They're comfortable...and you don't like them."

"Really?" he asked, moving her robes aside. Hermione moved her stuffed dog out of the way and shrugged her robes off. "If you weren't practically an invalid, I'd spank you for your impertinence. Perhaps I will when you have a clean bill of health."

"I...am not...an invalid," Hermione insisted, as she pulled her hips up to allow him to pull her jeans and knickers down. They bunched around her ankles as she scooted forward, sitting on the edge of the couch. Severus quickly released himself from his trousers, and thrust into her. She was already thoroughly wet for him.

Hermione gasped in pleasure as he filled her but steeled herself for it to be over soon. After the sixth thrust, she looked at him; he was watching her. "I didn't take the potion this time. Thought you might want to have a reminder of what you're missing."

Thoughts of retorts left her mind as she clutched at his shoulders, allowing her head to fall forward to rest on one shoulder. His hands gripped her hips as he thrust repeatedly into her, and soon, Hermione felt herself nearing climax. Severus chuckled and changed his rhythm, slowing down until Hermione wanted to grab him and make him go faster, but she didn't. She closed her eyes, brought her head back, and just focused on enjoying it.

"Look at me," Severus commanded, and she did. His eyes glittered with lust, then he brought one hand to her neck and drew her close to kiss her. It was a long, languid kiss that matched his slow thrusts, and Hermione felt as if she could melt into it. Hurriedly, she began unbuttoning his shirt, pulling it back to expose his chest, and then ran her hands over his body. His firm, wiry muscles were tense, flexing in time with his thrusts; his nipples were stiff, and she brought her fingers up, teasing them. Severus moaned deeply, speeding up as their kiss broke.

Hermione's head fell back as she approached climax again, and she came, her knees clutching at his thighs, and her hands clenching at his back. He came soon after, supporting his weight against the couch, while supporting her by the back of her neck. Severus nipped a trail up her neck and then whispered in her ear, "I miss this, Hermione...don't you?"

Moving forward and leaning on him, she whispered back, "Yes...I do, too."

"Then come back to my bed, Hermione."

"No, it can't be like that now."

"That is how it is...don't delude yourself into thinking you're going to change me. I am the man you married, and I am nothing less than what I told you. What are you afraid of?" he asked in a soft whisper.

"I'm not afraid."

"Yes...you are. But you're not afraid of me...it's something else altogether. What is that?"

Hermione pulled back to look him in the eye; they were still joined. "I'm not going to let you have your way in everything all the time, Severus. You're always telling me what to do and when to do it. I can't live like that."

"Hermione...much of that was for your protection. Now that Malfoy is gone, it won't be so necessary to look over you so closely. Your life is your own, but you gave yourself to me, and I will hold you to that. Don't think it can continue like this between us without end."

"I'll think about it," she finally said. Perhaps he was right. Maybe it was mostly because of Malfoy...he always did try to watch over her. He nodded, kissing her deeply once more before he pulled away from her, tucked himself back into his trousers, and stood.

Hermione pulled her jeans up, watching him as he went to his desk and looked down at the stack of papers there. Likely more grading to do. She wondered if maybe it would be different with Malfoy gone. She wasn't going to just take his word for it, though; he would have to prove that he wasn't going to boss her around all the time before she considered returning to his bed.

Hermione grabbed her stuffed dog, wondering what to call it, and went to her room. She realised Severus probably had been right about her not being in any condition for sex; just that bit of activity had her head throbbing again. She decided it was time for a nap.

Severus stood in the threshold of the door of Hermione's darkened room. She was recovered now from her concussion, and things between them had eased in some ways, while in others the tension remained. The topic of sex had returned to something they didn't speak of. However, she had initiated conversation a few times that week on neutral subjects. It had been a bit forced, but she tried. He had done the same, only with more ease.

He silently walked to the edge of her bed, watching the slow rise and fall of her chest under the blankets. She had been angry with him when she went to bed a few hours earlier; once again, he'd taken the potion. Their weekly encounter had been all too brief, and he realised that in penalising her, he was also depriving himself. Even so, she was wearing down, soon enough she would concede to him. Apparently, she had assumed that after their encounter the previous week, he wouldn't return to leaving her frustrated. She hadn't said anything, but she didn't need words. No, the furious flare of her nostrils as she glared at him, and the way her hair swished around as she had turned and stalked to her room, nearly slamming the door, spoke volumes. He had been in his bedroom ten minutes later when he heard the shower running, and over the sound of the water, a muted gasp and a muffled moan. However, the thud of what was likely her foot or fist slamming against the wall of the shower, that followed, told him she hadn't been very successful in easing her frustrations alone.

He reached out, a forefinger tracing her eyebrows lightly. Half her face was in shadow, the only light coming from her open doorway. Fortunately, Malfoy hadn't damaged her seriously...had he, Severus was sure he would have killed the boy. He felt another surge of anger as he thought of that, how his moment of neglect had nearly cost so much. Never again, he vowed silently...never again.

If the Ministry didn't put him away permanently, he decided the Malfoy heir might meet with an unfortunate accident. Simply giving someone like him time to sit and think up their revenge was not the way to make Hermione safe. No, as Machiavelli had said: "Men ought either to be indulged or utterly destroyed, for if you merely offend them they take vengeance, but if you injure them greatly they are unable to retaliate, so that the injury done to a man ought to be such that vengeance cannot be feared." The Senior Malfoy was unable to retaliate now; the same fate for his son would be best.

His hand drifted down her neck, fingers caressing the skin of her shoulder. He resisted the temptation to pull the coverlet back; instead, he leaned forward, examining her closely. "Oh, Hermione...my stubborn, willful Hermione," he whispered to her sleeping form. "Make no mistake...you are mine. I wait only for you to recognise the fact."

He turned and left her room, unaware of Hermione's eyes snapping open and her sudden intake of breath as he pulled her door closed. He had another concern he hadn't shared with Hermione yet, and he hoped she wouldn't end up involved. Walking to his desk, he picked up the parchment he'd received the previous morning from the Board of Governors. It seemed that there had been a complaint; he wasn't sure from where, but he suspected his own Slytherins. He was facing an inquiry for conflict of interests in his duties as a professor and Head of Slytherin.

Once again, **huge thanks** to my beta, Nakhash Mekashefah who is delightfully meticulous.

A Small Truce

Chapter 17 of 31

It's the week leading up to Valentine's Day. Can Hermione and Severus finally come to a small truce...and if they do, is it really enough?

Big thanks to my beta; Nakhash Mekashefah.

Hermione was at lunch but paying more attention to her homework than her soup and sandwich. She was so engrossed in her Arithmancy book, she didn't even spare a second glance at the Valentine hearts charmed to flap around like butterflies. She hadn't paid attention to the students who were exchanging Valentines; she hadn't even thought of Valentine's Day.

She was interrupted by Parvati Patil tapping her shoulder. "Hermione, didn't you hear me?" she asked.

"No, sorry, Parvati ...what was it?"

"Have you decided what you're wearing to the Valentine Ball?"

The Valentine Ball...she couldn't ignore it any longer. She wished she could get out of attending but, as Head Girl, she would have to be there. "I haven't really thought about it," she said to Parvati. At least, she'd tried not to think about it. It was difficult. Headmaster Dumbledore had undertaken the decoration of the Great Hall in the week preceding the Valentine Ball with gusto, and red and pink heart-shaped butterflies filled the air. She had managed not to notice, too, the numerous students talking about who was going with whom, and the girls talking about what they would wear.

She figured she would just stand in the background; it wasn't as if she would really get a date easily, what with being married, and it wasn't as if her husband would take her out on the dance floor or walk with her on his arm and offer to get her a drink.

"What do you think Professor Snape will wear? Have you picked something good for him?" Parvati persisted.

"Um...no," she said, not wanting to get into the conversation it looked like Parvati was trying to bring her into. "Listen, I've got to go...I have Arithmancy in fifteen minutes, and I wanted to ask Professor Vector about something. See you later." Hermione closed her book, packing it away in her bag, grabbed a sandwich, and left the Great Hall.

She did feel freer with Draco Malfoy gone. Severus had informed her a few days after the attack that he didn't think she would be in danger any longer, and there was no need to have himself or Harry walk with her everywhere. It was a relief to have a respite to herself. Her hopes that Severus had somehow decided to be nice to her were dashed the week after her concussion. Once more, they had met on Saturday in the living room to adhere to the requirements of the coitus clause. It had started well, and she was ready for something enjoyable. However, when he came after two strokes, giving her a challenging glare, she had gone to her room. She took care of her unfulfilled arousal alone in the shower, afterwards.

Hermione arrived in the Arithmancy classroom and took a seat, then retrieved her book and pulled her assignment out, placing it on her desk. One more read-through of her assignment - and finishing her sandwich - occupied her time before the class began.

As usual, Hermione found Arithmancy to be stimulating and challenging and was able to forget about her troubles amidst the calculations and advanced equations. The advanced wards they were studying were intriguing.

Ancient Runes followed Arithmancy in Hermione's timetable, another fascinating subject. By three, her classes were finished. She thought of going to the library to revise, but she did that nearly every day anyway, and now that she could walk the corridors of Hogwarts alone again, she found herself wanting to do something else for herself with her time. So she quickly went to the dungeons, entered her room and tossed her book bag on her desk, and changed clothes, donning long underwear before her jeans, turtleneck and jumper. She pulled her heavy wool cloak on, followed by her gloves, finally, and exited, making her way up the stairs and outside onto the Hogwarts grounds for a stroll.

The sun was shining for a change, though the early February air was cold; snow still covered the grounds. Hermione smiled widely as she walked past Hagrid's hut, feeling a surge of cheerfulness at her freedom in Malfoy's absence. The trial would be later that month, and she was concerned that he wouldn't get a harsh sentence, but at least he was gone from Hogwarts and, for the time being, he was in custody.

The evergreens in the Forbidden Forest were a deep green, contrasting with the bare white and brown of the branches of the deciduous trees. She walked among the trees, thinking about the dangers lurking deeper in the forest: Aragog and her brood, the centaurs, fortunately Grawp was gone. Hermione shook her head, thinking of the giant and how Hagrid had hoped to tame him and teach him manners. There is only so much in someone's nature that can be trained out.

Here, along the outskirts of the Forest, she would be safe. It was still off-limits, but she had faced danger before and could take care of herself. In a surge of energy, she decided to run...she hadn't just run for fun in ages; and so she did, taking off at a near-sprint through the trees. The snow and twigs, fallen from trees, crunched under her boots; birds and squirrels flew and skittered away as she recklessly crashed through the woods, slowing to a jog, then a walk after a while.

Much later, as the sky grew dark and the first stars appeared, she headed back to Hogwarts feeling pleasantly tired from her excursion.

Severus Snape searched through his filing cabinet when he returned from dinner in the Great Hall, pulling out Hermione's old student files. His inquiry was scheduled for the day after Draco Malfoy's trial. He was going to prepare early, and Headmaster Dumbledore had agreed to go over Hermione's old tests and essays to grade them independently and to prove that he wasn't showing her favouritism. Hermione's grade average had neither improved nor declined since their marriage, so the accusations should hold no water. It was still inconvenient that he should have to defend himself.

Just as he was placing the files together in a case, he heard a knock...he paused, but realised it was on Hermione's outer door, so he ignored it. Another knock came after a few moments; he scowled in annoyance, but continued with what he was doing. When the knock then moved to the main entrance of his quarters, he rose with no small aggravation and opened the door.

"Miss Weasley, you knocked a moment ago on Hermione's door. If she does not answer that door, do not come to this door to bother me," he snapped.

"S-sorry, sir...it's just...I can't find her," the youngest Weasley stammered.

"She isn't here. I suggest you check the library and the Gryffindor common room. If she isn't there, she's likely decided to find some place else to revise. Good evening," he finished with finality and closed the door. She hadn't been at dinner either, he mused. However, Draco was gone, and his wand would give him the alarm if she were in any sort of danger, and so he decided she had simply found someplace else to be. Still, he wanted to be sure. He withdrew his wand and focused it on the spell, which was on Hermione's amulet, stretching a quiet awareness to it. It would send him an alarm if she was in danger, but it could also be used at other times to sense her. Closing his eyes as he focused on the amulet, he focused on her.

Exhilaration...Happiness...Satisfaction.

She was safe if she was feeling that...so he let the spell drop, now curious about what she was doing. At least she wasn't off pouting somewhere; she'd been doing all too much of that lately. He wondered if she was revising...no, it had neither felt like the focus and determination of revising nor boredom. But perhaps she would be in a mood that he could make some progress with her, do something with her differently to hopefully bring about a conclusion of their all too tiring argument.

He finished putting aside the files he needed, and then exited his quarters to go check on his Slytherins. Several moments of spying revealed all was well in the Slytherin common room, and so he returned to his quarters, selected a book, and began to read.

It was half an hour later that another knock sounded on his door. He placed the book aside, musing that his quarters had seen more activity and visitors in the last several months than they had in the several years before that. He was surprised to find the Gryffindor Head of House there.

"Minerva," he intoned, "what brings you here?"

"Have you seen Miss Gra Madam Snape?"

"No, not since this morning. Why?"

"I have been looking for her and have had a few students looking for her. I needed to find her and discuss preparations for the Valentine's Day Ball. Miss Weasley informed me that she wasn't here, and I grew concerned, what with everything that has happened."

"I am sure that wherever she is, she is fine. But, I will inform her when I next see her that she is needed, Minerva."

"Thank you, Severus. Good evening," she said, turning to leave. "There you are!" she said, raising her voice as she turned from the door. Snape opened the door more fully and stepped into the corridor. His wife, looking rather rumpled, was walking towards them.

"Oh...hello, Professor McGonagall," she said.

"Where have you been? I've been looking for you. As Head Girl you can't just disappear, I needed to talk with you about the Valentine's Ball, and you were nowhere around."

"Sorry, Professor...I didn't realise anyone would need me this evening," Hermione said, looking sorry.

"Well, it's too late tonight, but tomorrow I need you to go meet with the Prefects and organise arrangements for the Valentine's Ball."

"Yes, Professor. I'll do that...I'm sorry I wasn't available."

"Very well, good evening to you both," McGonagall said with a nod to each of them and walked away. Severus stepped back inside, holding the door open for Hermione.

"When your friend Miss Weasley came by, I too grew concerned," he said softly as she entered.

"I was fine...just out for a walk."

Severus nodded but noticed, as she passed, that she had several bits of twigs and leaves in her hair. His gaze narrowed, sharpening on one particular sprig of leaves. "You've been in the Forbidden Forest," he said accusingly. "You've brought the evidence with you in your hair. What do you think you're doing roaming the Forest? Now that Malfoy isn't around to try and hurt you, you think to put yourself in danger?"

Hermione spun around to face him and backed away a step at the hard anger on his face. "No," she answered. "I was just on the edges. I've been there dozens of times for various reasons; I didn't go deep into the Forest."

"I should take points from Gryffindor for this; I could, you know."

"What happened to being my *husband* while we're in here?" she retorted, eyes narrowed and fists clenched at her sides.

Severus opened his mouth to retort but shut it again quickly. Taking house points from her now, even though he should, wouldn't help at all in bringing her around. Still, he had to do something. "Hermione, I would hate to think I married you for your protection just to have you run off and intentionally get yourself killed."

"Really? Would you miss me or would you just miss my body?" she spat, then turned quickly and strode to her room, closing the door firmly. Severus clenched his fists rhythmically in anger, taking deep breaths as he fought the urge to blast her door down and...and do what? Yell at her for being an immature girl not thinking about the danger she was in? Demand she always check in with him and inform him of her location? No...Malfoy was gone now, and when he was her age he'd spent time in the Dark Forest, too. He knew well enough that it was reasonably safe for someone who was alert and capable of defending themselves. Still, it was against the rules for all students.

Hermione breathed heavily after she closed the door to her room, angry that he would try to take house points from her. It was confusing...he was her professor still, but he was her husband, and then he wanted to be her Master to top it all off. Shaking her head, she began undressing, catching a strong whiff of sweat as she shed the layers of clothing. Definitely time for a bath. The run and hike through the edges of the Forbidden Forest and around the lake had been exhilarating, she'd felt so much better afterwards, and then to have to return to find Professor McGonagall upset at not finding her, and Severus being a prat had soured her good mood.

Once in the bathroom, she closed the door, which was slightly open from Severus's room, and started the water running while she gathered her toiletries from her cabinet. A shower would be faster, but she wanted a long soak...and besides, taking up the bathroom with a nice long soak would serve him right. She took another moment, before getting into the water, to cast a ward on the door. It wouldn't stop him if he really wanted in, but it would certainly let him know she wanted to be left alone.

They didn't see each other or speak again until that Friday. Hermione kept busy with the preparations for the Valentine's Ball. Thinking about organising the decoration committee, her exams, preparation for NEWT's, and helping her friends with their homework kept her mind off her problems. She also heard from four new Muggle-born women who'd been forced to marry and who wanted to come to her support group meetings. She owed them the time of the next meeting, which was the coming Sunday, and sent an owl to Treva, as well.

She went to see Dumbledore on Wednesday to ask about progress with the investigations on the ones who hadn't been able to respond. He'd given her a smile and told her not to worry about it, that she was doing more than her part already. She did, however, catch the sad look in his eyes, which didn't match his false smile and

assurances. It was so wrong that this tragedy continued to strike out against Muggle-born women. Fortunately, Dumbledore did have some good news for her. There was a faction of pure-bloods opposed to the marriage law who'd decided to join forces with the Order for the purpose of repealing the law. They brought with them: a team of solicitors, funding, and a number of well-placed names.

The Ministry of Magic had to set up a special new department just to deal with the flood of Howlers they were now getting from everywhere. The fliers had been taken to heart, and the people were rising up to fight the injustice. The spirit of some in the support group had risen, as well. It had taken a few meetings, but they had overcome the awkwardness of the first one quickly, and everyone exchanged information about their methods of coping with, or even getting around, the Ministry laws. A few of the solutions found by some of the other women were beginning to sound more and more appealing to Hermione. She wondered about bringing the subject up with Severus, but she wasn't really willing to just give up and go for completely separate lives just yet...he still intrigued her.

Hermione avoided the other girls who were busy talking about what they would wear to the Valentine's Ball, how they would do their hair, and who they were going with. It was fast becoming the most miserable Valentine's she'd ever experienced, and it hadn't even arrived. Even the previous Valentine's celebration during her sixth year hadn't been so bad. Headmaster Dumbledore had insisted on carrying on with a celebration even amidst higher Death Eater activity. She'd gone with Harry, mostly because he was so fraught with worry over his upcoming role against Voldemort that he hadn't asked anyone to go...and no one had asked her. In the end, she had told him they would be going together.

But not this year. No, she supposed she might be able to leave early and revise her notes if she could count on the Prefects to remain behind and close down the festivities. Maybe no one would notice she was attending alone.

Friday, February the fourteenth, arrived finally. After lunch, Hermione set to organising the Prefects on the committee to setting up the decorations and moving the tables aside, transfiguring them into a series of smaller round tables to sit in the corners of the Great Hall, leaving a large, oval space open.

In just under two hours, the Great Hall was transformed into a romantic setting: candles floating in heart patterns over the small tables, streamers of silver and pink and red weaving through the air, and dozens of butterflies charmed from crepe paper fluttering about.

"Ahh, yes, this is lovely," came a voice from the entrance of the Great Hall. Hermione turned and saw Headmaster Dumbledore entering, gazing about with a smile on his face. "Such a romantic setting. Well done, thank you all for setting this up," he said to the Prefects. "Now, I'm sure you will all want to go get ready for the ball." The Prefects smiled, murmuring their thanks as they left the Great Hall. Hermione smiled at him, then remembered the fact that she'd rather not bother going and began to leave.

"Wait," he said softly to her as she walked past him.

"Yes, sir?" she asked, turning her attention respectfully to the Headmaster.

"Is something wrong, Hermione? You seem...distracted."

"I'm fine, sir," she said, though not believably.

"Hermione, I know this would normally be a time you would be hoping to have a date with a young man who might be a romantic prospect...but perhaps Severus will surprise you? I know it hasn't been long, and I know Severus can be distant and even difficult. Have the two of you been having troubles?"

Hermione wasn't sure what to say. *Yes, Headmaster...I don't really like the idea he seems to have that I'm supposed to get down on my knees and take his orders, even if I did agree to it; and I don't really like how he's bent on running my life, telling me how to revise, and how he might take points from my house if he catches me at something I perhaps shouldn't be doing; and I don't like the fact that he's still practically a stranger to me who seems to think that love is overrated; and that he's scary and violent when he's angry and would have killed someone in front of me if I hadn't stopped him; and how he seems to think I'm some kind of possession.* No, none of that really seemed like something she could say aloud. Instead, she said: "Well, we're still just getting to know each other...and, well, have had a few differences of opinion."

"All married couples have differences of opinion. I do understand that in your case there is added strain because he is your professor as well as your husband, and the fact that marriage wasn't something either of you was planning on anytime soon." He paused a moment, regarding Hermione carefully. "Is there anything you would like to talk to me...or perhaps Professor McGonagall about? We've both known Severus a long time and won't judge either of you unfairly, either."

"Thanks...but no. It'll be fine, Headmaster," she said, giving him a wan smile and then leaving the Great Hall.

Once back in her room, she looked into her wardrobe. She hadn't even thought of what to wear. What was the point? Who was she hoping to impress? She decided on the dress robes she'd worn the previous year. They would still fit.

She laid the dress robes out on her bed, then went to the bathroom to shower. Letting the hot water soothe her tense muscles as she scrubbed herself and then shaved, she thought about how the ball would go. She knew Severus would be at the ball, or patrolling the gardens as he always was. She had no delusions he would ask her to dance; he'd made it very clear that he wasn't a romantic. She just hoped that she wouldn't get pitying looks from her friends - that would only make it worse.

Hermione jumped as she heard the bathroom door open. She was rinsing her hair and hoped he would just go away. She frowned when she saw him move in front of the shower door and begin removing his clothes. "I'll be out in a little bit, if you'd just wait a minute," she said.

"Hermione, how long are we going to keep this up?" he asked, sounding slightly exasperated.

"I'll be out of your way in just a minute," she said, ignoring his question. A few seconds later the shower door opened and he stepped inside. "Fine then, don't wait," she said peevishly and started to move around him to exit the shower, but he reached out, grabbing her firmly about the waist.

"Don't go, Hermione," he said softly, whispering just behind her ear.

"Will you take house points if I do?" she asked.

"Don't be ridiculous," he murmured. "I'm growing very tired of this attitude. Stop avoiding me...we can enter the ball together, and when we get back, let us talk tonight; sort this out once and for all."

Hermione gritted her teeth, closing her eyes and thinking about what he'd said. "You really want to talk about it?" she finally asked. "I mean, really...not just demand what you want?"

"Yes. I don't think you like how things have been lately either, Hermione. We're stuck together; we should make of it what we can."

"A few of the other girls in the support group have made different arrangements," Hermione said, shifting slightly against his arm.

"Such as?"

"Living separately...they meet once a week to do what they have to for the law, but the rest of the time they don't live together. Maybe that would be better for us? Once the marriage law is rescinded they won't keep track of the legal requirements anymore--"

Severus spun her around, looking her firmly in the eyes, one hand loosely grasping the wet hair at the back of her head. "No!" he exclaimed. "You realise the damned Ministry used permanent binding spells on us? That we will still be bound to each other...that we can never take another lover...ever? Do you really want to live a celibate life?" he asked, eyebrows furrowed together as he waited for her answer.

"What I want hasn't mattered since they passed the law," Hermione said quietly, looking away from him. She pulled away, turned and exited to her room.

Severus had let her go at her quiet pronouncement, wondering if perhaps she had finally revealed the root of the problem. What she wanted...what did she want? None of this was what either of them wanted, but he had tried to make it bearable enough for both of them, he thought. Severus washed himself quickly, then dried, donned his dress robes, and went to her door, knocking softly.

He opened the door when he heard no answer and found her seated on her bed, knees drawn up to her chest, dressed only in her underwear, looking down at her dress robes laid on the bed.

"Hermione, we should be leaving soon," he said.

"I'm not going," she replied, not looking at him. She wrapped her arms more tightly about her knees.

"I see. And what do you hope to accomplish by this sulking?" he asked. "You're being childish."

"I don't care. Maybe I want to be childish. At least it's something I can do if I want to," she replied hollowly.

Severus crossed the room and sat on the bed beside her. "Hermione...we all do things we don't want to do in life. We all have to live with choices made not only by ourselves, but by others that are out of our control. Railing against the inevitable will gain you nothing...I learned that well enough, long ago." He watched her as she turned her head away from him and noted the way her shoulders stiffened, her entire back seemed taut. He reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder. "I don't want you to be unhappy," he said truthfully.

"No, of course you don't. That's *tedious* for you!" she nearly shouted, her voice cracking at the end. "Leave me alone," she said in a near whisper, trying to pull away from his touch. She stifled a sob quickly.

Severus pulled his hand away and sat for several long moments, listening to the careful, forced evenness of her breath, watching the muscles in her back ripple as she held herself stiffly. She looked so small, suddenly. She'd never seemed so small before, looking nearly helpless. She reminded him of another image...one from long ago that he didn't want to think about. She looked...*weak*.

"I wonder...was I mistaken?" he asked quietly as he drew himself up, narrowing his eyes at her form. "I'd thought...I thought you were stronger than that." His voice held a note of accusation.

Hermione turned to him, giving him an incredulous look; her angry eyes alight with an inner fire, even through the unshed tears. "Mistaken in thinking I was strong?" she repeated. Her nostrils flared and she turned quickly away from him. "How can you say that?"

Severus stood stiffly, turning his back on her before he spoke. "Until recently I thought you were handling everything quite well. Lately, however...you've made me wonder if I overestimated your capabilities. In fact, perhaps when I helped you with your Arithmancy calculations, I misled you into a path you weren't capable of handling because of that overestimation. If that is the case, then I...apologise for not seeing that at the time." He walked quickly for her door once he'd finished speaking, not wanting to remain with her.

Once outside her doors he stood for several moments, fists clenching, his breathing turning heavy. For the first time since the marriage law passed, he felt a roiling discomfort of doubt creep into his stomach followed by a surge of anger. This was all Albus Dumbledore's doing...that man, convincing him to submit a marriage petition for a girl who now seemed to be all false bravado.

Why hadn't he seen it?

Had he been so easily fooled by her determination to move to the top of her class? By her open strength in the face of danger, by her commitment to assisting the Order in what capacity Dumbledore had allowed? And even before that, by her plans which were the driving force behind the student club: *Dumbledore's Army*. And even when she'd come to him, she had been understandably disquieted...but he thought she had gotten over that soon enough, that she had chosen to proceed in the most logical way and thought she would be fine once the initial strain of adjustment had passed.

He realised he had been overlooking a great many things. Over the years he had grown accustomed to simply doing as he had to do. His time as a spy, moving constantly between Voldemort and Dumbledore, constantly playing the line of how much truth to give to make the side of the light win had hardened him, tempered him into the man he was. And even before that, his father had hardened him to many things...though still he chose not to dwell on his father, no, that sort of thing was for people who wore their hearts on their sleeves and wallowed in misery.

Hermione didn't have the benefit of that sort of experience...but then, maybe not everyone would see his life as beneficial experience, he thought, as he exited his quarters and started down the corridors of the dungeons. And now...now he was stuck with a little girl who liked to play pretend as the brave Gryffindor. Stuck...for the rest of his life to a girl who was stuck with him, all because he'd thought she was more than she actually was. Her life had been too easy, her parents lenient, and even at school she'd been held to a different standard, as if she were above her peers. And so, in some ways she had been weakened even whilst seeming to be stronger than her peers. The brief time in which she had turned around and seemed to adjust to being his wife had misled him...she'd seemed happy, and he had started to think she would be a good wife for him.

He'd been blind.

He reached the Great Hall and swept about the edges of the dance floor, scowling at the students who stood aside as he passed. He paused at the refreshment table and poured himself a glass of punch, testing it to be sure none of the students had placed any alcoholic beverages within.

Looking around the Great Hall, he spotted Dumbledore, who was also watching him curiously, obviously wondering where Hermione was. He turned away and strolled around some more, dampening moods with a dark gaze wherever he could. He couldn't easily avoid the Headmaster making his way towards him, and to do so would be silly, so he remained where he was, waiting for the inevitable questioning. He didn't have to wait long.

"One might wonder, Severus, where your wife is?" Dumbledore said. While he was smiling, he also observed Snape closely.

"She didn't wish to attend, Headmaster," Severus answered lowly, not wanting nearby students to overhear.

"She didn't? Hmmm...you know, I find a gift of roses often makes women feel better, especially on Valentine's Day. Perhaps some chocolates? Or chocolate roses?"

"Headmaster, I know you don't mean to sound daft, but please, don't insult either of us by suggesting roses would solve any problems we may have," he said through clenched teeth, and then turned and made his way to the teachers' exit and outside. Normally he wouldn't have been so short-tempered with the man, but now his forward guise of senility seemed all too genuine...that he could have ever thought Hermione could be an appropriate wife to him, or that he could be an appropriate husband for her. She should have picked Shackbolt. At least then, he wouldn't be stuck with a weak, snivelling little girl.

He missed the fact that Hermione had entered the Great Hall only seconds before he exited. Instead, he turned to the rose garden, withdrew his wand, and began blasting the newly blooming roses. Professor Sprout liked her roses, and kept them enchanted to bloom year round.

Hermione entered the Great Hall with her head held high. She'd used a charm to cover the evidence that she'd been crying and had quickly dressed after Severus had left

her room. She was going to confront him, but he had already left, and so she went ahead to the ball.

How could he say he thought she was stronger?

Stronger than what? And what did his opinion of her strength or weakness have to do with anything?

Then, she'd begun sorting through what he'd said about the Arithmancy calculations. *"...you've made me wonder if I had overestimated your capabilities. In fact, perhaps when I helped you with your Arithmancy calculations, I misled you into a path you weren't capable of handling because of that overestimation."* What could he have done to mislead her by overestimating her?

On her way up to the Great Hall, the thought had hit her that maybe he did hold some level of respect for her. He certainly had an odd way of showing it if that was the case.

Looking around the Great Hall, she didn't see him. Many couples were dancing to music, while others sat at the tables with punch and small plates of cake or appetisers. She went to the left, walking around the edges of the Hall. A few of the sixth and seventh years cast glances in her direction, but she ignored the looks and whispers, determined to not let it bother her. She paused in her circuit and leaned against the wall, looking out over the dancers.

"Good evening, Madam Snape," a voice said. She startled slightly and looked for the source of the voice.

"Oh, hello Professor Dumbledore," she said. "Good evening to you, as well."

"I'm pleasantly surprised to see you here. Severus seemed to be under the impression you weren't coming."

"I wasn't feeling well for a while, but I'm fine now," she answered.

"If you're looking for Severus, I believe you'll find him in the gardens," Dumbledore said, smiling, and then turned and walked away.

Hermione remained in the Great Hall for a while after that. She saw Harry and Ginny dancing together, and Ron was dancing with Parvati Patil. Several of the Slytherin girls were standing together and whispering, casting her odd glances and giggling. She decided that was enough of that, and she too left the Great Hall. If he really wanted to talk, finally, she had some things to say to him. And, now that she knew there was a possibility he wouldn't like, she had a place from which to negotiate. Having to negotiate with her husband wasn't ideal by any means, but she knew it was simply the reality of her situation. She might not have had a choice in marrying him, but she did have a choice in how she proceeded with him.

It didn't take long to find him...she followed the trail of blasted roses until she came upon him, watching as he muttered curses at the shredded petals.

"Don't you think Professor Sprout will be upset at finding her plants ruined?" Hermione asked as she walked up behind him.

Severus turned to face her, his face a stony mask. "Finally decide to quit sulking?" he asked.

"You said you wanted to talk, and since you obviously don't want to stay for the ball, let's talk," Hermione challenged, ignoring his question. "Yes, I've had enough of how things have been, but there are certain things I won't compromise on anymore, either." She stopped walking towards him and stood about six feet away, crossing her arms.

"The truth is, I think I *could* stand to have a celibate life, and that's what we'll have after the marriage law is rescinded if you don't want to compromise. Once the restrictions on the Muggle-born women are gone, there will be no reason for me to need you."

"Well then, I suppose I shouldn't expect a Gryffindor to live up to her promises. It's all bravado masquerading as courage with you lot," he said venomously. "Running blindly into something and then realising it's not quite what you thought it would be seems to be adequate justification to go back on your word. Why do you think I was so explicit about what life would be like with me, Hermione? I wanted you to understand, just so you wouldn't end up turning around and running away. Brave Gryffindor, indeed," he mocked, then turned away and spat on the ground. He raised his wand and fired another hex at a rose, blasting it into a cloud of shredded petals.

"And what did you expect? What other choice did I have? I didn't have any choice, Severus. None at all. It was marry you, or marry Shacklebolt, or marry Lucius Malfoy. What the hell kind of a choice is that?"

"It was three choices, Hermione. Three possibilities, which is more than what some people get in their lives. Even if none of your choices were particularly pleasant, you made your choice, and now you want to change what went along with the choice. You had more choice in the matter than I did once the proposal was submitted, and I'm just as trapped as you are now." He turned back to the rose bush, pointing his wand. Instead of blasting another rose, he used his wand to mutter a cutting spell. He held the rose on a long stem, looking at it oddly. Then, he turned and held it out to her. "The Headmaster seems to believe roses would make it all better," he said. "Since you seem to take stock in what the Headmaster suggests, why don't you take it?"

Hermione reached out automatically, even as she asked: "Why would you bother to give me a rose?" As she grasped the stem, she gasped and pulled her hand away. Severus reached out quickly, grabbed her hand, and turned it over, stepping closer to her.

"A thorn pricked you, I see," he said, looking down at the dark bead of blood welling up on the pad of her ring finger. "I'm sure you think it ironically fitting." His eyes drifted from her hand up to her eyes. "Such it is with roses. Would a rose without the thorns be as desirable?"

Hermione watched, strangely transfixed as he drew her hand upwards and then took the pad of her finger gently between his lips, suckling the blood from her finger. She shivered involuntarily at the sensation and the sight of a small droplet of her blood resting on his lower lip when he lowered her hand, still holding it.

"At least with a rose you know to expect thorns. It's no surprise when you find yourself pricked by one."

He finished his statement by turning and walking past her, not even looking at her.

Hermione watched him walk away with a sinking feeling, but then she tossed back her shoulders as she gathered her resolve. She wasn't about to let him turn it all around on her. Decision made, she went after him.

"Severus!" she called as he went into one of the greenhouses. He didn't stop right away; instead, he continued through the greenhouse before stopping and turning to face her, a moment before he turned his attention to a large pot of a flowering plant. Hermione caught up to him. "Now who's the one running off?" she asked, perturbed.

"This particular plant is a favourite of Professor Sprout's," Snape said.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Humour me. What do you think of it?"

Puzzled, Hermione turned to look at the plant. It was about four feet high, with tough-looking stalks as big around as her wrists. They hadn't ever studied that plant in Herbology, and she wondered why it was here. An array of flowers grew from it in several colours. "Well...it's a flowering shrub?" she said, shrugging. "What's your point?"

"Those branches look quite strong, don't they?" he mused, studying the shrub.

"Yes...I suppose they do," Hermione agreed.

Severus reached out and, with one finger, stroked the nearest stalk. Hermione's eyes widened as she watched a trail appear in the stalk where he'd touched it. Quickly, the branch began dissolving and then toppled over, all the flowers above the point he'd touched wilting. "Appearances can be deceiving," Snape stated, turning to look at her. "Deception is quite...*disappointing*." He looked down at his pointer finger with distaste and smeared the slimy remains of the dissolved branch onto the moss growing in the pot. "My point, if you haven't discerned it yet, is that it is better to know ahead of time what awaits you, better to be aware of the dangers, and weaknesses, of another before you are bound to them, especially in marriage, and especially one such as ours. We had an understanding, yet you saw fit to go against it. I'm left with as little choice as you are here." As he spoke, he stepped closer to Hermione until he stood only inches away.

"I'm not a coward, and I'm not weak," Hermione said firmly. "This isn't about me being weak, because I'm not weak! This is about me not having any *choices*! Why can't you get that?"

"And why can't you understand that what I expect isn't so much to ask? Was I not clear? I had very few demands of you, yet you cannot find it in yourself to even do as you agreed to do. End this now," he whispered fiercely, grabbing her by the shoulders firmly. "Come with me; return to my bed. I ask only for you to fulfil your promises."

Hermione faced him, not blinking under his hard gaze. This was it...if he wouldn't compromise now, she decided that she would simply leave. All the fighting, all the silence and struggling really came down to only one thing. "I will, but not without a compromise."

"I've already told you what I'd be willing to compromise on."

"Yes, you have. But I want one more. I just want to have a choice. I want to be able to say '*no*' when I want to. I'll do what you want, but you need to respect that sometimes I need to have a choice."

They stared at one another, unblinking, for several very long moments. Hermione decided not to speak any more. It was his turn, and she was going to wait. His hands still gripped her shoulders firmly, and she could feel the occasional pulsing of his fingers clenching. If he denied that condition, she would leave. They could fulfil the requirements of the law without living together, and when the law was repealed she would live alone.

Perhaps he would be ready to compromise one day, if not today.

She could see his jaw muscles pulsing, his eyes glinting...whether with anger or something else, she wasn't sure. But she waited.

He wasn't answering.

Finally, he took in a deep breath and released her shoulders. He turned away slightly, taking several steps and crossing his arms, his jaw still clenching as he glared fiercely into the distance through the hazy glass panels of the greenhouse. The silence stretched on. Somewhere, a cricket started chirping in the greenhouse, but they both ignored it. Hermione waited, watching in silence for his answer.

"And if I grant you that, do you see yourself saying '*no*' often?" he finally asked.

Hermione felt a flood of relief. He was considering it. "No, all I'm asking for is a choice...I just want that option."

She waited again, this time longer. The cricket continued to chirp and then fell silent. Finally, he turned to look at her again. She felt her stomach flutter at his intense gaze. "Would you continue to take my instruction and direction?" he asked.

"Yes, Severus. As I said, I only want the option, even if I don't exercise that option often." Her heart was pounding and her palms were growing sweaty despite the cool air.

"And if I told you that if you return to my bed tonight," he began stepping back close to her, voice low, "I would want to tie you...stretch you between the bedposts...and punish your nipples until they would be sore for days, before I take you in every way I can, would you say no to that?" he asked in a harsh whisper.

Hermione's heart pounded harder as she met his gaze. He certainly had a lot of questions about when she would say no. But, she took that as a good sign, he was seriously considering it. She answered firmly, "Right now, that sounds like a very good idea, so I wouldn't say no." She gave him a smile, hoping to lighten the mood. It really wasn't the bondage or his sadistic tendencies she had a problem with...she'd even enjoyed that.

Severus looked thoughtful a moment. "So, if you had the option to say no and could speak freely when in my bed, you would return and end this silliness?"

"Yes," Hermione answered.

"You do understand this wouldn't mean I would change or suddenly become gentle with you, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And I want no more misunderstandings...no more accusations, if I grant you this."

Hermione nodded her assent. If he could compromise on this one thing, then she knew he could be reasonable. If she had enough power to say no, she felt that she wouldn't be so worried over the little things. The safeword, contract, and so forth, didn't really matter that much, if she could just say no when she wanted to.

Severus exhaled sharply, staring at a point past Hermione for another few moments, but this time Hermione thought she could see a softening of his features...his jaw wasn't clenching anymore. His eyes turned to meet hers and he said, "Very well, then. I grant you that."

"Thank you," Hermione said softly, exhaling as she realised she'd been holding her breath.

"Now," he said, reaching out and lifting her chin with a finger, "you said what I suggested I might do sounds like a good idea, did you not?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, her stomach flipping with a slight nervous tingle.

"Prove it," he challenged. Go prepare yourself, and I expect to find you in my bed when I return to our quarters."

Hermione nodded once, then turned to leave the greenhouse. Her legs felt weak as she walked, both with relief and nervousness. She was worried...had she asked for too little? Would this make any difference? A small, spiteful voice wondered if she should test this new condition when they met again in his bed, see if he would stop. But no, she decided that would just be petty. He'd compromised; he'd given her back the choice and freedom she'd wanted. Now that he had, she was looking forward to seeing him. She was relieved she didn't have to leave.

Severus watched her walk away. He wasn't sure what he would find when he returned to their quarters, to his bedroom. What if she wasn't there? He wasn't sure that he would trust her again if she wasn't. He already had a difficult time trusting her, but he'd decided to take a chance. Still, he wasn't sure if he'd made the right decision in compromising with her. Hermione seemed to be under the impression she wasn't asking for much. Perhaps it didn't seem like much to her, but it had been for him.

Would he find himself refused now? It had been hard enough to bring another person into his life...Hermione had already shared more time with him than just about any other woman. Not only his time - but his home, his privacy. He had always guarded his privacy well. In his home he was in charge, no one told him what to do; no one could send him on an errand, demand his service. His former lovers had always been clear that he would not accept refusal in his home, his bed. If they had a problem with that fact, they simply didn't return. That was why he made it so clear before they married what he would expect.

And then, Hermione had revealed that option...that she might leave. The problem was, he would never be able to take another lover. If she were simply a lover, he didn't think he would have conceded that point. He felt angry still, as if he'd been manipulated into giving her that option, and now he would be at the mercy of her whims. He'd never been refused in his own home since reaching adulthood. Never. It was with a great deal of trepidation that he began the walk from the greenhouse. Scenarios played in his head...what if he got down there and she told him no?

He wasn't sure what he would do if that happened. He could perhaps see some other time, maybe if she wasn't feeling well or had had a bad day, where she might say no...that seemed to be what she was getting at. But, if she said no tonight...that would be a slap in the face. He decided if that happened, he wouldn't leave it up to her to leave or not...no, she would find herself let go and he would just deal with being alone. His hand would serve him well enough.

He barely noticed the noise coming from the Great Hall as he passed it on his way to the dungeons. And, once in the corridors of the dungeons, it was overwhelmingly quiet. And then, he reached his door. The wards were taken down and he entered. He didn't go immediately to his room...instead, he paused at the liquor cabinet, pulled out a bottle of brandy and poured himself some in a tumbler. His nerves steadied as he sipped it, and then tossed down the last bit. The bedroom door looked nearly ominous to him. He shook his head, realising he was being silly. It was simple, he would find Hermione behind that door, ready and waiting for him, or he wouldn't.

Taking a deep breath, he pulled off his outer robe, laid it on the back of the couch, and then headed to the bedroom.

Hermione waited, stomach quivering in anticipation as she knelt in the middle of the bed. She wasn't sure how much time he would take to get to her, and she wondered if she'd prepared fully enough. The 'Fundamundic' charm had been employed, just in case, but she hadn't shaved more than her legs and underarms. She wasn't sure why she was nervous. But, it had been more than six weeks since she'd shared a bed with him.

She still wondered how well he would hold to what he'd agreed. What if he didn't stop when she told him 'no' some time? This wasn't the time to test it. No, now was the time to show him that she appreciated being given the choice finally, that he could see that she had free will. It wouldn't be fair to tell him no out of spite.

She heard the door open and heard his boot steps in the living room. He was taking a while, and she wondered if it was just to make her nervous. Was he just playing with her now?

Finally, he walked through the threshold of the bedroom door; his eyes locked with hers, and she thought she saw a faint smile on his lips before his face hardened and he walked to the edge of the bed.

"You may undress me now," he said, echoing the words spoken more than three months previously on their wedding night. Hermione gave him a smile and moved to the edge of the bed, reaching up to unbutton his shirt. His robe was already gone. She moved slowly, watching his eyes as he watched hers. She ran her fingers over his skin when she pushed his unbuttoned shirt off his shoulders, allowing it to fall to the floor. She expected to get off the bed to remove his boots, but he toed them off himself. She moved to his trousers and began unbuttoning them. His erection was quite prominent and sprang free as she pushed his trousers down his thighs.

She expected him to tell her something else or to fetch some ropes or clamps, perhaps the paddle. Instead, he grasped her by her hair and pulled her in for a fierce kiss. "Will you deny me now?" he whispered in her ear.

"No, I won't," she answered. Severus drew back, one corner of his mouth pulled up slightly, before he kissed her again, climbing onto the bed and pushing her back at the same time. His mouth was hot, his tongue dominant, his hands fierce as they roamed her body. Hermione gasped when he moved down her body, taking a nipple between his lips and sucking intensely. She moaned as his hand moved between her legs, and she met his eyes when his head came up, his eyes glinting at her when he found her wet. He thrust two fingers into her, curling them against the sensitive spot, causing Hermione to arch against him and grasp his shoulders.

He shifted and sheathed himself inside her an instant later, his hands grasping her shoulders and pulling her firmly as he thrust into her; his mouth found hers again, and Hermione lost herself to the feeling of his body pulsing in hers, his lips and tongue against hers. There was something primal about the way he took her, and she felt an orgasm coming...but unlike the last six weeks, he didn't come before she was finished...he rode out her climax, then reached between them, his thumb circling her clit as he drove her to another climax, and then he came, growling as he did so.

When he was finished, he stayed inside her, his weight resting on his elbows as he watched her recover. He kissed her again, but this time it was softer, a lingering kiss. Hermione stroked his back, relishing the way she made him shudder, and then felt him growing hard again. "Oh, I'm far from done with you," he said.

He took her again, this time slowly.

Hermione was surprised when he grabbed her by the shoulders and rolled onto his back; his hands moved down to her hips and he pulled her against him, urging her to ride him as he arched his hips up into her body. They both came again after a time, and Hermione collapsed on top of him as she caught her breath.

He stroked her hair as he lay under her, then shifted his weight and turned them to lie on their sides. They lay like that for some time, hands trailing over each other's bodies. Hermione wondered why he hadn't pulled out his various implements but didn't want to ask. It was good just to lay with him for a change.

Though she still had many questions, and some concerns, she felt like things could go better between them. It seemed such a small thing, and she didn't think it was right that she felt a touch of guilt over demanding something that, technically, did go against what she had originally agreed to, but she knew she wouldn't be able to live like that for ever.

Severus propped himself up on one elbow. "Shall we move to the bath?" he asked. "I've missed bathing you...having you wash me."

"Yes...I'd like that," she answered.

A silence settled between them later as they sat in the tub together, a tension of still unanswered questions. Hermione didn't want to break the silence, though...it was peaceful, restful. She had washed him, rubbing his body with the soapy cloth even though they'd both showered several hours previously, it was relaxing. Then he had taken the cloth from her, thoroughly washing her body.

Now they sat together, his arms wrapped around her waist as she leaned back against his chest. One of his hands trailed down between her legs. "You will shave again," he said. Hermione caught a slight note of what may have been a question in his voice.

"Yes," she said, agreeing or answering his query, whichever it was.

"Good," he said.

When they returned to the bed later, Hermione settled against him as he wrapped an arm around her waist, drawing her close. The tense silence was there again. Something had changed between them, and she wasn't quite sure what it was, or what it would mean for the future. But, at least she felt she had won on one point.

The Wisdom To Know The Difference

Chapter 18 of 31

The results of Draco Malfoy's Trial. Hermione takes a good long look at Snape and his words and actions. Snape's inquiry and the consequences. But, perhaps, finally, some understanding?

Big thanks to my wonderful beta, Nakhash Mekashefah who catches mistakes, Americanisms, and who has taught me a lot about proper punctuation, grammar, and canon.

A/N: About BDSM (skip this if you're not interested)

I've had a few people tell me this story has inspired 'experimentation'. This is cool, however I feel at this time I should include a note/disclaimer.

1) **Safewords:** If you want to play around with BDSM, and are new to the whole thing, I would strongly suggest a safeword. This story isn't a statement on safewords...the dispute between Hermione and Severus went deeper than that, the safeword issue was simply an issue that came up to depict the development of their relationship. I feel okay in them not using a safeword, because for this story, I know Snape. I'll say that in real life, I would only trust a Dom partner without a safeword if they were very experienced and knowledgeable about the human body and it's workings, physical, mental, and emotional, and I knew them well. Don't just take someone's word for proof of their experience/skill either.

2) I've been careful to depict safe practice of BDSM. Unlike certain novels, which were named earlier in the story, you won't find physically impossible or permanently damaging acts that amazingly leave the submissive able to walk afterwards, when in real life they would be headed for the emergency room. **HOWEVER**, I've also depicted a few things that should **NOT** be tried by beginners. Bullwhips, or single-tail whips, should **ONLY** be used by someone who really, really knows what they're doing. **They require significant practice and skill to be used safely** (for instance, there's a reason in the scene with the bullwhip that Severus had Hermione tie her hair up first. You may also notice a number of other things he's done for Hermione's safety...in the first intense bondage scene, for instance, he took her weight off her shoulders at regular intervals so as not to cause too serious muscle and joint strain). There are also certain implements which can only be safely used on certain areas of the body, while others are okay to use on a wider area. Incorrect use of some things can lead to serious injury. Very basic light bondage and spanking confined to the buttocks area is generally safe for newbies.

3) It's not about the implements of destruction and torture. They're tools, and BDSM can be practiced without expensive excursions to your local kink shop. (and things like ping-pong paddles, a simple leather strap, and a bundle of cotton rope can be had very cheaply too!).

4) There is a HUGE difference between a Dom carefully inflicting pain/discomfort on a submissive in a way to not cause injury, and an abusive person losing control and hitting someone in the face with a fist. There is no comparison between the two.

That out of the way, on with the story:

The halls of the Ministry of Magic seemed coldly impersonal to Hermione as they walked through them. No real justice could be found here. Of course, the fact that Draco Malfoy could afford the best barrister played a large part in the outcome of the trial. He'd been made out as a suffering, emotionally troubled young man who was merely acting out because of the traumas he'd experienced in his young life. The loss of his mother and then the loss of his father, through a full Obliviate, had been played to the hilt. If Hermione didn't already know what a slimy little ferret he was, she could have felt sorry for him from the case that was made.

Six months of house arrest with a once-a-week chaperoned outing...after all, it would be a shame for a young, promising man to not be able to do his shopping for books and other business. He also had no limits on visitors to his home. The final insult had been the judge. While he acknowledged the wrongs done to Hermione, he had looked to Draco, after giving him his sentence, and had said: "And, young Mr Malfoy, your father was always such a supporter of the Ministry, I do hope you will see it in your heart after this unpleasantness to continue in your fine father's footsteps."

Hermione glanced over to Severus, who seemed distant. His eyes looked straight ahead as they walked to the exit; he hadn't said a single word since giving his testimony of the attack. Fortunately, the counter charges of assault that Draco had pressed were dismissed. At least that was something.

Hermione and Severus squeezed into the callbox and waited for its ascent to street level. He still wasn't looking at her.

"Severus?" she prompted.

"What?" he responded dully.

"I'm glad the charges were dropped for you."

"As am I."

Silence fell again just as the callbox opened. It had been nearly a week since Hermione and Severus had come to a compromise, and things hadn't returned to the previous easy rapport, as Hermione saw it in hindsight. She was beginning to wish she had never found the articles on safewords and the various means of interpreting sexual sadomasochism. Really, she hadn't been unhappy...things had been slowly getting better between them; maybe ignorance really was bliss. She shook her head, wondering how she could think that. Ignorance was the last thing she wanted; she opposed ignorance on every level as a matter of pride. Ignorance couldn't ever be a good thing.

She wasn't paying attention as they walked down the street in Muggle London. They would be Apparating back soon, but Hermione didn't really want to go back right away. She didn't get away from Hogwarts for more than the support group meetings, and hadn't spent much time with Severus lately either. After that first night, they'd only had sex twice out of five nights.

"Would you like to stop somewhere for lunch before we get back?" she asked.

"I suppose we could."

"Great," Hermione said, infusing her voice with cheerfulness she didn't quite feel. "Do you like gyros?"

"Yee-ros?" Severus asked, looking at her directly for the first time since they'd left the courtroom. "Never heard of them."

"I was sure I smelled gyros when we first Apparated here, and I haven't had any in ages. They're very good: lamb meat in a flatbread with a yogurt sauce." Hermione stood at the intersection they had arrived at, looking around, sniffing the air slightly for the distinctive aroma.

"You look as if you're picking up habits from Lupin," Severus said dryly.

"I think it's that way," Hermione said, ignoring his comment as she looked both ways and began to cross the street. Severus walked alongside her.

It turned out she was right, and they found a small, slightly shabby Greek café two blocks up the road. The smell of roasting lamb loaf permeated the small restaurant. Hermione walked to the counter, quickly ordering two gyros; she paid for them out of her own wallet before Severus could. They took a seat at a small, chipped Formica-

covered table in two metal folding chairs.

"I know we were both hoping for him to get something more for what he did," Hermione said.

"Do not concern yourself about Malfoy, Hermione. He won't try to harm you again, I can assure you that."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked. Something about the assured way he spoke made her wonder if he might be planning something.

"I simply mean that I take my duty to protect you seriously; I won't have anything happening to you."

They were interrupted by a young man in his early twenties bringing their plates. Severus looked down at the mass of sliced lamb loaf, onion, tomato and yogurt sauce piled atop a steaming flatbread. He looked over as Hermione lifted hers with both hands, folded the bread together and took a bite. "Are there no eating utensils?" he asked, scowling.

"Use your hands," she said, just before a dollop of yogurt sauce dripped from her gyro and onto the front of her blouse. She dabbed at it with a napkin while Severus stood and walked to the counter. He returned with a fork and knife.

They ate in silence for a short time, until Hermione decided to ask: "Would you like to do something else today? We don't get out much...and you know, I was hoping maybe we could...well, do something outside Hogwarts."

"Not today, perhaps another time," he said flatly. He had yet another trial to attend the following afternoon, only it wasn't quite a trial, no...an *inquiry* before the Board of Governors. Dumbledore had looked over Hermione's grades and had noticed no change, nor any indication that he'd ever shown her favouritism. In fact, Dumbledore had chided him on his overly strict grading...the Headmaster felt that Hermione deserved a grade average several percentage points higher than what she actually had.

"Okay," she answered. Silence fell again as they both ate their lunch. "Severus, is something wrong?" Hermione asked.

"Why should anything at all be wrong?" he snapped.

"Well...you just seem...I don't know, distant. I thought now that things were back to normal, well..." she trailed off, shrugging as she took another bite of her nearly-completed sandwich.

He applied more pressure than really necessary to slice through the bread, before bringing a piece of meat and bread together on his fork to his mouth. 'Normal' was not the word he would have used to describe the state of their relationship. She still hadn't refused him, likely due to the fact that he'd only sought her attention twice more since she'd returned to his bed, but it was a tension hanging over his head. Which time would it be...would she wait until he wanted to really take the time to enjoy her before she refused him?

Meeting her eyes momentarily, he said, "I'm not sure what it is you were expecting." He returned his attention to his meal, stabbing a tomato and placing it on the side of his plate. He did save the yogurt sauce from it, as it was quite good. Not exactly fine fare, but a decent enough fast meal.

"I was hoping," Hermione said, disrupting his contemplations, "maybe on the way back we could stop off at that place in Knockturn Alley?"

Now what is she playing at? he wondered. "And what is it you are so eager to purchase?"

"Well...I'd hoped you might have a suggestion," she replied, almost flirtatiously. He narrowed his eyes at her. *Yes, I'm sure...and what of the next time you have a problem with my suggestions, will you threaten once more to leave me?* That, above all else, rankled him. Not even four months married, and she'd already threatened to leave him.

He took another bite, looping a sliver of meat with an onion on his fork, before he looked back to her. Her eyebrows were raised slightly, and she was giving him a small, hopeful looking smile. "I really must be getting back soon. I have work that needs to be done." Her smile drooped, and she went back to finishing her gyro, this time leaning over her plate so as not to spill any sauce on herself.

"Severus," she said softly, "I never said I wasn't willing."

"No, I don't suppose you did."

"Well then...what's the problem?"

Severus looked over to her again, jaws clenched. She looked puzzled...she likely thought that returning to his bed meant that there would be no further problems between them; that he would simply forget about her going back on her word. He'd thought, before he finally relented, perhaps giving in would solve something. After all, she did say she was willing to do as he said...or, she would be willing most of the time. "The problem, Hermione...the problem...I don't suppose you would understand," he said.

"So now you think I'm an idiot as well as weak?" she hissed at him.

"We should be going back to Hogwarts now," he said, glancing down at their empty plates. "The Headmaster was interested to hear how the trial went." He stood, stepping away from the table and towards the door. He glanced back at Hermione, who was still seated. "Well, are you coming?"

In tense silence, they walked to an Apparition point in an alley and Apparated back to Hogwarts. "Severus, listen...are you still mad?" Hermione asked as they walked through the gates of the grounds.

"I'm not angry," he said in a clipped tone.

"For someone who isn't angry, you're sure acting like it!" Hermione exclaimed, jogging to catch up with his long strides.

"Lower your voice...there are students about," Severus hissed.

"Not that many, and they're all far away." It was after lunch, and some of the students who had a free period (and any who would normally have Potions class at that time) were not in class, and some were walking around the grounds, a few hand in hand. "Besides, we're married, it's not as if married people never talk in public."

Severus stopped and spun around, nearly causing Hermione to collide into him. "I am a *professor* at this school and a Head of House, as you well know, and I cannot have the reputation for bickering with my teenaged, student *wife* in public! If you wish to discuss something, we can do it in the privacy of our quarters later. Now, I have a meeting with the Headmaster, and you have things you should be attending to as well. I will see you this evening," he said in a low voice, before turning around and stalking into the castle.

She spotted Harry and Ron walking towards her after Severus had entered the large front doors of Hogwarts, both with concerned looks on their faces. "Hermione? Is something wrong?" Harry asked as they approached.

"Why should anything at all be wrong? Draco Malfoy has house arrest for six months, so I suppose *justice was served* for the poor deprived boy who was only acting out his grief over his parents; I dropped yogurt sauce on my blouse, and now...ohhh," she growled in frustration. "It's nothing, really...I'm sorry for snapping at you," she apologised at seeing the shocked looks on their faces. "At least the charges against Severus were dropped." Ron looked befuddled and uncomfortable, as did Harry, but Harry still walked closer to her.

"Hermione, um...want to take a walk or something?" he asked.

Hermione closed her eyes, sighed deeply, then looked at Harry again. "That would be nice, actually. Wait, you two both have class in a little while, don't you?"

"It's just Divination," Harry said, shrugging. "Besides, last class Ron predicted I would have a sudden illness and would miss an important revelation," he said, laughing.

The three of them all laughed together at that. "Yeah, but where's my excuse? You predicted I'd find great fortune and good health," Ron said, glaring in mock-accusation.

"You guys, the only reason you're still taking that is for an easy grade."

"Yeah," they both said in unison, nodding. About that time Parvati Patil passed by, smiling at Ron. Hermione saw how Ron smiled back, blushing.

"You're coming to Divination, right, Ron?" Parvati asked.

"Yeah, I'll be right there," he answered, grinning as she walked away. He turned back to Harry and Hermione. "Oh...uh."

"You *both* need to get to class," Hermione chided. "Go on guys, I'll talk to you later."

They both nodded and left as Hermione walked over to a grassy spot of fresh clover at the edge of a large slope and sat down, looking out over the lake and the Forbidden Forest. She startled slightly when there was a sudden movement to her right. She looked over and saw Harry.

"Aren't you supposed to be in class?"

"Yes, but, it won't hurt to skip a class once," he said. "Besides, if I'm not there, Ron can team up with Parvati and they can predict beautiful futures together," he said with a dreamy look on his face. Hermione smacked him on the shoulder.

"Ow!" Harry said. "Besides, I figured we haven't spent much time together lately, and I wanted to catch up, and you look like you could use a little goofing off for a change."

"I suppose so," Hermione agreed. They fell into the comfortable silence that good friends share together, looking out over the trees and the water. "So...how are things with you and Snape...or I guess you call him Severus, now."

"Yeah, but that's *Professor* Snape to you, Mr Potter," she said playfully. She then sobered. "Well, Harry, this has certainly been...different."

"How so?" Harry asked, scooting closer when he saw her shiver in a gust of cool wind. He pulled off his outer robe and settled it around her shoulders.

"Thanks, Harry. Well...it's hard to say, exactly. Severus is...difficult."

"Yeah...so tell me something I didn't already know."

Hermione chuckled as she pulled Harry's robe around her knees, crossing her arms over them. "Well, where to start? I think he's mad at me now."

"Why?"

"It's hard to explain."

"It's even harder if you don't try."

"Really? I wouldn't have thought..." she said wryly. "Okay...but, to try...back before we got married...there was this...um, thing...that he wanted to talk to me about. It was...how to put it...a little...different."

"I'm going to start keeping track of how many times you say the word 'different' and don't tell me what it means."

"Anyway..." she continued, ignoring his quip, "he wanted me to agree to something before we got married. And, at the time, I didn't really think it would be a big deal...but, it turned out to be a bigger deal than I thought it would be...and now, well...we had a big row about it over Christmas break. Last week, I thought we finally settled it. But, now I find out he's still mad."

"Hmmm," Harry hummed thoughtfully.

"We're basically stuck with each other. We *could* live separately, but we can't ever...um, be with anyone else, so, basically I make it work with him, or we're both alone."

"Oh yeah, I remember that," Harry said, scratching his head.

"So...now, I want to make it work, and I don't want him mad at me. Because before we had the disagreement, things were actually going fairly well."

"Hmmm."

"Yeah, that's helpful."

"Well, sorry...I still don't know what the problem is. Maybe if I knew what it was that was so important that he asked you to agree to, I might be able to understand."

"Ahhh...I can't really say."

"Oh, come on, Hermione, you want me to play twenty questions? What, is he some kind of sexual freak?" he asked, laughing. "Actually, I don't think I'd want to know about that anyway; if that's it, don't tell me." He grimaced, then shook his head as if to clear unwanted images from his head.

"Since when did you get interested in helping me be happy with Severus? I thought you were still upset," Hermione said quickly, steering him away from the subject. She wasn't about to talk about the intimate details of her sex life with Harry, even if the sex were somewhat more on the normal side. At least he didn't want to hear.

"No, Hermione. I want you to be happy," he said, laying an arm around her shoulders and giving her a squeeze. "Besides," he said in a lower voice, "Ron told me if I didn't stop acting like a complete prat, he'd kick my arse." They both laughed again. Hermione smiled as she put an arm around Harry's waist, giving him a reciprocal squeeze. It felt good to share a good time with him again. It felt good, too, to tuck her head under his chin and just sit quietly in the cool, spring breeze.

"He's not being really mean to you or anything like that, is he? I mean, I know he's a prat in class, but you said he isn't like that all the time, right?" he asked, rubbing her back.

"No...he's not mean...he's just difficult sometimes. In a way he's in just as much of a predicament as I am, I suppose."

"Yeah, well, I'm here for you if you ever want to talk about it more, you know?"

"Thanks, Harry," she said quietly after several moments.

"Hey, anytime. You want to go inside now? It's getting cold out here and you've got my robe."

"Good idea...let's go down to my room; if you're going to skip class, you won't get caught there."

"Okay," Harry agreed. They got up and walked inside together. "You're sure you're okay? Since when would you be helping me break rules?" he asked.

"Well, after today, I'm a little disillusioned about rules."

From a window above the main entrance, Severus Snape stood in a corridor looking out over the grounds of Hogwarts. All but two of the students had returned to classes. He could see quite well how Hermione and Potter sat closely together, smiling and laughing, talking easily together. A man inclined to be overly jealous would probably be very angry to see his wife sharing an embrace with another man. But, because of the binding spells, Severus had no need to worry about infidelity. He wondered for a moment if he would be worried if the binding spells weren't in place. He knew, however, if Potter was out to take his wife's affections, he was at least smart enough not to try it in open view.

Despite his earlier protest to Hermione, he was still angry: angry with Hermione for threatening to leave him if he didn't compromise; at himself, for giving in so easily, and he especially didn't like the fact that she still seemed unaware of the significance of his compromise. It was a moment of weakness on his part, he decided. He'd begun to regret it after their union when they were bathing together.

Though he'd been very glad when he returned to his bedroom that night and found her as he had requested her to be, as well as being pleased to discover the next day she'd shaved her pubic area again, at least she showed willingness to comply. But, Hermione had seemed to have an air about her: that she'd won something, that she'd put him in his place.

Before her excursion on that Muggle device, he had very much enjoyed being with her. It had been a delight to watch her as he made her squirm or caused her to find pleasure in something she didn't think she would enjoy. The surprise in her eyes after the time he'd taken her arse had been wonderful to see, especially after the fear and discomfort she had obviously felt beforehand.

And then, the way she had submitted to his punishments and tests was just as enjoyable. Before, her inner battle as she fought to do as she was told, to overcome her aversion to pain, the thrill he felt when she finally would accept the pain along with the pleasure, the moments when he truly felt as if he held her life, her safety in his hands. But most of all, the look in her eyes in those times when she was happy to have pleased him. While past lovers had been more adept and experienced, able to withstand quite extreme acts, Hermione's inexperienced determination was more appealing.

What would happen if he wanted something of her, and she didn't want to try it? He still would punish her for going back on their agreement; he still wanted to bend her to his will...not break her, but bend her ever so slowly and gently, like training a plant to grow in a certain shape. Move too quickly, and the branch would snap...but if you never pushed, it would never bend to the desired shape. Sometimes, the process could be a bit of a strain. Now that she had an easy way out, he wasn't sure she would be up for the strain.

He decided it was time to test her. He hadn't demanded much of her since she'd returned. Now he needed to know if she really was weak, or if it had just been one of those moments...she was still young, after all. He had to know what she was made of; she'd proved willing enough previously, as well as able enough. The situation may yet be salvageable if certain things were made clear to her.

He still didn't like the possibility of being refused in his own bed...but that might not be such a difficult thing to get around. Before, he hadn't pressed her too much when she had studies, or when she might be too tired. There might be things she would balk at doing, but if he presented it right, appealing to her Gryffindor bravado, making it a challenge or a dare...while at the same time continuing to be aware of her moods and those times she would rather sleep or be alone, he decided he could very well never have to hear her say no. It might be a bit more of a challenge, but there was no need to worry. He was nearly twice her age and had much more experience than she did...it would be an easy enough thing to ensure.

Harry had left Hermione's room to go to Quidditch practice at three o'clock. She felt a bit guilty at aiding him in skipping class for nothing more than sitting around and talking; maybe it was selfish of her. But, even if she wasn't going to share the details of her problems with Severus, knowing that he was there for her as a friend and had gotten over his personal issues about her marriage, helped a lot.

Hermione had been excused from all her classes for the day of the trial, and so she decided she should be revising. However, she found it hard to concentrate on her studies...Severus's words from the previous week kept running through her head.

"I thought you were stronger than that."

That had surprised her. When he'd said it, she hadn't been feeling particularly strong...the fact that he would notice and care made her wonder.

"...you've made me wonder if I had overestimated your capabilities. In fact, perhaps when I helped you with your Arithmancy calculations, I misled you into a path you weren't capable of handling..."

Her Arithmancy calculations had played a large part in her decision to choose Severus over Kingsley Shacklebolt. It had served the Order well in coming up with a way to defeat Voldemort. At the time, she'd been in such shock over the entire situation that she'd put her trust in numbers and equations. She felt she could trust equations...they didn't feel, they didn't think...they simply *were*. It was truth at its most basic.

So what had he meant about misleading her? She thought his calculations were good...she'd checked and double-checked them. She opened her desk drawers and, after rifling through the stacks of papers, found the parchment with the equations. Now, nearly five months since she'd put them away, she checked them over again, paying close attention to the numerals and symbols he had written.

She was surprised to find, after some more quick checking, just what he had meant by what he wrote. He did believe she was strong at that time.

"If that is the case, then I...apologise for not seeing that at the time."

He apologised. Severus never apologised...so why would he do so over some numbers? Pulling out a separate sheet of paper, Hermione began the equation anew, but with a few changes. Once she had identified the numerals which represented her perceived resiliency...(discovering numerals for both physical and mental resiliency)...she changed them to reflect what would have happened if the numbers reflected someone of weaker constitution.

Deciding to look at it from all sides, she also recalculated the equation for the possible future with Kingsley Shacklebolt. When she saw the answers taking shape, her heart began to pound and she broke out in a sweat.

It really had been important.

"Well then, I suppose I shouldn't expect a Gryffindor to live up to her promises. It's all bravado masquerading as courage with you lot."

But, it was just a moment...just a moment when she'd felt weak, as if it were too much to handle, when she wanted to just give up. Just a moment. Everyone had those, right? She looked down at the calculation for her potential future with Kingsley...amazingly, when she changed the numbers, giving herself less credit than she thought she deserved for courage (and less than Severus had thought at the time) the results were markedly different. It looked like an ideal future, happy times, and great potential for success. She had also changed her projections in the equation on how important a career was to her...less desire for independence.

Why would that make such a difference for the better with Kingsley? At the time she thought it was all about him...now she was starting to realise it wasn't about him, rather how she faced him. Did that mean Kingsley needed a weak person to be happy with?

No...that wasn't right either. She didn't want to make judgements like that...people were different. Someone with less desire for independence and less courage and physical fortitude wasn't necessarily a lesser person...they were just different.

"Running blindly into something and then realising it's not quite what you thought it would be seems to be adequate justification to go back on your word."

Was this really all about an agreement to him, or was there more involved? And still, she wondered why it was such a big deal to him. The scenario she now saw in the calculation with the changed numbers resulted in a frightening outcome for her future with Severus.

That didn't make sense to her. He wanted someone to submit to him; he wanted someone to do as he told them. He had a tendency to tell her what to do all the time, too, not just in the bedroom. Wouldn't he be happier with someone who tended to be meek, someone who would just do what he said without question or concern?

.. "Appearances can be deceiving." ... "Deception is quite...disappointing"

Deception...did it all come down to deception?

So, if he had thought she was stronger, if she'd appeared stronger, but then he thought it was just a false appearance, a mask of strength to cover a weak core...well, she really would be in serious trouble based on this. The possibility for a happy future, with the new figures, was bleak indeed.

Hermione put her quill down and rubbed her temples. She thought the new figures were wrong. At least she hoped so. She did think she was stronger than that, and if Severus had figured on it, then there must be a good reason for it. She just had to find out what that reason was.

When she heard the door to the living room open and then close, she decided it was time to find out. She gave him a few moments while she checked the equations again, forming a few theories. She could understand the need for physical strength, certainly. It was the rest of it that confused her.

She got up and went into the living room, where she found Severus looking over some parchments at his desk. When he saw her enter, he rolled them up and set them aside. "I see Potter isn't skipping classes to spend time with you, now. As a professor of this school, if you're going to make a regular habit of assisting your friends in shirking their classes I will have to take appropriate steps. I cannot turn a blind eye to misbehaviour simply because we are married."

"I understand," she answered. Perhaps it would be better to accept that he was a professor, and she shouldn't put him in a position where he had to choose between acting as a professor and acting in the bounds of their relationship. "I was wondering if we could talk about something."

"Have you calmed yourself since we returned?" he asked.

"Yes, I have." She walked to the couch and sat down. "Would you come sit with me?" His eyebrows rose a moment as he observed her. "Please," she added.

Severus stood and crossed the room. "If this is going to be a long conversation, perhaps you would like a drink?"

"I'd rather keep my head clear, thanks."

Severus poured a glass for himself from the decanter of brandy and took a seat next to Hermione. "There are a few things I wish to discuss with you as well." He took a sip from his tumbler and turned to face Hermione.

"First, if you threaten to leave me again over a dispute," he said, voice cold and icy, "I will help you pack your bags at that very moment. Is that plain enough?"

Hermione blinked, swallowing thickly. That wasn't what she'd expected. "Um...okay...but-"

"No 'buts'. I will not be drawn into a game such as that. If that is what it comes down to, then I would prefer to separate and meet weekly until the marriage law is repealed. I have lived with periods of celibacy for a fairly long time and would rather rely on my hand for gratification than live with that threat surfacing again. If you are concerned that I haven't been acting 'normal' it is because of the lack of consideration and maturity you've shown me by making that threat. I've spent these last days considering what to do about that."

His words stung, but Hermione didn't let it show. She thought she'd gained something; she thought she'd finally showed him that she had certain limits and wouldn't back down. Instead, he'd taken it wrong. "Severus, I'm sorry you took it that way...it's just that at the time, I wasn't sure what else I could say. But, if it bothered you so much, why did you..."

"I hoped that we might simply go on as we had before, but I regretted that almost as soon as I'd granted it. As far as I'm concerned, you still must prove yourself willing to submit to me, and a request to go *shopping for toys* is not sufficient proof."

Hermione ran a hand through her bushy hair, scowling. Not sufficient proof? She'd gone back to his bed, she'd accepted doing what she could to please him sexually. "Then what would be?" she finally asked.

"I trust you haven't forgotten what I told you several weeks ago?" His casual phrasing belied the import he placed on his previous words.

She remembered...their heated conversation and equally heated coupling after her concussion. "No...I haven't forgotten...I wondered when you would bring it up."

"Ahh, yes...you see, Hermione, by demanding the compromise you did, you've now taken responsibility for living up to your agreements. I shan't begin certain things with you if you might simply decide to stop at an...inconvenient point. If you wish to earn my respect and assure me that you truly will live up to your word, you will come to me and tell me when you are ready and willing to accept your punishment. I will be very *disappointed* if you keep me waiting long. Understood?"

"Yes, I understand," she said, her stomach churning with nervousness.

"There was something else I've been waiting for as well," he added, turning to gaze into the fireplace. His shoulders were held stiffly. Hermione wondered for a moment what it was, then she remembered. An apology. Did he really deserve an apology?

Hermione wasn't about to apologise for something for which she didn't believe she was wrong. However, to him, she realised, it came down to the simple matter of an agreement. She'd agreed, and then she'd gone back on that. She didn't regret questioning him...she did, however, regret the way she'd done that, and she decided she could apologise for her methods as well as the points where she'd been unreasonable. She cleared her throat softly, and began. "Then...I apologise. I was wrong to question you in the way I did." She glanced quickly at him to judge his reaction, but his profile was still hard. "I should have been more...respectful with my questions."

"Is that all?" he asked quietly.

"No," she said, taking a deep breath and swallowing her pride. She felt as if she was about to hold her heart out on a platter to him to crush or spare as he saw fit. "I also apologise for accusing you of lying to me. You didn't...I just-"

"Adding justifications to an apology seriously causes me to doubt your sincerity," Severus cut in before she could try to reason her actions to him.

"All right...I won't then." She didn't have to explain it to him, she understood now why she'd acted as she did, and it was still inexcusable. She was trying to understand his perspective more, to understand him more. It made a difference. While he could have told her more, given her books, perhaps...something...he didn't exactly lie. In the

literal sense he'd told her exactly what *he* expected, and that wasn't a lie. She would simply have to be careful not to infer more than what he meant.

"Are you going to apologise for questioning me?" he asked, turning to look at her expectantly.

"I'm sorry for *the way* I questioned you...and for accusing you of lying," she said carefully. "I'm not sorry that I had questions, but if I have them in the future, I promise I'll be respectful about it." She met his eyes, waiting to see what would come next. She hoped he would accept, because she wasn't going to apologise for having questions.

"Very well then, that is sufficient. I accept." He continued to watch her; Hermione had the strong feeling he was waiting for her to say something else and, as one brow rose in expectation, she knew what it was.

She glanced down at her hands a moment, then back up to look him in the eye. There was a constricting feeling in her abdomen, but she forged on...she was brave and she would prove it. "I will submit for..." she took a deep breath, "...punishment..." there...that wasn't so hard to say now, "for that...whenever is good for you." There, she said it. It was out and, whatever came, she would prove to him she wasn't about to back down.

"Good. Now, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?" Hermione blinked a few times, waiting for her pounding heart to slow. She'd almost expected to be carted off at that moment. "Are you sure you don't want a drink, Hermione?" Severus asked, smirking at her, looking thoroughly amused as he stood and went to re-fill his brandy tumbler.

"Oh...yes, I'll have a drink then." She felt like she needed one anyway...the adrenaline rush had left her feeling slightly woozy, and she felt a bit shaky. She waited as he poured a second tumbler and brought it to her, sitting down again next to her. She nearly jumped when he placed a hand gently on her thigh.

"So, that's all cleared up then?" she asked.

"If you can prove to me that you will submit, then yes."

Hermione nodded, raising the tumbler to her lips with a sense of relief that maybe now things would be back to 'normal'...even if it wasn't a typical sort of normal. The brandy burned her throat and nearly made her cough, but she felt better now.

"I was doing some thinking about what you said last week, about the Arithmancy."

"Were you? And what conclusions have you reached?" he asked conversationally, his previous anger already gone.

"Well, I'd kept the papers, so I went over the calculations again and re-figured them. I have to say I think there is a big difference from...well, a moment of feeling a bit out of sorts...I was under a lot of stress. Anyway, there's a difference between that and really being weak." She glanced over to him, looking for any sign he would say something, but he merely sat, his glass of brandy in his hand resting on his knee and his eyes seeming as dark tunnels. She started to look away since he still unnerved her with that gaze, but she met his eyes.

"I don't think the equations were wrong when you worked them. But, when I changed the calculations it made a very big difference and I wanted to ask you why."

"Really."

"Yes, well...you see, it seems like you would rather have someone who's a bit more...on the meek side anyway, what with the way you are."

Severus took a sip of his brandy, not taking his eyes from hers. "And why would you think that, Hermione?"

"Well...wouldn't a meek person...well, wouldn't they get along with what you tell them what to do easier?"

"They might. But, why do you think /would desire a meek person."

"You don't?"

"There is a difference between meekness and submission. Someone who simply does what they are told because they are too afraid to do differently is weak. Most especially a woman who doesn't stand up for what is right, who cowers and allows someone to harm another because she is too afraid to do what should be done." His voice grew low as he spoke, yet was infused with emotion...anger. His jaws clenched tightly for a moment as he looked into the flames of the fireplace. "A weak woman will never have my respect nor would she ever bear a child for me," he added in a near-whisper.

Hermione shivered suddenly, wondering what had brought on his turn in mood. "Why do you feel so strongly about that?" she asked.

He shot a glance towards her, but then looked quickly back to the flames. "I have my reasons," he said in a clipped tone. Hermione knew the end of a subject when she heard it, but now her curiosity at why he felt that way had grown. She determined to find out. For the time being, however, she sipped her brandy and looked into the flames, alongside him, reaching over and resting her hand on his thigh and squeezing lightly. He tensed momentarily, but then glanced over to her, lips pursed, before he seemed to dismiss a thought.

"Dinner will be in half an hour," he observed, looking at the clock. "I've been curious, Hermione; what happened to the robes I gave you at Christmas?"

"They're in my room," Hermione answered after a moment.

"Hmm." He finished his brandy. "I will see you after dinner, there is something I must attend to now."

Chicken and herbed dumplings were waiting when she arrived, slightly late, for dinner. She found an empty space between Ginny Weasley and a third year Gryffindor girl who'd always been very quiet. "Hey, I was wondering if you would make it. Ron and Harry told me about the trial," Ginny said.

"Well, I was afraid something like that might happen. But, at least it's something." Hermione shrugged as she began filling a bowl.

"Did you go shopping today? I've never seen you wear that before."

"Oh...Severus gave it to me at Christmas."

"He did? Wow...I didn't know he'd bought you clothes. That's a good sign."

"You think so?" Hermione asked after she'd swallowed a lump of dumpling.

"Definitely. Either that, or he doesn't like your regular clothes. At least he's taking an interest."

"He doesn't like Muggle clothes is all, I'm sure," she said flippantly.

Up at the High Table, Severus had watched Hermione enter the Great Hall. It seemed appealing to her Gryffindor honour and bravado was a good way to go. The question was: how far would it work? Perhaps he would now convince her to choose his way all the time. Yes, first she wears proper clothing...and next, what more? He smiled as he thought about what that might mean. Perhaps soon enough he'd be waking in a very pleasant way on a regular basis.

At nearly ten o'clock, Severus looked up from his book that he'd been reading in bed when Hermione entered the bedroom. She looked at him, swallowed, then continued to her side of the bed. He swept his eyes along her body, deliberately letting her see that. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, voice tight.

"You do realise your punishment will be difficult." His voice was stern.

He watched her inhale deeply. "Yes," she answered firmly.

"Good. But not tonight," he said, looking back down at the book propped up on his knees. He had to resist laughing as she stopped; he could feel her eyes on him. Perhaps it would be even more fun now that she knew she held the responsibility for living up to her promises.

The bed shifted as she climbed in, and he heard her deep sigh as she settled between the sheets. He read a few moments, glancing over to Hermione, who was staring up at the canopy of the bed, something of a scowl on her face.

"Disappointed?" he asked.

"Not exactly. Just...I figured...never mind. What are you reading?" Severus tilted the front cover so she could read the title.

"I would think you'd know the Hogwarts rulebook front and back by now," she said after seeing the title.

"Just double-checking a few things."

Hermione got out of bed, returning a moment later with a book of her own. She settled back into bed and opened the book, removing a bookmark, and began reading.

"And what is your book?"

"*Job: A Comedy of Justice*. It's about this guy who keeps getting shifted between alternate universes and everything keeps going wrong for him. Just when he thinks things are going well, everything changes and he has to start all over again...it's mostly about dealing with problems, retaining your identity and values when everything is going wrong. It's a good book, you should read it."

"Sounds a bit too close to reality to me," he scoffed, and returned to reading up on the format of staff inquiries and what rules might apply to him and how to defend himself on the morrow. Never before had there been the problem of a Professor answering charges of favouritism towards his wife.

"Never before has there been the problem of a Professor showing favouritism towards his wife!" the rather portly wizard declared. Severus raised an eyebrow at the rather obvious statement. "And we won't stand for it here at Hogwarts! You, sir, by marrying a student, have caused serious concerns for many parents who have contacted us. Several students have even contacted their parents with reports that you have asked your wife to stay after class on several occasions. Now, I am not alone in questioning the appropriateness of *that* action."

"Now, now, Mr Greenwood, I assure you that Professor Snape has kept his relationship with his wife completely out of the classroom," Albus Dumbledore said firmly, but Severus caught the look he gave him, as if he were hoping it was the truth. "I've also independently graded Hermione Snape's papers and found no show of favouritism. She has always been at the top of her class, and the fact that she continues to be is no reflection of wrongdoing for either of them. Madam Snape was in quite a predicament with the passing of the Marriage Law, and Professor Snape's proposal was something that would have never happened had it not been for that law. He has never, in all his years as a teacher, given me any reason to think he might behave inappropriately with his students."

"That may be, but his actions with Draco Malfoy concern us as well. We believe that he would not have acted as he did if it were a matter of students simply arguing. His actions show clearly that he cannot maintain a professional distance in matters which concern his wife."

"I'll have you know," Severus began in a low voice, "that Draco Malfoy was not simply bickering with my wife. He attacked her and intended to do her grievous harm." He was growing agitated. Though the proceedings hadn't carried on for very long, it was growing more and more obvious that this was about appearances and not facts. At least the suggestion to bring Hermione in for questioning hadn't been exercised.

When that had been brought up, he'd regretted not revealing the fact that he would be undergoing an inquiry about his perceived misdeeds concerning her. At least then she might be prepared for possible questions about having ever been offered rewards in return for sexual favours. A Gryffindor with no sense of subtlety wouldn't handle something like that very well, even if it were Hermione.

"And according to the report from his trial, Madam Snape was the one who fought off his attack. The charges against you for assault may have been dropped, but you clearly crossed the line. What will it be next time? Will you next begin issuing detentions when other students call her names, perhaps?"

"Of course not, that is her business to handle at her discretion and within the school rules, just as it would be for any other student."

"You may say that, but it is still our desire to retain the appearance of propriety for the concerned parents of the students. I move that Severus Snape be removed from his position as Head of Slytherin. He may continue to teach Potions, but another Head of House should be appointed immediately. All in favour?"

"Now, let's not be hasty-" Dumbledore began, but was cut off by a witch sitting next to him at the long table.

"A movement has been made, and once made, must be voted upon. He's had his chance to speak, and now we vote."

There was a chorus of 'Aye's' from around the table.

"All opposed?" Mr Greenwood asked, looking around expectantly. Two 'No's' were heard: Dumbledore, and another who Severus remembered as a Slytherin a few years ahead of him in school.

"Very well, the matter is settled. Headmaster, we give you two weeks to appoint a new Head of Slytherin. I believe there are two other former Slytherins teaching here?"

"That is correct," Dumbledore said grimly.

"Good. Headmaster, Professor, good day." The Head of the Board of Governors stood and walked out of the staff room, as the others on the Board stood and followed him. Severus stayed seated, staring down at the table.

"Severus, I'm sorry," Dumbledore said after a long silence.

"It is of no matter. I'd planned to retire from teaching soon at any rate. I would recommend professor Vector for the position of Head of Slytherin."

"You're the best Potions master we've had in a very long time, Severus. I hope you'll stay on. Don't make any hasty decisions now, please. I'm sure with time I can turn this decision around."

Without another word, Severus Snape stood and left the staff room. He walked quickly to the dungeons, not pausing to find reasons to deduct house points from students.

His quarters were empty, and he was glad Hermione was probably somewhere else at the moment. The last thing he wanted was her bothering him. He stood in the middle of his living room, looking around. It had been his home for eighteen years.

Eighteen years of work, wasted. Never mind the fact that he'd planned on resigning soon anyway. He'd been forced from his position. He knew it wasn't Hermione's fault, but he couldn't help but feel angry with her, Dumbledore, too. He'd had to leave the room before he was in danger of doing something he might regret. No, this was Dumbledore's fault. Hermione might be a factor, but it was Dumbledore who had urged him to submit the petition.

He thought for a moment about the timing, the state of his bank account, and his possibility of finding gainful employment outside Hogwarts. At least Hermione would be graduating. He only had four months remaining, four months of students sniggering at him for his humiliation and whispering rumours about the reasons he'd been forced to leave his position. The Headmaster would likely try to put a positive spin on the situation, but Heads of Houses didn't suddenly step down in the middle of term. He realised, also, that it was likely his pay would be reduced now that he'd been demoted.

"Blast!" he bellowed, and withdrew his wand and fired a curse, not caring that it mostly destroyed his couch.

He didn't feel any better when his rage-clouded vision cleared and he saw the damage he'd done. With long strides, he left his quarters, the dungeons, and went for a walk towards the Forbidden Forest.

Lucius Malfoy peered out the window of the carriage pulled by invisible horses. He looked down at the floorboard where he'd packed the things he'd gathered while living at St. Mungo's. It was a small bag, containing a few books given to him by the nurses and a few knick-knacks from some of the other patients he'd come to know. He hadn't really wanted to leave yet, but his son Draco insisted he was fine and would recover more quickly at home. His nurses had been sad to see him go, and there had even been a small party for him before he left.

"Almost didn't think I was going to get you out of that place," Draco said.

"The doctor said I should stay a while longer, did he not?" Lucius said, running a hand through his hair, which almost came to the middle of his neck now. He had seen his old pictures and thought he looked better with longer hair.

"When you see our home, you'll be glad to be out of that place. The pictures don't do it justice."

"It looked very big in the pictures."

"It is. There is something I'll show you when we get there, Father. You've been reading the books I gave you, right?"

"Yes, I read them all."

"There are more at home, too. I still haven't found your journal...but I will keep looking. I did find some things, though...it's a way you used to store some favourite memories. I have to admit I couldn't resist peeking," Draco said, smirking. "There are some very *interesting* things there. Just one thing: Snape is in some of them...don't let him fool you, though. He's the one who did this to you; he's the one who erased your memories, and he's going to pay."

"I see, Draco," Lucius said, knitting his brows together and turning to look back out over the passing countryside. Soon enough, the winding road and meadows gave way to trees, growing thicker as they progressed. It was dark under the canopy of thick trees, which were just beginning to bud and sprout. After a time, they came to a gate that opened as the carriage approached, closing behind them with a heavy clang once they entered. Lucius felt a growing excitement as the trees thinned, and then they came into another open meadow and he looked out over the rolling hills and the centrepiece of that luscious meadow.

It was beautiful. He watched the large Manor as they drew closer, passing elaborate gardens and mazes of bushes. When they finally came to a stop before the grand entrance and stepped out of the carriage, he looked up to the great doors emblazoned by a knot work of snakes.

"I'm home," he sighed. It was home...he didn't remember anything specific about it, but it felt right.

"Yes, Father, we're home."

Lucius smiled as his son placed a hand on his shoulder, squeezing firmly. He still wasn't completely comfortable with Draco, but he, too, was familiar.

Hermione entered the Great Hall with her friends for dinner Thursday evening. They'd spent the afternoon after classes revising together. They took their usual seats at Gryffindor table along with the other seventh-years.

"Not corned beef," Ron whined as food appeared on serving platters. Large slabs of sliced corned beef filled the platters, along with large bowls of mashed potatoes and boiled cabbage.

"Good evening, students!" Headmaster Dumbledore called out. The murmur of voices quieted as they all stilled and looked towards the Headmaster. "I have an announcement to make. There is to be a new appointment for Head of Slytherin, brought on by a decision of the Board of Governors." The Hall filled with collective gasps and murmurs. Hermione looked over to Severus, who was sitting stiffly at his place, hands under the table, looking straight ahead over the body of students. "Professor Vector, our Arithmancy teacher and Slytherin alumni, will be taking over the position as Head of Slytherin at this time. So please, I ask you to show your appreciation for our new Head of Slytherin House!"

There was scattered applause as Professor Vector stood and smiled at the Slytherin table, mixed with a growing roar of students talking amongst themselves. Hermione looked around and noticed the Slytherins ran the gambit of reactions...the younger students seemed concerned, while she noticed smug smiles on the faces of Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode.

"Professor Snape will continue in his position as Potions master, and I want it known that this change is not due to any transgression on his part. As I'm sure you all know, the Board of Governors sometimes makes decisions for the school solely at their discretion. He has served as Head of Slytherin quite splendidly for many years, and his service to Hogwarts has been long appreciated."

"Hermione, what's going on?" Harry asked.

"I don't know...Severus didn't say anything to me about this," Hermione replied. She continued to look around the Hall as the chatter settled down. She watched as Severus stiffly began eating his food, still not looking at any of the students. She turned back to the table, lost in thought. She'd been hungry, but now her appetite was gone. She grabbed a few slices of bread and quickly made a sandwich, then hurried from the Great Hall, ignoring her friends inquiring after her.

She was shocked when she saw the damage to the couch. She pulled out her wand and, with a few spells, managed to repair it. She sat on the repaired couch and waited for Severus, picking at her roast-beef sandwich.

About half an hour later, he entered.

"Severus, what happened?" she asked with concern as she stood from the couch. She stilled when she saw him; the very air around him seemed to crackle with energy. "Severus?"

"I would prefer some peace and quiet at this time," he said very quietly in carefully measured tones. "Leave -- now."

Hermione decided she didn't want to deal with him when he was that angry, and so went to her room, closing the door softly where she listened carefully at the door, wondering what to do. She had to find out what happened, and so she decided to leave and go ask Headmaster Dumbledore. At least if she had some facts to understand what was going on, she might know why he was so angry. She left her room and headed for the Headmaster's office to get some answers.

It was well past midnight and Severus lay in bed, reading the book Hermione had left on her nightstand table. He'd picked it up several hours earlier out of a desire to read something different, not associated with the rules of Hogwarts or memories he had within. Thus far, he was finding it an uncomfortable reminder of his predicament rather than an escape, yet he kept reading.

Hermione still hadn't come to bed, and he was starting to wonder if she'd decided to sleep on the couch in her room. When he'd seen her earlier, he only wanted her out of his sight. The last thing he needed was a reminder of the cause of all his current troubles. Now, he mused, his life was similar to the poor protagonist in Hermione's book. Just when he thought all was well, his life turned upside-down. But, his anger had cooled somewhat, replaced with a dull realisation that things had been too good. Of course, the Dark Lord was dead and gone; issues with his young wife seemed to be on their way to resolution; he'd come up with a plan to deal with Draco Malfoy...no, it was too much. He wondered what deity he might have angered to have such a cursed life.

"Severus?"

He snapped his head around to see Hermione standing in the doorway of the bathroom, still wearing her school robes.

"Hermione."

"Are you okay? Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Don't ask ridiculous questions," he snapped. Hermione nodded and turned to leave. "Wait," he called. She turned back to look at him. "You're quite overdressed to come in here." She smiled at him, then quickly removed her robes and walked into the bedroom. The candlelight gave her body a golden sheen, casting shadows that emphasised the curve of her breasts, the gentle curves of her stomach, the shadow of her navel.

"So...you want to talk about it?" she asked, moving to stand at his side of the bed, thoroughly unabashed in her nudity. Yet, Severus thought, there still seemed to be a purity about her that he hadn't seen in women he'd had before, in the way she stood before him so comfortably...neither hiding herself nor attempting to display herself in a vulgar way.

"No. But, if you'd like to help me, I suggest you put that mouth of yours to better tasks than talking," he said firmly. At the moment, he wanted to take his mind off of it all. Hermione's lips around his cock would be a good start toward that goal. She smiled at him, then lifted the covers near his knees and slipped between the sheets. Severus placed the book on his nightstand table as she settled between his thighs, and he threw back the covers to watch her. He gathered her bushy hair in his hand as she licked teasingly at the tip of his cock, then he sighed with pleasure as she took his entire length, expertly applying the lessons he'd given her on relaxing her throat.

Perhaps he did have some things to take comfort in after all.

"Better now?" Hermione asked, after she'd swallowed the results of her incredible attentions.

"It's a good start," he answered, leaning forward to give her a kiss. "A pleasing job, Hermione," he whispered in her ear.

"Pleasing enough to earn a reward?" she whispered back.

"Yes, I believe so," he answered, chuckling. He guided her to lay down, then moved over her, losing himself in enjoying her body, laving her nipples with his tongue, the softness of her skin...and then downward, using his fingers and tongue to give her a fitting reward.

Afterwards, as he tucked her to his body and pulled the covers up over them, he told her: "Saturday will be your punishment."

"Yes, sir," she murmured sleepily back.

"It will hurt," he warned.

"Yes, I know."

He smiled and then, just because he could, bit her at the junction between her neck and shoulder. He felt her stiffen then relax after a few seconds. Her head and shoulder moved slightly to give him better access as he bit down on her. She made a slight whimpering noise in her throat before he released her and settled down to sleep.

And Life Goes On

Chapter 19 of 31

The much awaited punishment. An announcement in *The Daily Prophet*. And a few interesting conversations.

Once more, huge thanks to my lovely beta Nakhash Mekashefah!

And, a special treat, LeDivineMarquis has drawn two lovely scenes from this chapter. URL's in the end notes.

When Hermione woke Saturday morning, she stretched luxuriantly in bed for a few moments. Friday had been harrowing and, even if she hadn't known it would be the day Severus had warned she'd get her punishment, she would have stayed in just to avoid everyone asking her about why Severus wasn't Head of Slytherin any longer.

It had been a difficult day for Severus, as well. In morning double Potions, at which Hermione was present, someone had released a dungbomb in his classroom. Though she'd always thought his classroom manner was too harsh before, she felt glad when he'd apprehended the culprit, Gregory Goyle, and given him three weeks detention with Filch and deducted fifteen points from Slytherin. Gryffindor hadn't escaped unscathed, losing thirty points during the course of the class. Afterwards, Parvati Patil had accused Hermione of being a House traitor for taking his side, along with a few choice allegations as to why she would take his side.

He still hadn't said anything to her about being removed as Head of Slytherin, and she didn't pry him for information, knowing that it was a touchy subject. Dumbledore had explained on Thursday evening what had happened. She couldn't believe the Board of Governors would do something like that after he'd been Head of Slytherin for so many years even more ironic was the way he'd always favoured Slytherin over Gryffindor, and he'd never been in trouble for that. She began to wonder if something more might be going on with that...perhaps Draco already was following in his father's footsteps by *supporting* certain actions through bribery and threats.

She heard voices through the closed bedroom door, and so went through the bathroom to her room to get dressed...not that she thought she was likely to stay dressed, for very long anyway. Curiosity drove her to the living room where she found Severus and Professor Vector speaking at his desk.

"Morning, Professor," she said, as the Arithmancy teacher looked over to her when she entered.

"Good morning," Vector said with a tight-lipped smile. She looked tired, as if she hadn't slept much. Her usually neat hair was pulled back in a messy-looking bun.

"Hermione, I haven't called for breakfast yet, if you would please," Severus requested, glancing up from the papers he was looking over.

"Sure," she answered, moving to the fireplace to Floo to the kitchens and request their morning meal...closer to mid-morning, actually. "Will Professor Vector be staying for breakfast?" she asked, kneeling before the fireplace.

"No, I've already eaten, and I'll be leaving soon, thanks anyway. You two have taken to long lie-ins weekend mornings, haven't you?"

"Yes, we have," Severus answered. "And now that I don't have the Slytherins to attend to any longer, we might take even longer lie-ins."

Hermione heard her say in a low voice to Severus, "Should we wait to discuss these things until later?"

"No need, Hermione won't spread news through her friends."

Hermione went to sit on the couch and wait for breakfast to arrive, picking up a book on the couch side table while they spoke so as not to seem as if she was eavesdropping. She couldn't help but overhear them, as they were less than ten feet away.

"I still can't believe they did this," Vector was saying to Severus, rubbing her temples. "How on earth you managed all these years with them, Severus...I know it's just the change over, this is their time to act out and see what they can get away with. I have some idea of who's who, but not everyone takes Arithmancy...and of course I remember when I was a student, everything was completely different when a professor was around to see goings on."

"Come with me, I have something to show you which has served me well for many years, and which I'm sure you'll find educational," Severus said, standing from his desk.

Breakfast arrived as Severus and Professor Vector left. Hermione nibbled at a muffin, a bit nervous about Severus's return, but not overly so. She was also looking forward to the day. She felt better around Severus, now confident that their troubles had been cleared up, and though he'd said she would have to prove herself, she felt certain that she would be able to handle it. She'd faced real danger in the past and knew that Severus wouldn't really harm her.

About twenty minutes after they'd left, Severus returned alone, strode to where the breakfast tray sat, and helped himself to eggs and toast. Hermione watched his deft fingers as he ate, the precise movements he made, never a careless or superfluous gesture. She wondered what he might do to her later, how those fingers could so precisely measure potions, put forth his exact and small script, or drive her to intense pleasure and pain. No matter what, he always was precise and controlled.

When he finished his breakfast, he levelled his gaze towards her. Hermione met his eyes, feeling a thrill of anticipation at his intense scrutiny. "I believe there should be no further interruptions today," he said simply. Hermione understood his implication.

When he stood and walked towards the bedroom without another word, Hermione took a few deep breaths before entering her room, disrobing, and then moving to the bathroom. She'd bathed the night before, and so only took a few moments for the Fundamundic charm and to run a brush through her hair. Squaring her shoulders, she entered their bedroom.

He was standing, hands clasped behind his back, in the fairly large area on the other side of the bed; the sheepskin rug had been moved and was positioned at his feet. He was dressed in his usual black boots, trousers, and a simple white shirt. One eyebrow cocked up as he looked at her, then glanced pointedly down to the rug at his feet. Hermione took his silent cue and crossed the bedroom, kneeling on the rug. She was glad that she hadn't eaten much, because her stomach was fluttering wildly.

Severus moved behind her, and she felt his knees brush her arms as he knelt down. His hands rested on her shoulders a moment, before moving upward and running his fingers through her hair. Hermione felt a bit of surprise when he began dividing her hair into sections, swiftly but neatly weaving it into a French braid, then tucking the tail of the braid up and tying it with a length of leather thong.

She felt a throbbing between her legs and chills down her spine, as he silently leaned forward and kissed her gently on the bruise he'd left Thursday night when he'd bitten her.

"And now, will you still submit?" he asked in a near whisper.

"Yes," she answered firmly.

His fingers gently traced her spine as he continued speaking in a low, almost gentle voice. "This is a bit more than a test, Hermione. Our relationship is one of rules. There may be some compromises along the way...but it is one of rules and duties, first and foremost. Do you understand that?"

"Y-yes," she answered, suddenly nervous.

"And," he continued, fingers lightly stroking her outer arms, "in a relationship such as ours, there are consequences when you break those rules. Because this is a punishment, you will not be allowed to climax until it is complete, is that understood?"

Hermione nodded, then whispered tightly: "Yes."

He stood, Hermione remained still as her heart pounded and her breathing quickened. She heard his footsteps cross the room, stopping directly behind her, and then all went dark as he lowered a blindfold over her eyes and tied it firmly around her head.

"Head and hands down," he said firmly.

Quickly, Hermione moved to comply, placing her forehead on the rug and resting her hands just above her head. She felt his hands moving over her back, then behind her and between her legs. She gasped as she felt something hard close around her clit, and again a moment later when she felt something hard at her anus. She focused on relaxing as a slick and increasingly thick object was inserted, stretching and filling her.

"Kneel back up," Severus ordered.

Hermione pushed up with her hands to the kneeling position, sitting back on her heels. The object in her arse was mildly uncomfortable, as was the clip.

"Remain where you are. You may adjust your position to retain adequate circulation in your legs. Do not, under any circumstance, touch yourself intimately."

She heard his footsteps move away, and then all was silent.

At first it was uncomfortable. But, after what she estimated to be ten minutes or more, the clamp had progressed from uncomfortable to a bit painful. The object in her arse, however, seemed to cause her lower regions to throb with need, her nipples to tighten, and she had a very strong urge to find release. She wasn't sure where Severus was...she couldn't hear anything, but didn't think he would be far.

So, if this was punishment...it didn't seem too difficult so far, but she had a feeling it was only the beginning.

Severus watched her from his chair about five feet away. He'd walked away, and then cast a silencing charm on his boots to walk back and observe her. He held the nipple clamps in his hand, watching and waiting for the right time to employ their use.

He watched the set of her lips, her chin, and her hands for signs...would she break down? Thus far, she seemed to be doing well.

Hermione was beginning to sweat, and the urge to touch herself and relieve the building pressure had grown to a need. Her rear entrance throbbed, and she clenched down on the plug to help. However, she found that only increased the sensations, rather than relieving them. Almost against her will, one hand crept from the outside of her thigh where it rested and began towards her crotch. She stopped herself, however, firmly putting her hands back, clenching and unclenching her fists.

Her legs felt uncomfortable, so she rose up, shifting her weight from one knee to the other a few times before settling down again. The silence became uncomfortable, stretching on and on, focusing her awareness down to only the feeling of the clamp tight on her clitoris, the plug in her arse, and the aching.

Then his hands were on her shoulders; she jumped slightly at the sudden contact and sighed, relieved in thinking he would remove the objects. When his hands slid down her chest, palms rubbing over her nipples, she arched into him. The soft contact was quickly replaced by two more clamps on her nipples. She winced at the added sensation.

"You almost earned an increase in your punishment. Be glad you didn't disobey me," he said.

So, he had been watching. She felt a little better knowing he was right there, while at the same time she was highly aware of herself, and that she couldn't fail to follow his directions now since he would more than likely be watching.

"Again, remain where you are."

And again, she did.

She had to shift her weight three more times while she waited, to relieve the pressure on her knees or ankles and to flex her toes. Always, there was the added sensation of not knowing where he was, if he was watching her closely and, if he was, from what angle. She'd changed her breathing pattern, taking in long, slow, deep breaths. Her clit and nipples had begun to burn some time ago, and at times she felt her hips begin to rock of their own volition.

Her mind drifted as she knelt, flitting between Arithmancy, her friends, Potions, the pain and discomfort, her parents, her developing relationship with Severus, the ache in her nipples, what she would do with her future...their future... Would she find a good job? Would she score well on NEWT's? ...and then back to her present... Was Severus sitting a few feet away, watching her? Or was he instead grading papers? No, she didn't think he'd be doing that now.

Severus had been right; it was difficult.

Severus watched her chest rise and fall with her deep breaths; he could see the sweat on her body. Her hips would rock intermittently, but she hadn't started to touch herself again. He ran one finger along his thin lips, wondering if she would give up or break down. She seemed determined enough.

He glanced at the clock...it had been nearly forty-five minutes, and he realised to her it had undoubtedly felt like much longer. With darkness and silence her sense of time would be warped. He stood and took three strides to her, then reached between her legs and removed the clamp. She let out a shuddering sigh, then a slight whimper as the blood rushed into the tender flesh. She was so wet his fingers came away coated in her moisture. He smiled.

"Open your mouth," he ordered. Tentatively, she did, and he placed his fingers inside. "Lick them clean," he instructed. He nearly sighed as her lips closed around his fingers and she used her tongue to thoroughly remove her natural lubricant.

"Stand up, now," he prompted next, removing his fingers from her mouth.

With some difficulty from kneeling for so long, she complied. She bit her lip a moment, but then stood still, hands at her sides. He turned and retrieved the chair, which had been against the wall, then sat in it.

"Walk towards me," he said.

She turned her head towards the sound of his voice and took small, careful steps towards him. He reached out as she approached, a hand on either hip steering her to stand beside him.

"Bend over," he instructed, guiding her as she bent at the waist across his thighs. "Place your hands on the floor." He rubbed her thighs, her buttocks, and her back, pausing a moment to press against the plug in her arse, causing her to jerk her hips.

She knew what was coming and took deep breaths, preparing herself for the onslaught; it seemed odd, though, that her skin tingled in anticipation of the event.

"Tell me, Hermione," he began, caressing her curved buttocks, "are you...frightened?"

"No," she answered, her heart suddenly racing.

"Not even a little?"

"*Should* I be afraid, sir?" she asked, not sure how to answer his question. She was nervous...perhaps concerned...but not afraid.

He answered with a chuckle as one arm clamped firmly over her lower back, and his other hand descended. His swats were stinging, falling in a regular rhythm, alternating between her left and right cheek as he moved up and down her buttocks, barely overlapping each stroke from the last. He'd swatted her harder before.

Hermione began to jerk her hips with each stroke and soon was making muffled groans as his hand continued to fall in the unceasing, tireless rhythm. His strokes might not be as forceful as what he'd done at other times, but the continuous slaps over her buttocks soon increased from a sting to a burning warmth which spread between her legs, the pain growing to a point where tears formed in her eyes, wetting the blindfold which covered them.

Each jerk brought another surge of pain to her rear and her breasts, and soon her breath was coming in hitching gasps...and then it seemed too much and, automatically, she reached back with one hand to block his next blow, only to have it captured in his hand, giving her a moment's respite.

"I-I didn't mean to," she gasped, realising what she'd done.

"Nevertheless, you *did*," he said, releasing her hand. "Put your hand back down on the floor."

Hermione followed directions, but then gasped when she heard him mutter a spell. Tentatively, she flexed her hands and discovered they were stuck to the floor as she lay over his lap.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sure you are...yet, you will be sorrier for that shortly."

If his swats hurt before, Hermione thought his renewed assault on her bottom was excruciating. Some part of her mind wondered how he could keep it up with his bare hand...surely this was hurting him, too. But for the most part, the pain crowded thoughts out, and it didn't take long before she was crying out, nearly screaming with each fall of his hand.

When he finally muttered the spell to release her hands, she was lying limp over his legs; tears had soaked the blindfold, and she was gasping in deep, shuddering breaths. He lifted her partway, and she moved to stand when he told her to. Roughly, he grabbed her upper arms from behind after she'd stood and guided her to walk. She felt the rug under her bare feet again.

"Kneel."

She sank to her knees quickly, taking huge gulps of air, wincing as her heels brushed against her extremely sore bottom.

His hand moved down her shoulders, then to the object imbedded in her. "I'm sure this is quite uncomfortable," he said casually, pushing on the exposed end.

"Mm-hmm..."

"Soon enough I will remove it, but not yet."

His hands moved around her waist, then up to her breasts where he removed the clamps. She sighed in relief, but soon the throbbing only increased.

"This is not yet over," he whispered. "There is much more to come. That is...unless you're too tired to continue?" he asked in a tone which sounded understanding...concerned, to Hermione.

She drew in a deep breath, thinking how nice it would be to stop, to end the aching and burning, the stinging pain and discomfort. But, before she could give voice to that desire, she realised it was another test.

"I said I would submit...and I will," Hermione said in a low voice.

"Very well. Lay on your back, your legs should be completely straight, ankles together, and your arms straight out to your sides, palms up. Do not move."

She felt incredibly exposed in the new position. She could feel his presence as he stood over her and thought it would be easier if he used restraints tied her hands or feet into position - so she couldn't move. But, he expected her to stay still even after she'd mistakenly reached up to stop his relentless spanking. Her body hummed with a tingling need, a tension and urge she fought to control.

Severus watched her when she'd complied. Her stomach tightened with each breath; her breasts shook slightly. She looked like an offering...a succulent, willing offering. He would still test her willingness, but he enjoyed looking on her: open...vulnerable...obedient. His cock throbbed, fully erect from having her over his lap...even the intense stinging of his hand seemed to add to his overall thrill. While he could have used a paddle to spare himself, he'd wanted to feel it, too...to experience it with her in at least a small way.

He knew she was trying; she was opening herself to accept him as he was...and he felt another thrill thinking that each time he'd given her an option to back out, she'd firmly let him know she wouldn't. Even though she'd reached back to stop him at one point, she hadn't said no, so he was sure it was nothing more than an automatic reaction...not a conscious decision. Perhaps their compromise did lend some advantages after all...

He retrieved a wide pillar candle, which he had lit a while before, and then stood besides her, holding the candle over her body. "Do not move," he repeated firmly. He placed a finger in the wax, calculating how far it would need to fall to cool sufficiently so as not to burn her delicate skin, then tilted the candle.

He watched every muscle in Hermione's body grow taut as he poured the molten wax over her stomach. Her mouth opened as she gasped, and then closed again tightly...her fists clenched as she fought to remain still. His heart pounded as he watched the evidence of her inner battle: her quickened breathing, her repeated gasps of pain...and then her hips rocked, her legs pressing firmly together as they did so...her attempt to find sexual release in the midst of the pain was proof to him that he'd succeeded in ingraining that association firmly in her subconscious mind.

Soon, the molten wax was gone, so he put the candle aside and looked down over her, the wax now hardening over her stomach, breasts, and thighs in loopy strands and spatters from where it had splashed. Her hands began to relax, unfurling from the tightly clenched fists she'd held. She still remained relatively motionless as he watched.

After a moment, he shifted his weight and brought his foot over her throat, just barely touching her with the toe of his boot; he kept his heel on the floor. Her breathing stopped for a moment, and he waited to see if she would move, bring a hand up to protect herself, but she didn't. He clamped down on the overwhelming urge to fall onto her and take her right then and there; to kiss those parted lips.

"Most people in your position would react to someone's foot on their throat with some concern even panic; and would quickly move to protect themselves. Why didn't you?" he asked. "I could crush your throat with one move."

"I-I...I know you wouldn't do that," she answered.

Severus took a deep breath as he removed his foot. "Stand up," he hissed.

Her hands moved to her sides and she pushed up, standing quickly.

He grabbed her by the back of her neck and steered her to the side of the bed, then spun her around so the backs of her thighs brushed against the top of the mattress. "Reach up," he directed, guiding her hands to grasp the wrought iron of the canopy frame. "Bring your feet up and put them on the bed frame," he said next. "Spread your legs wide...yes, that's it."

It was an awkward position...her legs were splayed wide, feet pointed out and knees bent at a forty-five degree angle as she half stood on the bed frame and half hung by her hands from the canopy frame. She felt his hand between her legs then, another gently on her waist, and he whispered for her to relax as he removed the plug.

"Hold your position," he instructed firmly.

The waiting began. The iron cut into her hands a bit, and so she would put most of her weight on her legs, but after a while the awkward pose became too much, and she would use her arms again, trying to relieve the aching of her shaking thighs and calves. Back and forth she went...

Then, it came. She heard a swish, which she immediately identified as the horsehair flogger she'd picked out at the hidden shop in Knockturn Alley. The sting when it hit felt odd against the wax, but as he whipped the flogger across her thighs, abdomen, and breasts in quick strokes, the wax flaked off. He continued whipping her when the wax was cleared and Hermione let her head fall back as the stinging spread over her body. She saw flashes of colour before her eyes, and felt the stinging grow almost distant along with the burning of her muscles from holding the strained position.

There was an overwhelming, warm feeling building...as if she was floating, flying...feeling nothing but the sharp sting, the ache, the throbbing need. It was as if it was happening somewhere else, yet right there. She continued to hold onto the rail, to maintain her balance, to arch into the strokes of the whip as it sped up even more in the rhythm, striking her inner thighs, then her breasts, then straight between her legs, and it was as if she was catapulted, suddenly released, and she cried out in a shuddering orgasm.

She fell limp again, barely hanging on. The whipping had stopped and all was silent, except the rushing sound of her pulse and breathing, for several long moments.

"I do believe, Hermione, that I told you not to climax until your punishment was finished."

Her stomach clenched a bit, and then she felt his hand on her shoulder, guiding her down to sit on the bed on her sore bottom. The bed shifted as he climbed on, and then his hands pulled her close, between his legs. She collapsed on him, her mind and body whirling, but when his hand rested on her back and he said: "It's over now; rest, Hermione," she felt her body relaxing, growing heavy and limp as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

She had climaxed from a flogging. Severus stroked her back idly as he sat on the bed against the headboard. Hermione was draped limply over him, her head resting on his chest. She had actually climaxed from a flogging. He looked down; her eyes were still covered by the blindfold, and the corners of her mouth twitched upward as she let out a deep, satisfied sounding sigh.

"Hermione?"

"Hmm?"

"I thought you'd gone to sleep on me."

"Hmm."

"Are you incapable of expressing yourself in more than grunts?" he asked, amused.

"Mmn-huh."

"I do believe I will have to come up with better ways to punish you," he declared.

"Hmm?"

"Punishment is supposed to be unpleasant."

"Oh...it was," she assured him, but the sighing, satisfied quality of her voice didn't do much to convince him.

"Yes, I believe this is a problem. How am I to punish you if you enjoy it?"

"I'm sure you'll come up with something."

"Yes...perhaps I shall make you write lines; or clean cauldrons...yes, I'll make you clean cauldrons and write lines." He felt her shake a bit as she laughed.

"That isn't very sexy," Hermione observed, raising her head as if to look at him with a smile, but she couldn't because of the blindfold. There was the imprint of one of his shirt buttons on her cheek. "What would you get out of that?"

"You're growing impertinent. Just for that, turn over," he said, pushing her onto her back. He quickly removed his trousers and nestled between her thighs, tucking his hands under her shoulders to grasp them. He thrust into her swiftly, roughly, savouring the feeling of her slippery, tight body around him, her hands grasping at his hips, moving up his back. He buried his face in the crook of her neck, pulling on her shoulders as he thrust into her; the noises from her throat, next to his ear, were a delicious accompaniment to his frantic pace. And then her inner muscles began clenching him, and he gripped her shoulders tightly as he spilled into her, shouting wordlessly.

It took them both some time to catch their breaths.

He felt exhausted, spent, purged. Hermione's soft, supple body embraced him, her inner muscles giving little flutters around his slaking erection. His eyes grew heavy, but he pulled up, studying her face. He withdrew from her body, moving his hips to one side of hers as he propped himself up on one elbow, his free hand tracing her profile. He bent down and took her lips, filling her mouth with his tongue, retreating again to suck her lower lip.

He smiled, closed his eyes, and pulled her against him. "Sleep now," he whispered. "Just for a while." Before he drifted off, he removed her blindfold.

The next Friday evening, after dinner in the Great Hall, Severus closed the door to his quarters with a sigh of exhaustion. It had been an awful week. He went to his liquor cabinet, poured himself a drink, knocked it back and then poured another. Sitting in his chair, he rubbed his forehead with one hand. Potions class had been dangerous all week; his Slytherins - no, not *his* Slytherins any longer - had turned on him in his disgrace. In the last week, he'd issued more detentions and taken more points from Slytherin House than he had in several years previous.

And, while Slytherin was no longer his official responsibility, he'd had to spend a great deal of time with Professor Vector, going over the inner-House politics she hadn't been following, previously. They'd met nearly every evening during the week as he revealed to her many of the techniques he'd used to keep a handle on the Slytherins. The secret observation cubby had helped her immensely. She would be a good Head of House, he'd decided.

Just five months, he assured himself. Five more months, and he would be gone. Then, maybe he could start over in another job, one where he didn't have to deal with dunderheads. He could make potions to order, and perhaps even take on a promising apprentice or two to take the workload of the tedious potions. He was sure that Dumbledore would contract him to continue brewing the potions he'd been doing for years. He wasn't sure how his reputation as a known former Death Eater might affect him. And, while many of his former students would know he was an apt Potions Brewer, they might not trust him enough to obtain brews from him. Still, he had contacts that trusted him and one or more could be used as a front...a middleman would take a commission, of course, but if it proved necessary, he would do what he had to.

He was also making a mental checklist of the various expenses he would have once he left Hogwarts. He had adequate padding in his Gringotts account to stretch out for at least eight months, he thought. There would be housing and food, which Hogwarts had always provided. There would possibly be the added expenses of Muggle utilities since Hermione would likely want to have some of the Muggle amenities she'd grown up with; he remembered mention of paying the electric bill while staying at the Grangers' over the holiday, but he had no idea what sort of cost would be involved.

Then, he wondered what Hermione would do. He hadn't spoken with her much on her job and career plans. He didn't expect her to start out making much money, but even if she could, and despite his warning to her before they married, he wouldn't feel right demanding a monetary contribution from her. He didn't expect to provide her with an allowance for frivolous spending, but he felt the basic living expenses were his duty to attend to. Even if they hadn't married under normal circumstances, she was still his

wife, not a housemate. He'd had more money...but the wedding rings had set his savings back some, and at the time he hadn't thought of the possibility that his regular income might be cut off so soon.

After some thinking, however, he wanted to take his mind off of things, and decided to go get the book he'd set aside just over a week earlier. But, once in the bedroom, he discovered both nightstand tables were clear; the book wasn't there. So, he went to Hermione's door, knocked twice and opened it.

Hermione and Potter were there; both looked over to him when he leaned into the room. They were sitting cross-legged on the couch facing each other, books between them and many parchments, which were probably notes, scattered about.

"Hi, Severus, did you need something?" Hermione asked, quill paused from her writing.

"Another time," he said briefly, then shut the door, wondering where the redheaded hinge of the trio was. Potter...another thorn in his side that wouldn't be going away anytime soon. The boy looked more like his father with every passing year.

"What was all that about?" Harry asked, looking with puzzlement at the door Severus had closed.

"Don't know, I'll find out later. Now...who else would want to sign this?" Hermione asked, looking over her handiwork. Remus Lupin's birthday was approaching and she and Harry had decided to chip in together and send him a letter and presents.

"Neville would, and Ginny I'm sure. I'll take it up to Gryffindor Tower and get signatures and a collection going. I think there were some in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff who would remember him teaching and might want to chip in, too."

"Good, but I'll need all the money tomorrow morning; I'm going into Hogsmeade in the afternoon and can pick up Remus's presents while I'm there. After that, I'll use the post there to send it off before the meeting."

"That'll be good. I'm sure Remus will appreciate it. Too bad we can't be there to see him when he gets the presents."

"I know," she said, rolling the parchment and handing it to Harry. He took it, his fingertips wrapping around hers for a moment and he smiled at her. She smiled back at her friend. "So, back to Charms. NEWT's are only four months away."

"Yes, you keep reminding me; how can I forget?" he said, laughing. "At least it's quiet in here and I've got you to study with. I was afraid, before, that Snape wouldn't want me down here with you."

"No, he just doesn't want you down here with *him*. Why do you think he wanted me to have my own room? And besides, I wouldn't put up with someone dictating to me when I can see my friends."

"Yeah...that you wouldn't," Harry agreed, tucking the scroll into the pocket of his school robes which were draped over the back of the couch.

"Severus? What was it you wanted?" Hermione asked several hours later when she emerged from her room. Severus had chosen another book to read and was now fairly relaxed after having a few more tumblers of brandy.

"You had a book in the bedroom; I'd started reading it and it was gone. I was going to see if you had put it away."

"Yes, I put it back up. Why didn't you just say so when you came in earlier?"

"Potter was there."

"Yes...and?"

"I do not wish to display our relationship in front of that boy."

"Severus...it's just a book. You couldn't ask to borrow a book in front of Harry?" Hermione asked, rolling her eyes. "Yes, I suppose that would be a bit too exhibitionist...never mind the fact that we're *married* and the fact that the terms of the Marriage Law are fairly common knowledge...anyone who wants to think about it knows we're having sex. Exchanging bodily fluids on a regular basis is fine...but books, no, we can't have anyone know that we might share books." Hermione was laughing by the time she finished.

"Are you quite finished?" Severus snapped.

"Oh, come on...can't you see how silly that is?" Hermione asked, sitting in the armchair across from him and tucking her stocking clad feet up, opening the Charms text in her lap.

"No, I don't. If I display familiarity around you before your friends, it will change their perception of me. I'll not have students of mine looking at me as someone they might consider a friend. Additionally, as I'm sure you've noticed, I'm not exactly a favourite amongst the Slytherins any longer. I do not want them having additional ammunition by which to damage either of us. While some might speculate on the state of our relationship, they have nothing concrete to go on, and I would prefer it to remain that way. These things are private."

"Well...okay, I can see that then," she conceded. "But, you really don't need to worry about Harry; he's been pretty accepting about things lately. I don't think he'll spread rumours of our shocking bibliophilic harmony," Hermione teased, smiling at him, despite his scowl. "So, that was *Job: A Comedy of Justice* that you were reading?"

"Yes, it was."

"It's on the third shelf from the bottom on the left side," Hermione directed.

When Severus had retrieved the book from her shelves and seated himself again, quickly finding where he'd left off reading, Hermione looked up from her Charms text and asked: "So...about the books...does there really need to be a major negotiation about them each time?"

"Judging by the condition of your books, I am confident that you know how to care for them. If you borrow one of mine, I would prefer it to remain in our quarters, as some of them are rather expensive and difficult to obtain. I would ask that you inform me of which title you're reading so I know where it is if I need it. Additionally, the texts on the top shelf are there for a reason; don't open them out of my presence...they can be dangerous." After he'd read several pages, he looked over to where Hermione was seated. "I trust we won't have any more incidences of throwing books?"

"Of course not, Severus. You made your position on the throwing of books quite clear."

"Yes, still...that was an enjoyable lesson to teach you," Severus teased. Hermione glanced at him, smiled, and then went back to reading.

After several more moments of silence, Hermione looked up. "Severus...I can understand not wanting your students to see...well, that you're not always an evil git...but, I don't want to keep up something like that around my friends all the time, you know."

"Once we've left Hogwarts, or aren't around students, I suppose I could...relax...a bit," Severus conceded.

The next day, as they approached the main thoroughfare of Hogsmeade, Severus told Hermione he would meet her at the Three Broomsticks when the meeting was over, and went to the apothecary to purchase a few potions ingredients, as she had shopping of her own to do. Since he had something to do in Hogsmeade anyway, he'd decided to walk with her to her bi-weekly meeting with the support group. Though he never asked about what went on, he did wonder what they talked about in there. The 'sharing' of feelings wasn't something he could see the point in, though he thought that perhaps having strategies to handle the situation, especially for some of the less well equipped, would be something they might discuss.

Whatever went on in there, from the attention Hermione gave the group, he supposed she served in a role of organising and trying to help rather than seeking help for herself. She didn't exactly need help.

"Hello, Severus," a low, feminine voice behind him said. He recognised the voice and turned from where he had been inspecting dragon scales.

"That is *Professor Snape* to you," he said coldly.

"Are you still angry? It's been what...five...no, six years now?" she asked, giving him a hopeful smile.

"If you're looking for Hermione, she's likely already in the meeting room upstairs at the Three Broomsticks. If you'll excuse me, I have things to attend to," he said stiffly, and turned his back to the tall, brunette witch.

"Severus, must you continue to hold a grudge? I said I was sorry, didn't I?"

"You might have said it, but you weren't," he accused, after glancing around the shop to be sure no one was present to overhear their conversation.

"No, I don't suppose I was," Treva admitted with a chuckle. "But how else was I supposed to go about it? And now, it seems as if you've broken your rule about students and former students twice...at least that I know about."

"You know quite well that I would have had nothing to do with Hermione had it not been for the Marriage Law, as you're in a similar arrangement."

"Yes, I suppose that's true. But, couldn't you lighten up about things now? We could be friends, you know," she suggested, a teasing lilt in her voice.

"We are not, nor will we ever be, nor have we ever been..*friends*. If you thought there was anything more between us, then you're deluding yourself."

"If that's all it was, then why are you still so angry about it?" she asked.

Severus spun around, fixing Treva with a hard glare. "I do not take kindly to being lied to," he hissed. "We have nothing to say to one another, so I would suggest you get on to your little coffee klatch and talk about whatever it is you talk about in that *support group*."

Treva smiled wryly at him. "Severus, I've missed the way you talk...among other things. I wondered if I might invite you and Hermione over for dinner sometime...perhaps you might find it in yourself to forgive me, and maybe give Barius a few subtle pointers?"

"Finding your bedroom life a little...dull, perhaps?" Severus taunted. "I'm sure you're quite capable of instructing him in what it is you enjoy; I won't have any part of it. Why you would even think it appropriate to ask is beyond me."

Severus turned and left the store, deciding to shop for potions ingredients later. That woman irked him to no end...she was proof that Ravenclaw had no stereotype other than brains. She had been in the top of his class as a student during his early teaching years. Had she not been Muggle-born, she would have certainly been put in Slytherin. He just hoped Hermione and Treva weren't talking about certain things...but he thought Hermione knew well enough not to share personal information about him, and he didn't think Treva would reveal information to Hermione about their former arrangement.

Hermione smiled as Treva entered the meeting room.

"Sorry I'm late, had a few things to take care of before I came here," she apologised to Hermione and the few women who'd arrived early. "Now, we should go over the things we were to discuss today."

"Sure, no problem, Treva. Today, division of household duties and how to approach them was on the schedule," Hermione said, looking at the programme they had come up with together. "At least, for those who are trying to work things out living together."

"Okay...good. I was afraid it would be sex...there's a topic we need to cover, but I'm not sure that's a topic that will go over very well," Treva said, sitting down next to Hermione. "How have you and Professor Snape been getting along on division of household duties?"

"Pretty well, actually. We're both organised and keep our things separate, for the most part. We haven't had any issues on that topic at all."

"That's nice. Barius and I aren't doing so well on that. He gets mad at my lingerie hanging to dry in the bathroom, and he has the awful habit of leaving his dirty socks on the coffee table in the living room."

Hermione giggled. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh..."

"Quite all right...it is funny when you think about it, I suppose. But what about the sex? How on earth do we cover sex?"

"I'm not sure," Hermione admitted.

"Well, not getting too personal, I hope...but have you had any issues on that topic?"

"Um...I'd say we've worked out any difficulties we might have had at the start," Hermione said carefully, looking down at her papers. "How about you?"

"Oh...things could be better, honestly. You know...ironically, when I was a student, I always wondered what Professor Snape might be like."

"Really? Before the Marriage Law, I hadn't thought of him like that at all. I didn't know anyone ever had, actually."

"So," Treva began, grinning conspiratorially, "Were you pleasantly surprised or disappointed?"

"Um...I'll say that it certainly wasn't what I might have expected had I thought of him like that," Hermione said, smiling.

Treva raised an eyebrow. "I see."

Two hours later, Severus was seated in the Three Broomsticks, looking over the menu. He watched as the women left the pub from the upstairs room in groups or

individually. Finally, Hermione came down...talking to Treva. Severus scowled back down at the menu.

"Severus, we're all done," Hermione announced when she came to his table. He glanced up, finding her alone and caught a glimpse of Treva leaving the pub.

"Ahh, good. Would you like to have dinner here or go back to Hogwarts?"

"Dinner here would be nice." She took the menu Severus handed to her as she sat down across the table from him.

"I trust all is well with the...group?" he asked, taking a sip of water.

"It's going," she sighed, "better for some than others. The bad thing is that there could have been so many better ways to solve the problem of purebloods intermarrying without a law like this. For instance...there are some wizards and witches who are considered purebloods, but who don't share any of the common gene pool that a lot of the British wizards do. Yet, instead of encouraging purebloods who want to keep their lines 'pure'-" she said, rolling her eyes, "- to marry other purebloods of foreign roots, they pass a law to force Muggle-borns to marry them. And now the only ones who have really tried to take advantage of the law are men who couldn't get a woman interested in them any other way." She looked down at her menu for a moment, then back up at Severus. "Of course, then there's the ones who agreed to marry women to keep them out of worse situations...apparently some of them are feeling a bit...used, as well."

"I am sure, if they extended themselves only to blindly rescue some helpless wench, they *would* feel used, especially if they didn't require compensation in some form for their heroics." Hermione looked up from her menu, about to think of something to say, but he continued. "When one does something for another only out of the goodness of their hearts, they open themselves to be walked upon, taken advantage of. If the other partner in the arrangement fails to return their favours in a way the first party feels is sufficient, then they *are* being used."

"I see...is that Slytherin Philosophy 101?"

"Slytherin or not, it is a basic fact of life."

"Hmm...and is there any chance you might feel used?"

"No. You've lived up to your side of things, but for some misunderstanding, which has been resolved. And, I'm confident you will continue to do so."

She looked down at her menu again as she pondered his words. Little by little, she was piecing together information. There were still gaping holes in the picture she was making of the man she had married. Perhaps a little probing would reveal another bit to add to the picture, she thought.

"Oh, there was something interesting I learned today," Hermione said, smiling at him. "One person who was a former student used to have a crush on you while she was at Hogwarts."

"Did she?" he said dryly.

Hermione nearly snickered. "Can you guess who?"

"Hermione, if I've been the subject of juvenile fantasies, it is not something that would interest me."

"Oh...well, never mind then."

Severus had a good idea who might have had that 'crush' on him and, if she was telling Hermione about it, Severus wondered if it would be best to discuss the situation with Treva, or simply let Hermione know before Treva told her herself. He didn't think that was something Hermione would be comfortable learning from another source. Presently, Madam Rosmerta approached them, and they both gave their orders.

It was with great care that Hermione made her way to breakfast Wednesday, April the 1st. Severus had walked with her to the Great Hall, and they had found four booby traps on the way up from the dungeons, two of which had surely been set by Peeves. She sat down and began buttering her toast, hardly looking at anyone else, as she was tired from revising late the night before. A delivery owl dropped her morning copy of the *Daily Prophet* on the table in front of her, and she idly picked it up to scan while she ate.

Upon reading the headline, she dropped her toast.

Marriage Law Repealed!!

In a sudden press conference, Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge has announced that the 'Muggle-born Marriage Act' is clearly not working as it was intended and, after calling a session of the Wizengamot, held a vote to unanimously repeal the law. As many of our readers are aware, this law was first passed in September of 1997. In the nearly eight months since then, there have been one hundred eighty-six marriages performed. This controversial law was meant to revitalise the pureblood population of Wizarding Britain, while the restrictions on popular ingredients in contraceptive potions was meant to further the aims of this law. However, since its inception, three Muggle-born women have died under suspicious circumstances, and there are further investigations proceeding in regards to some suspicions of abuse of Muggle-born women in some of these marriages...

Hermione read on about the protests that she knew the Order had been organising, there was even a small mention of the Muggle-born victims of the law banding together to support each other. She was excited at the news but saddened by the deaths of the women. Dumbledore hadn't said anything about that, and she hadn't seen anything in the *Daily Prophet* before now.

"They've repealed it!" she announced excitedly when she looked across the table to where Ron and Parvati were sitting together. "The Marriage Law! They've repealed it!" she clarified, turning the paper so they could see the headline. They both smiled.

"That's great!" Ron chimed in, then he glanced sideways at Parvati, who was intently reading the article. Hermione wondered if he had something serious in mind there. He hadn't said anything about it, but the two of them had been spending a lot of time together. As the marriage law also had forbidden marriages between purebloods, it would mean that they wouldn't be able to marry as long as the law existed.

It didn't take long before everyone in the Great Hall was talking about it; Hermione wasn't the only one who subscribed to the *Daily Prophet*. It was with some irony that today, of all days, should be the time that the Marriage Law would be repealed and publicly revealed to be a farce. It was a sobering thought...the biggest practical joke upon everyone directly affected by the Marriage Law, and it wasn't the least bit funny. For some, it had even been deadly.

Hermione composed a letter to Treva that night, asking to meet with her to discuss the future of the support group and how they should continue. She received a reply the next morning at breakfast, agreeing to meet, as well as a suggestion that they throw a party for everyone in the support group, husbands included, to celebrate the occasion. It sounded like a good idea on the surface, but she wondered if it would only be a reminder that they were the unlucky ones who were now stuck in mockeries of marriages not of their choosing.

While many had taken to trying to get along and make the best of it, it wasn't a happy situation. It was something one dealt with, finding ways to get along in spite of the

problems; no one had married someone they actually loved or cared for deeply. Hermione wondered if anyone could come to love someone they'd been forced to marry. More to the point, she wondered if she could come to love Severus.

Things were better. They were getting along. They still didn't spend a lot of time together, but the time they did spend together was relaxing and didn't hold the tension that had been present at other times. She felt she understood him a little better than before but still, in the broader scope of things, their relationship was rather shallow. They had great sex. They shared books. They were both fairly neat. Otherwise, she wasn't sure just how much they had in common. They never spoke of their respective personal histories...oh, once in a while she might share a little tidbit that seemed to fit into a conversation...occasionally Severus would make a comment that she would place on her growing mental map of the man she had married. She'd started to ask him one night, while they were getting ready to go to sleep, why he'd joined the Death Eaters, but decided not to. She wasn't sure she wanted to know; she didn't want to think about what he might have done in his past.

She wondered what he thought of her, as well. She thought he trusted her to some extent, as evidenced by his comment to Professor Vector she'd overheard. And then, after the much-anticipated punishment she'd accepted, he'd seemed to change slightly. He was more relaxed, more open. She remembered his comment to her regarding her 'disobedience' in climaxing before her punishment was complete...she'd expected him to start anew with something more, but he hadn't. Instead, he'd guided her back onto the bed, and pulled her to him. She remembered lying there, almost unable to think clearly, and feeling an overwhelming sense of accomplishment. It had been painful; it had been difficult, even scary. But, when it was over, it seemed as if a tension between them had eased. She also felt more confident that in the future, she would have no problem with anything he wanted to do.

And since that time, their sex life was pretty normal, she thought. The occasional spanking, blindfolding, or tying with ropes...nothing extreme. She'd even asked him to whip her with what she'd come to think of as 'her' flogger one evening...he'd complied most agreeably...it had done wonders for the itch she'd had just under her shoulder blade all that day and had left her body humming with arousal. The sex that followed had been quite intense. But, he usually saved the truly extreme things for times when neither one of them were busy, and she'd been quite busy with revising for her NEWT's, usually in her room with Harry who seemed to prefer the peace and quiet of her room, as well as her constant guidance on study plans, rather than the busy Gryffindor common room. If only Harry had been so willing when the time had come to take his OWL's.

She hadn't felt the need to refuse his sexual advances...the fact that she had the option, though, was comforting. He seemed to know when she was tired or had her mind on her studies, and there were times that he, too, seemed to prefer to just go to sleep.

And so, with that sense of ease in place, she decided it would be a good time to approach the subject of their future. The past, at least his past, might be too dark to delve into, but the future was something else. So, Friday evening after dinner in the Great Hall, she went to their living room where he was grading papers, furiously scratching with his red-inked quill.

She picked up her History of Magic text and waited for him to finish, eager to use any time available to cram information in preparation for her NEWT's. It was about an hour later that he rose from his desk and put the parchments in a large folder marked 'Fourth-Years'. He walked to his liquor cabinet, asking Hermione on the way, "Would you like a drink?"

"The brandy is a bit harsh," she returned. "What else do you have in there?"

"Firewhisky also harsh, but I do have a blackberry cordial you might enjoy," he said, rummaging through his cabinet and pulling one bottle from the back. "I find it too sweet; Minerva gave it to me for Christmas a few years ago; I thought you might have discovered it on your own by now."

"I've always had the feeling I shouldn't go drinking from bottles in here...I never know what it might be. But, blackberry cordial sounds nice as long as it isn't too strong. It's Friday but I do still have NEWT's to study for."

He brought her a glass of the cordial; it was a deep purple, almost black. It smelled nice enough, and so she took a sip, the sweet, rich flavour bursting on her tongue. "This is good," she said, as he sat down next to her on the couch rather than in his chair. He stretched his feet out, toed off his boots and laid his head back against the couch, closing his eyes.

"I will be interminably pleased when I no longer have to cope with dunderheads," he announced tiredly. "The Slytherins were difficult to deal with when I was Head of House, having been responsible for many of their parents ending up in Azkaban after the Dark Lord's defeat. Now, they're downright impossible." He took a sip of his brandy, then reached a hand over to Hermione, grasping her denim-clad thigh. "Vector is still coming to me weekly to ask my advice. I nearly snapped at her today."

"So...I guess that means you don't want to stay at Hogwarts much longer?" Hermione asked, even though it was obvious.

"No, I don't. I plan to resign at the end of this school year...we needed to speak of this soon at any rate."

"I was thinking the same thing. Where were you thinking of moving?"

"As long as I have a decent place to brew potions and a garden for some ingredients in a secluded site, the exact location isn't relevant. I was going to ask if you had a preference."

"Well, since I'm doing well enough on Apparition to go from here to London with no troubles, I don't think commuting will be a concern. I talked with Professor McGonagall earlier last month about career options and I'm seriously considering Arithmancy...perhaps in ward construction...not sure I'd want to work for Gringotts, even though they're the biggest employer of Arithmantic ward-breakers and -setters. I could use the other side of Arithmancy in trend predictions, maybe. I wanted to work for the Ministry, before...but ever since they passed that law, I don't think I'd want to work for someplace that has that much of a problem with common sense."

"No, you don't want to work for the Ministry. Hogwarts deals with enough bureaucracy as it is, it's even worse working directly for them."

"Have you thought about what you're going to do?"

"Potions, of course. And, while Dark Arts - or rather, the defence against it - is my original specialty, I've come to enjoy Potions. Perhaps I shall brew on a contract basis for St Mungo's and Hogwarts, and do other odd potions to order for apothecary stores that stock some of the more difficult brews for those dunderheads who can't do it on their own."

"Don't disparage the dunderheads if you'll be making money off of them."

"I shall disparage the dunderheads as I see fit," he retorted. "I won't do it to their faces, of course. That would be unwise if I wanted to make money from them. At any rate, anywhere secluded in Scotland or England would be sufficient, though the southern side of England wouldn't have such harsh weather. I was going to ask, however, if you did want to get a Muggle house, what the usual amenities run as far as cost goes."

"Oh...there's electric and water utilities, of course, then gas if it has gas fixtures - though I figure with spells for most things it won't cost too much - and telephone, of course; it would be nice not to have to rely on sending owls to my parents to communicate. Probably...oh about...150 Pounds which translates into Galleons as 30 a month."

"I see. If you would like, we could begin looking for an appropriate place now. We can likely stay here at Hogwarts through July or even August, if we need to; the Headmaster won't insist I leave straightaway, I'm sure."

"Okay...um, what price range would we be looking in?" Hermione asked. "I'm not really sure right now what kind of money I'll be making...and if we'll be splitting the bills..."

"I will cover the living expenses. If you would prefer it, you can put your money towards your savings, luxuries and similar things."

"It'll be my living expenses too. Wouldn't you rather split the bills? I should help too, you know."

"Let's discuss that when the time comes. It's been a long week. For now, we should start looking for a place to stay. You have NEWT's, so perhaps we could set aside one or two days a month to look for places once we get a few catalogues."

"As if I could forget about NEWT's...it's only what the rest of my life is hanging on."

"You will do quite well, Hermione. Don't worry so much."

Hermione sipped at her cordial; he hadn't given her very much, and it was soon gone. She decided a little more wouldn't hurt, so she got up and helped herself to another serving.

"I might change my mind about those Muggle trousers of yours." Hermione turned her head to look over her shoulder at Severus. His eyes flicked up to meet hers and then travelled back down as he smirked. "They do frame your arse quite nicely."

"Well then, as long as you see some merit," she quipped. "I don't plan to give up Muggle things entirely, the Wizarding world is a bit backwards when it comes to some things."

"Yes, perhaps. But for now, I believe I will take advantage of magically enhanced pipes and fill the tub," he said, draining the last of his brandy. "Join me?" he asked, rising from the couch, picking his boots up on the way.

"I want to read through this chapter again. I'll be in there in about half an hour." When she heard the water running into the tub, Hermione wondered why it was that he seemed so fastidious about hygiene, yet he only washed his hair once in a while, and then with soap. She wondered if it would be possible to introduce him to shampoo.

The Two scenes drawn by LeDivineMarquis! Her talent is wonderful.

http://www.playwitch.net/issue2/fanart/spanking_color2.jpg

http://www.playwitch.net/issue2/fanart/wax_color.jpg

Calm In The Tempest

Chapter 20 of 31

Hermione and Severus, things are better, but will outside forces threaten them? **Another Lovely Drawing by LeDivineMarquis for this chapter. URL in the endnotes**

I would like to thank my very thorough, very wonderful Beta, Nakhsh Mekashefah. She is the most fantastic beta, working with her is highly educational.

"Severus?" Hermione called as she walked through the living room in her bathrobe. Her wet hair was pulled back in a scrunchie.

"In here," he answered. The door beside the fireplace was open, and she walked into the corridor, which led to his private lab, office, and classroom. He was stirring a potion. He glanced over to her when she entered. "Come to drip on my stores?" he asked scornfully.

"No, I haven't come to drip on your stores," Hermione assured him with a snort. "I was going to see if you'd mind if I borrowed some of your supplies. I'll replace them next time I go to Hogsmeade."

"Wouldn't it be wiser to dress before brewing potions?" he asked.

"I suppose it would, yes. But it's not a complex potion and shouldn't take too long."

"What potion is that?"

"Hair removal potion," she said, crossing his lab to an empty table and turning on a burner, quickly gathering ingredients from the shelves. "Certain areas are a real bother to shave, you know."

"Yes, I suppose it would be." He went back to stirring his cauldron, adding another ingredient.

"You could have offered me a potion, Severus," Hermione told him with a touch of irritation in her voice.

"Yes, I could have," he admitted. "I wondered how long it would take you to decide to use a potion, though."

"You..." Hermione stopped measuring ingredients and turned to Severus, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "You mean to tell me I've been sitting there in the shower, contorting myself and taking all sorts of time to shave my...my...crotch; the number of times I've had razor rash...and all this time you were sitting back and laughing at me?"

"I do find it interesting that it's taken you all this time to seek a very simple wizarding solution."

"You...you...arrhhhgghh!" Hermione turned back to her cauldron, lit the flame on the burner, and resumed measuring ingredients again. After fuming for several minutes, she glanced over to Severus and caught a glimpse of the corner of his mouth twitching upward.

"Why?" she asked stiffly.

"Why do *you* think it is that it took you this long? You've known you were a witch now for nearly eight years, correct? You've done quite a number of things since starting Hogwarts yet for this one, simple thing, you didn't. You aren't the first Muggle-born to keep Muggle habits, even when other solutions would fit better." He turned off the burner and removed the cauldron to another table to cool. "I was aware, during your fifth year, of your solution for 'Dumbledore's Army' to organise their meetings. When pressed, you do come up with good ways to deal with things. I suppose, before now, shaving wasn't something which gave you enough trouble to seek an alternate solution, a *Wizarding* solution," he continued as he gathered a rack of potions bottles and set them beside the cauldron.

"Then why wait...why not make a suggestion? It would have certainly saved me a lot of time...and razor rash."

Severus looked at her and cocked an eyebrow, tilting his head slightly, and then began bottling his potion. Hermione scowled and turned back to her cauldron.

"Why is it you still use a straight razor?" Hermione asked when her hair removal potion was well on its way.

"I like it, and it doesn't take much trouble for the area I have to shave. It would be a waste of potions ingredients."

"Hmm," she answered, noncommittally. It took another ten minutes before she turned off the burner and set the potion aside to cool. She opened the cabinet nearby and withdrew a large, wide-mouthed empty jar, which would work to keep the potion in. She was about to cast a cooling charm since it was a minor potion, which wouldn't be adversely affected by a charm, but had left her wand on the bedside table. Before she could go get it, Severus moved behind her, cast the cooling charm, and then grasped her by the hips and spun her around.

"Up," he directed, hefting her to sit on the edge of the worktable, leaning forward to gently bite her neck.

"Severus, what are you doing?"

"Helping you," he said smugly, untying her robe and opening it. He ran his hands down her body, over her breasts, stomach, and then her thighs, pushing them apart. "I see," he said, kneeling down to examine her partially shaved pubic region, "it took a cut to motivate you, did it?" He smirked, reached into the cauldron, brought the potion out, and began to spread it.

"It really doesn't take that much, Severus," Hermione pointed out as he spread a thick layer of the potion between her legs, thoroughly covering her.

"Perhaps not if it was just for you." He finished, then pulled his work robes open, unbuttoned his trousers and moved between her legs. "I think I shall make use of this too..." he explained, positioning himself quickly, then thrusting into her.

Hermione was reading her *Daily Prophet* on Friday, April 10, at breakfast. The repeal of the Marriage Law was still in the news, mostly involved in cleaning up the mess left behind. There was a new committee now, which the Headmaster had mentioned last time they spoke after the repeal of the law, to investigate allegations of abuse. At least some steps were being taken to try to fix things, and the decrees that the Muggle-born partners in the marriages would have to seek permission to get a job or bank account had been repealed, as well. The monitoring spell on the marriages was still in place, but there were no longer any monitors to track the couples' adherence to the law. They were still organising a committee to determine if there was even a need to try to reverse the spell. She wondered, too, if the much stronger fidelity spells could be reversed.

Another voluntary programme was in the works to prevent genetic incompatibility; it promised to offer genetic screening for purebloods who desired it. Hermione wished she could have been involved but, as she was a student still, there was only so much she could do. At least forming the support group made her feel like she was doing something to help out. After talking to Treva and raising the idea at the last meeting, the suggestion for a celebratory party hadn't gone over very well, so they decided to skip it. And now, the support group was beginning to run itself. A few more women had joined, and a few had dropped out, and smaller groups had formed, as well. For some, it wasn't really the focus on therapy so much as it was being around others who understood what they were going through.

Hermione wasn't sure she was really getting anything out of it, though. It didn't really matter that she wasn't; she thought the important part was to help others. During the times they took turns relating things they had done to make their lives better, giving each other ideas on how to approach issues, Hermione always felt a little weird not having much to bring up. She had started to wonder if some of the women in the group simply thrived on drama. One in particular always had a story...a long, involved story about how Darryl had done this or that or the other...Darryl's ex-girlfriend...Darryl's mother...Darryl's collection of beer bottle caps that he was going to make furniture out of and which were kept in a large bucket that he insisted could not move from the kitchen counter. She was beginning to wish that Felicity would just *shut up already* about Darryl. She'd said to Treva, when the meeting was over, that she was glad at least Severus didn't have any ex-girlfriends to worry about.

Treva's response of "And if he did, do you think she might be jealous?" had given Hermione pause. She had to admit, she was a bit curious about what sort of women Severus had sought out before.

"Hey, Hermione." Harry prodded as he sat down next to her and helped himself to scrambled eggs and bacon. "You'll be at the Quidditch match, right?"

"Yes, Harry, I will be."

"And what about the victory party afterwards?" Harry asked, giving her a sly grin.

"Counting your chickens before they hatch there, aren't you?" Hermione asked.

"Nah...with Draco gone, they haven't got a chance of winning. Their new Seeker has a hard time catching a ball thrown directly at him, much less a Snitch," he said, taking a large mouthful of scrambled eggs. "Besides, you'll want to be at the party, or you'll have to put up with Snape sulking about Slytherin loosing." He winked at her, and then went back to his breakfast.

"I doubt he sulks, Harry," Hermione retorted. "He fumes, rants, broods, but doesn't sulk."

"Excuse me then...you'll want to be there so you don't have to put up with Snape *brooding* over his House loss then."

Hermione rolled her eyes and went back to reading her paper. Harry finished his breakfast quickly and left the table, but Hermione continued combing the paper for anything relevant to what was going on with the Marriage Law. She frowned when, on page eight, she found a report of a mysterious death.

Man found Murdered

Nathaniel Sullivan, aged seventy-three, was found dead this morning at his place of work in Godric's Hollow where he was employed as a shop assistant for the last fifty years. He was found with his throat cut, his body under the table where he had been working. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement was called to investigate, but no traces of magic were found. This is baffling, as the area has no Muggles present. No items were stolen from the shop. He leaves behind his new wife of six months, who is due to give birth to their son in four months time. He was married recently through the now repealed Marriage Law. His wife Patricia, aged twenty-four, had no comment for our reporters. Aurors have already eliminated her as a possible suspect as she was at home during the murder with Nathaniel's mother.

Hermione determined to send an owl to Patricia Sullivan. She knew she probably already had done so from the list of women she'd gone over during the Christmas holiday, but there were quite a few women who hadn't responded.

It was well past curfew when Hermione made her way from Gryffindor Tower on Saturday night. There had been a celebration party, after all. It had still been a close game. She went to the dungeons swiftly and slipped quietly into her room, undressing silently. She made her way into the darkened bathroom, shutting the door to their bedroom before muttering '*Lumos*'. The wall sconce flared to life. Hermione took a while in the shower, the water washing away the exhaustion she felt after the party, which had been all too loud and rambunctious. She exited the shower, drying off with a towel. She stopped short when she saw the mirror. The top half was fogged over, and in the fog was written '*Fundamundic*'. She chuckled, proceeded with brushing her teeth, and then went to the water closet to perform the enema charm.

When she extinguished the lamp and opened the door, stepping out, she jumped as a hand clamped over her mouth from behind. Her heart hammered as she felt hot breath on her neck. "Well, well, my little Gryffindor back from her celebrations." He nudged her to walk forward, towards the bed, keeping his hold over her mouth and his

hand gripping her hip. "Gryffindor may have won in Quidditch, but perhaps it might be better to have our own private Slytherin vs. Gryffindor match tonight?" he asked in a low whisper.

"Hmm?" she asked, muffled under his hand.

"Get on the bed," he said shortly.

Heart hammering, Hermione did so quickly. The room brightened with several candles when Severus muttered *Lumos*. She turned to look at him, surprised to see his teeth exposed in a fierce smile.

"Fight me," he hissed, moving onto the bed.

"What?"

"Fight me," he repeated, his arms poised as if to grab her as he knelt on the opposite side of the bed. "Ready yourself, I'm not going to hurt you...and you need not worry about holding back for my sake." Then, he lunged at her.

Automatically, Hermione dodged to one side, but he still managed to grab her around the waist and push her roughly down to the bed. "Come now, surely you can do better than that?" he mocked.

Hermione paused for a moment, face down on the bed, his hand pushing down on her lower back, pinning her. She turned her head to look back up at him. He was watching her with a smirk. So, she decided to play along, quickly twisting her body out from under his hand. Hermione turned on her back, hesitated a moment, and then kneed him in the ribs.

"Is that the best you can do?" he asked, seemingly unfazed by her kick. "I assure you, you won't be able to hurt me." Hermione's eyebrows rose as she considered the possibilities...he was giving her a free-for-all to lash out in any way she could. Well, if that was what he wanted...

She scooted backwards quickly, reaching the headboard of the bed, and then crouched in a defensive posture. Severus was also on his knees, his cock bobbing straight ahead. Hermione glanced down and decided there was probably one area she should certainly hold back on. He moved forward slowly, hands in front of him, ready to grab her again. Hermione waited for the right moment, and then reached up, nearly standing, to grasp the strong canopy frame just as he lunged towards her again. She caught his head between her thighs, twisting her hips quickly and letting go of the frame. They landed, and she couldn't help but sit rather hard on his chest, her knees on either side of his head and her feet beside his shoulders. She heard the 'omph' of his forcefully exhaled breath and saw a wince cross his face, but he recovered quickly.

"Much better," he said.

"So, I win?" she asked with a smile.

His response was a quirked brow as he grabbed her hips, tilting his head up between her legs. She watched as his tongue extended and he began to lick her. She sighed. Just as she began to relax, she felt a sudden flexing of his muscles; then his legs grabbed her about her arms from behind and she was pulled back. She quickly found herself prone with Severus on top of her.

"Not quite," he said.

She kicked again, trying to aim for his ribs, but he caught her leg deftly and pushed it up over her head. Using his hand as leverage, she rolled backwards out of his grip, trying to think of some way she could win. She quickly ran through self-defence moves she'd learned. When he lunged towards her again, she caught his head by the chin and hair and pushed to the side, trying not to twist too hard. He landed on his back, and she jumped over him, kneeling with her hands holding his forearms down and her ankles over his thighs.

They gasped for breath for the space of several minutes; eyes, glinting with mirth, locked on each other.

Then, his arms and legs both moved suddenly and Hermione lost her balance and fell clumsily on top of him, her forehead bashing into his face. He rolled with her, and then pushed her over again, resting a forearm across her shoulders and his ankles firmly across the backs of her knees.

"No, you don't win," he pronounced.

Hermione struggled, trying to find purchase on the bed, leverage to roll over, but she was quite well pinned.

"To the victor," he whispered, pushing her legs apart with his knees, "go the spoils." She felt his length pressing between her legs and tilted her hips up to meet him. He laughed, and then thrust into her. Hermione gasped, and as he began to thrust into her quickly, her hips continued to move up to meet his strokes. She cried out as she came, and then he stopped, withdrawing and repositioning himself at her anus.

"I suggest you relax and let me in," he said in a low voice as the fingers of his free hand reached down, gathering moisture from between her legs and spreading it around her rear entrance, gently inserting a finger to lubricate her tight passage. It was replaced quickly with his cock, and he slowly entered her. Hermione relaxed, groaning with pleasure as he filled her, her toes curling as he began to thrust again...she could feel the tingling sensation along her inner thighs, all the way down to her toes.

He collapsed on her just after she released. She lay spent under him, both gasping for breath. He soon rolled over onto his back, and Hermione raised her head to look at him.

"You're hurt!" she exclaimed upon seeing a trail of blood trickling from his nose. Severus reached up to wipe the blood away, looking at the smear left on his hand. He felt at the bridge of his nose, and then turned to her.

"The bone is whole," he proclaimed. "Not that it makes much difference, I've broken it enough times before." He closed his eyes again, sighing deeply with a serenely relaxed expression on his face. "Slytherin wins after all," he murmured.

"That wasn't exactly a fair match."

"No, it wasn't. But, you didn't do too badly. Perhaps, next time, you might take a little longer in losing."

Hermione was revising on Tuesday evening, her Arithmancy text in her lap and a parchment of notes to the side as she sat on the couch sideways against the arm, legs stretched across the seat of the couch.

"Unbutton your blouse," Severus said.

Hermione looked over to him, seated in his wingback chair, reading a book; he was watching her intently.

"What?" she asked.

"Unbutton your blouse," he repeated, "and remove your bra."

"Severus...um, I'm in the middle of revising here..."

"I'm not interfering with your studies; I simply want to see your breasts. Now...unbutton your blouse."

Hermione waited a moment, eyes locked with his, a faint glimmer of a smirk playing on his lips. She cocked an eyebrow at him, smirked back, and then reached up, slowly unbuttoning her blouse. She pulled the shirt apart, leaned forward and unclasped her bra, reaching up the short sleeves of her blouse to pull the straps off her arms, then pulled the bra off and set it aside on the couch. It felt a little strange to sit in the living room with her chest bared: dressed but exposed.

"Thank you," he said, his eyes drifting down her body. Hermione rolled her eyes and looked back down to her Arithmancy book.

She glanced up now and again. Sometimes his eyes were on his book, and other times, on her nude breasts. When he caught her looking, he would smirk at her. Finally, Hermione asked: "Like what you see?"

"Yes, I do. You have very nice breasts, Hermione."

"So, you're something of a connoisseur of breasts then?" Hermione asked, amused.

"I've seen a fair few. I like yours."

"Not like they're very big," Hermione said dismissively.

"Larger than some, smaller than others. There's more to good breasts than size," he said, a thoughtful expression touching his brow. He set his book aside and walked to stand beside her, then sat facing her on the edge of the couch. "Right now..." he said, trailing his fingers over one breast, "...they are untouched by gravity. This will change over the years, of course." He cupped one, gently pushing it upward and inward slightly. His thumb traced over her nipple. "Small nipples..."

"Hmm...smaller than most? It's not as if I've sat around in the girls' dorm and compared."

"Yes, smaller than most." He then pinched her nipple lightly. "Nipple size doesn't matter much, but I like the way yours look." He bent down and took a nipple between his lips, laving the tip of his tongue around it.

"I thought you said you didn't want to interfere with my studies, Severus. Not that I mind your attention...it's just, NEWT's are-"

"What are you reading?" he asked, sitting upright again, his hand still cupping her breast as he looked down at her book. "Ahh, I see. And do you think you have grasped all the concepts therein?" he asked, looking at her again...this time at her eyes.

"Well..." Hermione shifted slightly. "I've got most of it, but sometimes have troubles with the Inverse Logarithms used in anti-Muggle wards. Harry usually studies with me, but he doesn't take Arithmancy and I haven't had time to get with some of the other students to revise for this yet."

"Then perhaps you might welcome my assistance?"

"And Arithmancy was one of your good subjects?" Hermione asked.

"Second only to Defence against the Dark Arts, and Potions," he assured her. "Come on, move," he prompted, standing.

"Move where?"

"Sit in my lap," he said. Hermione scooted forward, and Severus sat on the couch, grabbing her by the hips and pulling her back up to sit against the arm of the couch, sideways across his thighs. His right arm wrapped around her, cupping her breast, and his left hand turned the book for him to look at it better. "Now...show me where you're running into troubles," he said.

"Okay...but, isn't this a bit distracting?" Hermione asked, pulling her parchment up to begin an equation.

"If you can do this with a bit of...distraction," he purred in her ear as he tweaked her nipple, "just think how much easier this will make it when you sit down to take your test."

It felt a little odd at first to be revising and taking instruction on Arithmancy while she sat in Severus's lap, chest bared as his hand occasionally found its way to cup, squeeze or stroke her skin, but true to his word, he knew what he was talking about and was able to explain a few of the problems in a way that made it easier to understand. Arithmancy was one of her best subjects, but still, she ran across things now and then that gave her troubles.

"Maybe you should have taught Arithmancy instead of Potions," Hermione said after a while, when she had calculated the fourth difficult problem with ease.

"Hmm, perhaps," he said, then looked at her with an intently stern face, leaned forward and brushed his lips against her ear. "You are here to learn the subtle art and exact science of Arithmancy. Few might, but I expect *you* would understand the beauty of a well crafted equation with it's shimmering numerals, the delicate trace of wyrd that creeps through the fabric of time and space, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses..." Hermione shivered at the combination of his hot breath and his silky words, "...I can teach you to invert integers, calculate parametric velocities, and even to accelerate vectors." Hermione laughed as he finished the modified speech of his Potions introduction.

"Unfortunately," he said, pulling back and returning his attention to the book, "the Arithmancy position was filled when I began teaching, and Valerie Vector took the position twelve years ago before I had a chance to apply. Actually, I would have much preferred to teach Defence, however...that was not to happen. But, one advantage of Arithmancy I missed out on in teaching Potions: as an elective, only the students who actually want to learn are there."

"Yes, the class does seem a lot more focused than the required courses," Hermione agreed.

"Now, do you feel you have absorbed the techniques?" Severus asked.

"Yes, I do. Thanks for helping me."

"You are quite welcome. Actually, there could be another way I might help you further," he said.

"How?"

"A revision game," he said, giving her a sly smirk. "Question, demonstration where applicable, and answer for all your subjects; rewards and punishments given for correct and incorrect answers."

Hermione thought for a moment, narrowing her eyes at him. "And I thought that sort of thing was just for fun in the bedroom..."

"Oh, it is, of course," he answered in a low voice, nipping her earlobe as he rolled a nipple between a thumb and forefinger. "However, since we have already made a few changes and compromises, why not a few more? I'm not requiring this of you...it is an option. In fact, I would want for you to assign your own rewards and punishments."

"You would?" Hermione asked suspiciously. The idea was an interesting one, intriguing in a way. But, she was wary of anything that might break the line between games in the bedroom and the rest of her life. However, since he assured her that it was completely up to her, she decided to indulge in a bit of questioning.

"Yes...the punishments should be severe enough to give you some true anxiety about giving an incorrect answer, of course. There will be immediate pressure to get the right answer...much as it would be during your NEWT's. You can also choose which rewards you would like for getting a certain number of correct answers." He drew back

to study her after his explanation, waiting for her answer.

"So...hmm, something severe enough to cause true anxiety then..."

"Yes, for instance, one incorrect answer could lead to twenty swats with my hand, or five with the paddle...yes, I see the paddle would be something you would be anxious about," he said at her reaction to mention of the paddle. "If you truly want to know if you can perform well under pressure, choose punishments that would be appropriately...severe."

"And would you try to trick me just to be able to punish me...trick questions and the like?"

"Phrasing of a question in a test is often used to mislead those who read without enough attention," he pointed out. "So, yes, I would attempt to phrase things in a way which might cause some confusion if you aren't listening carefully. This will serve both to help you remember not to be deceived by those sorts of questions...and I admit I do enjoy punishing you," he said softly, leaning forward to nibble her ear. "The way you bite your lip and try not to cry out at times...the way you finally let go when you *do* succumb to the pain...most of all, the way you bravely accept it, never pleading or begging for me not to..."

"So, is begging or pleading something you've heard a lot of?" Hermione asked quietly, seeing another opportunity to perhaps get a glimpse of his past relationships.

"I've had a few women who, when the time came for a punishment they had agreed to, backed down and begged me not to do it.*weaklings*." He hissed the last word derisively.

"When that happened, what would you do? Did you still make them take their punishment?"

"With one or two of them who I thought were only having a momentary anxiety. But, if they repeated that kind of behaviour I would simply end things and not see them again." He was caught up in examining her breasts for a while then, blowing cool air across her nipples to watch them crinkle with the chill, lifting and pinching gently at them, tracing the contours. Hermione reached a hand up, running her fingers through his black, greasy hair, combing out a few tangles as she found them with her fingers. He seemed to like the repetitive motion, or at least he didn't stop her. She wondered then, how things might have gone had she ever cried and begged him to stop something. She never had...even when she demanded the right to tell him no to something, she hadn't cried or begged, rather, she had stood firm on her convictions.

"Actually, I do have a few punishments to suggest for your list that you haven't yet experienced..."

Thursday evening, Hermione was sitting in her room, writing down a list of punishments and rewards. Harry had just left to return to Gryffindor Tower after revising with her. Actually, her more serious contemplation of Severus's idea for a revision game was a result of trying to have Harry quiz her. As happened during their fifth year in revising for OWL's, Hermione couldn't resist snatching the book away from him after nearly every question to make sure Harry had asked her right and to make sure that that he wasn't telling her she was correct when a more complete answer should have been given. She had to admit, she probably was annoying Harry quite a bit through that. At least he was a lot calmer about things now than he'd been then. Of course, not having Voldemort giving him dreams and visions, constantly, helped.

It was a little odd, and she felt a thrill of excitement while going over the list. She still hadn't decided whether or not she wanted to take him up on the unusual offer.

As per Severus's suggestions, she'd chosen a different punishment for each subject. Severus would quiz her orally on Charms, Potions, Arithmancy, History of Magic, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Astronomy, and Ancient Runes. Punishments for failure to answer a question would be delivered immediately, and rewards would be delivered at the end of the quizzing when the tallies of correct answers were tabulated. She found an interesting conflict too. On the one hand, she did realise that for there to be real pressure to answer a question correctly, the punishment for an incorrect answer would have to be appropriately severe. On the other hand, it was very strange to write down *For incorrect answers in Charms, five strokes with the wooden paddle*. or to write: *For incorrect answers in Ancient Runes, three minutes of enduring the anal plug with stinging potion crème*. She scowled at the punishment for Ancient Runes...it was one of Severus's suggestions, and she really wasn't sure about that one (he had assured her that if she chose that, he would have the antidote crème on hand to administer after the time was completed). She crossed out three minutes and changed it to one minute.

Deciding to skip the rest of the punishments for the time being, she went on to the rewards. Hermione nibbled the end of her quill momentarily as she thought. *For Arithmancy score of more than 95%, twenty minutes of cunnilingus*. She smiled...yes, that would be nice, certainly. She then wrote: *For a score above 95% in Charms, thirty minute back massage*. She then decided on a foot massage for an exemplary score in Ancient Runes, smirking to herself at the thought of sitting back and having Severus give her a foot massage. For Astronomy, she decided upon having her breasts suckled and played with for thirty minutes; she really did enjoy that. For History of Magic, Potions, and Defence Against the Dark Arts she chose having him wash her hair and give a scalp massage, dinner in a nice Muggle restaurant, and having him read three chapters of the book of her choice in bed, respectively (she really did like his voice).

Rewards finished, she went back to punishments. Maybe this was like the pressure of NEWT's in some ways...she dreaded a low score because that would impact her future...the punishments were short term, of course, but she had to make them difficult enough that she really would have motivation not to fail. The problem was, she was running out of punishments she truly found dreadful...

Finally, she finished and debated hanging onto it for a while or taking it to Severus. She decided to take it to him. He was grading papers at his desk; she walked in front of it and extended the parchment to him. He looked up, took the parchment, and read over her list.

"Acceptable, except for this," he said, crossing out the punishment she'd chosen for DADA. "That is dangerous, though quite creative. I would suggest instead..." he quickly wrote next to the crossed out punishment, "this."

Hermione took the paper back and looked at his replacement. "Um, yes, okay." She nodded, and handed the parchment back to him.

"Good. Now, when would you like to be *tested*?" he asked, eyes glinting.

"Um..." she paused, suddenly feeling nervous. "This Sunday?"

"Very well. I do hope you do well in Charms, otherwise, you might find sitting in class on Monday to be rather...uncomfortable. Bring your books to me on Friday, and I will devise an appropriate assortment of questions...of course, you can leave your Potions and Defence texts behind, I know quite well what test questions would be appropriate for those."

Saturday, April 18, Hermione made her way into Hogsmeade with a group of students. It was a Hogsmeade weekend, so she was looking forward to having a good time with her friends, but still had the support group meeting to go to later that afternoon. Ron, Padma and Parvati Patil, Harry, Neville, Lavender Brown, Colin Creevey, and Seamus Finnegan were all walking together in a cluster, sharing concerns about the upcoming NEWT's. Hermione was listening carefully to conversations, trying to hear of any more 'revision aids' in the form of dangerous compounds which were being touted to help one concentrate, sleep less, and revise more. She'd caught one student with them earlier that week in Gryffindor Tower, confiscated the 'revision aids', which had turned out to be nothing more than a combination of dust and powdered toenail clippings, and reported the students to Professor McGonagall. There had been rumours that someone had Runespoor eggs, which would be a valid revision aid, but they were still dangerous and a controlled substance.

Unfortunately, the fact that she was Head Girl and had a reputation for always reporting miscreants meant that the other students were careful not to mention rule-breaking around her too much. She had to be careful, too, to devote time specifically to spend in Gryffindor Tower. Living in the dungeons and having all that space and quiet - to herself, sometimes made it too tempting just to stay there. But, she had responsibilities to attend to.

The morning was relaxing, though. They spent time shopping; Ron and Parvati excused themselves to go to Madam Puddifoot's for tea together. She filled up on chocolate at Honeydukes and bought extra to take back with her.

When it was nearly one thirty, she excused herself from the group of laughing and joking friends and made her way to Madam Rosmerta's for the support group meeting. As usual, she began by looking over the day's agenda, notes made, and other things with Treva, also mentioning the letter she had sent to the young widow she'd read about in the paper, giving her an invitation to join their support group.

It didn't take long for the regulars to arrive, and at two they commenced with the meeting. Ten minutes into proceedings, as Hermione was trying not to roll her eyes at reports of Darryl's latest antics, there was a knock at the door, and the nearest young woman rose to open it. A young, pregnant woman stood in the doorway; a slight smudge of soot was on her sleeve as if she hadn't dusted completely after Floo travel. She held a piece of paper in her small hand.

"Excuse me, is this the support group for the Muggle-born women affected by the Marriage Law?" she asked.

"Yes, it is," Hermione answered, suddenly realising they needed a better name. "I'm Hermione Snape, and we're all here to talk about things and help each other out where we can."

"I'm Patricia Callicotte...that was Patricia Sullivan up until nine days ago," she said. "I received your owl."

"Yes, I'm glad you could come," Hermione said. "Won't you sit? We have tea and biscuits, as well."

"Thank you," Patricia said, quickly finding the nearest seat. Hermione glanced to Treva, who handled some of the awkward moments better than she could.

"I'm Treva Bulstrode, if you would like you may introduce yourself now, or if you feel more comfortable, please feel free to simply sit and listen. I read about your husband's death in the paper...you have my condolences."

"Oh, please, I'd rather have congratulations for that," she said archly, making a dismissive motion with her hand. "It's the consequences I need condolences for," she said, scowling momentarily down at her protruding belly. "I don't mind introducing myself now, actually. It's good to finally get out," she said, looking around at the group of about twenty women. "I was married just over six months ago, one of the first of that damned law, to the most incompetent, idiotic, alcoholic, crude, old and wrinkled excuse for a man I've ever known. He had to take a potion to keep it up," she said, sneering.

"Between him and that hag of a mother of his, I was always watched, couldn't get out, he even hid my wand. I was pregnant within the first month and figured at least then I could get out of the fucking Ministry 'coitus clause' bullshit. No, they sent us a fine notice anyway...the bastard blamed me, and since he had control of my bank account, took the money from there to pay the fine. Of course, he was delighted to discover I had savings, and it didn't take him long to spend it gambling and drinking. So, now I'm twenty-four, widowed and pregnant and not a Knut to show for having been widowed...I won't be keeping it, by the way, I never wanted to marry or have children, and it's too late to abort. I've found a wizard couple who can't have children and wants to adopt. But, whoever killed my late husband, I owe a debt of gratitude to," she finished firmly. Her recitation of the events had been clipped but delivered with an underlying anger.

Hermione thought she had a coldness about her and wondered if she had always been like that or if it had been brought on by what she'd been through. She felt sympathy for her, but at the same time, was reminded that she had been fortunate in having Severus to help her.

Later, Patricia didn't stick around after the meeting had come to a close. Hermione had hoped to talk to her some more, but apparently she needed her space.

"Well," Treva began after the room had cleared. "I'm not sure if this group will be beneficial to Patricia, or if her presence will be good for the group."

"But, she's been through so much, it's not her fault," Hermione protested.

"Oh, I'm not saying it is. I'm simply looking at the fact that...well, our purpose for the most part is to help everyone adjust to their lives and to deal with the reality of their situations. Patricia was obviously in a terrible situation, not one that she should have learned to simply deal with or get along in. I'm rather behind her in being glad her husband was killed, actually. But, even if Barius and I aren't getting along well in everything, I don't want him killed. And you, would you want something to happen to Severus?" Treva asked, crossing the room to the refreshments table and starting to pack up the biscuits.

"No, I wouldn't...yes, I see what you're saying, then. But, can't we do something for her?"

"Actually, I've been speaking with some of the committees this past week regarding cleaning up the mess left behind by the law. One thing they are working on is identifying, and getting women out of abusive marriages. My parents are going to work directly with anyone they are able to get out of those relationships, in counselling, so we can focus on this group."

"But, I thought they couldn't get out...the binding spells, the fidelity charm..." Hermione withdrew her wand and quickly charmed the scattered chairs about the room to stack neatly along one wall.

"They might not be able to get out of the marriage, but they can get away. The new head of the committee is quite serious about fixing this problem. His former fiancée was one of the three women who died mysteriously. They were going to get married but hadn't officially become engaged, and since he was a Muggle-born, too, once the Marriage Law was passed she had to marry someone else when she got a petition. They haven't been able to prove that her husband murdered her, but he is doing all he can to make sure it doesn't happen to anyone else."

"That's good. It's bad enough to be forced to marry...but, I'm not sure I can imagine what some of them are going through," Hermione said sadly. "What Patricia was talking about today...that's just awful."

"Yes, it really is. Personally, I'd like to see Minister Fudge's and Lucius Malfoy's heads on platters for what they pulled over on us all."

"I don't think, after a full Obliviate, Lucius Malfoy would be worth going after."

"True, but from what I've heard, he's always been a slippery snake...wouldn't surprise me a bit if he still managed something. I just wish I could have been there to see Severus curse him," Treva said as she emptied the tepid tea with a wave of her wand.

"I was there...and it wasn't nice. Of course, at the time I was trying to keep Severus from bleeding to death."

"Hard to imagine him in a position like that," Treva mused. "Well, you know, after always seeing him in such control in the classroom back at Hogwarts. But, that was a long time ago."

Monday morning, Hermione sat down gingerly at breakfast just as the delivery owl swooped down with the morning paper. Harry joined her as she scanned the headlines, looking for any news related to the repealing of the Marriage Law, but found little of importance.

"Hey Hermione...you want to revise with me tonight? I was kind of thinking maybe we could go somewhere else, like the library..."

"I suppose we could, yes. I need more work on advanced Charms anyway, and that's something we're both taking, so we could work on that."

"I thought you were doing great on advanced Charms?"

"Well...I've discovered that some of the more obscure Charms are difficult to perform...um, might be difficult to perform under pressure, like during NEWTs," she said,

correcting herself mid-sentence. Yes, under pressure...like Severus standing before her with a paddle in his hand, eyes gleaming malevolently as he tapped out a beat with the paddle against his thigh, eagerly watching the grains in the timer glass run out as she tried to perform the charm and give a correct recitation of the properties of said charm. She hadn't earned a back massage, but was only one question away from earning that reward. Unfortunately, the three questions she had missed had lasting effects. She had, however, earned twenty minutes of cunnilingus (which had been absolutely delightful), her hair shampooed (very relaxing), and dinner at a Muggle restaurant (which he promised would be the following Friday evening).

"Really? You seemed to have everything down when we went over it last time..."

"But Harry, we didn't go over everything...NEWT's will be very thorough...they might even test us on something very obscure...what if we don't know everything just from our notes and textbooks? And the pressure! Harry, this isn't going to be like some kind of revision session or even the tests we've had already...this is NEWT's! This is what our future careers will be based on; we have to be ready," Hermione lectured.

"Oy, you know," Ron, who was sitting very close to Parvati, chimed in, "you were just like this when it was time for OWL's, and you did just fine. Really, you can afford to relax a little...it's not like Snape is poor or anything," Ron said. Hermione scowled at him furiously, and Ron's eyes widened as he glanced around, suddenly aware that the eyes of nearly every girl who had overheard him was glaring at him or looking pointedly away. Parvati looked embarrassed. "Um, well...I mean, I'm just saying you can afford to relax a little is all...you know, even if you don't do all that well...er...sorry, I didn't mean it to sound like that." Ron's nervous back-peddalling seemed to calm Hermione a bit.

"Ron...it doesn't matter that I'm married to him. I have every intention of doing well on my NEWT's and having a career of my own," she told him in a low voice.

"Okay...listen, really...I didn't mean it like that, okay?"

"Yeah, Hermione," Harry said, "I think he was just trying to help...you know, you *are* getting a little frantic about all this. Really, think of it like OWL's...you did fine with them, and you were a nervous wreck until you got your scores back."

"Well, maybe the reason I did so well was because I was so worried about it, did you think of it that way?"

Harry shrugged as he bit into a sausage. Hermione turned back to her own breakfast, and the thought hit her that she actually knew nothing of Severus's financial status. She didn't think he was rich...but he didn't seem all that poor, either. After all, he had an expansive library, good furniture, and had been able to pay for their wedding rings and her wedding dress without limiting her to a certain budget. And, the way he'd dismissed her suggestion that she should pay for half their bills once they left Hogwarts made her assume that he was probably fine in financial matters.

After Ancient Runes, Hermione made her way to Advanced Potions where she waited in the hall for the door to open and class to begin. Harry joined her, smiling, and they waited in silence for a few more moments. The door opened and the Advanced Potions class quickly went to their tables and took their seats. Hermione, just as she had at breakfast, sat slowly. It wasn't too sore, but she wasn't about to simply plop down on a hard wood chair. Hermione looked up to the blackboard as Severus flicked his wand, causing the directions for the day's project to appear.

"As you lot are now preparing for your NEWT's, we will be intensifying our revision even more than the usual high standards for this class," Severus said in a low voice. "I don't need to remind you that your score on NEWT's will determine your career options, or lack thereof. As my reputation as Potions master of this school hinges on the scores you produce, it should come as no surprise to any of you that I will not accept failure." He crossed his arms and scanned over the seated students. "Potter, in the fifth step of brewing Veritaserum, which direction should one stir?"

"Um...anti-clockwise, sir," Harry answered. Hermione stifled a groan.

"Incorrect. It appears fame *still* does little to help one's attention in class. Two points from Gryffindor. Miss Patil," he said, turning to address Padma Patil, "do you know the answer?"

"Clockwise, Professor Snape," she answered with assurance.

"Well, well, well...also incorrect. Two points from Ravenclaw." He stalked between the tables. "Does no one know the answer?"

Hesitantly, Hermione raised her hand. Soon enough, Severus's eyes turned to her. "Mrs Snape," he said, "would you care to inform this class, which apparently does not pay attention, of the correct answer?" he asked with a smirk.

"Yes, one should stir in a figure eight pattern during the fifth step of the brewing of Veritaserum, neither clockwise nor anti-clockwise," Hermione said...she'd gotten that one wrong on Sunday, and her nipples tingled with the memory of it.

"Correct...four points to Gryffindor." Hermione's smile faltered when Harry shot her a curious glance with a hint of suspicion. She looked back down to her parchment, where she began writing the day's assignment. On her way to get her supplies from the cabinets, she also caught a scowl from Pansy Parkinson and a malicious sneer from Blaise Zabini.

"Severus, I have a favour to ask you," Hermione said that evening, after she'd returned from a short visit from Gryffindor Tower. She'd made an excuse to Harry that she wasn't feeling up to revising with him that night, but promised to do so the rest of the week. Actually, she wasn't up to dealing with the results of that morning's Potions class. Word had spread that she was now officially Professor Snape's pet, and if the others of Gryffindor had thought her a traitor before, now it was worse.

"And what might that be?" he inquired.

"Don't call on me in class."

Severus glanced up sharply from grading. "And why not?"

"Well...because when I get something right, everyone thinks it's because you're showing me favours, or asking me something you know I'll know the question to...or playing favourites..."

"That is a question that might very well show up on NEWT's. While you remain a student of mine, I will call on you in class when it is appropriate to do so, just as I would with any other *student*. And, I would think that a little rumour and gossip wouldn't bother you. After all, since we've been married the gossip and rumours have been circulating profusely. You should know by now that that is the reason I lost my position as Head of Slytherin. If I can stand up and teach class every day, knowing it was my students, my *Slytherin* students, who most likely were the cause of that, then you can deal just fine with a few harmless rumours and assumptions," he declared. "At least now that the damage has already been done, it's harmless," he said bitterly and looked back down at his grading, slashing furiously through a paragraph with his red-inked quill.

His words stung, but Hermione walked to the front of his desk, resting her hands lightly on its surface. "Severus," she began softly, "I really am sorry you lost your position as Head of Slytherin."

"Sorry?" he hissed, looking up at her. "Sorry? Yes, tell that to the Board of Governors, why don't you? Then, watch while they come up with three new allegations of how I'm favouring you above my other students despite all evidence to the contrary. Perhaps they might see fit to dismiss me as a teacher, as well."

"I only mean that I wish it hadn't happened to you like that. It was wrong," Hermione continued.

"Yes, it was wrong; but it did happen. Remember that if ever again you think you're on the unequal end of our arrangement," he said coldly.

Hermione bit her lip, feeling tears spring to her eyes as he looked back down at his grading, ignoring her. She turned away, took a deep breath and retrieved one of her textbooks. It was tempting to close the door and revise alone in her room, but she didn't. She settled down on the couch and reminded herself that it must have meant a lot to him to be Head of Slytherin. But, she was really looking forward to leaving Hogwarts behind. Perhaps, once they were no longer student and teacher as well as husband and wife, things might be easier.

Several hours later, he apparently finished with his grading. Hermione looked up when his footsteps stopped just before her, his face was blank. She gave him a questioning expression, and he pursed his lips, clearing his throat. "Recent events have been rather...disconcerting, for me. I am sure you can understand that during such times," he continued, a muscle in his cheek twitching, "one can easily say things which sound harsher than they are meant to be."

Hermione nodded, giving him an understanding smile. Severus turned stiffly and stalked to the bedroom. It wasn't quite an apology, Hermione thought, but it was pretty damn close.

Severus disrobed quickly, preparing for a shower before bed, hardly believing he'd apologised to Hermione. He didn't want her to expect that at every turn; but still, he'd snapped at her and had been harsher than he probably should have. It wasn't until she'd sat down with her book that he'd glanced over to her and noticed her furtively dashing moisture away from her eyes with the back of her hand before her face hardened and she focused on her reading. He had then realised that it probably wasn't best to go about snapping at Hermione the way he would a student. He had no qualms sending a student away in tears, he did it all the time...had done it to Hermione even when she was younger, and he'd felt no guilt.

But, she had been attempting to offer him some words of comfort, and meeting her words of comfort with harsh barbs, even if he didn't particularly want her compassion, wasn't exactly the best way to maintain the rather easy contentment he'd felt around her of late. He would much rather have peaceful contentment, along with the rather enjoyable sexual aspects of their relationship, than simply sex and awkward or hostile silence between them.

Just as promised, Severus took Hermione to a Muggle restaurant the Friday following the game they had made of Hermione's NEWT's preparations. She actually had a wonderful time and had been surprised that Severus had managed to find such a nice place. She'd wondered momentarily during their dinner if his finances really were good; it wasn't an inexpensive restaurant by any means. Ron's comment about that still irked her, though.

After revising non-stop for nearly a week, Hermione hadn't been eating well and had just started her monthly cycle. Usually, her cycle gave her no problems, some minor cramps, but for some reason this time she felt miserable. It was eight in the evening and she had decided to go to bed early for a change. Not only that, but she had a headache. She'd extinguished the lights in the bedroom after a quick shower and snuggled under the covers, glad for the silence of the dungeons. She wondered if she should bother getting a headache potion or a general painkilling potion, but she simply wanted to do nothing for a while. It was one of the symptoms of headaches that the one experiencing the headache didn't feel like going through the trouble to procure a solution to said headache at times.

Just as Hermione was nearly asleep, she heard Severus enter their quarters. A moment later, he was in the bedroom, disrobing. He slid between the sheets, reached a hand out and grasped her by the shoulder, urging her to turn over.

"Severus..." she groaned, rolling over onto her back. "Not now...please, no." She looked over to him; his face wasn't visible in the darkness. He'd stilled, his hand still on her shoulder. "I've got a headache, cramps...and besides, the passage is blocked," she continued tiredly.

After a long silence, Severus suggested: "I shall get you a potion to relieve your headache and cramps; there are some already prepared in the lab. And...blockages can be removed."

"I'd appreciate the potion...but still, not tonight," she asserted quietly, a queasy feeling in her stomach. She hadn't felt the need, up until that moment, to tell him no on sex. Perhaps she could have gone ahead once her headache and cramps were gone, but she was tired. Her responsibilities, from being Head Girl, preparing for NEWT's, and playing a large part in organising the support group, were pulling her in so many directions. He'd promised she would have the right to tell him no, and now that she'd said it, she wasn't going to back down; now was the time to see if he would respect that.

Without another word, he rose from the bed, tossed on a bathrobe and left the bedroom.

Hermione sighed, squeezing her eyes shut tightly. She didn't really worry that he would press the matter, but she wondered if he might be difficult to be around afterwards. A moment later, she felt the bed shift again and opened her eyes as he lit a candle with his wand.

"Drink this," he said shortly. Hermione took the phial, glancing at his expressionless face as she drank it.

"Thank you," she said, handing the phial back to him. "Tomorrow, Severus...just...I mean, you did say-"

"Hermione," he interrupted, his lips were tight as he spoke, "I hold to my bargains." He gave her a piercing glare; she wasn't sure if he was upset about her refusal or that she thought he wouldn't hold to what he had said. He extinguished the candle as he rose from the bed and left the room, leaving Hermione in now blessedly pain-free silence and darkness.

It was as she was about to go to sleep again that Hermione remembered the date. It was April 30th. Six months since they had been married. Typically, newlyweds celebrated every anniversary that came along, yet she'd forgotten, and she wasn't sure if he'd forgotten or simply didn't think the date was worth mentioning.

She made a decision that by their first year anniversary they would have something that was worth celebrating. Maybe not love...but she was going to find something they could both share, something more than sex and books. There had to be more. She smiled wryly...perhaps they could be celebrating not having driven each other completely crazy after another six months had passed?

The next morning, a Friday, Hermione glanced up as a Ministry owl landed before her breakfast plate. Curiously, she reached forward and untied the missive, opening it quickly.

Dear Hermione Snape,

As you may have heard, The Ministry of Magic is taking seriously the allegations that abuse has taken place in many of the marriages performed under the Marriage Law. It is our goal to see that appropriate actions are taken to prevent such atrocities, and to further that aim, all couples married under the terms of the former law are to be interviewed under Veritaserum to be sure that all is well.

An Auror and a Ministry-appointed counsellor will be sent to evaluate your situation and to question you regarding your relationship on Monday, May 4, at three o'clock pm. Please be ready in your residence at that time.

Thank you for your cooperation,

Gregory Ludwig

Ministry of Magic

Department of Marriage Law recovery.

Hermione's heart raced and her stomach felt as if it were in her throat. She looked up to the High Table, where she saw Severus frowning at a parchment. He glanced up and met her eyes; a muscle in his cheek twitched as he folded the parchment and put it in his robes.

LeDivineMarquis has drawn another masterpiece, inspired by the scene of Severus helping Hermione with her Arithmancy:
<http://www.playwitch.net/issue2/fanart/studying.jpg>

Honesty

Chapter 21 of 31

Truths of several kinds come out.

Big, big THANKS to Nakhash Mekashefah, super-beta extrodinare! *applause*

They sat across from each other Friday evening in the living room. Hermione hadn't been able to concentrate on her classwork all day and had even lost points in Transfiguration class, earning a rather concerned look from Professor McGonagall who had asked after class if she was feeling well.

After receiving the letter, she knew right away that certain aspects of their relationship might easily seem suspect as abuse to an outsider. Severus had received a letter as well. Apparently, they were both to be questioned under Veritaserum.

"This is ridiculous," he muttered. "Ministry regulations are clear that Veritaserum is not to be used unless during investigation of a crime."

"Well, in some cases it might be ridiculous, but can't you see why they're doing it?" Hermione asked.

Severus scowled. "A simple medical examination should be sufficient. Veritaserum questioning is going too far."

"I wonder what a medical examination would make of bruises left from a paddle on someone's bum?" Hermione asked pointedly.

"A healing potion would take care of that quite easily," Severus said, and then scowled at her...he'd been too distracted to realise she'd made the point. "Yes, of course, I see your point," he said angrily. "And I'm sure you see the problem here, don't you?"

Hermione looked back down to her letter. "Well, it depends on what they ask, I suppose...and what kind of follow-up investigation they might do. Perhaps we could simply explain that we're a little...um, exuberant in bed, if something comes out that seems...well, a little odd to them?"

Severus snorted and stood hastily from his chair, wadding the parchment and tossing it on his desk. He paced back and forth in front of the fireplace, running a hand through his greasy hair. "And of course the Ministry doesn't do anything with any sense, so you can just imagine the questions they'll be asking," he ranted.

"Well, isn't it possible to get around Veritaserum questioning...depending on how you phrase it?"

"Yes, certainly!" he spun around and advanced on her, leaning over and bracing himself on the arms of the chair she sat in. His face was only inches from hers. "Tell me, Mrs Snape, has your husband ever struck you in any way?" he asked, glaring at her. "Just how will you answer that under Veritaserum, hmm?"

"Um..." Hermione frowned as she thought. It was not a good predicament to be in. He was quite right. If she was asked that question under the Truth Potion, there was no way she could phrase an answer to fit and not get Severus in trouble.

"There is no way either of us would be able to get around that question," he finally said, letting out a frustrated sigh as he stood fully. He took a few steps and sat heavily in his chair.

"Severus, you're giving up a bit too easily here. Why not simply tell them up front that we like certain sexual role-playing games that might seem a bit extreme to some? After all, there's that book, and then there's that shop in Knockturn Alley where..."

"Hermione...the person in charge of this committee, from what I've heard from the Headmaster, has lost someone he was apparently going to marry."

"Yes, Treva mentioned that to me at the last meeting...she'd been working with him, too." He scowled at her at the mention of Treva.

"He is in that position for personal reasons, and he will be highly biased. He will look for anything out of the norm, anything that is the slightest bit unusual, and it wouldn't surprise me in the least if he were to deem our sexual relationship as abusive, no matter what either of us say to the contrary." His fingers came together, elbows resting on the arms of his chair. She noted how the pads of his fingertips rubbed against one another.

They sat quietly a moment, and then a knock sounded on the door to Hermione's room. Severus glanced in the direction of her room, clearly irritated with the interruption.

"Just a minute," Hermione said, rising and quickly going to open her door. Harry was there.

"Hey, Hermione, I was wondering if you were okay? You seemed a little off today." He stepped forward as if he was expecting to enter, but Hermione didn't open the door any wider.

"Um, fine...just, now isn't a really good time, okay?"

"Anything I can help with?" he asked, brows knitting together with concern, looking over her shoulder, trying to see inside.

"No, no...it's hard to explain. I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Yeah, okay, Hermione. Are you sure it's all right? Is Snape..." he trailed off, lowering his voice. His lips pursed together tightly as he waited for her answer.

"No Harry, it's something else, don't worry. I'll see you tomorrow at lunch."

He nodded, still looking worried, and Hermione closed the door and went back to sit across from Severus.

"Well, Severus, I think that depending on what questions come up, we should just tell them the truth. Why are you so afraid of the truth?"

"I am not afraid; I am simply cautious. I am well aware that many would view my desires as extreme, even brutal. Why do you think I was so careful to explain things to you before we married? At the time, I actually thought it would scare you off. But it didn't."

"No, it didn't," Hermione confirmed. "And there's another thing, if they have a problem with anything, I can tell them that you told me ahead of time what you like and that I agreed to go along with it. I actually do enjoy those things, you know."

"Yes, I'm aware you do; I made sure you would. That doesn't change the fact that they will not have unusual sexual practices in mind in their questioning. It won't matter that you agreed to anything, because just like everything else, they will presume to take rights from the Muggle-born women here, making decisions for them. If they had simply sent a questionnaire to the women asking if they were being abused and then followed up the problem cases with investigation, there would be no problem. But by requiring Veritaserum questioning, even of those for whom there have been no suspicions or complaints, it is obvious that your opinion of the situation will mean nothing to them."

There wasn't much to say after that. They sat in brooding silence together for a while before Hermione decided to try to study, but she wasn't able to keep her mind on her work. She gave up, deciding on a bath to try and relax. Severus joined her just as she was stepping into the tub, offering her a generous serving of the blackberry cordial. They bathed in silence, neither feeling the need to talk anymore, and then went to bed.

"What might they do if they decide you're abusing me?" Hermione asked, as they lay spooned together in bed in the darkness.

"It is possible that they will insist we separate. After that, I might be taken into custody, but since there are no more dementors at Azkaban, it wouldn't be too difficult. If that happens...you are to remain at Hogwarts. Malfoy has not been stopped. The Headmaster will be sure to offer you a position here; you will be protected if you remain after you graduate."

"Dementors or not, I wouldn't want you in Azkaban."

"Do not concern yourself with that. I will make provisions to be sure you remain protected from Malfoy, if he might still be a problem. At this point, we must prepare for the possibility. Now, this has been a trying day, get some sleep."

Hermione gripped his forearm, which lay across her stomach, wishing she knew more about what would happen. If this had come up five or six months ago, she wondered if she would have felt any differently about it. Probably so, she finally decided. She might have seen it as a way out, even if it would be wrongly imprisoning Severus. She couldn't just look at the upcoming questioning as something to just allow happen, but at the same time, she couldn't see anything she could do to stop it. She decided that, depending on how it went, even if Severus protested her doing so, she would explain the situation to them. It might be a little embarrassing, but a little embarrassment would be a small price to pay for making sure they didn't make a decision based on a few minor facts that would only give them a skewed picture of the reality of the situation.

Hermione woke before Severus for a change, having slept restlessly. She sat up, scooting to the side of the bed, remembering only snatches of images from fitful dreams...standing naked in the Great Hall atop the High Table, everyone pointing at her, and trying to find some clothes to put on, but every time she turned around, Draco Malfoy had been there, poking at her with his wand, while Lucius Malfoy stood in the background, watching her leeringly.

She shuddered at the image and went into her room. She decided while dressing that maybe it would be better to put her wardrobe in their bedroom; it would be easier that way. She liked having her own space, but still, it was inconvenient to go to a different room to dress.

She went to her bookshelf and pulled the leather-bound title-free book from the shelf where it had sat for the last six months. She still looked at it occasionally. She had accused him, when he'd shown it to her the second time, of showing her something abusive...perverted. She'd thrown the book, then, and well remembered what had followed, being turned over his knee right there in the living room. Of course, she'd been spanked much more soundly on a number of times since then.

Looking through the pictures, she tried to examine how she felt about it now and how someone else might view the situation. She'd gotten used to it...she enjoyed it, actually. She remembered, though, while looking at the pictures, what she had thought when she first saw them. She'd been horrified at the prospect that he would do that for fun, for sexual gratification. But she was starting to think maybe there was more to it for him than just pain and obedience. Maybe there was a deeper reason for his desires.

"Up early looking at picture books, I see," Severus said from the doorway to her room.

Hermione looked up. He'd just woken, his hair was a mess, and he wore only a bathrobe. "Just thinking," Hermione said, looking back down at the picture of herself and Severus. In this picture, there was a bullwhip in his hand, and she was tied to a wall as he'd struck with the whip, causing red streaks to blossom on her back.

Severus entered her room and took a seat on the couch beside her. "A rather...arousing picture, don't you think?" he murmured.

Hermione pondered his question, realising that she did, in fact, find it arousing. "Yes," she answered simply. "I was just thinking about how different it seems now. How other people might think it seems. Before, when you first gave me the book, I thought it was abusive."

"Yes, you were quite vocal and *abusive* of my books, regarding that opinion," he said, reaching out and turning a page of the book, displaying the next two pictures. In one, Severus was spanking her while she lay across his thighs, and in the other, he was pulling on her nipples, stretching her breasts to conical shapes. "And what do you think now?"

"Now...well...no, I don't think so...it depends," Hermione shrugged, her shoulder moving against Severus's.

"I see. On what, precisely?" he asked.

"Well," Hermione began, biting her lip as she focused on the problem as if it were in the distance, out the window of her room over the lake somewhere. "If...if you'd just, let's say, grabbed me and started in with it one day without ever saying anything about it before...or if you'd gone and used that sort of thing whenever you just...well, wanted to take out your anger on me or something, it would be."

"Agreed," Severus said, turning another page of the book in Hermione's lap.

"I'm curious, though, when did you learn about this...the whole...sadosomochism thing?"

"The sadosomochism thing?" he echoed her. "Yes, the Muggle term for it...and by the way, I did read some of those articles of yours...quite the complicated mess they've made of it. I was introduced to it early on in my sexual learning, younger than you are now, actually."

"What, you had some girlfriend who wanted you to spank her?" Hermione asked jokingly.

"Not quite," he said elusively.

"Um...I've heard rumours...about things...um, well, this sort of thing going on at Death Eater gatherings...is that...?" Hermione trailed off, not sure how to put into words the things she'd heard snippets of rumours of over the last several years. She hoped he wasn't re-living some horrid atrocities through his activities with her and enjoying those sorts of memories.

Severus laughed for a moment, making Hermione feel a little ridiculous. "Ahh, the infamous 'Dark Revel'? Yes, I've heard the rumours as well, and most Death Eaters did little to dispel such rumours, finding them rather entertaining. But no, while some Death Eaters may enjoy this sort of thing, the Dark Lord would hardly have had anything to do with sex at a Death Eater gathering...his 'rejuvenation' never completely took hold, and he was rather sensitive about certain issues. Besides, even the Dark Lord, as insane as he may have been, knew one didn't achieve world domination by raping one or even ten Muggles or Muggle-borns at a time. I thought you were smart enough to know better than that, Hermione," he scoffed. "How I was introduced is of no matter at this time. And sitting around brooding about what might happen is of no use. We should eat breakfast."

"I'm not really hungry," Hermione stated.

"Eat anyway, else they'll have charges of starving you to add to the list of things I've inflicted upon you," he said, scowling. Hermione wasn't sure if he was joking or not.

Hermione was preparing for the support group meeting, later that day, in the upper room of the Three Broomsticks. Treva seemed to be running late, and so Hermione went ahead with setting out the refreshments they kept available. Treva arrived after several other women had, looking rushed.

"Running late today," she said as she quickly took a seat in the mostly empty room. "Had to go meet with the new head of the clean-up committee, looks like they're on the ball and are going to try to be effective."

"Yes, I got a letter Friday," Hermione said.

"You're not the only one; they're going out to everybody, even me. Gregory is insistent that everyone goes through Veritas serum questioning. I did try to tell him we can probably eliminate most of the women in the support group from worry, but he overruled me on that one."

Hermione was about to ask more, but one of their regulars who had been absent from the previous meeting entered, looking as if she'd been crying. "Chris...are you okay?" Hermione asked.

Christina Haulden raised her hand to her mouth, stifling a sob. Hermione stood and walked over to her quickly, putting an arm around her shoulders and leading her to a seat. Christina then broke out in fresh sobbing, and Hermione patted her ineffectually on the shoulder, giving Treva a 'help me' glance. "I'll get you some tea," Hermione said quickly and went to prepare some. She came back and sat on the other side of the woman, who took the tea while dabbing at her tears.

"Now, has something happened?" Treva asked.

"I...Oh, I..." she broke off, crying some more.

"Is it something to do with Anthony?" Treva asked. "Has he done something?"

"N-n-no," she sobbed. "It wasn't him...it was me..."

"Just tell us what happened," Treva urged her softly.

"I-I ran into an old friend I hadn't seen in a long time, actually; I was shopping a bit before I came to the last meeting two weeks ago," she informed them in a shaky voice. "Well, 'friend' is probably an understatement...but, well...oh, I can't believe I did it!" she wailed, burying her hands in her face once more.

"Chris, whatever it was, I'm sure we can talk about it, and it might not be that bad. Now, please...take a deep breath, that's good," Treva encouraged her. "Now, take a bit of tea, and another deep breath. Let's just put it into perspective; you're going to be just fine. So you ran into this old friend, and then...?"

"Well, it started out with lunch...you know, we were just catching up. And I told him about what had happened with the Marriage Law; I would have contacted him, but he's a half-blood...and Anthony...and well, you know, Anthony really isn't all that bad...but he's never...ohhh!"

Treva said nothing, giving her shoulder an encouraging squeeze.

"W-well, anyway...I'd missed this...friend of mine, and then...well, one thing led to another, and next thing I knew we were both back at his place...it was just down the street from where we had lunch together. And then, well...oh, it's obvious isn't it?"

"Yes, but it's fine. None of us are exactly in an ideal situation; I can certainly more than understand the desire to take up with an old friend in that way," Treva assured Christina with sincerity. "What's done is done. Now, did you tell Anthony about this?"

"Well, I kind of had to...you see, do you remember the Fidelity Charm put on all our marriages?" she asked. Treva nodded. "Well, I-I had...b-boils," she said, crying more. She pulled herself together more quickly that time, however, sniffled, took another sip of tea, and continued. "Boils in a rather...um, sensitive area...I had to go to St Mungo's...and then Anthony met me there, and then the Healer was asking about what happened...and he heard me. He was upset...I mean I can see why, honestly. He's been really understanding about helping me out in this and all. B-but...they're a little better now, but they still won't go away...and the Healer said that the curse is too powerful to use a counter-jinx on, and I'd just have to wait, and they should be gone in a few weeks." She broke into quiet sobbing after that, Treva rubbing her back in sympathy.

Hermione was horrified. She knew about the Fidelity Charm, of course...but didn't know just how bad it was. The only thing mentioned about it in the law was that the Fidelity Charm would prevent extra-marital sexual relations; she should have known. She wasn't sure if it was worse than the jinx she'd used on the 'Dumbledore's Army' DADA group in fifth year...at least it wasn't visible, but it would certainly be painful. And weeks? That was just awful.

Christina shared her experience with the group, who met the news with understanding and support. Hermione was surprised to discover that two others had also had to learn the hard way not to try to flout the Fidelity Charm. She felt rather agitated about the fact that they hadn't warned anyone, but she soon replaced her agitation at the others in the predicament with the Ministry and those who had specifically designed this jinx...it was hardly a 'charm'. She wondered why there hadn't been any more information given about it and if, perhaps, Severus had known what it would entail. Maybe this was why he had been so insistent that they remain together?

They also discussed the upcoming questioning. Everyone had received a scheduled meeting time, and Treva shared the fact that the Ministry was now serious about stopping cases of abuse and that as they would be under Veritas serum, they wouldn't be able to lie concerning things such as physical abuse or if they had been hit by their spouses. Hermione's stomach sank as she realised what would likely result. Would they be able to recognise a difference between a sexually oriented spanking and outright battery?

When the meeting came to a close and Hermione and Treva left the Three Broomsticks together, she asked, once they were on the street. "I wonder about the questioning...what if something might be interpreted as abuse when it isn't really?"

"What do you mean by that?" Treva asked, looking at Hermione thoughtfully.

"Oh...well...never mind, it's nothing. I need to be getting back to Hogwarts now...lots of studying to do and all, you know...NEWT's and all that." Hermione gave her a smile

to cover up her nervousness. She wished she could just come out and say it. Treva seemed like the kind of person who might understand, who might not jump to conclusions and think Severus was some kind of monster or weirdo.

"Hermione, is there anything you might want to talk about?" Treva asked, placing a hand on Hermione's shoulder.

"No...it's fine. I'll see you for the next meeting," Hermione answered uncomfortably. She turned and left, not seeing the concerned expression that crossed Treva's face as she walked away.

Monday, Hermione was excused from her afternoon classes by Professor McGonagall. Severus continued teaching, but arrived back in their quarters after dismissing his two o'clock class early. They waited in tense silence for the Ministry-appointed counsellor to arrive. Saturday after her return from Hogsmeade, she had tried to study with her friends in Gryffindor Tower, but her worry over the upcoming Veritaserum interview made it difficult to concentrate.

When the knock came at the door, Severus rose, stiffly crossing the room, and opened the door.

"Mrs Bulstrode," he said stiffly. "Am I to assume you are the Ministry-appointed counsellor?" he asked, clearly displeased.

"Yes, Professor Snape, that is correct. This shouldn't take too long; we have a long list of couples to interview today. This is Auror Billingsly, and he will be here to supervise the administration of the Veritaserum. May we come in?"

Severus stood aside, scowling at the two as they entered. Hermione noticed he had gone a shade pale, and she looked to Treva in surprise. Treva gave her a smile and a wink when the short, stocky-looking Auror was busy looking around the living room, and then took a seat on the couch. Severus walked around to his usual chair, eying her suspiciously as he sat down. His pallor still hadn't quite returned to normal.

"Now, Hermione...Professor Snape, as I said, this shouldn't take too long. I have a list of five questions to ask initially of each of you, and depending on your answers, there may be follow-up questions to clarify any concerns. It is the goal of the Ministry to immediately identify any abuse that might be taking place and to take immediate action to prevent further abuse should questioning raise any suspicions. Now, for the Veritaserum," Treva said, reaching into her robes and removing a phial of clear liquid.

"Mrs Bulstrode," the Auror interrupted, "I thought we were doing questioning of the spouses separately."

"Yes, for most of them. But I've been working closely with Hermione for nearly five months now, and if I had any suspicions of abuse, I would have done something about it already. Please remember that not everyone is suspect here. I know what your instructions are, but I am the appointed counsellor, and it is my judgement to make. Is that understood, Auror Billingsly?" she asked, looking at him pointedly.

"Very well, then," he conceded. He remained standing behind the couch, arms crossed as he looked between Severus and Hermione. She thought it was quite odd that, only months before, the Ministry had been supporting the Marriage Law, and now anyone who had entered into such marriages was seen as suspect. It was just another case of government being hypocritical.

"Now, let us get on with this. Unless either of you would prefer to be questioned separately, that is?" Treva looked between them and, receiving no negative response, removed a small figurine from her pocket, transfiguring it into a water goblet. Hermione thought it was an interesting design, actually. It looked to be made of blackened glass and was in the shape of a rose; the stem of the glass resembled the stem of a rose, and the bowl resembled the petals. She then muttered a water spell, filling the goblet with the stream of water from her wand. She carefully measured three drops of Veritaserum into the water. "Professor Snape, if you would drink this please."

Hermione noticed that his eyes seemed fixed on the goblet; his lips were drawn in a tight line. "I want it noted that questioning under Veritaserum has always been reserved for people already suspected of a crime, as I'm sure you know. Do you have any reason to suspect either of us of a crime?"

"No, I don't. And yes, I agree that this isn't ideal, but neither have many things been. However, you are required to follow through with this, and Auror Billingsly is here to be sure you comply. If you don't, you may be detained, pending investigation, until the committee is able to make time to get to you. Also, the Veritaserum given to both of you will prevent false charges of abuse being levelled against you. So drink," she said firmly.

Hermione observed the tension between Severus and Treva; something about the way she looked at him made her wonder, and then she saw Treva wink at Severus, just as Treva had earlier to her when they entered. Severus took the goblet from her, staring at it a moment; then into Treva's eyes, and drank the contents.

"Thank you, and now we will wait for one minute for the Potion to take effect." Severus frowned and resettled in his chair. His jaws were clenching rhythmically, and Hermione wondered if he was just as worried about the possibilities as she was, or more so.

"Now, Professor Snape, have you ever struck your wife in anger?" Treva asked.

"No, I have not," Severus answered.

"Have you ever threatened her with bodily injury or death?"

"No, I have not," he answered without hesitation, though his eyes narrowed at her. Hermione looked between them, and Treva glanced over towards Hermione a moment, a slight smile on her lips.

"Have you ever taken money from your wife without her knowledge or consent?" she asked next, focusing her attention back to Severus.

"No, I have not."

"And regarding your wife's relationship with her family and friends, have you intercepted letters from her family or friends or prevented her from communicating with them?"

"No, I have not." Hermione looked between Treva and Severus; the questions weren't at all what she was expecting. They were specific, very specific. Had they been phrased in a broader way, especially about striking her, he wouldn't have been able to answer in the negative. But she had specifically added the qualifier to ask if he'd ever struck her *in anger*.

"Finally, have you ever purposely withheld food or water from your wife?"

"No, I have not."

"Very well, I am finished with your questioning. As you know, Veritaserum will remain active in your system for approximately an hour, and I will ask you no more questions while we are here. You may leave the room if you wish to at this time, or if Hermione would prefer to be questioned alone. Hermione?" Treva turned towards her.

"No, I'm fine, he can stay," she said, glancing over to Severus, who seemed to be sitting much less stiffly. His colour had returned to normal. She noticed a slight flaring of his nostrils, but then he looked to her and gave her a nearly imperceptible nod; his mouth didn't seem to be set in such a hard line, either. Treva refilled the water goblet and measured another three drops of Veritaserum. Hermione took the goblet from her and drank. They waited the proscribed minute, and then Treva questioned Hermione.

"Hermione Snape, do you fear for your life or safety while with your husband?" Treva asked.

Still thinking that was awfully specific, Hermione answered truthfully: "No, I don't."

"Have you been threatened in such a way that you fear you might ever be in danger of serious injury or death with him?"

"No, I haven't." Hermione spoke before she even thought much about the question, the Truth Potion causing the answer to leave her before she could think on it at any length.

"Regarding the questions asked of Severus Snape and his answers, do you believe he was in error?"

"No, I don't."

"Are relations between the two of you such that you feel free to visit with friends or relatives without being chastised or denied to do so in the future?"

"Yes, they are." While he occasionally made disparaging remarks about Harry, he'd never given any indication that would make her think he would try to stop her from seeing her friends.

"And finally, do you believe your situation warrants further investigation for abuse?"

"No, I don't."

"Auror Billingsly," Treva said, pulling a parchment from her satchel, "if you would sign here, confirming the questions were administered under Veritaserum, we can get going." The Auror signed the parchment; Treva put it back in her bag. "Thank you both for cooperating, now we will get on with investigating cases that do actually need our help. I'll see you in two weeks, Hermione," Treva said, smiling.

"Okay, I'll see you then, Treva."

"Just remember, you will be under the effects of the Veritaserum for another hour approximately, so you might not want to wander about where people might ask you difficult questions. We'll just let ourselves out now, thanks."

Hermione frowned at the door after it closed...there was something very odd about the way Treva had questioned them both. She felt relieved that Treva had been able to do that, but the fact that she would have known to ask in that way concerned her. "Severus, do you know why she was so specific in her questions?" Hermione asked, knowing he would have to answer.

"Yes, I've a pretty good idea," he answered through gritted teeth. "I suggest you not ask questions you don't really want the answers to now, Hermione."

"Would you like to tell me?" Hermione asked, carefully phrasing it so as not to raise his ire. It could be answered or not.

"Not particularly, but I suppose I will tell you at any rate. Mrs Bulstrode knows quite well my particular desires, having had extensive personal experience to learn them, and I believe she asked us both such pointed questions in order to protect us from further investigation."

"You mean...you two used to be..."

"We were sexually involved," he said, his face blank.

"For how long?"

"Four years. Our last encounter of a physically intimate sort was nearly six years ago."

Hermione's mind whirled, connecting timelines; he would have seen her last when Hermione was in her first or second year at Hogwarts, then Treva's comments about her crush on him...she felt a surge of anger at Treva for saying something like that...the various questions Treva had asked, comments meant to brook a response from Hermione at various points during the times they'd worked together in the support group. Hermione had never said anything that would seem like too much information, but if Treva already knew what Severus was like, it was enough information to come to accurate conclusions. She thought Treva had truly been her friend, someone she could trust, but now she wasn't at all sure.

And Severus, she looked over to him, he was sitting stiffly, his face was still blank. They were both still under the influence of the Truth Potion, though...she could ask him anything and get the answers she wanted, if she asked in the right way, but she knew Severus would probably resent having the truth forced from him like that. "Well," she began, "I'm surprised...kind of...but it makes sense, now."

"Yes, I would imagine that she couldn't resist saying certain things that would seem to fit in hindsight," he said with a snort.

"You don't like her, do you?" Hermione asked, already realising the truth.

"No, I don't. I have my reasons for that."

"Well...I guess it wouldn't be fair to try to get you to tell me everything about that now."

"Fair or not, I suppose you should know certain things, just so you won't be overly trusting with her. I've never intentionally had sexual relations with a student or former student for many reasons, before you," he stated.

"But Treva..."

"Yes, she was a student. However, when we began our...affair, I was unaware of her identity. She lied to me, used a few charms to change her appearance enough that I didn't recognise her. When I first began seeing her intimately, it had been nearly seven years since she had graduated. In her seventh year, she approached me once, expressing a desire to have relations with me, and I turned her away. I occasionally have students who approach me in this way, every few years or so."

"Really?" Hermione blurted out before she could stop herself. It was surprising; she never would have thought to do something like that...she didn't think anyone would at all.

Severus smirked. "Yes, believe it or not, I do have women who approach me, infrequently admittedly, but still, it happens. Perhaps I'm not *your* type, but there are certain young women who find someone like me to be attractive for whatever reason...usually because they want attention, and I don't give it to them. At any rate, when she approached me it had been a number of years since her graduation; there wasn't enough about her that I made the connection at first, especially since she changed certain aspects of her appearance. Since we only met for sexual congress, nothing more, it wasn't until she accidentally revealed her identity that I realised who she was. She seemed to be under the impression that she had done nothing wrong; I disagreed.

"Our relationship, such as it was, ended then, and the next time I saw her was in the Three Broomsticks after that first support group meeting of yours. When I saw her come in today, I thought she'd finally found her chance at getting back at me for the way I turned her away. However, she seems to have gained some sense since I last saw her."

"You could have said something sooner," Hermione said quietly.

"I considered it. I wasn't sure if Treva would do anything to reveal our former relationship or if you might discover it on your own. And I didn't believe knowing about it would actually be of help to you as it would simply have made it difficult for you to work with her. Of course, I would still prefer that she not be someone you would choose to share intimate details with. She may have helped us today, but I still don't trust her."

"I can see why," she said. "Thanks for telling me, though. While we're here, is there anything you're just dying to know about me?" she asked, trying to lighten the mood.

"Which do you prefer, my cock or the anal plug in your arse?" he asked.

Hermione laughed but, as she was under Veritaserum, she had to answer...

"So do you still want her?" Hermione asked. It had been nearly a week since the questioning. Neither of them had said anything more about Treva, but it had been gnawing at her all week.

"Hermione, are you still on about that?" Severus growled. "No, I don't want her."

"She's prettier than I am."

"The fact that she is prettier is of no consequence."

"So, you *do* think she's prettier than..."

"Hermione," Severus growled, rolling over her and glaring down at her. "Don't start this. You've been quite enjoyable to be around these past two months. Will you look at me, Hermione? Really look at me. Do you see a handsome man before you?"

Hermione looked at him, as he'd asked...but she wasn't sure if he wanted an answer. He wasn't a handsome man...though she'd grown accustomed to his appearance; he hadn't ever been repulsive to her, at least. He wasn't like Bill Weasley or some of the handsomer young men in sixth and seventh year.

"You think me so shallow that I would look only to surface beauty? I find you quite attractive, Hermione. So Treva is prettier than you are; I would never have anything to do with a woman who would lie to me, even were she Helen of Troy." Severus sighed and rolled off of her, lying on his back to her side. "Besides, you have no need to fear I would be unfaithful to you, what with the Fidelity Charm in place."

"Maybe not Treva...but without the Fidelity Charm, would you ever want to have anyone else?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Yes, I probably would. Before you, I never limited myself to one partner at a time. I didn't always have time to keep up any relations of that sort, but I never held with monogamy. In fact, if you really want to learn all about Treva," he added, sounding agitated, "why don't you ask her about the time I told her to bring a friend along with her to one of our meetings? Would you like to hear about that? After all, you seem so interested in my past dealings with her. Or would you like to hear about our first time together, in the trees just off the road between here and Hogsmeade...you pass it every time you walk that road. Or perhaps the time..."

"Never mind, Severus...just stop it," Hermione said angrily, rolling to her side, away from him.

"Jealousy over my past is pointless," he said. "And honestly, I haven't a clue as to why you would waste your time on it."

"Maybe, Severus...it's because the only thing we have is sex," Hermione replied.

"Hermione, were you aware that before you, I'd never shared a bed overnight with another woman, much less shared living space? Or that I've never put up with so much aggravation over another woman? The fact that I've done so, and continue to want you around, should tell you that I'm actually quite comfortable with you, when you aren't jumping to ridiculous conclusions based on sketchy evidence."

"Oh wonderful, I share your bed and give you aggravation; I feel so pleased," Hermione scoffed.

"You should. It would be well in your interest to do so as we're rather stuck with each other."

Stuck with each other was certainly the correct term for it, Hermione realised.

"Do stop sulking over there, Hermione," he said, reaching over to her, urging her to move back to where he lay. "I won't fall into the trap of having to constantly comfort absurd insecurities of yours."

"Absurd insecurities? Absurd? Why is it absurd? Hardly anyone notices me like that!" she exclaimed, pushing his hand away.

"If you'd take a bit more time to fix yourself up, they would. And yes, it's absurd. Hermione," he sighed her name in exasperation, "just because I'm not going to spend all my time devoting sonnets to your beauty, doesn't mean I find you unattractive. And just because some idiot boys don't seem to notice you, it doesn't mean you're ugly. Now, I will say no more on this. Get over here and calm yourself and go to sleep."

Hermione stubbornly crossed her arms as she continued to sit in bed. How could he say something like that? But after a moment, she realised that she really didn't take much time to focus on fixing herself up. She didn't even wear make up like most of the other girls did and hardly bothered with her troublesome hair beyond occasionally pulling it back in a braid or a pony tail. But with the knowledge that he had been with Treva, it had sparked some insecurity. Treva was pretty...beautiful, if she really wanted to be honest about it. She was tall; her figure thinner than Hermione's, and her hair always seemed perfect. Though clearly, that fact didn't mean much to Severus at all.

"Hermione, come here. I've grown rather accustomed to sleeping with you, at any rate," he said in a softer tone. Hermione sighed and scooted back over to him, fitting her body against his in their customary sleeping position. It really was comfortable. His cock jutted against her thigh, quite hard, yet he only settled his arm around her waist, then was quiet.

Maybe she was being ridiculous. After all, he must have learned all that somewhere, and yes, vast experience was a great way to learn. So he'd been with Treva, and apparently Treva had a pretty good idea of what they were up to...and had even chosen to help them both out of a difficult situation that she couldn't have without that knowledge. Hermione wondered how she would face Treva at the next support group meeting...and couldn't help but wonder where along the road to Hogsmeade had been the spot of their first sexual encounter. Maybe it was better not to know who all he'd been with before. She decided it didn't matter; the past was the past. It might help her to figure him out but there might be more time for that, anyway. And besides, she remembered the reaction they'd both had upon seeing each other again; it wouldn't be that hard to spot that sort of thing now that she knew what to look for.

She tried to go to sleep, but his cock throbbing fairly near the junction of her thighs was distracting her, arousing her. It had been a few days...well, nearly a week, actually, since they'd last had sex. She wanted to. Hermione shifted her thigh slightly, and his erect cock moved into position between her thighs; she closed her legs around his erection, flexing her muscles against it, and rocked her hips back against him.

"Hermione, do you want something?" Severus asked sleepily.

"Well, I thought you might want something...at least, it seems like it." She moved her leg slightly to rub against his erect length.

"It has a mind of its own sometimes," he mumbled back to her. "I'm actually rather tired."

Hermione stilled, scowling. A mind of its own? Did it really? She grinned in the darkness, and then reached between her legs, parting them slightly, and grasped his penis, guiding it upward as she tilted her hips back.

"Hermione, what do you think you're doing?"

"Did you know it's been nearly a week?" she asked, rather than answer him. He rolled away onto his back; she thought he was refusing her and felt perturbed for a moment.

"You do know we aren't obligated to keep up the requirements of the law now, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes...I know...I just wanted to," she said, a bit hurt that he would turn her away like that.

"Get up here. If you want it, you can be the one putting forth the effort," he declared.

Hermione rose and straddled his hips, grasped his cock and held it firmly as she lowered herself onto him. She let out a sigh of pleasure as he filled her and simply sat a moment, flexing her muscles around him. When she began moving, he did nothing more than place his hands on her thighs, occasionally letting out a slight moan or a sigh. Hermione took her time, experimenting with different angles and rhythms. She rested her palms on his chest for support and found a good pace, steadily building until she climaxed. Just as her climax was fading, Severus grabbed her hips, pushing her down on him as his hips tilted up, and gasped her name as he came.

Hermione lowered herself over his torso, running her fingers up his arms to his neck as she did.

"Better now?" Severus asked with a chuckle.

"Yes," Hermione answered. She rolled off to his side, resting her head on his shoulder and pulling the covers back over them both.

May passed in a whirlwind of revising, classes, and dreams of failing NEWT's. She'd even woken from one dream with Severus telling her he was about to get her some Dreamless Sleep and make her drink it if she didn't stop disturbing him by answering test questions in her sleep. She lectured Harry, Ron, Seamus, Neville, and any other classmate who would stand still long enough, about how important their NEWT's were. Head Girl duties seemed to fall by the wayside, and Professor McGonagall had reminded her once that she needed to keep a better eye out on things.

Hermione had also sent a letter by owl to her parents, asking them to send her some housing catalogues as she couldn't get Muggle post at Hogwarts, and they would likely be looking for a Muggle house. Her mother had written back with a case of catalogues and a letter, which expressed that her parents were quite happy that she would probably be living in a place easier for them to get to. Wizarding villages were closed off to Muggles, of course, and the only place accessible to them was Diagon Alley for the benefit of the parents of Muggle-born witches or wizards to do their shopping for school.

She had left the catalogues on the coffee table, and Severus had looked through them, as well, immediately tossing out the suburban and urban catalogues that were too close to towns, though he did circle a number of rural possibilities he thought would be acceptable. Hermione noticed that most of his choices were fairly far out in the country and tended to be on the lesser end of the expense spectrum, focusing mostly on two bedroom homes, but all with basements, and all with at least three or four acres of land. She saw a number of them had 'fixer-upper' in the advert. She started to wonder about his financial security about that time, but decided that a 'fixer-upper' would be easy enough to repair with spells.

There was the next support group meeting May 16, which Hermione walked to with some trepidation. She couldn't help but wonder on the walk to Hogsmeade, this time without Severus, just where on the road would be ideal for a hiding place but shook her head. It would be silly to go about trying to figure out where it was. She could probably ask Severus if she really wanted to know, but didn't.

Treva was already in the upper room when she arrived, and Hermione smiled awkwardly at her. "Very, um...specific questions you asked there two weeks ago," she said, deciding to go ahead and let out that she knew. "Severus explained why, after you left."

"Yes, I supposed you would have noticed. I figured that's what you were worried about at the last meeting and simply made sure I got your file on my list of interviewees."

"I suppose I should thank you," Hermione said awkwardly.

"No need. Let's just say I owed Severus a good turn, and it was more than high time I did something about it. I wouldn't want to see either of you having more troubles over the Marriage Law. Hermione?" Treva crossed the room to where Hermione had turned her back, trying to busy herself with the refreshment table. "Hermione, listen...I know, well, if Severus told you about me, he probably didn't have entirely kind things to say. But everyone makes mistakes...does things they shouldn't. You can trust me, okay?"

"How could you keep up a lie like that for four years?" Hermione blurted out.

"Ahh, he told you quite a bit, then," Treva said, shifting uncomfortably. "When I started it, I just thought it would be fun, you know...I'd had a crush on him in school and actually revealed that to him at one point. He wasn't very...um, nice about it, let's say. Honestly, I wanted to get back at him for the way he'd treated me and thought it would be a good way to get the last word in. Petty, I know. But once I started...well, it just went on, and even after I felt bad about it, I didn't want to tell him because I knew he would be mad...and so..." she shrugged as she trailed off. "Let's just say my plan didn't work as I thought it would. Take it from me, never lie to Severus," she said wryly.

Hermione pondered that as she went about the preparations. Several moments later, she sat next to Treva, who was preparing notes for the day's session. "So did he punish you for that, then?" she asked hesitantly.

"Not physically." Treva turned to look at Hermione. "He never saw me again and refused my attempts to tell him I was sorry. In retrospect, I wasn't completely sincere at the time...but it still hurt. Severus won't punish someone with spankings or floggings if he is truly angry with them. And that's why I knew to ask the questions the way I did, while still making sure it was an adequate screening for legitimate abuse."

The door to the room opened and a few women entered, so Hermione couldn't ask any more. But she did have a lot to think about afterwards.

The next day, Hermione, worried desperately about her NEWT's, asked Severus for another testing session and was quite please when she managed to earn the rewards for excellent scores in each subject he tested her on. She missed no more than two questions for each subject and in Arithmancy received a perfect score, even earning an extra reward.

The history with Treva she left alone after that, as well. She wasn't sure if she might want to ask Treva more about it in the future, but in a way it was actually nice to know another woman who experienced and enjoyed that sort of thing. She thought it might be nice to talk about it with someone who would really understand, too.

She'd missed reading the paper on a number of occasions, but decided to do so one morning when her delivery came and found a note of a murder, this time on the front page of the May 23 issue of the *Daily Prophet*.

Three Murders in Two Months

This morning, another man was found dead. The body of Darryl Gillequest was found in Knockturn Alley, his throat slit. Just as with the previous two murders, no trace of magic was found. Darryl Gillequest was married under the terms of the short-lived Marriage Law, just as were the previous two murder victims. His wife Felicity, who he married in November of 97, wishes for his murderer to be found and brought to justice. Magical Law Enforcement investigators on the scene stated that they are doing all they can to discover the identity of the killer and bring him to justice. They have said that anyone who was married under the terms of the Marriage Law should take care to employ extra security precautions. The MLE suggests hiring a professional ward setter, even if you are fairly knowledgeable with charms.

"Severus, have you heard about these murders?" Hermione asked when he finally came in late that evening.

"Yes, I have. The Order is also investigating them, though at this time I'm not involved with it," he said as he helped himself to a glass of brandy.

"Do they have any idea who it is?"

"No, they don't. But do not concern yourself with it. The person, probably some sort of vigilante, is likely only after the men of the marriages."

"Like you?" she asked, irritated by his lack of concern.

Severus turned to her, giving her a smirk. "I find your concern quite touching, Hermione. But it's not needed. I am well able to protect myself."

The weather heated up as May turned to June, and the seventh and fifth years were teeming with nervousness over the approaching NEWT's and OWL's. Nearly everyone became irritable as they slept less and studied more; Hermione was still having to confiscate 'study aids' from other students.

Severus and Hermione had made two outings to look at two houses, but both had been too near a major Muggle thoroughfare for Severus, and the second Hermione had thought was too low-ceilinged, making her feel a bit claustrophobic. Hermione had felt as if they were trespassing when they'd gone to look at the houses as they hadn't made an appointment, rather had merely Apparated directly to the locations after casting Disillusionment spells on each other, let themselves into the empty houses with an *'Alohomora'*, and looked around. Severus didn't see the need to make an appointment if they were just looking and said if they found one they both liked, they could then go through the trouble of getting a message through the Muggle post, probably having to use her parents as a contact. She supposed it was a lot of trouble to go through, but it still didn't feel quite right to trespass.

The June 6 meeting of the support group was a sombre occasion. Felicity came to the meeting and lamented her loss. Even though she hadn't wanted to marry him to begin with and had complained of his faults constantly, she hadn't wanted to see him killed. She was also upset that she had refused to stop taking the contraceptive potion and tearfully lamented that now there was nothing left of him...that she could have at least done that for him. Hermione was more grateful than ever for Treva's expertise as she wasn't sure she would ever get used to handling all the issues and personal anguish people went through. Other people's tears just set her off, made her feel nervous and awkward no matter how much she wished she could put forth a comforting demeanour and say the right thing to help someone feel better.

She wondered how it was that Treva could be so good at that and yet could have been so wrong when it came to dealing with Severus. Perhaps she had been right, everyone makes mistakes. But she couldn't really feel angry with her too long.

Finally, the day of the start of the NEWT and OWL testing arrived. The fifth and seventh years stayed in the Great Hall after breakfast. Hermione stood and fidgeted nervously near the Entrance Hall, not noticing when Severus came to stand right by her on his way to morning Potions class.

"Stop fidgeting," he growled. "You did quite well the last time I questioned you, and I was very thorough," he said in a low whisper, leaning over close to her ear so the other students around wouldn't hear. "If it helps, just picture me standing before you with a paddle in hand, ready to spank you if you get something wrong." He stood to his full height; his lips were pulled upward in a facsimile of a smile.

Hermione laughed as he turned and walked away, causing a few nearby students, including Harry and Ron, to look at her as if she were crazy. She did feel slightly less nervous, at least. It took her a moment to realise that, in a slight way, he was 'displaying their relationship' in front of others. Maybe he would settle down about things after all.

Severus Snape walked away from Hermione on his way to the dungeon Potions classroom. Hermione had been driving herself relentlessly in her studies for NEWT's, spending late nights studying, sometimes with classmates, sometimes alone, though often with Potter in her room. Severus had observed him in class and other times they were together for meals in the Great Hall and had come to the conclusion that Potter had feelings for her. It only made sense; he was the sort to fall in love with a woman, investing his time and feelings in someone who could not return his affections. His look inside Harry's mind during the ill-fated Occlumency lessons showed Severus all he needed to know; the boy would forever be looking for love. He knew trying to tell Hermione about it would not help, would likely only cause stress for her, but he wondered if warning Potter, or at least displaying a reminder that Hermione was his and that there was nothing Potter could do to change that, would.

When it came to his dealings with Hermione, things were going well, he thought. He was pleased that she had finally come around to seeing things his way. He also had certainly enjoyed the times she'd wanted to have his brand of testing, and he knew that it would help her. He hoped she would do well and was sure that she would. Hermione had enjoyed the rewards she'd earned, and those times she missed a question, she hadn't protested, she'd simply set her jaw, lowered her trousers, and accepted her punishment. After each missed question, he had gone over the points at which she had gone wrong and made her perform it correctly. She never made the same mistake twice. Even with the extensive testing he'd done, attempting to use harder and more obscure questions to be able to punish her, she'd done very well. He thought it too bad that he wouldn't be at Hogwarts to watch how Minerva would gloat over her prize Gryffindor student's performance on her NEWT's. He wouldn't say anything about why she had done so well, but he thought it would be very satisfying to watch her gloat and to at least imagine what she might think had she known just how Hermione had been preparing for her tests.

It was a new experience, too, looking for a home with someone, planning a future. There were marked differences in being with Hermione as opposed to his previous relationships. It was true when he told her he'd never put up with so much aggravation over another woman before. He'd lost his position as Head of Slytherin; he'd lost the privacy and easier life he'd been looking forward to experiencing alone after the fall of the Dark Lord.

He'd never given up so much control in a relationship, either. His worries that Hermione would take advantage of his compromises had, thus far, proved to be untrue to his relief and delight. Only once had she refused him, and then, he realised he should have been paying more attention. Had he taken a few moments to observe her, he would have noticed she wasn't feeling well and wouldn't have pressed her. He'd been a bit perturbed but not at Hermione, rather at his own lack of forethought brought on by a bad day and a desire to quench his bad mood through a good sexual release.

In his previous relationships, he'd only met women specifically for sexual relations...they'd known what to expect and had known it ahead of time, and if they weren't in the 'mood' at a particular moment, they had ample warning to get themselves in the appropriate mindset to please him. But he couldn't expect Hermione to be ready at a moment's notice all the time. She had pleased him well and was willing the vast majority of the time, which he decided was enough.

Now, in preparation for the future with his wife, he had been taking inventory of his personal potions stores and equipment, preparing a list of other supplies he would need. Over the years, he'd come to rely on Hogwarts equipment for some things and once on his own, would need his own supplies.

He also realised the furniture he'd been using for his nearly eighteen years at Hogwarts wasn't actually his. It had come with the Head of Slytherin job. He'd had very little of his own things when he started. So furniture was another thing to add to the list of starting out. Furniture, potions supplies and equipment, a house to lease, Muggle utilities, food...the list kept growing and the tabulation of expected expenses with it. It was essential that he start out his business on a good foot. With that in mind, he began another mental checklist of any and all contacts that might want to purchase his potions.

He walked through his office, gathering the day's lesson plan, and then on to his classroom, thinking that the future might hold more possibility for contentment, despite some stresses. As he opened the door for his first years class to enter, he looked down at them in confusion. They were all staring at him. With a surge of self-consciousness, he realised he'd been...well, smiling.

"Don't stand there gaping like idiots!" he bellowed. "In! Now! Time to put those weak minds of yours to the task at hand, if you're able..." Yes, that was more like it. He would

need to terrorise a few more classes to make up for whatever damage his reputation had suffered from that moment of inattention.

Into the Great Wide World

Chapter 22 of 31

The Hogwarts school year comes to a close. Opportunities and challenges arise.

Thanks to my beta, Nakhash Mekashefah, the anal-retentive one.

Snape was taking inventory of his books and packing them in boxes. He couldn't use a shrinking charm on them individually, as he wasn't sure how long it would be until he would be unpacking them again, and having the charm wear off after a few weeks in a box would be a disaster. He would shrink the boxes along with the contents when they were ready to move. The empty shelves looked odd; it had been many years since he'd had open shelf space. Bookshelves, he would have to find a house with bookshelves or obtain them on their furniture shopping expedition.

Hermione entered the room and looked around curiously.

"And how did your Charms test go?" he asked, levitating another stack of books into a box.

"I think I passed," she said, a worried expression crossing her face.

Severus suppressed the urge to snort in disdain. Of course she'd passed.

"There was an extra credit question at the end, and I think I got that one perfectly, but I may have missed a few questions in the practical testing of Charms. I just hope I did well on the Arithmancy."

"I'm sure you did," Severus said as he arranged the books within the box to fit in a space-efficient manner.

"So you're getting ready to move already?" she asked.

"Yes, I don't see the need to wait. The Headmaster should be reading my resignation notice at this time. I'm packing away the things I won't have immediate need for, so when the time comes to move, there will be less work involved. Your last day of NEWT's is tomorrow, so you should probably begin packing your things at that time, as well."

"We still don't have a place to stay," she said.

"No, but we will soon enough. I have another list of places I thought we could look at Saturday, that is, if you're still convinced you'd like a Muggle home?"

"Yes, I really do want a Muggle place. Thanks for being reasonable about that...I didn't expect you would be."

"Personally, the idea of not living on a wizarding village street is a good one to me. As long as we are in a remote location, I've no objections to your having Muggle conveniences...that is, if you will be more discerning about the kind of information you look for on that interweb."

"Internet," she corrected. "And yes, I'll be more discerning about that in the future."

"Good," he said, closing the twelfth box of books and placing it on the wall of boxes he was slowly making behind the sofa.

"Severus...there was another murder this morning."

Severus looked over to Hermione; she seemed concerned. "Was it anyone you knew of from the group?" he asked. He remembered how drained she'd seemed after the husband of a member of the support group had been murdered.

"No, it wasn't. There was a full story in the paper from the widow...she was rather happy about it, actually. She'll be having a baby in a few months, too." Hermione ran a hand through her thick hair and walked over to the couch and sat heavily. "Wouldn't it be better to stay at Hogwarts, at least until they catch the person?"

"You plan on going into warding, correct?" he asked.

"Yes. I still haven't heard back from any of the places I've sent applications to..."

"You only started that last week, I am confident you will find employment soon after your NEWT results are available. At any rate, I am also skilled with wards and was a spy for a number of years around some very dangerous people, as you should know. I'm confident that between the wards the two of us put up around our residence, there should be no need to worry." Severus strode around the couch to look at her. "I'm rather surprised you're so worried about this. One would think all the women affected by the Marriage Law would be more than happy to get out of unwanted marriages." He went to the liquor cabinet, poured a glass of what was now Hermione's blackberry cordial, noting the bottle was halfway gone. He took it to her and sat beside her, sipping his own firewhisky.

"How could you say that? It might not be good to get forced into a marriage, but I don't think anyone, at least in the support group, would want their husbands killed, even if they aren't getting along really well."

"I think, Hermione, that you are too trusting in the innate goodness you believe people have, most especially concerning people you like or trust in some way. You like to think everyone is as nobly intentioned as you are. You will save yourself quite a lot of trouble if you take the outlook that everyone is out to take what they can from you, and defend yourself accordingly." He hoped she would get over this overly trusting nature she had with too many people. Still, she was young; she had many years in which to gain that kind of scepticism.

About that time, a knock came at the door, not Hermione's. Severus scowled and rose to go see who it was. He wasn't surprised to see Headmaster Dumbledore standing there. "Headmaster," he intoned, nodding. "What brings you to visit this evening?" he asked, knowing quite well why the Headmaster was there.

"Severus, may I come in?" Dumbledore said softly, his blue eyes seeming to look deeply into him.

"Yes," he said, standing aside and averting his eyes, "might I offer you a drink?" he asked. Usually, he didn't bother offering a drink, but now that his freedom from Hogwarts was finally approaching, he was feeling magnanimous. He turned after closing the door to see the Headmaster taking a close look at the empty wall of bookshelves and the stack of boxes behind the couch.

"Good evening, Professor Dumbledore," Hermione said to him, smiling.

"Ahh, Hermione," he said, and walked around to sit on one of the wingback chairs. Severus noticed him look pointedly at the glass Hermione held in her hand. "I do believe alcohol consumption by students on school property is against school rules," he said.

"I...um," Hermione stammered.

"Headmaster, surely you can't think to apply that to Hermione," Severus said, moving to sit across from Dumbledore. "Hermione, don't put that glass away. You've been drinking in our quarters since before we were married, and you shall continue to do so," he said in a hard tone. How dare Dumbledore come into his quarters and think to tell his wife what she could and could not drink. "Now, Headmaster, you wished to speak with me?"

"Ahh, yes, Severus. Hermione, if you will excuse us please," he said, turning to Hermione a moment. She started to get up to leave.

"Hermione may remain where she is," he snapped. He glanced sharply over to Hermione, who was already rising from the couch.

"It's okay, I don't mind leaving," she said.

"No, it is most certainly not *'okay'*. Sit down; you've just as much entitlement to remain here as I do." He turned back to the Headmaster as Hermione settled gingerly back onto the edge of the couch, looking uncertainly between him and the Headmaster. "Anything you have to say, you may do so in her presence. As I assume you've come regarding my resignation, that is a matter that should not require her to leave, as the matter is settled as far as I am concerned."

"Well then, Severus, even if you consider the matter settled, I've come to ask you to reconsider your resignation," Dumbledore stated, intertwining his fingers over one knee. Severus caught his quick eye movement as he glanced at Hermione, then back to him with an amused expression.

"No." Severus would not reconsider.

"That is a shame, for the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor has just handed in his resignation, owing to the fact he will be moving to Lithuania to be with his family. I thought that perhaps now that Voldemort is gone for good, you would do well in that position."

Severus gripped the arms of his chair tightly. The Dark Arts job, the one he'd applied for every year for seventeen years only to be turned down, and now, he was being offered the position when he had finally decided to retire from teaching. He looked at the Headmaster, wishing to take that beard of his and use it to wrap around his neck and choke him with it.

"It would be a shame to see you leave. But since Hermione is here, as well, I've come to offer her a job, too. Hermione, we have an opening for an assistant Arithmancy professor. Professor Vector is hard-pressed, what with her new job as Head of Slytherin, and she could use some assistance in tutoring. I spoke with her earlier and she would be open to having you as her assistant," the Headmaster said cheerfully to Hermione. "And," he continued, turning back to Severus, "if Hermione took a position here at Hogwarts, you both would be able to remain here. After all, with the murderer targeting the men who were married under the Marriage Law at least so far as we can tell at this time it would be safer for both of you to stay."

Now he's offering a job to Hermione? When will his meddling cease? Snape thought angrily. He glanced over to Hermione, who was staring at the Headmaster's genial smile with a stunned, but excited expression.

"You're offering me a job here, Headmaster?" she asked after a moment, her voice higher than usual, almost a squeaking quality.

"If you'll have it, yes, I am," he assured her with a kind smile. "However, if you do not want that job, I will still serve as a reference for any other position you might choose to take."

"I...well, I'm not sure what to say," she said, then glanced to Severus, bit her lip, then back to the Headmaster. "I'd need some time to think about it."

"I hope you do take the job, we would love to have you on the staff. And Severus, I really do think it would be for the best if you consider the Dark Arts position. Even if you aren't Head of Slytherin any longer, that is no reason for you to feel ashamed in remaining here. We know, at least, that it was through no fault of your own...rather, misfortunate happenstance."

"Thank you, Headmaster, for your offers," Severus bit out through clenched teeth. He could feel his cheek beginning to twitch, and he asserted control over his features, attempting to calm himself. He wasn't at all thankful for Dumbledore's offer to Hermione, though.

"Well then, I'll leave you to consider it, Hermione. And Severus, if you should choose to take this post - and I know how much you want it - I, for one, would welcome you both to remain here indefinitely." He smiled, and then stood. Severus stood stiffly, as well, and crossed the room, opening the door.

"Headmaster, according to my calculations, I am to receive a partial stipend from the years I've worked here..."

"Yes, yes, of course, Severus." Dumbledore nodded, and gave him an understanding glance as he exited.

"Bloody interfering bastard!" he exclaimed, walking back to his chair after he'd closed the door. He turned to Hermione, who was looking rather nervous. "Oh, don't look like that," he growled. "I knew he liked to interfere, but that was just beyond..." he trailed off with a groan. "Seventeen years...seventeen years I've applied for the Defence Against the Dark Arts position, and for seventeen years I've been rejected. The only reason he offered was because I plan on leaving. So, are you considering it?" he demanded to know, crossing his arms over his chest as he glared at Hermione. He wasn't sure which was the worse offence by Dumbledore...offering him the Dark Arts job or offering Hermione a position as an assistant Arithmancy teacher.

"Well...um...it's a surprising offer," she managed to say.

"He wouldn't have done that if it hadn't been for my resignation," Severus told her. "He wants to keep us here...keep us under his thumb."

"Aren't you being just a bit paranoid here?" she asked him.

"You wouldn't say that if you knew Dumbledore as I do," he hissed. "I'm not sure why he wants us here, but it can only be because there is something he wants one of us, likely me, to do for him. I'm finished. I've paid my debt to him. I shall continue working for the Order, but I am finished with teaching."

"Why do you think he wants something from you? Why can't he just be offering you the job because now that Voldemort is gone, you won't be in a bad position?" Hermione reasoned.

Severus scowled as he wondered if he should tell Hermione all about the time Headmaster Dumbledore had asked him to keep the secret of Lupin's lycanthropy, how Sirius Black had nearly killed him, how Dumbledore had ignored the constant bullying he had experienced at the hands of James Potter and Sirius Black. He knew that Potter would have told her all about what he'd seen in his Pensieve three years previously...he decided she knew enough.

"I know him, Hermione," he said lowly. "At one time, I would have taken this offer of his, but not now." No, now he wanted to be in a position to make his own decisions about how he spent his time, to get away from the halls of Hogwarts, which still seemed haunted with old memories...memories he tried not to dwell on. He wondered if,

once in a new and fresh setting, the scourges of his past at Hogwarts might be more easily forgotten.

Severus stood and walked towards his desk, retrieving the catalogues for housing. He returned to sit beside Hermione, rather than his separate chair. He wanted to distract his thoughts from unpleasant matters, and Hermione's flesh did that well enough. He stroked her thigh through her robes as he held the catalogue in front of her. "This one looks promising; we should look at this one first, Saturday morning."

"In other words, you're not going to talk about it?"

"I would rather not dwell on the unpleasantness of the past. Most especially," he murmured, leaning down to brush his lips against her neck, "when there are much more pleasant matters to attend to."

"Why do I feel like we're still just strangers who just shag a lot? Severus...I'd really like it if you would talk to me about these things; I won't go out and tell anyone, you know."

Severus lifted his eyes to look into hers. He was irritated that she would say that, having already told her he had shared more with her than he had with any other woman previously. He had told her much more than he would have if he thought she couldn't be trusted with what he said. But now was not the time he wanted to get into a long discussion.

"Talk is overrated," he said simply, turning his attention back to her fragrant skin for several moments, chuckling in triumph when she reached up to clutch at his shoulder, gasping his name, before he tore himself away to discuss their future living arrangements.

Later, he felt accomplished at the fact that he had been able to suggest a dwelling of lesser expense without revealing to her his financial situation. He didn't have to lie, for it was a fact that through magic they would be able to make much more of a smaller, less expensive house. And as they wouldn't have a child for several years at least, he had reminded her, there was little need for a larger home. While he was not destitute, he was wary about using the savings he did have on unneeded things. Between the small stipend he would receive from Hogwarts and his savings, he estimated he had six months before things were truly worrisome.

And so it was, the following weekend they went to tour homes for lease. Hermione sneezed intermittently from the dust in the long-abandoned dwelling as they walked through the three levels of the house, which was the fourth on their list for the day. They had stirred up quite a bit of dust in the large main room. The previous three houses had been wrong for various reasons, but they had spent quite a bit of time looking around in this one. There was a fireplace opposite the front door in the living room, and directly behind the fireplace wall was the kitchen. The wall to the right had a full case of bookshelves. They weren't built with exacting craftsmanship as the shelves in their quarters at Hogwarts were, but they were functional and sturdy.

"This is satisfactory. Wouldn't you agree?" Severus asked her. It fit all his criteria. There was a cellar, room for a decent potions supply garden, and it was secluded.

Hermione turned to him, sneezing again. "I...ah...it needs some work." She had an unsettled expression on her face.

"Yes, it does. But the location is good. The cellar is adequate for my needs. You can make use of the second bedroom for whatever you need, and it has bookshelves." Hermione followed his gaze to the single full wall of bookshelves. He seemed more optimistic than she about it. They were a dirty, putrid yellow, and a bad paint job at that. The yellow paint continued in the living room and into the kitchen. There was a small dining area open to the living room at the far end of the kitchen, which had a window facing the west.

"I want to look upstairs again," Hermione said. She turned and started up the dusty, creaky stairs, wondering just how old the building was. It appeared the house had once been a barn, converted for human dwelling some years after original construction. She noticed the phone cords were run above the baseboards, fastened to the walls, rather than run inside the walls. The wallpaper in the stairwell was peeling, and it was obvious children had once lived here; crayon marked the lower walls. There was a large window, which let plenty of light into the stairway at the landing. Hermione paused to peer out through the large ash tree, which crowded the window. She could see enough through the branches to note that the back garden was overgrown terribly. Trees grew thickly about a hundred feet from the house.

Hermione reminded herself that everything she didn't like about it so far was superficial: lots of dust, ugly wallpaper and paint. The garden needed lots of work. Those things could easily be fixed, and so she worked on imagining the walls painted a better colour...a light crème or maybe lavender in places to lighten it up. It seemed a dark and dingy house, but she also noticed that was probably from the terribly overgrown hedge outside the ground floor and the very dirty windows. The windows were actually fairly large and well placed. She couldn't help but think her parents would have thought it a shabby dwelling; however, it was in better shape than the Weasleys' home, and there was no ghoul in the attic, at least (Severus had cast several spells to detect ghosts and ghouls upon their arrival in the house). It was slightly larger than their quarters at Hogwarts with the kitchen and dining areas, though the bedrooms were smaller.

The door directly opposite the stairwell was to the smaller of the two bedrooms. Having her own room at this point seemed a bit silly to Hermione, but she decided it would be good to set it up as a guest room. Despite the fact she knew Severus might chafe at the idea of overnight guests, she knew if she put her foot down about it, he wouldn't refuse her on something like that. The door to the left of the stairwell was to the washroom, which smelled of musty old mildew (another thing which could be easily remedied); an old-fashioned claw-footed tub was within, nothing nearly so nice as their bathtub back at Hogwarts. But once again, judicious application of magic could fix that. The landing was something of a room in itself, approximately eight by eight feet square; there would be room for a settee against the wall.

The other door to the left of the stairs was to a largish 'L' shaped bedroom, the corner of which had the chimney for the fireplace downstairs jutting into the room slightly. There were two windows on the west wall, which a bed would fit between. The smaller end of the 'L' had a window-seat overlooking the front garden to the east.

"I believe," she heard Severus's voice behind her, "the beams are structurally sound."

Hermione turned around, startled to see Severus looking up at the wood beams of the ceiling. "I didn't hear you...you scared me," she gasped. She had the bad feeling that someone would show up and discover them.

"Did I?" he asked, smirking. He advanced on her slowly. Hermione smiled back and suppressed a laugh at his controlled stride and his superior smirk, as if he thought he had her cornered.

"Well, we aren't exactly supposed to be here...this is technically trespassing...the owners could come here at any time."

"It is not as if we're here to destroy property. And if this is the house we decide on, I am sure the owner would be happy to have new tenants. Besides, it doesn't look as if anyone visits here often. Now, as I was saying...these beams are structurally sound..." he looked up, and Hermione followed his gaze to the ceiling, so that when he reached out and grabbed her, she was unprepared. "Yes, strong beams by which to suspend a struggling young woman," he said silkily, looking back down at her.

"Don't you ever think about anything else?" she asked, attempting to give him a long-suffering sigh, but her giggle when he tweaked a nipple ruined the effect she was going for.

"Certainly, I do all the time," he murmured, his lips moving against hers. Hermione sighed and bit his lower lip lightly before he pulled away. "But as I told you the other evening, I'd rather focus on more pleasant thoughts and pursuits."

Fifteen minutes later, Hermione's elbows rested on the dusty window seat, as Severus stood poised to follow those pleasant pursuits. His fingers stroked her clitoris at a maddeningly slow pace, and he chuckled at her attempts to move her hips to capture his cock within her. Hermione threw her head up, eyes still closed. "Severus...please..." she groaned. He finally decided to stop teasing her and sheathed himself in her body, picking up a steady, but still slow pace.

Hermione opened her eyes, not really focusing on the large wheat fields, which dominated the landscape on one side, or the large pasture on the other side of the dirt road...on which she could see a Land Rover, a trail of dust being kicked up along the road. It was coming towards the house; the only house for what seemed like miles around.

"Shit! Severus! Stop...someone's coming!" she exclaimed, moving to stand and twist away from his grip. He stopped a moment, but continued to firmly grasp her hips.

"We have several more moments, at least," he replied; then plunged back into her. Hermione forgot her protests for the next few moments, but when he withdrew, she reached down quickly and pulled her jeans up, hastily fastening them, ignoring her shaking legs.

"We have to get out of here!" she said, glancing back out the window, where two people were exiting the now-parked Land Rover in front of the house.

"And I thought you were going to specialise in wards. Come now, Hermione...this is a perfect opportunity to test out a simple anti-Muggle ward."

"Severus, we aren't even supposed to be here! We're trespassing and shagging in someone's house!" she hissed, waving her arms for emphasis.

Severus was fastening his trousers, seemingly unfazed by the approaching Muggles. "Withdraw your wand and place a Muggle-repelling ward on the stairway," he instructed in a firm tone.

Hermione's eyes widened when she heard the squeak of hinges and voices below. "Remove your wand," Severus instructed again, moving behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist. "Or I shall use a Confundus Charm."

"Severus, you can't..." Hermione whispered, removing her wand. "Let's just get out of here."

"A simple Confundus Charm would cover that we shouldn't be here, and we can proceed to negotiate a lease rate," Severus reasoned. "It wouldn't hurt them, Hermione. If you'd rather I not..." a creak was heard as the people began to ascend the stairs. "...then you have just enough time to cast a ward. But it would be quite a hassle to find the opportunity to get in touch with them again," he whispered. Hermione felt him move, and then his arm came up, wand in hand, pointing at the doorway.

Her heart pounded as she listened to the voices below. She felt this was wrong, but still...the steps creaked as they progressed to their hiding place; they would be discovered in a moment. She withdrew her wand, quickly recalling the steps to a ward, which would cause them to remember they had to be someplace else. But then she hesitated, realising that if they were going to get this house...and she could agree that it would be a decent enough house once it was cleaned up, it would be a lot more hassle without a telephone...then the suspicion when they showed up without a car to 'officially' tour the house...

"Okay, Severus...do it," she said, just as the Muggles came to the top of the stairs and turned into the bedroom where Snape and Hermione were standing.

"Hey! What're you doing in my house?" a tall man demanded loudly as they entered far enough to see into the part of the room they stood in. He paused, taking in the two of them, and a lady stepped out from behind him.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, echoing the man. Hermione's stomach felt as if it were in her feet. "We're calling the police!" she yelled.

"*Confundus!*" Snape said, flicking his wand. Blue light shot out and enveloped them a moment. "Put your wand away," he whispered quickly to Hermione. She did so, watching as the two Muggles blinked in confusion, then slowly focused on them. The man started to open his mouth to speak, but then Severus stepped forward, extending his right hand.

"Yes, thank you for the tour. We find this house satisfactory," Severus said. The tall man frowned at him, looked to his wife, and then accepted Severus's hand, shaking it. "I'm glad you also see the need to lower the asking price for the lease, as we are ready to sign a contract immediately. Isn't that right, dear?" he asked, turning to look at Hermione, smiling.

Dear? She looked at him a moment, seeing he wanted her to play along. "Um...yes, that's right, we like the house. We'll take it," she agreed.

"I'm...I'm glad to hear that, then," the man said slowly, looking confused. "...have you seen the cellar?"

"No, we haven't toured the cellar yet."

Hermione's stomach churned as Severus handled the discussion with the landlords. She smiled at the lady, who apologised, after they had returned from the cellar, for forgetting their names. They 're-introduced' themselves, causing Hermione to feel even guiltier about the scenario. She very nearly protested when Severus very deftly manoeuvred the man, Mr Thompson, to drop the monthly letting rate by more than a hundred-fifty pounds and later to drop the required deposit and first two months rent in lieu of performing the repairs the home needed.

By the time they Apparated back to Hogwarts, Severus having had to cast another Confundus charm upon them to cover the fact they were in a remote location without a car, Hermione felt nearly sick.

"Severus, that wasn't right..." she muttered as they walked back to the castle.

"We've saved them quite a lot of work, Hermione. I did nothing unfair; they wanted to let the house, and they now have tenants who will also perform repairs that would have been very costly."

"You took advantage of them...they didn't have a chance..."

"Hermione, had I truly wanted to, I could have had them believing the house was ours, within minutes, without ever having to pay for it. I did nothing outside the usual haggling, which occurs over a house to lease. If you're going to get like this over every encounter with Muggles, I don't want to hear about it."

"My *parents* are Muggles, if you've forgotten!" Hermione exclaimed as they entered their quarters. "I can't believe just how callous you can be...and what's worse is it's not just you...almost everyone is like this about Muggles. It's okay to run around stirring up or wiping out their memories and influencing their decisions because it's convenient, or they saw something they shouldn't have!"

Severus spun around to give a retort, but scowled at her instead. "I will not be drawn into a fruitless argument with you," he snapped.

"Fine!" Hermione snapped back. She watched in irritation as he huffily moved to his chair and sat heavily. Not wanting to stick around with him, as she thought his company wouldn't be enjoyable and she needed to check in at Gryffindor Tower at any rate, she left their quarters.

It was almost a surreal feeling, which descended as she walked through the portrait hole. She would be leaving Hogwarts soon, and looking around at what had been her home for the better part of seven years just seemed so final.

She had considered Dumbledore's offer and had decided against it. It really would be best to leave. She didn't want to go through another year of students whispering about her involvement with the Potions master and what they might get up to in the dungeons. She also knew they would think she got the job only because of him, and she thought if she did take the job, they wouldn't be too far off in assuming that. And so Hermione would be leaving behind the centre of magical learning and going, of all places, to a Muggle house with her husband, the most feared teacher at Hogwarts. Memories flooded back as she made a check of the girls' dormitories, then sat in the common room where many students were sitting together, laughing and talking. She felt rather left out. She snapped back to the present as Harry walked in and flopped down on the worn, red couch beside her.

"I got a letter from Kingsley," he began without preamble. "He said I'll get into the Auror training programme with no problems. He wanted to know how things were going between you and Snape."

"Did he? Tell him things are fine," she said.

Harry looked back down at the letter sadly. "I'm still not sure I really understand why you chose Snape over Kingsley..."

"Harry...don't start that again," Hermione groaned. "I thought you were over it." And really, the last thing she wanted to think about was how things might be going had she married someone else. It was best to focus on those good things she did have in her life. Just because Kingsley was nice and seemed like he would have been more fun - even a gentleman - didn't mean it really would have been any better. And aside from Severus sometimes being difficult (like today), she supposed they got on well enough.

"I know...I know...I'm sorry," he sighed. He rose from the couch and, without looking back at her, trudged towards the stairs to the boys' dorms.

The support group meetings were becoming a chore. She didn't get anything out of them...and even though she could sympathise with many of them...well, their problems and complaints, for the most part, seemed petty and silly. None of them had had to marry their teacher, at least. Most of them had actually married friends or friendly acquaintances.

She also knew that, while she may have started the group, if it hadn't been for Treva's expertise, it would have quickly spiralled out of control. Even with Treva, the meetings still tended towards the more vocal members using it for a whinge-fest, and Hermione didn't think she could have kept that under control, while still keeping members coming back.

"You've been rather quiet at these meetings, Hermione," Treva noted when Hermione moved to start cleaning up after the group had left.

"Well, you know...not much to talk about, really. I started this to help out the other people."

"Maybe you did, and it really is helping some of the others out, but have you actually gotten anything out of this?"

"Well...you were very helpful when it came to the questioning...that was a real surprise."

"I'm glad I could help. When Gregory asked me to, it turned out being a very good thing."

"Did anything come of the questioning of the others?" Hermione asked.

"I personally have fifteen cases to follow up. With four couples, I took immediate action. We're not publishing the results in the *Prophet*, especially with the murders going on. Personally, I think we should publish a public list of all the men who have done terrible things to their wives because of this damned law," Treva said through clenched teeth. "At least then, whoever it is would get to the ones who really deserved it."

She frowned a moment, then refocused on Hermione. "I get the feeling you're only still doing this because you feel obligated to. If you don't really want to keep it up, I don't mind handling this myself. Actually, Gregory is thinking of making this a paid position since I've got the schooling for it. He's working on a bill to give some kind of damage compensation to all the Muggle-born victims of the law, too."

"You really wouldn't mind?" Hermione asked.

"Hermione, you're very good at a lot of things, but I don't think it's news to you that you really don't enjoy this," Treva said with a smile.

"You're right; sometimes I'd just like to tell everyone to stop with the whinging already," she admitted.

"I want to do that sometimes, too. Believe it or not, there was actually a class dealing with just that scenario at university. To bad we can't just spank them all when they get annoying, really," Treva said with a smirk.

Hermione laughed. "I can't believe you...oh, that's terrible!" she gasped between the laughter. "But I do need to get busy on finding a job once I'm away from Hogwarts."

"Then don't worry about it...I'll handle it. You've got other things you need to focus on, and if you want, you can always come back to it later."

"Well...if you really don't mind...okay, thanks. I'll keep in touch." She smiled at Treva, feeling as if a load had been lifted from her. Hermione's walk back to Hogwarts seemed easier, too.

After NEWT's were officially over, they still had classes to attend, but these had consisted of lectures on how they would likely apply each subject in the real world of the workplace. Professor Binns, however, simply droned on with another History of Magic session as if it was no different than any other lesson time.

Graduation Night finally came at the end of June. The students had packed their belongings and were ready to head for home on the Hogwarts Express the following day. Harry would be staying with the Weasleys before entering Auror training.

Hermione had packed her things, too, and rather than going home to her parents this year, would be moving into a home of her own...well, her and Severus's home. As she sat in the Great Hall for the evening Graduation ceremony, watching as each seventh year student was called forward and given a gift by their Head of House, she found herself apprehensive, yet excited about the future. The Professors were all seated upon the raised dais in the Great Hall, and the graduating class sat below. Professor McGonagall called each of their names in succession, and the student called would rise and take his or her diploma. Each Head of House was also giving out small gifts to those of their graduating students, as well.

"Hermione Snape," McGonagall called as Justin Finch-Fletchley descended from the dais and took his seat. Hermione stood and walked towards Professor Dumbledore, who smiled warmly as he extended her graduation scroll. Professor McGonagall took a small wooden box and gave it to her.

Once seated, she was vaguely aware of the other students going to receive their scrolls, and she joined in with the applause. Her box wouldn't open when she tried it, so she held it in her lap through the remainder of the ceremony.

When she returned to the dungeons, Severus was already there, seated in his usual chair, having not remained afterwards to speak with his former students. He looked up as she walked in and raised a phial to show her.

"Shoot, I forgot about that..."

"Yes, let us be glad that I am observant of these things," he muttered back to her. Hermione crossed the room and took the phial from him, drinking her contraceptive potion quickly, then sat down across from him, studying the box Professor McGonagall had given her.

"We have much to accomplish in the coming weeks. I've informed the Headmaster we shall be moving in two weeks time. We will need...furniture," he muttered, scowling.

"What about all this?" Hermione asked, looking around the room.

"It came with the job. These chairs are mine, at least," he said, indicating the green leather wingback chairs, "and most of the items in my workroom are mine. Everything else belongs to Hogwarts for teachers' use while in residence."

"Oh, I see..."

Hermione examined the box again, and found it was a puzzle box, which opened after several minutes of fiddling. She found inside a set of earrings. They were medium

studs which seemed to have very tiny gold pinwheels inside a crystal sphere. She smiled and placed the earrings back into the box.

Hermione wrote a letter to her parents that evening, letting them know she needed to come by and pick up her bedroom furniture. It would do until they could buy their own, and then could be moved to the second bedroom for guest use. After she sent her letter via one of the Hogwarts owls, she realised they would need their own owl, too. Severus hadn't exactly come out and said money was tight, but by piecing together the various things he'd mentioned, she gathered that he might not be as financially secure as she'd previously thought him to be.

"When we get all this done and get moved in, it'll be great to have a housewarming party," Hermione said as she carefully used her wand to remove the layers of paint and years' worth of grime from the bookshelves in the living room.

"I do not care for *parties*," Severus muttered back to her. He was directing four paintbrushes with a dark wood stain onto the bare wood that Hermione was leaving behind, with flicks of his wand.

"Severus, I want a housewarming party. If this really is to be my house as much as yours, then I will have a party. You don't have to help with it, you don't even have to come, but I *will* have a party."

Severus said nothing for several moments, only continued staining the shelves. "I wish to understand why it is that you become so defensive on so many things. Have I not allowed you to do as you wish in anything outside those things I've required of you? In comparison to some, I've been extremely accommodating."

"Where on earth do you get your examples for comparison?" Hermione asked, probably a little more loudly than she meant to.

"The same place most people do, their parents. But after meeting your parents, I can understand how you would have a very different idea on things."

"So what were your parents like, then?"

"Very different from yours," he muttered vaguely.

"That doesn't explain much."

"My parents had a marriage that seemed fairly typical amongst the few people they associated with. My father was very harsh."

If he thought his father was harsh, then he must have been far beyond harsh if Severus thought himself to be accommodating.

By the end of that day, they had made much progress, and Hermione stood at the front door, surveying their work. The floor was now free of dust and grime; the bookshelves looked nice, though the walls were still that putrid, ugly yellow. The fireplace had been swept out, and she and Severus had decided upon a communication-only Floo Network connection, for security reasons. The kitchen had been scoured, the falling wallpaper torn off, the bathroom sanitised, and the wood floors left gleaming throughout the house. The only major thing left to do was to paint. Hermione wanted to use a number of colours, but decided to wait until they could get settled in. For now, at least, it looked clean and bright.

Everything was packed, and all they had to do was move; however, the house would be very empty until they could get more furniture. Hermione went outside and went to the back of the house, thinking they should put in a back door, too. But the ground floor was small, so another door wouldn't really be needed, she supposed. Severus was standing, arms crossed, looking over the back garden.

"You ready to get back soon? I'm exhausted," Hermione said as she approached him.

"Yes, momentarily. I believe the back garden will receive enough sunlight for the potions ingredients I wish to plant here." He looked around, turning to look up at the house. "Do you find it satisfactory?" he asked. He knew her childhood home wasn't exactly a large, sprawling manor, but it was nice, larger than this one, and most certainly in much better condition. He wanted to be able to get a larger home, but had presented it in a practical way that a small home would be better.

"Yes...it'll get better. I hope to do a lot of improvements. I want to paint the inside soon."

"No pink," he said shortly. "No purple, either," he added.

"I think I can manage that." *Lavender, at least a light shade, isn't really purple...* she thought.

St Mungo's was busy. Hermione was visiting along with Harry and the rest of the Weasleys' who had invited her. She had asked Severus if he wanted to go, too, just to try to be inclusive, but he'd only snapped something about not wanting to socialise with her friends and to watch out for trouble, and had then turned back to shrinking boxes. She'd told him she would be back in two days and that she would be gathering some things from her parents' house and taking them directly to their house on Monday, and had then left with Harry to Apparate to the Burrow without another word. Harry would be starting Auror training the first of August, so she wanted to spend time with him while she could.

Bill Weasley was in hospital, having been injured deep in the labyrinth of caves under Gringotts bank. He was expected to make a full recovery, but Molly Weasley wasn't one to leave one of her children, even if he was very much an adult, in hospital without 'proper' food. And so she carried with her a picnic basket filled with mince pies, sandwiches and other things that would 'do for a few days'. Hermione thought it would feed ten people for as many days.

"Here we are," Mrs Weasley said as they came to the last door on the fifth floor.

Hermione heard dramatic organ music playing as they walked into the Spell Damage ward, and a deep, American accented voice asking "*Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men...*". Looking to one side, she saw there was a Wizarding Wireless radio on the nurse's desk, which the nurse reached for, turning a knob and lowering the volume as she looked up at them.

"Hello, are you here to see someone?" the stern looking nurse asked, eyeing the crowd of Weasleys. Her eyes widened slightly when she saw Harry.

"Yes," Molly answered. "My son Bill, right over here." Bill saw them come in and waved to them.

"I need everyone to sign in here, please," the nurse said, tapping a book on her desk. Hermione waited for the others to sign in first, and then signed her name on the bottom of the list of visitors.

"Hermione Snape? Formerly Granger?" the nurse asked upon seeing her name.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I've heard about that support group of yours; a good thing you're doing, that is," she said approvingly, looking Hermione directly in the eye with a discerning gaze.

"Thanks...it's not much..." she trailed off, shrugging. "Actually, Treva Bulstrode is handling that now."

"Oh, but it is, it truly is. I've had a few women in here since that horrid law was passed...ones even less lucky than the rest of you. Gives 'em hope, it does, knowing about it,

even if they can't go. You're doing a good thing, you and your friend are," she repeated solidly.

Hermione nodded self-consciously then moved along with the Weasleys. She hadn't seen Bill since the previous summer while staying at Grimmauld Place for several weeks. His wife, Fleur, had turned out to not be nearly as snooty as Hermione had previously thought her to be.

"Yes, Mum...they're feeding me well, but of course, I do love your pies," Bill was saying as Hermione neared his bed. His arm was in a sling, and his head was bandaged, but he still wore a smile. "I'll be out of here in no time, I'm sure."

"You need to rest, Bill. Oh, that job of yours is so dangerous sometimes, makes me worry."

"So was it a big explosion?" Ron asked brightly.

"It wasn't an explosion, Ron," Bill responded. "I miscalculated on a ward, and it set off the booby trap...curses flew in every direction. Good thing I erected the Shield Charm just in time, though..." He chuckled, flashing them all a grin as Mrs Weasley looked faint and shook her head.

"Hermione! Good to see you again! Oh, my supervisor from the bank came by earlier today. I got your application, but haven't been able to look it over, just a little hung-up here and all. I wanted to get with you soon to test you for the position. Officially, I'd have to wait for your NEWT's results, but for you that's just a formality. If you'd like the job, it's yours."

"Wonderful! That's great, Bill, thanks so much. So you'd be my boss, then?"

"Immediate supervisor, yes. You'd still interview with my goblin supervisor before hiring, but that shouldn't be a problem at all; she pretty much goes with whatever I suggest."

"Congratulations, Hermione," Harry said, putting an arm around her shoulders and squeezing. The rest of the Weasleys chimed in with their congratulations, as well. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. She had been worried about a job. Gringotts, while not her first choice, did seem like an exciting position.

The nurse finally shooed them out after about an hour, saying the patient needed rest. She had a good time visiting with the Weasleys and slept in the spare bed in Ginny's room, glad to have time to spend with her friend.

Monday, Hermione Apparated to the backyard of her parents' home, unlocking the backdoor with an 'Alohomora' and entering quietly. Her parents were at work, but she quickly wrote a note to let them know she'd taken her furniture and would be back to visit soon. She was surprised when she got up to her old room to find a note from her mother, telling her to look in the cellar for anything else they needed.

It took only a few minutes to shrink her furniture - the bed, dresser with mirror, chest of drawers and bookshelf - to doll-house size then she Apparated directly to the larger bedroom of their new home and placed the furniture in the appropriate places, enlarging them. Her old white furniture set seemed out of place and strange, compared to the mahogany furniture she'd grown used to.

She heard thumping from below and went downstairs to the cellar, where she found Severus arranging a few long tables, cauldrons, and his shelf of potions ingredients.

"I trust your stay at the Weasleys was pleasant enough?" he asked when he saw her enter.

"Yes, and I've got a lead on a job too. Talked to Bill Weasley, he said they only needed my official NEWT's results and they could probably hire me. I just hope I did well..."

"You did, I am sure of it."

"I've put my old furniture in the bedroom; I'm glad you're here, since I wanted to see if you'd like to look over some other things. My mum said to take my pick of the stuff in the cellar; they've got some old furniture we can use until we can get our own."

"I am finished here, so we can go ahead."

Amidst the boxes and other old junk in her parents' cellar, they found a table to use for the dining room, along with four chairs in need of repair. There was an old bench Hermione wanted to put upstairs in the landing/hallway area. With a coat of paint, it would be nice. She even found some landscape paintings and some other picture frames that had long ago been relegated to the basement.

Towards the afternoon, they took their freshly shrunken findings upstairs, where the aroma of food filled the air, just as Jane and Frank Granger entered their home.

"Mum, Dad, I found your note; thanks for this stuff, it'll help out a lot."

Severus nodded to the Grangers, feeling uncomfortable. He'd hoped to be out of there long before they got home.

"We needed to get rid of that stuff anyway. Your father planned to do something with the cellar when we bought this house, but it just seems to be a place to accumulate junk. Hello, Severus, how have you been?"

"Well enough."

"Oh, there are some more things I've got for you, Hermione; come upstairs." Hermione and her mother went upstairs, leaving Severus and Frank standing in the living room. It was an uncomfortable silence, and Severus wondered if he should speak first.

"Hermione tells us your new house is in Lincolnshire," Frank said.

"Yes, it is between Tattershall and Sleaford. Hermione preferred a Muggle dwelling."

"Good of you to give her that," Frank said stiffly. "I trust you shall be providing for her well enough in the future?" the balding man asked him firmly.

Despite the fact that the man was a Muggle, Snape was fully aware he could make things difficult if he thought he wasn't treating Hermione well.

"Of course," Severus said, equally stiffly.

"One would think that a man of your years and position would have no trouble getting furniture."

What is taking Hermione so long? Severus was starting to wish he had simply told Hermione to transfigure furniture. It wouldn't last, and the charms would need to be re-done frequently, but surely it would have saved them the indignity of taking her parents' cast-offs. "I will, of course, be purchasing furniture in the near future. As I'm sure you are aware, there are many expenses associated with obtaining a new residence. It seems prudent to prepare for more pressing needs first, as well as to assure the basic expenses will be covered."

"Right," Frank said, giving a curt nod. "So you have a new job, yet?"

"I will be making potions to order for several apothecaries, as well as individual orders. I am confident this will bring adequate income."

Severus was relieved when Hermione and her mother returned from the first floor. She carried a cardboard shoebox with her.

"Will the two of you stay for dinner?" Jane asked. "I've had a roast in the slow-cooker all day."

"Sounds good, Mum, we only had to get these things back to the house tonight, so we've got time."

Severus wished she hadn't said that. He knew, too, if he protested it would only make him look as if he was being inconsiderate of Hermione and her family. All through the meal, Hermione and her mother chatted amiably while Severus managed to maintain a stiff discourse with her father. It hadn't seemed this awkward over the Christmas holiday; he wondered what had changed. However, towards the end of the meal, over ice cream, Frank seemed to warm up to him.

"I was rather worried when Hermione wrote us with the news you wouldn't be teaching any longer. Made it sound as if you wouldn't have much," Frank told him lowly as Hermione was discussing her job prospects with her mother in the kitchen, who was trying to understand just what a ward-setter actually *did*.

"You need not be concerned for Hermione's welfare. I do take my duties seriously."

It was a week later, mid-July, that Hermione sat on the front stoop, looking out over their new front garden and the wheat field, which dominated the landscape. Trees were in the distance in a meandering path. The owner had mentioned a stream that was behind the house where the trees thickened.

Almost everything had been moved in and most things arranged. The living room was still very bare, containing only the two wingback chairs. The bookshelves were filled with both their book collections. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her that she hadn't had dinner yet, and they didn't have any food in the house. Severus had gone back to Hogwarts for one more trip, telling her to remain and rest. A full day of Shrinking Charms, Engorging Charms, Levitation, Apparating several times, and just figuring out a place for everything had been exhausting.

Hermione looked down at her NEWTs results with a smile. The owl had arrived earlier that day. Severus had responded to her exclamations of delight with a gruff "I knew you would do well." She had achieved nine NEWTs, and had achieved 'Exceeds Expectations' in History of Magic, Care of Magical Creatures and Astronomy.

The house cast a long shadow over the front garden, and the sky in the east was darkening; she could see Venus, and then Jupiter, shining first in the waning light. Severus Apparated with a loud 'crack' only ten feet from the house with a paper bag in his hand. He handed her the bag after he had removed a gyro and sat beside her on the front stoop. Hermione transfigured a twig into a water goblet then filled it with water with another incantation.

They still had the wards to cast, as well, but as tired as she was, she thought it would be best to wait for the following day. She pulled her gyro from the bag and bit into the warm meat. When they finished, Hermione stood, as did Severus.

"I was wondering," Hermione said, looking towards Severus with a teasing smile, "if wizards had the same tradition of carrying the bride over the threshold...you didn't do that when we got married. I thought, now that we have our own house, well..."

He raised an eyebrow at her, then smirked and withdrew his wand. Hermione's eyes widened as he muttered a spell and ropes shot out from his wand, quickly wrapping around her torso and knees. Just as she was about to unbalance, Severus bent over and hefted Hermione over his shoulder, an arm holding her legs firmly.

"This isn't what I meant!" she shrieked.

"Well, I *am* carrying you over the threshold," he retorted with a chuckle as he entered their new home and then climbed the stairs. "And I shall carry you to bed, where I shall ravish you without mercy."

"But aren't you tired from all the work today?" she asked, slightly strained from hanging upside down over his shoulder, as he turned into the bedroom.

"I believe I shall manage, and I trust you might as well." Hermione's breath escaped with an 'oomph' as he tossed her onto the bed. She rolled over to look up at Severus, who was eying her hungrily as he unbuttoned his shirt.

"I'll scream," she warned, trying not to laugh.

"Scream all you wish, for no one can hear you," he purred as he moved onto the bed. "Not a soul for miles around," he whispered in her ear. "Perfect, isn't it?" He pulled back up, looking her in the eye, brushing her hair back from her face with one hand.

Severus waited for her answer, watching her lips, then moving his gaze down over her bound body. Finally, a home of his own, and a wife of his own tied up in bed with him.

"I like it." She smiled at him, and Severus lowered himself upon her, unbuttoning her jeans and pushing them down as far as he could, what with her knees tied together as they were. He kissed her deeply, feeling utterly at peace, forgetting for the moment the expenses which had been weighing heavily on his mind, the murderer who had killed yet another victim the previous night unbeknownst to Hermione, who hadn't had time that morning to read the *Prophet*. He thrust his tongue deep into her mouth, rubbing his thumb against the soft skin over her cheekbone, then pulling away and sucking softly on her lower lip. He watched her face as she smiled at him; saw the arousal in her eyes, delighting when she arched to grind up against his hips. So willing, his Hermione, so resilient, so delightful.

"Will you scream now?" he whispered, running a hand over her body, teasingly skimming his fingernails across the gentle swell of her hip.

"Mmmm," she groaned, thrusting her hips up, attempting to guide his hand where she wanted it. "Don't suppose it'd be to me any good..." she admitted. Severus chuckled and moved his hand to where Hermione obviously wanted it, gently nibbling at her nipple through her clothing, before pulling back, pushing her bound legs up to rest on one of his shoulders. She squeezed him as he thrust into her, catching a rhythm quickly with him, using her ankles on his shoulder to pull herself up against him.

He gripped her thighs tightly as he climaxed after Hermione had, then he pushed her legs to the side, lying down behind her, pulling her to his body.

"Severus...can you untie me now?" she asked when he felt nearly ready to drift off to sleep.

"I think I like you like this," he replied lowly, tugging on the ropes around her torso.

"I've gotta pee!"

"I suppose I *could* let you go," he muttered, grabbing his wand from his trousers on the floor and using it to banish the ropes he'd conjured to tie her with, then watched with a smile as she clambered out of bed and headed for the loo, nearly tripping on her way. His head fell back onto the pillow, and he closed his eyes, enjoying the feeling of complete freedom he couldn't remember ever feeling before in his life. After he graduated, he'd joined Voldemort. Once he began spying, he'd felt as if under Dumbledore's thumb, and that feeling had never truly left him, until now.

Much later that night, Severus awoke to a sound he hadn't heard while sleeping in many years: rain. He readjusted his position and was nearly back to sleep, when suddenly there was a cold, wet 'splat' on his temple. He looked up to the ceiling, which was a mistake, as the next 'splat' landed directly in his right eye. He rolled over, grabbed his wand from the floor beside the bed, and pointed it at the ceiling, muttering a water-repelling charm. He draped his arm back over Hermione's waist, with another chore added to the list of things to be done.

How It All Began

Chapter 23 of 31

Snape tells Hermione how things began with his sexual interests. Hermione goes for a job, and there is an interview in the paper with Gregory Ludwig.

Thanks to the wonderful, anal-retentive, Nakhash Mekashefah for beta-reading!!

And, with this chapter, I'm now current with this story here at The Petulant Poetess. New chapter is with my beta, and should be coming soon.

The first week in their new home was busy as well as enlightening. Severus spent Monday morning on his old broomstick, hovering over the house, casting a multitude of Repairing Charms on the broken tile shingles. He knew underneath the shingles there was likely a layer of rotting wood, but for the time being, he hoped only to fix it enough that they wouldn't be dripped upon when it rained. In the meantime, he cast as strong a Water Repelling Charm as he could over the roof. That should hold for a few weeks, at least. If he couldn't completely repair the roof before then, he could simply re-cast the charm.

When he came down for lunch, finding Hermione making herself a sandwich in the kitchen, he suggested they get started on the wards, and she followed his suggestion by showing him the multitude of books open on the old Formica dining table they'd taken from her parents' basement. He found her plans satisfactory, and so they began in tandem around the house, casting wards.

The first ward they cast was to prevent Apparation inside the house. They followed that by wards to repel people who had ignoble intentions, which would deter thieves, children snooping about (if there were any around, possibly over the tree covered hill to the back of the house), and salesmen. Snape suggested an anti-Muggle ward next, but Hermione pointed out her parents and their landlords were Muggles, so they couldn't do that. Personally, he didn't really see the problem, if her parents were coming for a visit they would know of it ahead of time and could let them through the wards, and he'd heard enough stories about nosy landlords that keeping them away seemed a wonderful idea to him. The wards would need to be refreshed weekly, but the first casting was the hardest. He was glad when he went inside to find Hermione pulling out a tin of chocolate biscuits, which she had obtained from her mother. The cupboards were bare, so they Apparated to Sleaton and ate at a curry house.

Wednesday, they both had to make a trip to Gringotts: Hermione for her interview, and Severus to exchange some Galleons for Muggle currency. They had shopping to do, as well.

"Oh, there he is," Hermione said as they entered Gringotts, returning a wave from Bill Weasley at the other side of the large main floor of the bank. "I'll see you later, back home?"

"I have a few things to attend to here, and then I will meet you outside Gringotts in an hour's time for the other things we need to do today." He watched her walk across the marble floor and greet Weasley, who cast him a hard look. Even after all his work for the Order, Bill Weasley still didn't like him. Severus took care of his business at the bank and left.

His first stop was at Slug and Jiggers, where he spoke with the proprietor about the potions he had offered to allow him to sell there for a small commission and picked up some potions ingredients. At Borgin and Burkes, he made a similar bargain, but knew that he would have to be more careful about the clientele he accepted, especially for some of the potions they would want.

An hour after leaving Gringotts, he went back to the bank. When he saw three figures standing at the foot of the stairs, two pale blond and one Hermione, he rushed forward, withdrawing his wand as he came to a stop beside Hermione, facing the younger and elder Malfoys. Draco glared at him.

"Think you're going to use that, do you?" Draco asked haughtily.

"You have no business with my wife; what are you doing?" he asked in a threatening tone. He spared a glance to Lucius, surprised to see the same aura of pride and prestige he had always worn.

"We have business at Gringotts, and as I am now a free man, I can go wherever I wish. If you think you're going to try to attack my father or me again, you have nothing to stand on in a court of law. Go ahead, I'm sure your Mudblood would be delighted to be free of you. Or, if you'd rather, I hear there's some Mudblood avenger out there killing off the pure-bloods, I'm sure they'll get to you soon enough."

"Severus, let's just go," Hermione said, grabbing his arm.

"Severus Snape," Lucius spoke smoothly, extending a hand, "I understand we were once ... friends?"

"Father!" Draco hissed, elbowing Lucius.

Severus did not accept the proffered hand, though he did lower his wand to his side, seeing they weren't trying anything outright. "At one time, yes, you and I were friends. However, our interests came into conflict in recent years," Severus said carefully. He looked into the cold grey eyes, wondering if he would see anything of the friend he had once been in their youth. Now, he could see that the Memory Charm might not have been as thorough as they thought, what with Draco to guide and train him again.

Lucius's lips pulled back in a cold smile. "Yes, Draco has told me all about *that*. However, I feel as if I'm a new man now, and at one time we did share quite a bit, did we not?"

"I have nothing to share with you now," Severus said coldly.

"That is...unfortunate," Lucius drawled, his grey eyes flicking over to Hermione for a moment. Severus wanted to hex him, but knew that here in the street, with dozens of witnesses, he could not. "I had hoped to perhaps renew our friendship, as I understand I was instrumental in bringing you together with your wife. Could I invite the two of you to dinner in my home? No hard feelings, let's let bygones be bygones and all that," he said with a smooth smile and a wave of his hand in a dismissive gesture.

"We must be going. Lucius, we have no more to say to one another." Severus turned, nearly dragging Hermione down the street with him.

"Did they try to hurt you?" he asked as they came to a stop around the bend. Once again, he had allowed his attention to slip, and had put Hermione in danger because of that.

"No, no...Draco was just being...well, Draco," Hermione said. "He was gloating about how he is free now, and how he had special attention from the testing committee who came to his house to give him his NEWTs ...I was about to walk away when you got there."

"What of Lucius?"

"He didn't say anything until you arrived...I didn't like the way he was looking at me, though," Hermione said, shuddering. "I'm fine, Severus, don't worry."

"I will be accompanying you on your public outings from now on," Severus declared.

"Severus, *no!* It was bad enough at Hogwarts when you had to walk with me everywhere; I'm not doing that again! I can protect myself. Besides, Bill said that employees at Gringotts are given a special key to Apparate inside the office, so when I start, I won't need to worry about that."

"So you have the job, then?"

"Yes, they're starting me at a rate of forty Galleons weekly, and it'll go up from there once I've finished my training. I'll start that next Monday."

"That is fortunate, then. But I would rather you not make yourself vulnerable."

"Severus, I've still got that amulet you gave me, so if something happens, you'll know about it...I can't hide forever. I'm not going to be taken everywhere; you can't be my bodyguard forever."

"Hermione..." Severus began, but trailed off. "We have things to do," he said instead. He knew he couldn't keep following her around, confining her movements just to keep her safe. And he also knew that even if the entire reason for their marriage were for him to protect her, he would have to find more subtle ways to do so now.

Hermione nodded, and they went on with their shopping at the grocer in Diagon Alley, then to the general store, where they purchased household items and toiletries. Hermione felt unsettled after the encounter with Draco and Lucius Malfoy, but at least felt confident that, with the extensive wards they had erected around their house, home would be a safe place.

Next, they stopped at the Owl Emporium and looked at the selections. There were Tawny Owls, Barn Owls, and Snowy Owls; a beautiful black Eagle Owl was perched in one corner of the shop. After looking around, Severus nodded to a Tawny owl. It was a mid-priced breed, one that was known for being reliable. They paid the shopkeeper and arranged for the owl to deliver them a letter later; they would simply keep the bird when it arrived.

They also went to the Ministry of Magic, found the Floo Network offices, and had their fireplace connected. Severus mentally subtracted the Galleons for the fee from his shrinking savings as he handed them to the clerk. Hermione stopped by the *Daily Prophet* office and informed them of her change of address.

Their landlord had arranged to have the utilities turned on, so they didn't need to pay the starting fees for those, at least. Hermione thought it would be good to look into getting a few Muggle things she'd missed having. A stereo, television, and computer would be good to get. However, she didn't have much money of her own at that point and decided she would wait until she had her own income to get those things. However, she did insist they go ahead and purchase paint.

Snape ended up touring the hardware section while Hermione selected cans of paint. They met up again at the register, where Snape counted out Pounds, glad that his spying duties had made it necessary for him to learn Muggle currency.

That evening, he used a few spells to imbue the ringed bolts he'd bought into one of the beams of their bedroom ceiling. He hung the chain he'd owned for years from it, a satisfied smile coming to his lips as he thought of what he would do that night with Hermione. He went downstairs and found her in one of the wingback chairs in the living room with a new, fairly narrow book.

"What are you reading?" he asked.

"A Gringotts employee handbook...Bill gave it to me this morning...I'm supposed to read all this before I start next week."

Severus's response was a noncommittal grunt, and he decided he should prepare dinner...something that would give her plenty of staying power, yet wouldn't make her too groggy. He stood and went to the kitchen, peering into the cupboards, then the icebox, which was making an annoying humming noise. He scowled at it, then looked behind it, remembering that Muggle electronics worked by way of a plug. It wasn't too far to reach and he unplugged it. Silence. He nodded in approval. A strong Cooling Charm cast daily on the icebox would be sufficient to keep food cold or frozen.

"Thanks for cooking," said Hermione, taking a bite of the chicken potpie Severus had made. "I'll cook tomorrow. I figure we can switch every other day, that would be fair."

"Agreed," was his short reply. They ate in silence, Hermione reading her employee handbook at the kitchen table. She levitated their dishes to the sink when they finished as Severus stood and looked into another cupboard.

"Have a bit of wine," Severus said, placing a glass down on the table before her a moment later. "Once you've finished with that, I'd like you sufficiently...relaxed," Severus said silkily. Hermione looked up, noting the way the corners of his eyes crinkled slightly and the relaxed set of his mouth as he sat at the table adjacent to her. "It's been some time since I've *thoroughly* thrashed you, young woman; you're long overdue."

Hermione's stomach fluttered at the sound of his voice, and she looked back down to her handbook, rather coolly, she thought. "Yes, I suppose it has been," she agreed, scanning the page before her. She was still curious about his history so decided this would be a good time to ask him. He seemed relaxed. "I'm wondering..." she mused, taking a sip of her wine, "if you'd tell me about the first time you whipped...spanked...well, you know. I've been quite curious as to how it is you got into it..." She glanced up to him, just for a moment, giving him a confidently curious expression, before she looked back down to her reading.

"And what, precisely, is it that you are curious about? Would you want to know what colour her hair was, where we were, if she asked for it or if I decided she simply deserved it?"

"Yes, all of the above," Hermione answered solidly.

"I see..." said Severus, sitting back, crossing his ankles. "I suppose I could ...tell you a story," he said with a note of humour. Hermione pushed her reading aside to listen.

"I was sixteen...it was actually the second sexual encounter of my life at that point...the first is hardly worth speaking of. I was staying the summer at Malfoy Manor, soon to start my sixth year at Hogwarts...yes, Lucius was a good friend of mine, then. Lucius, ever the ladies' man, had just begun seeing Narcissa...unfortunately, he had neglected to tell his other *lady-friends* about that, and when one showed up, thinking herself welcome, he pulled me aside and took us to the cellar before Narcissa could see her." Severus was wearing a smile as he thought of the memory.

"Now, Lucius had given her explicit instructions that she was not to come without first receiving word, by Floo or owl, that he was available for her, and so he explained to her that she would be punished, but as he didn't have the time to do it -- Narcissa was upstairs and he was serious about courting her, you see -- that I would be delivering her punishment, and that if she did not care for that option, she could leave, but that she shouldn't bother trying to come back or contacting him again. He handed me a leather strap, ordered her to disrobe, and told me to deliver her twenty lashes, and after that to enjoy myself as I wished, but that I shouldn't be late for tea, which was two hours later.

"So, I did. The young woman - her name was Belinda - I came to learn was quite experienced in receiving punishments; so much so that a simple strapping across her backside was little more than a warm up. I found I greatly enjoyed the initial deliverance of her punishment, and when I was finished with the twenty lashes, I didn't want to stop. Lucius had told me not to be too hard on her since he said I didn't know exactly how much would be too much, but since she was experienced, I decided she would be perfect to learn to gauge that sort of thing, so I began a game...do keep in mind, I was sixteen and rather inexperienced, so it didn't turn out quite as I intended it to at the time...

Severus Snape swung the strap again, remembering Lucius's words 'do it hard for this'...twelve...thirteen...fourteen...he looked upon the naked, blonde woman who was on her hands and knees on the floor before him. She stiffened and gasped at each blow, and he felt conflicted in doing it, but there was something about the sharp red marks

on the pale skin of her buttocks and the backs of her thighs, and the sound of her soft moans that gave him a thrill. She was breathing heavily, panting in shaky breaths. He was worried for a moment, but she didn't seem to be crying or truly upset...and Lucius did this to her often enough, if she didn't like it she wouldn't keep coming back. Severus looked down, seeing his erection poking his robes out rather obviously when he finished with twenty strokes...he wanted to take her. Lucius said he could enjoy her as he saw fit...but would she agree to that?

He crossed his arms, making sure there was a hard scowl on his face. His hair fell down over his face. "Turn around," he said. He was delighted when she complied...would she really do whatever he told her to do? "You've been a bad girl," he said next...immediately thinking that sounded like the stupidest thing he could say. The look on the woman's face seemed to reflect that; she rolled her eyes, looking perturbed.

"Lucius did say I could enjoy you as I wished. So, what shall I do with you?" he mused, raking his hair back out of his face, and seriously hoping she might have a suggestion.

"Just how old are you, anyway?" she asked, an eyebrow quirked up in amusement.

"I'll be seventeen in January," he answered defensively. He thought she looked to be in her mid-twenties, the same age as one of his teachers, in fact. The woman smiled at him, rather patronisingly, he thought...but then, she stilled her features as she looked up at him from where she knelt on the floor.

"Well, since Lucius said you could have me, I'll do whatever you tell me to do," she told him with a smile. "So, what would you like me to do?"

"I know it may strike you as strange, Hermione, but there was a point at which I truly didn't know what to do with a woman on her knees in front of me," said Severus.

Hermione smiled, in a way it was certainly good to hear that at one time even Severus had been out of sorts in a sexual situation.

"So it sounds like she was perfect for you, then, gave you a good introduction?" she said, hoping he would continue with the story. She decided she'd broach the subject of why he'd been staying at Malfoy Manor during his summer break, later. "Wait! Your birthday is in January? You never told me!"

"Birthdays cease to have much meaning past a certain point...I stopped bothering with it at twenty-five. Not much point to making a big deal about it."

"When is it?"

"The ninth of January, if you must know. Now, do you want to hear about this or not?"

"Yes, sorry...keep going."

"She had given me a decent enough introduction to do what I wished...and, as I lacked imagination at sixteen, the only thing I could think of was what I'd seen in a few magazines the boys kept under their beds in the dormitory at Hogwarts..."

Severus's cock was aching; he could feel his balls pulling up tightly. "I want...I want you to...suck me," declared Snape, nearly breathless. He gasped as the woman moved forward, took his hand, and then took his ring finger in her mouth and sucked. Of course, that wasn't what he wanted.

"Not like that!" he exclaimed, snatching his hand back and regretting the slight tinge of whine that suffused his voice.

"No? How about like this?" she asked, then stood and sucked on his earlobe after pushing his hair back. That time, Severus took a few moments to back away, that had felt rather good, but he was still perturbed; she was being dense. Of course she should know where he wanted her to suck him.

"No! You should know what I mean," he said harshly to her.

"I'm sorry, was I a bad girl? Maybe you should punish me again..." She took a step back, her eyes filled with laughter. "I know when Lucius really wants to punish me, he uses that flogger over there, and beats me across my breasts. It's truly a horrible punishment," she assured him, nodding.

Without truly thinking about it, Severus took the flogger off the wall, placing the strap back on a hook. "Fine," he spat, "I'll punish you with this, then!"

"Oh, to make it even worse, he ties my hands to that chain over there," she said, nodding to the chain which hung from the ceiling.

"Really?" he said, his voice a bit higher than he meant it to be. He quickly cleared his throat. "You'll regret that, then," he said, thinking he sounded much more authoritative. He quickly found some rope, wrapped it around her wrists, then took her under the chain and looped the rope through the end of it. He hefted the flogger in his hand, then whipped it across her chest.

"Oh...you're so...gentle," said the woman, smiling at him. "If Lucius knew how easy you were on me, he'd probably have to beat me all over again, just to be sure I've learned my lesson."

Severus got mad then. She was taunting him; how dare she taunt him? He pulled back with the flogger and with all his might, whipped it across her breasts. He was satisfied when he heard her gasp and saw that her eyes went wide. He set his jaw and continued whipping her harshly, delighting in the way her breasts shook when the flogger hit them and the small whimpering sounds she was beginning to make. Her breasts were red when he stopped.

"Still think I'm gentle?" he growled at her.

It took her a moment to catch her breath. "No...no, sir. I'm sorry I was being so thick...may I suck your cock now, sir?" she asked. Severus glared at her, almost thinking she was mocking him again, but she seemed sincere. He reached up and untied her hands, noticing that he'd tied her so badly she'd had to hold the ropes to keep her hands in them.

"Yes, you may suck my cock now," he said. He watched in fascination as she knelt in front of him, lifted his robes, stroked his balls with her fingers and then opened her lips, taking him deep in her mouth. Of course, being sixteen, he didn't have much control and came in less than a minute. He was almost afraid she would laugh at him, but she didn't. She actually knelt there and swallowed his come, all of it, then smiled up at him.

"Now, sir...what else may I do for you?"

"Of course, I was quite ready for more in only a moment. It didn't take me long to figure out her 'reverse psychology' act, I may have been naive but I wasn't stupid. It was a good thing, too, that that particular implement was relatively safe for even the most ignorant and inexperienced wielder. But by then I was enjoying myself too much to be mad about it anymore." Severus chuckled. "I ended up missing tea entirely. I saw her a few more times, she actually taught me a lot...oddly enough, while I held the whip, she completely controlled what happened. However, I believe the last time I saw her I surprised her there..." He drifted off with a slight smile, then turned his focus back on Hermione. "So, there you have it, the first time I whipped someone."

"Well, sounds like you enjoyed yourself. So after that...what did you like about it so much that you would only have sex if you could do it that way?"

A pensive expression crossed his face then as he thought about it. "My specific reasons at that point in my life" He trailed off, tapping a finger against his lips.

His dark eyes turned to Hermione then, and he continued, "There is something to say for the feeling of holding a person's very life in your hands...of the feeling that someone would put themselves in that position, that they would accept and even learn to enjoy pain and discomfort." His voice was low and hypnotic as he spoke, then leaned forward. Hermione's breathing and heart-rate accelerated as his hand brushed her throat, and then he stood over her, his other hand behind her head, wrapping in the hair at the base of her skull as he pulled her to her feet.

"Do you trust me, Hermione?" he whispered, his fingers pressing softly against her throat.

She had a feeling she knew what he wanted to do; he'd had his hand at her throat before. But he wanted her to answer the question, and thereby acknowledge she understood what he wanted. "Yes, I trust you, Severus," she whispered. Then, she felt his fingers press into her throat, felt the pounding of her blood under his fingers. She looked into his black, intense eyes, clutching at his shoulders as she felt a tingling begin in her hands and feet...her breath passed through her throat raggedly, and then the web of flesh between his thumb and forefinger pressed against her windpipe.

"Trust me, Hermione," he whispered fiercely. Her mouth opened slightly as she fought the natural urge to gasp for breath she couldn't take...her knees buckled, but he quickly brought his leg up, propping his foot on the chair to support her. Her vision tunnelled down to one small point before her, in which she saw only his eyes as he closed them, then bent his head, taking her mouth in a kiss. Her hands couldn't hold him any longer, and they fell limply to her sides. His tongue against hers was the last thing she felt as consciousness left her.

She was in his arms and could hear his footsteps as he climbed the stairs. She opened her eyes, seeing the threshold of their bedroom door as they went through it. She stirred slightly.

"Be still," he murmured.

She relaxed, then as he lowered her feet to the floor, stood with little problem. He pulled her hands over her head, binding her wrists quickly with rope, then attached the rope to the chain. His hands moved down her arms, then stopped at her collar. He unbuttoned her robes, then pulled them up over her body, wrapping them around her hands as well. He drew her bra up her arms, then her knickers down her legs, and stood back, flicking his wand and igniting the candles around the room.

Severus walked behind her, and Hermione turned in place to see him open the window-seat trunk. He stood with nothing in his hands, however, then looked to her, tilting his head to the side in a contemplative gesture as he crossed his arms.

"What do you want tonight?" he asked.

Hermione looked at him a moment, surprised by the question. While she knew she could say 'no' at any time, and had initiated sex between them before, he'd only ever given her a choice between a few actions before, never an open-ended question. But already, her skin was tingling in anticipation of a whip or flogger or strap...she wanted it, and more.

"I want...first, the anal plug, please," she said. Severus's lips curled up and he reached into the trunk, withdrawing it along with a bottle of lotion. He spread the lotion over the object as he approached her.

"Spread your legs," he murmured. She did so and focused on relaxing as he positioned the plug at her entrance. She moaned in pleasure as he slowly slid it in place and she flexed her muscles, causing it to move slightly within her. Hermione writhed slightly. "And now?" he prompted.

"Now, the strap." She steadied herself, planting her feet firmly on the floor together as he retrieved the supple leather strap. His story about using it had set her mind running...but she wondered why he wanted her to set the pace, choose the actions tonight. Hermione gasped as the strap landed across the top of her buttocks, jumping slightly as the pain laced across her and she waited for the next blow to fall, but it didn't. She turned her head to the side to look at him.

"Just how thorough a strapping do you believe you are up to?"

Hermione felt disappointed in the delay. Her nerves were humming, her body heating with desire...she knew after a strapping it would only intensify. Why was he waiting for her to tell him how much of a strapping she wanted? He had always been able to judge just how much she could take and how much she couldn't take. She thought for a moment, however, and answered "Forty." He smiled at her, and raised the strap...

The rope cutting into her wrists, the strap falling repeatedly in a steady rhythm, never in the same spot twice, but a perfectly predictable pattern beginning with the top of her buttocks, then moving down to the middle of her thighs, and back up again. She gasped and groaned as each stroke fell, her buttocks would clench and the plug within her would move, spurring her on to higher levels of tension...and just as it was bordering on too much, he stopped; forty strokes had been delivered. Hermione's breathing quickly returned to a deep, steady pattern.

"You enjoyed that, didn't you?"

"Yes," she gasped.

"So, what would you have next?"

"I want..." she thought quickly, but still, was a bit shaken out of the mood, "I want...use the strap between my legs, from behind," she finished as she spread her legs apart. Her clit was aching and the entire region tingled with need.

"How many times?" he asked.

"I oh eight," she said quickly, growing slightly annoyed. She closed her eyes, this time nearly squealing and rising up on her toes as he swung the strap underhanded, causing it to fly up between her legs, curling around and snapping just at her pubic bone. The searing sting was wonderful, and she mentally counted eight blows...her labia burned and stung when he finished, and she brought her legs back together, rubbing them closely and writhing slightly.

The sound of the strap falling in the trunk was followed by Severus's voice. "And what shall I do next?"

"Um nipple clamps," said Hermione, "and and the horsehair flogger..."

Soon enough, clamps weighted her nipples, and she sighed and gasped as the horsehair flogger was swished in a fast rhythm all over her upper body, stinging sweetly.

"And now?" he asked after several minutes of flogging her.

Once again, Hermione was broken from the building tension. "Just I do what you want, please...this is so much better when you tell me what to do!" she exclaimed, exasperated. His laugh surprised her.

"Very well. Turn around." She did and saw him pulling the bullwhip from the trunk. He smiled as he shook it loose, trailing it on the floor behind him, but then scowled at it, pointed his wand, and it shrunk by more than half its length. "This room is entirely too small," he declared, then swished the whip, judging its action in the shorter form, and swung.

As the whip fell repeatedly, snapping at her nipples, wrapping around her body or legs, Hermione let her head fall back, and she simply enjoyed the sensation of the burning and stinging as it spread over her body. He whipped her from either side, causing the tail of the whip to crack across her back as it wrapped around her, or the especially sharp sting as he wrapped it around her already-tender buttocks. He stopped, and then approached her, drawing his fingers gently over her body, tweaking her nipples and rolling them between his fingers after he'd removed the clamps and tossed them in the trunk.

One hand crept down, stroking between her legs. "I shall release your arms, then you are to suck my balls," said Severus firmly. He untangled her robes from around her hands, then untied them. She dropped to her knees as he pulled his robes off, and grasped his cock, stroking it with her hand as she opened her mouth, taking his balls and rolling them around, laving them with her tongue. He pulled her away and sat on the edge of the bed and beckoned for her to continue. When she did, he reached down and rolled her nipples between his fingers slowly.

"Get up here," he said finally, and Hermione, not needing much encouragement, quickly straddled him. He pushed her hips down as he lay back fully, arching his body up to meet her and she rolled her hips, filling herself with his cock. He moved one leg slightly upward, so that every time she came down on him, it moved the plug in her arse; the sensation was soon overwhelmingly intense.

Afterwards, she lay draped over him; their bodies were still joined as they relaxed in the afterglow. "And just what point was it you were trying to make earlier?" Hermione asked sleepily.

"It wasn't a particular point, Hermione. However, it did confirm what I'd thought..."

"Oh? What was that?" She summoned the energy to roll off of him and tucked herself against his side, laying her head on his chest.

"That you really have become accustomed to me."

"Mmm," she hummed. "I've gotta get up now and get this thing out, too," sighed Hermione, not particularly feeling like moving.

"Run a bath; I'll join you in a moment."

While running the bathwater, Hermione realised that he had never quite answered the question regarding why he enjoyed the feeling of having someone submit to him like that. But he was sixteen at the time...she remembered that Sirius Black had called him 'Snivellus' then. She wondered what on earth it had been that had made him cry at one point...and if that had anything to do with him staying at Malfoy Manor for his summer vacation...that must have been when he was introduced to the Death Eaters, too.

Their new owl arrived with a receipt the next morning as they were having breakfast. Soon following it was Harry's owl. He'd written to congratulate her on her job and to give his NEWTs scores. Next, the *Daily Prophet* was delivered and Hermione began reading. There was an interview on page two with the head of the new Department of Marriage Law Recovery.

Mr Ludwig, what is it you hope to accomplish through this new department?

It is the position of the Ministry of Magic, and the Department of Marriage Law Recovery, that the Marriage Law was a travesty of justice to one hundred sixty-eight Muggle-born women, and indeed, the Wizarding world itself. The person who was largely responsible for the passing of the law met with an unfortunate, but understandably justified, permanent memory-loss at the hands of another suitor of a Muggle-born witch he wished to have for himself. There is no sense taking action against him now, but we have set up safeguards to assure Wizarding Britain that such a travesty shall not occur again. As to what we are doing now, we've already taken steps to ensure that the women who were forced into these marriages have resources available to them in the form of counselling, and protection if they find themselves in dangerous positions.

What are your thoughts about the serial-killer who seems to be targeting the men of these marriages?

Of course, we are against vigilantism. No matter how understandably relieved some of these women have been to be free of their abusive husbands, not all of the pure-bloods who were married under the law are abusive, in fact, I have been working closely with one woman, Treva Bulstrode, who arranged her own marriage with someone she thought would be compatible. She has also been heading up a support group for Muggle-born victims of the law, which was started by another Muggle-born victim of the law. She assures me that a good portion of the women, while they aren't exactly in marriages of love, are getting along reasonably well....

Hermione scowled, suddenly realising that even though she hadn't been completely qualified to run the support group and had handed over control to Treva willingly, she resented being referred to as simply 'another Muggle-born victim of the law'. However, she read on.

This killer should be found and stopped. If this person believes himself to be helping the Muggle-born women, he is mistaken. There have been five women I have spoken to personally who were very distraught at the loss of their husbands, three of which would be raising children without a father. We are taking steps to identify abusive situations and to prosecute men who have taken undue advantage of that horrible law. There have already been twenty-one arrests in clearly abusive situations, and investigations continue. So please, whoever this person is, I hope he stops or is stopped by the law. Indiscriminate murder cannot accomplish true justice.

You have lost someone close to you personally because of this law, is that correct?

Yes. My fiancée, who was a Muggle-born, was petitioned under the terms of the Marriage Law only two months before we were to be married. As I am a half-blood, I did not qualify under the law to petition her. She was forced to marry a man who is now in Azkaban for her murder. I work every day to honour her memory and hope that she knows how very much I loved her, and that I will stop at nothing to ensure that no one ever again has to go through what she did.

Hermione swiped her eyes with the back of her hand quickly as she read on.

As many of you may already know, there have been twelve murders in the last four months, all of them pure-blood men who took advantage of the Marriage Law. The identity of the killer still baffles Magical Law Enforcement, who seem powerless to do anything to stop the criminal. But the question remains, is it justice being visited upon these men, or the quest of a madman...or woman? The Daily Prophet will keep you up to date...

Hermione glanced up to see Severus bent over a parchment at the table; he appeared to be writing lists of potions to make. *It could have been so much worse*, she thought. Unbidden, an image came to her mind of Lucius Malfoy and what might have happened that day in Diagon Alley if he had won against Severus in the duel. Severus had considered him a friend at one time...Severus had even learned his particular sexual tastes because of that man...but she knew he would have been nothing like Severus.

"Severus...the women you knew, the ones Lucius Malfoy introduced you to...based on that, it sounded like he was...well, the one you told me about didn't seem like she was terribly abused...would he have..."

"He changed after the second return of the Dark Lord. When he was younger, he wasn't the same man...and the time he spent in Azkaban did something to him, too. If he had been the man he was in his youth, then there wouldn't have been as great a concern when he petitioned you for marriage. But," his eyes met hers solidly, "I've no doubt that if he had succeeded in obtaining you, you would not have survived for long."

"What about now? He could be different...after receiving the Memory Charm..."

"Perhaps. But I'd rather not associate with him again. At one time, I had hoped that Draco would be a fine young man, as well, but they have been offended, and they are dangerous. Draco is even worse than his father was, and he has been able to keep Lucius under his thumb." His mouth turned down in a frown. "They may forget, find other things to do...but I wouldn't underestimate either of them."

Hermione nodded, then placed the newspaper down on the table for Severus to read if he wanted. She decided to get a letter written to Harry and Ron, who were soon to

be roommates. She was out of earshot when Severus muttered: "I assure you, Hermione...they will never harm you."

A/N: Forty Galleons a week is equal to 200 UK Pounds a week, or 293 American Dollars a week according to the Harry Potter Lexicon's Muggle-Wizard money converter found here: <http://www.hp-lexicon.org/wizworld/galleons.html>

DO NOT TRY THAT AT HOMEBreath-play and blood-flow play can be EXTREMELY DANGEROUS. It should not be attempted by someone who is not very experienced.

If anyone is curious about the strap used on Hermione, this illustration is a good example: <http://www.cobrawhips.com/misc01.html>

As to the whip, a shorter version of a bullwhip is good for areas in which space is tight: <http://www.cobrawhips.com/snake02.html>

The Search for The Elusive Killer

Chapter 24 of 31

Hermione begins her new job, while Severus begins brewing potions at home. The killer still eludes detection. Hermione decorates the house, throws a party, and visits with Harry. Meanwhile, Treva Bulstrode and Gregory Ludwig have a talk.

Also, thanks to whoever nominated this fic for a Multifaceted Award in the 'Best Snape Fic' and 'Courage' categories, and to everyone who voted! I didn't expect to win...but this won in the 'courage' category! YAY!

Thanks to Nakhash Mekashefah, my wonderfully anal-retentive beta-reader.

Hermione's first day at work didn't include much work. She began by Apparating to the front of Gringotts bank. She walked inside, and quickly found Bill Weasley, who was talking with one of the goblins behind the counter. He finished what he had to say, then turned and spotted her.

"Hullo, Hermione, ready for your first day?"

"Yes, I am," she answered, smiling at him. It was exciting, knowing that she had been able to get such a good job directly out of school, that it was a job that required skill, that she was trusted enough to have it.

"Let's start with a tour of the labyrinth," Bill said, extending a hand to the hallway at the back of the lobby. Hermione followed him to the waiting cart and then got in with him.

"Ready...here we go!" he exclaimed, tapping the cart with his wand. It shot off at a quick pace, and Hermione's stomach lurched.

Snape was relieved when Dumbledore sent him an owl, contracting him to brew the potions for the Hogwarts hospital wing, just as he had when he taught there. He was worried about Hermione, and found himself checking his wand frequently, muttering the charm to extend awareness to the amulet she wore. The first time, he nearly ran outside the anti-Apparation wards they'd erected to get to her, feeling a terrible lurching sensation. He realised though, that she must be on that damned trolley cart in Gringotts, because he felt excitement but not fear. Awe, concentration, laughter, and again, she felt awed at something throughout the course of the day. He finally decided that if she were fine once she got to Gringotts, she would be fine until she left work that evening, since if Malfoy did decide to try anything, it most certainly wouldn't be in the bank.

At least he got a good deal of brewing started. Skele-Gro, Analgesics, and Pepper-up Potion took up most of the day. He left the cellar at four to start dinner, then went back to finishing his potions as it cooked.

"I trust your day was productive?" he asked when she walked into the kitchen just after five.

"Mostly, Bill just showed me around today. I start training on some of the other protocols tomorrow, and should be doing something productive by the end of the week. It was actually nice. The goblins aren't very nice, but Bill, and Edgar he also works there seem like they'll be a lot of fun to work with."

"Fun...I see." Snape ladled gravy over the mashed potatoes on their plates. "I suppose that is fortunate. It is not often one has a job that is 'fun'."

"No, I suppose not...." Hermione acknowledged as she sat at the table. "And your day?"

"Productive. I'm brewing the potions for the hospital wing at Hogwarts. I should hope some of the other contacts I made will be making orders soon."

"Good to hear, then."

After dinner, Hermione pulled out the box her mother had given her, which was filled with photos and picture frames. In a few hours, she'd framed the ones she liked the best, and had hung them around the house. About that time, she wondered why Severus didn't have any pictures of his childhood or friends. The few paintings that had been in his quarters at Hogwarts had belonged to the school, so they'd remained there when they had moved.

Severus stood behind her as she hung one of the last pictures. She glanced back to see him looking at it. "From our trip to France," she said.

"Obviously." Hermione rolled her eyes; yes, she supposed it was obvious, what with the Eiffel Tower in the background.

"This was just before my third year at Hogwarts. Do you have any pictures you'd want to hang up?" she asked next.

"No. One request: I'd prefer it if you kept pictures of your friends out of our bedroom...I'd rather not have Potter and Weasley gaping at me whilst I'm fucking you. At least most of these pictures are Muggle photos."

Three weeks after starting her job at Gringotts, Hermione was sitting in the living room, frowning at the fire. There was something nagging at her, something she realised she should know about...a connection she needed to make...something Bill had said when they were eating lunch in the break room at Gringotts. They had been talking

about the possible identity of the murderer...who was he, or she? Bill had been re-telling a joke someone in his hospital room had told him...and then he mentioned the radio show the nurse seemed to listen to every day: it was about a Muggle crime-fighter who could do a little bit of magic. He mentioned she had been upset the day that everyone had come to visit because she'd missed the show.

Why did that seem so relevant?

A yawn overtook her, and she stretched widely, it was well nigh bedtime. She'd cooked that evening, and it weighed heavily on her stomach. Severus had eaten slowly, and after a while, had said diplomatically, "Perhaps, you should try following recipes from a cookbook, at least, while you're learning to cook; I'm sure you will do well without recipes with some practice."

Well, at least he didn't expect her to be some kind of domestic goddess right away. Okay, so she couldn't cook all that well...yet. Hermione stood, grabbing her wand from the mantle as she started towards the stairs, when suddenly, a high-pitched shriek sounded, something like a train-whistle.

"The WARDS!!!" she yelled. But there was little need for her to yell, as the door from the cellar burst open and Severus came out, brandishing his wand.

"Get upstairs, now," he said loudly. She started to protest, but he turned his wand on her. "NOW! Do not argue with me!" he bellowed. With the shrieking wail of the ward alarms piercing her ears, Hermione ran upstairs quickly and into the spare bedroom. She opened the window and leaned out, looking out over the front garden, pointing her wand along the track of her eyes. Seeing nothing, she ran to their bedroom, opened another window and looked over the back garden. There was little light, and other than the moving shadows amongst shadows of the trees swaying in the slight breeze, she could see nothing out of the ordinary. The wailing alarm stopped, but had thoroughly woken her. Her heart was pounding as she realised that was the sound they had cast for someone trying to physically cross the wards around their garden. It would also produce a stinging sensation on whoever tried to cross it.

Deciding danger had passed, she went back downstairs. When she tried the door, she suppressed a few curses, as she found Severus had locked her inside. Scowling, she used an Unlocking Charm to open the door, and stepped outside quietly. It was very quiet and still, not even the crickets sang. She moved as silently as she could along the front of the house, staying in shadow as much as possible. The moon was a waning crescent; the light was very dim.

The overgrown hedges snagged at her shirt as she moved past them, and then she stepped on a twig. The 'snap' seemed to echo in the night. There was no sign of Severus, and she continued to the corner of the house. She didn't have time to raise her wand to defend herself when a blinding flash of red light shot at her and enveloped her. Hermione fell to the ground unconscious.

Groggily, she opened her eyes, relieved to see the ceiling of their bedroom. She sat suddenly, and found Severus sitting in a chair at the edge of the bed, his arms were crossed and he was scowling at her darkly. She quickly realised that her entire body ached, and there was a dull throbbing in her head.

"I believe I told you to stay inside."

"What happened?" she asked.

"I thought you were a trespasser, and I used a Stunning Spell on you. Be glad I was being cautious...there were many more spells I was preparing to use. However, if you had been in here, as I told you to remain inside, it would not have happened. How am I supposed to protect you if you insist on running around when an intruder is about?"

"Severus..." she sighed. "Listen, not only is this my house too, but if it was that nutter who's out killing off the purebloods married under the Marriage Law, then you're the one in danger, not me. Remember that last one just last week? The wife was taking a bath when her husband was killed. She opened the door and found him not five feet away in a pool of blood."

"It is not your duty to be my protector, Hermione."

Hermione rolled her eyes, sighed deeply, and flopped back onto the bed with an arm thrown over her face. "Severus, just drop it already," she said in an exasperated tone. "Did you find anything?"

"No, my search was cut short by having to carry your unconscious form up here. I had only time to search the perimeter of the house, and part of the garden before then. I will try again in the morning when light might reveal a clue."

"That siren wasn't for an Apparation attempt...someone was trying to physically cross the barrier," Hermione said. She had specifically chosen the wards to make different warning sounds. "There isn't anyone around for quite a ways...and I know I set them not to respond to animals..."

"Someone was there, yes. We can hope it was perhaps some Muggle from the area who might have been poaching...but I doubt it."

"We should call Magical Law Enforcement," Hermione said. "We need to report this. They're keeping track of this sort of thing, and we need to report it to the Order, too."

"Yes. I will go make a Floo call to Dumbledore. How are you feeling?" he asked as he stood.

"Like I've been run over by one of Hagrid's pets." She groaned and squeezed her eyes shut against the headache.

"I will bring you a potion in a moment," he said. She heard his footsteps as he walked out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

Three days later, Hermione and Severus Apparated to a copse of trees in a park near number twelve, Grimmauld Place. The Order of the Phoenix was meeting again for the first time since the fall of the Dark Lord the previous summer.

They walked into the foyer of the old house, which was now in much better shape than it had been when Hermione first saw it. The situation with Mrs Black's painting had been taken care of by building another wall to cover it. Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Tonks, Harry, Mad-Eye Moody and Sturgis Podmore were already there. They all gathered in the drawing room. Tonks looked up when Hermione and Severus walked in.

"Wotcher, Hermione, Snape, I hear there was some excitement out at your place," said a purple-haired Tonks.

"Yes, a bit," Hermione said, moving to sit beside her. Harry came near and sat beside her on the couch too. "Purple now?"

"Pink was getting old...and y'know, the purple seems a bit too boring, too." She scrunched up her face, and her hair transformed into a kaleidoscope of colours. Hermione laughed.

"So are you okay?" she asked.

"Fine, the person apparently decided to leave after they'd tripped the wards."

Remus Lupin entered soon and smiled at Hermione, then nodded to Severus, who only scowled at him. Soon, Ron, Fred, George, and Bill Weasley arrived too, Ron mentioning their mother had insisted on a family dinner and they would be there shortly. Hermione spent a few minutes catching up with Fred and George, who had just opened up two more locations of Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes, one in Ireland, and another in France. Arthur and Molly Weasley arrived, and Headmaster Dumbledore called the meeting to order.

Tonks and Shackbolt stood to give the presentation, which was a listing of all the murders which had taken place in the last six months.

"And you're absolutely certain it's the purebloods who took advantage of the law who are the targets, no doubts at all?" Severus asked.

"Yes, considering the fact that relatively few took advantage of the law...Gregory Ludwig has also compiled statistics based on the interviews he had done of all the couples married under the Marriage Law. In total, there were only forty men who were active in propositioning Muggle-born women. While there were over a hundred-seventy marriages in total, the others were mostly initiated by Muggle-born women who asked men they trusted to marry them to keep them from what they thought would be bad situations. Unfortunately, not all these women were the best judges of character, and it was also discovered that approximately sixty of these women still ended up in very...unpleasant... circumstances.

The murderer has also left a certain...signature, of sorts, which hasn't been reported in the *Daily Prophet*. Department of Magical Law Enforcement investigators found, at each scene, a number...the first murder was the number of marriages performed under the Marriage Law, and he's counting down--"

"How do you know it's a 'he'?" Harry interrupted.

"We don't," Tonks said before Shackbolt spoke up. "Personally, it seems to me a woman would be just as likely to do this as a man."

"Yes, that's true," Shackbolt agreed. "Though, given the way in which the men have all been killed, I believe it's someone who would not be squeamish about blood, and who would be physically strong enough to overpower their victim without leaving signs of struggle. We're still working on how the murderer might be getting around, too," he said, unrolling a map of the British Isles onto the table before him. It was marked with red dots. "These are the locations of the murders. Most have been in or around the London area, but that's also where most of the couples married under the Marriage Law live, as well. The furthest north a murder has been is Thornhill, Scotland. We've been keeping track of Floo registries, and so far no pattern has emerged on Floo usage, so the culprit is either Apparating, flying by broom, or using Muggle means."

"They could be on a Hippogriff or a Thestral," Hermione pointed out.

"They could, but that's unlikely. Hippogriffs are rare, and Hagrid cares for one of the few domesticated groups of Hippogriffs. There are even fewer domesticated Thestrals around."

"Do you even have a list of likely suspects?" Severus asked.

"At this point...no. However, we've been checking a few people. We did think Gregory Ludwig might have been responsible at first, he certainly has motive; however, he's had a solid alibi for at least six of the killings. For now, the MLE and even the Hit Wizards are stretched thin; they've decided to start patrolling the homes of those in danger on a regular basis..."

The meeting wore on, though when it was all through, Hermione felt that not much had been accomplished. She asked Shackbolt for a copy of the map before everyone left, thinking it would be good to look at it on her own and to think about it a while and see what she could come up with.

Severus agreed to do some of his own investigating through his less than on the up and up contacts, while Mundungus Fletcher would do the same, only with those that were in a lower social rung than Severus would penetrate. Hermione frowned at him when he spoke up, thinking it wasn't right the Order was still including someone who was known to be a thief and who had at one point even tried to hex another of their members when Arthur Weasley had been conducting investigations into controlled items years back.

Still, she supposed that his contacts with the unsavoury characters of Wizarding Britain had its advantages. The crowds he ran with were people she would never see on a social level, nor would most people she knew.

When the meeting had broken up, and Hermione and Severus had Apparated back to their house, Hermione sat at the table looking over the map. Red dots indicated locations of the murders, and blue dots, the locations where all couples married under the Marriage Law were currently living together. She tried drawing lines between the locations, and even started an Arithmancy calculation. Someone might as well have taken a paintbrush and splattered it across the map for all the sense she could make of it. Even with the Arithmancy, she didn't have enough information to make a connection.

August moved quickly into September, and Hermione, finally feeling ready to host a housewarming party now that the house had been nearly completely painted and the bushes tamed, decided to make it on her nineteenth birthday. There hadn't been any murders since the Order meeting, and Hermione began to wonder if the person had decided to stop, or was merely laying low to keep from seeming suspicious. Hermione stayed in contact with Treva through letters, and was relieved to know that the new committee had taken action on thirty more cases of spousal abuse since it had been formed. She was also glad that the support group was working out still from what Treva told her, and that they were now offering individual couples counselling as a part of the efforts to make up for the Marriage Law.

Treva had also apologised that Hermione hadn't been mentioned in the article in the *Daily Prophet*. Apparently, she had told them, but they hadn't seen fit to keep it in the final edition. And now she was getting out of work, feeling happy at having just exchanged the last three weeks' pay for Muggle cash. She'd deposited her first three weeks' pay, and determined to save half of her earnings, while the other half could be used for what she wanted. And this week, she'd decided to get a few things. She didn't have enough for a computer yet, but did have enough for a CD player, a television, and a VCR player. She had already made a Floo call to Severus, letting him know she would be out for a while running errands and would pick up supper on her way home as it was her night to cook.

There was a shopping district only a few blocks from the Leaky Cauldron, and that was where she made her first stop. She didn't take long to pick out the electronics equipment she wanted, having already perused a catalogue. The boxes were large and heavy, and the salesperson in the store offered to help her carry them to her car, but she assured him she would be fine, and then left the store. She went around the corner between shops, scanned the area to be sure no one could see her, then quickly shrank her purchases to a manageable level and placed them in her large purse she'd brought for that purpose.

She decided to get some CDs next, as well as a few movies. She probably spent a bit more money than she'd intended, but decided she deserved to splurge a bit, especially since her birthday was quickly approaching. Hermione made one last stop at a pizza place to order dinner, then went home.

Severus frowned as he looked over the receipts from Hermione's shopping expedition, unable to keep his teeth from clenching in frustration. She'd spent nearly three quarters of what their monthly rent was. Still, he couldn't hold it against her; he had told her to save her money and spend it on what she liked. The Muggle utilities she'd offered to pay turned out to be cheap since they used magic for most of the lighting and refrigeration. The phone wasn't too expensive, but he wondered if it was really worth the one, short, weekly conversation she had with her mother.

He dropped the receipts back into the dustbin and frowned down at his ledger book, subtracting the amount of the monthly rent, his potions ingredients which he'd purchased more of that day, and the clothing he'd also recently purchased for his gardening and other work around the house. He was able to add a small amount from potions sales to Hogwarts, as well as sales from Slug and Jiggers Apothecary. Still, the amount he added was far, far less than the previous month's expenses.

He rubbed his forehead as he realised that if his potions sales didn't pick up soon, he would run out of money completely in six months. He glanced across the room to the television and music-player Hermione had purchased, unable to hold back a slight feeling of resentment. They had plenty of books; why couldn't she just read a book if she wanted leisure time?

His thoughts drifted then to the phial he'd kept from the night he and Hermione had married which contained the blood of her maidenhead. It was a very hard to acquire ingredient, and would fetch a very high price.... He shook his head, disgusted with himself for that thought. He couldn't use her blood like that. He didn't know what he would use it for just yet, but he would never simply sell it, even though the price could well cover three months expenses. Severus's eyes drifted up to watch her, and he felt

an odd lurching sensation in his stomach.

"Severus?" she called, swivelling in her chair to look back at him sitting at his desk. "About this housewarming party...I wanted to warn you I'd be inviting most of my Gryffindor class...and some of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, too. But they'll only be here for one day, not like a week or anything."

"Do as you like; I shall be downstairs brewing potions, and plan to employ a strong Imperturbable Charm on the cellar ceiling and door," said Severus as he looked back down to his ledger.

The party was winding down; most people had shown up and stayed for about four hours, socialising and sharing news of where they were going on to next; and now, her immediate friends were left, sitting in the kitchen and leaning against the counter as she flicked her wand around, cleaning up the after-party mess. She felt good; it had been a wonderful party.

"So, why didn't, um...Professor Snape stick around?" Harry asked.

"He's brewing potions in the cellar...and you know how he is; *I don't want to socialise with a bunch of dunderheads*" Hermione said, doing an imitation of his inflection in a lowered voice. Neville laughed nervously.

"Yeah...uh, speaking of which, I should probably get home; my Gran gave me a list of things to pick up..."

"I thought you were getting your own place," Ron said.

"I was...but you know...my job isn't paying enough yet..." He was working for a magical plants nursery. It had potential to go somewhere...eventually.

"You can stay with us if you want...I've got two more bedrooms not being used; I was thinking about another housemate or two," Harry offered as he finished off his beer. "Rent wouldn't be too much." Harry had decided to purchase a house near Hogsmeade, using a large chunk of his inheritance, just a few weeks before.

"Hey, that'd be great, Harry; you sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all. I was going to invite someone else too..." He trailed off as Cho Chang walked into the kitchen along with Parvati Patil. Ron smiled at Parvati as she sat down next to him at the table. Hermione thought they were getting more serious, judging by the way they were looking at each other.

"Well, I'll see you all later," Neville said. "Had a good time Hermione, nice place you have...um, I guess I'll not say 'hi' to Professor Snape..." Hermione smiled and went to give him a hug before he left.

"I'll see you later," she said.

Ron and Parvati said they wanted to do something together too, and left soon after Neville, leaving her with Harry and Cho Chang. Harry smiled tightly at Cho.

"So, everything been okay with you?" he asked. Hermione felt the tension level in the room rise uncomfortably, and she wondered what Harry was upset about. She'd thought they were on friendly terms.

"Oh, things are going pretty well. I'm starting next week with the Ministry...working as a secretary for one of Amelia Bones's assistants. Oh, I wanted to tell you congratulations on getting into the Auror Training Programme," she said, smiling. Hermione thought she looked at Harry hopefully.

"Thanks. It's starting off well so far, keeps me busy."

"Well, I should get going then. Thanks for having everyone over, Hermione; I had a great time. Good to see you again, Harry."

"You too," Harry said.

"Call anytime through Floo," Hermione offered.

"I thought you liked her," Hermione said to Harry after she'd left.

"She's okay, I guess," Harry said. "I just...don't want to get involved with anyone now and I get the feeling she...well, before everything got so crazy in sixth year we were dating, but..." he trailed off, shrugging.

"Well, okay. So, you miss any of the old Muggle shows you used to watch?" she asked. "I've gone ahead and gotten a telly."

"Sounds good," he said with a smile. "I hardly know what's on anymore, and really, I didn't watch much growing up at the Dursleys'."

"Let's see what's on...that is, if you don't have to go anywhere?"

"Nah, not tonight. Ron will probably want the place to himself for a while, anyway." He winked at Hermione, and she caught the hint that Ron and Parvati were probably busy with each other.

They arranged the chairs to face the shelves, and spent a few hours in sporadic, light conversation as they relaxed in front of a few old 'Red Dwarf' episodes.

"I see it is now a party of two." Hermione jumped at the deep voice.

"Severus, I didn't hear you coming," she said, turning to face him.

"I wonder why," he mused, looking pointedly at the appliance, the volume of which was probably slightly too loud. "Potter," he said, nodding.

"Hello, Professor," Harry greeted stiffly.

Severus set his lips in a tight line, then went to his desk. Hermione turned around and saw him writing what looked to be a letter, then turned back and continued watching the show.

"Um...I'll get going," Harry said quietly a few minutes later. "Hey, want to come over tomorrow and see my new place?"

"That would be great, yes."

"It's just about a mile off of High Street. Take a turn just before the Three Broomsticks. There are several other houses around there all surrounded by old oaks; out of the way, but not too hard to find. There's a stone arch over the front garden gateway, the only one on the right side; you can't miss it."

"Okay, what time?"

"Anytime after ten in the morning would be good. I'll show you around; we can have lunch...you know, just hang out and stuff." Harry smiled at her.

"Good, I'll see you tomorrow then." She stood with Harry to walk outside with him and give him a hug before he Apparated away. Hermione felt glad that her best friend was still there for her; she couldn't imagine life without Harry there after all the things they'd been through together.

She went back inside and said to Severus, "I'll be gone most of tomorrow, since it's my night to cook I was going to see if we can trade and I'll cook Monday night."

"Very well," he said, glancing up at her. "I hope you'll keep in mind not to give Potter...ideas...which could prove difficult," he said firmly.

"Severus, he's my *best friend*. He's not like that at all. Just...oh, never mind," she sighed in frustration.

"I have some things to take care of in Hogsmeade tomorrow. I would feel better for your safety if I Apparated there with you. No, Hermione," he cut in before she could protest, "I'm not trying to keep tabs on your activities with your *friends*; I simply want to be assured of your safety. If you don't plan on Apparating straight home, I would rather you have Potter escort you."

"Well, people brought some presents, some of them for both of us; would you like to see? There are packages from most of the staff at Hogwarts, too; they couldn't come with all the start-of-term things going on. Most of the presents were books. Severus thought it was likely that her friends weren't sure what else to get her.

True to his word, he was prepared to leave and was holding a large satchel the next morning a few hours after breakfast. They Apparated together to Hogsmeade, and he walked with her to Harry's house, and then went his own way once she'd crossed the barrier of the garden walls, which were heavily warded.

Hermione was impressed with his new house; it was one of the largest in the small residential area of Hogsmeade, with a large garden. There were five bedrooms, three bathrooms, a library and a living room. Harry showed her around and talked about how Auror training was going so far. He also mentioned that Ron was away helping Neville pack his things, and they'd be arriving by Floo that evening since Neville couldn't Apparate that far yet. He was living with his Gran just outside Nottingham, so the distance to Hermione's place hadn't been too far for him.

Harry cooked a simple lunch for them while she sat at the kitchen table, and she quickly lost track of time as they passed the afternoon sitting on a couch together in his Library, discussing how much of what they'd learned at school was actually relevant to their lives. Harry admitted that taking Divination had probably been a big waste of time.

Hermione glanced at the clock, and realised it was nearly six. "I should probably get back home soon. I've got to make sure my stuff for work tomorrow is ready."

"I'm glad you could come over...I miss spending time with you." Hermione relaxed as he wrapped his arms around her, folding her in a comfortable, friendly embrace. He didn't let go, and she wasn't inclined to pull away; it felt good. She sighed deeply as she rested her head on his chest and listened to the sound of his heart beating.

"Don't worry, Harry; I'll make sure not to neglect you." Her hand rubbed small circles on his back as they sat together, and she enjoyed the sensation of his fingers running softly through her hair.

Reluctantly, they pulled apart as the sound of crashing came from the living room. They found Ron and Neville in a heap on the hearth, along with a bunch of boxes that had been miniaturised. Neville looked harried.

"Well, I'm glad you were there, Ron," he said. "Gran is easier to deal with in front of other people."

"*That* was easier to deal with? She tops my mum!"

"Oh, it would have been worse if you hadn't been there. Don't worry, though, I'm sure she didn't mean it...I figure she'll write me back into the will in a few years when she gets over it." He tried to give Ron a confident smile.

"Hullo, Harry, Hermione...I guess I'm home now."

They all laughed together, Harry and Hermione moving to help Ron and Neville get up. She ended up staying a bit longer to help them levitate Neville's things up to his room. It wasn't until Ron mentioned he was famished and that dinner would be a good idea that she remembered she should be heading home. After saying her goodbyes, she Apparated from the street in front of Harry's house to the front garden of her own home.

It was growing dark as she walked inside, and went straight to the kitchen. There was a plate with a Warming Charm cast over it on the table for her, and she sat down and quickly ate the spaghetti and meatballs which Severus had prepared. She went into the cellar when she'd finished, finding him standing at a worktable, stirring a cauldron.

"Thanks for making dinner," she said.

"I was beginning to wonder if you would deign to return this evening."

"I just lost track of time; that happens sometimes when you're with friends, you know. Didn't you ever do that with your friends?"

"Yes. A few times," he admitted.

"Well, I've got to get things ready for work tomorrow. Will you be here much longer?"

"Another hour, then I will join you." Hermione turned to leave. "I'd like you to pull a few things out of the chest," he said. "Nothing too extreme."

Once upstairs, Hermione laid out her clothes for the next day and went over the notes she'd taken about the various protocols and, when she was finished, went to the window-seat chest and looked inside. However, nothing really caught her eye. She was tired and just wanted to go to sleep. When Severus came upstairs a short while later and found her in bed in the darkened room, he slid into bed with her once he'd showered.

"Is there a reason you haven't chosen anything from the chest?" he asked.

"I'm too tired. Tomorrow..."

"Mm hmm, tomorrow then." He scooted up close to her, nibbled her neck for a moment, eliciting a sleepy but pleasant sigh from Hermione, then settled himself to sleep. It wasn't long before he heard her breathing become steady as she fell asleep, and he realised he wasn't really bothered by her putting off their more pleasant activities. He actually found her body against him as she slept pleasant enough, and though his cock hardened, insinuating itself slightly between her upper thighs, he didn't press the matter, and went to sleep himself.

Hermione realised their one year anniversary was quickly approaching, and she wondered if it was something they should try to celebrate, or simply allow to pass by without notice. For one thing, she did at least feel they were getting along. While his particular sexual habits had bothered her at first, she had slowly come to enjoy it. She wondered, though, if he'd tried to cut off her breathing like he had the previous month when they'd first married, how she would have felt about it.

It had been a little scary, but had been quite a rush too, and when he'd closed his hand around her throat, she'd felt completely safe with him. But did feeling physically safe with him mean anything more? After all, she would trust a Healer, or a Muggle doctor or dentist to do things that might be dangerous for others to try, and that meant nothing more than the fact that she trusted in their skill, and in what they'd learned in school. When it came down to it, while there was an intense feeling of sexual

excitement with Severus, her trust in him had little to do with any feeling, but rather, the fact that she trusted in his skill, control, and restraint to not cause her harm, just as she would trust a medical professional. She knew that she would be safe in letting go.

She knew by now that for him, there was something very significant to his desire to retain control. She'd been thinking more about that, wondering if his desire for control, especially since he was introduced to it at sixteen, was something that he'd begun to use as a crutch...a way to put himself in power at a time when he'd felt powerless. Certainly, what she'd heard of his youth from other sources wasn't a very bright time for him.

"Hermione, watch out there!" Bill called. Hermione snapped back to attention, realising she was allowing her mind to wander a bit, and aimed her wand at a vault which they were unwarding that belonged to an elderly man who had passed away. Even though it was against Gringotts policy, he'd put a number of his own wards and curses on the vault, and now his heirs couldn't get in. She broke through the last curse, then whispered "Alohomora" once she was sure they were all down. The vault swung open, and Bill went inside. She followed when she heard him laugh.

"Well, I know some people are going to be upset about this one," he said, laughing and holding a note out that had been found on the floor of the very empty vault.

To my gold-grubbing heirs,

I spent it all, and you aren't getting a single Knut!

Hermione shook her head and laughed. "Well, which one of us gets the honour of delivering this?"

"I'll leave that to one of the goblins," Bill said. "That's another great thing about this job, we don't have to actually deal with any irate customers."

"All right. So our next assignment is in the catacombs..."

"Yes, the catacombs...you haven't been there yet. Some of the higher-ranking Ministry officials and older families will pay for the extra security down there. C'mon, let's get that done, then we're done for the day," he said. Hermione followed him to the cart and got in, now rather accustomed to the fast rides. She laughed as the cart plummeted down a steep precipice, nearly in free-fall as they went deep beneath London.

"Severus, in just two weeks, it'll have been a year," Hermione said over dinner in the middle of October. She'd cooked that night; the cookbooks Molly Weasley had sent through Ginny had come in handy, and she was learning quite a few household and cooking charms. Hermione had cast several floating, blue fireballs to hover around the table, as the dreary weather had made it dark before sunset.

"Yes, it will be," he acknowledged. "Have you thought to celebrate the occasion?" he asked in a neutral tone.

"Well, I think, considering the fact that we probably wouldn't have ever been together without that Marriage Law, we're doing okay; don't you?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Actually, I was hoping we could get to know each other better," Hermione said.

"And we don't know each other now?"

"Not really. I'd like to learn more about you...there's still a lot I don't know, and it just seems like I should. I know you don't think your past is relevant, but it is. I want...what I want is for us to be able to have more...well, than what we've got now," she said awkwardly, looking down at her mushroom and pea soup. She spread the dollop of sour cream around the top and took another bite.

"And what is it you think you need to know?" he asked.

"Well, anything, really. What were your parents like? Who were your friends? I know some things...well, I know you might not want to talk about what being a Death Eater was like, but I'd really like to understand where you were coming from since I know we have a lot of differences in how we grew up. I'd just like to understand you better."

She watched as he poked at his soup with his spoon for a moment, then nodded shortly. "I'm not sure why you think it would make a difference, but if you truly want to know..."

Hermione listened as he talked. It wasn't a detailed account by any means, but she found she was intrigued by what he *didn't* say as much as she was about what he did say. His father was a manager of a shop in Knockturn Alley, and they'd lived in a ratty flat behind the shop, and his mother hadn't worked. They had been together for three years when Severus was born, and he was an only child. He said only that his father tended to be harsh, and wanted Severus to learn before he went to school, and to further that aim, had allowed him to study Dark Arts books. His father had died when he was in his fifth year at Hogwarts.

After that, he'd spent his summers at Malfoy Manor, and Lucius had taken him in and taught him some of the points of finer society which he hadn't had growing up, as his family was poor because of his father's habit of starting business ventures on the word of dubious sources, and his mother's habit of drinking.

"Severus," she interjected when he'd paused. "What about your mother?" Hermione asked. "I thought both your parents were dead."

"I don't recall saying that."

"I'd assumed if you had family you would have wanted them to be at the wedding...you've never mentioned them as if they were alive..."

"Actually, I don't know if she's dead or alive, and I don't particularly care." Hermione was shocked. "You *did* ask, Hermione. If the answers I provide bother you so much, you shouldn't ask."

"Severus...she's your mother! How could you not care?" Hermione asked, taken aback.

"She didn't care much for me, and she was a weak alcoholic who wasn't fit to be a parent," he answered sourly. "My father would get angry with her not without reason, I suppose, she couldn't keep a house clean if her life depended on it. I believe our little flat housed most of the flies and mice in all of Knockturn Alley and when he yelled at her, or occasionally hit her if he was truly angry, she would drink and cower. She never bothered to contact me after she left, and I never saw the point in trying to find her."

Severus watched Hermione's mouth work open and closed a few times, and he wished he had simply told her she didn't need to know about his life. She couldn't imagine his life, and he hadn't even gone into detail. He stood and took the dishes to the sink, allowing her a few moments to decide if she wanted to continue the conversation or not while he washed them.

"So you really think not keeping a house clean was a good reason for your father to hit her?" she asked as he was putting the now clean dishes back into the cupboards.

He leaned against the counter, facing her as he crossed his arms and answered, "No, Hermione, I don't. I think they were ill-suited for each other, and she irritated him to no end and then was terrified of him when she'd finally pushed him past his limits. It was wrong of him to do that, but he wasn't angry without reason. They were both at fault. Him, for allowing his temper to get the better of him; and her, for not leaving the first time he lost his temper and beat her. She was a weak-willed woman who couldn't handle life on her own, and couldn't handle it with my father either." He watched her closely as she seemed deep in thought, hoping she wasn't now thinking he condoned his father's actions, or worse, thought he could be like that. He stepped forward and crouched in front of her, his eyes level with hers.

"Hermione, my childhood and much of my young adulthood was unhappy. I understand yours was not, and that it would be difficult for you to understand such a different upbringing. I despised my father as much as I did my mother, and vowed long ago that I would not end up like either of them. I've never hit a woman in anger, nor would I do so. I can say with absolute certainty that the...sexual games I enjoy, and that you've come to enjoy, have nothing at all to do with that." He reached up and brushed her hair back from her face, his hand resting on the back of her neck afterwards. "Now, I've told you more than I thought was wise, but I hope you would understand that who my parents were has nothing to do with who I am today. I've had two solid examples of how *not* to live, and how *not* to raise a child.

"I think, perhaps now, you might understand why I think it is that we are doing far better together than you seem to think we are. I am quite content, actually. I hope you can be content, as well."

"Contentment is the most you think we should hope for?"

"Contentment is far more than many have," he said softly. He rubbed his thumb along her cheekbone, then leaned forward to kiss her, truly enjoying her lips parting beneath his. He pulled away slightly, speaking with his lips moving against hers, "I have far more than I thought I would have with you. And besides," he added in a husky whisper, "your skills at fellatio, at this point, are unsurpassed in my experience."

Hermione pushed him back, and he landed on his backside with a thump on the kitchen floor. He looked up, and saw her expression warring between trying to look angry, and her trying not to laugh. "Severus," she said firmly, "there really is more to a relationship than fellatio!"

"Your cooking has improved as well," he added thoughtfully. Hermione groaned loudly in frustration.

"Severus...seriously now, please."

"Hermione, jest aside, I believe things between us are quite fine. I am content. For now, I would rather not try to push for something we wouldn't be capable of; it can only bring troubles. Now," he reached up quickly, grabbing her by the front of her robes and pulling her down. They both grunted as she landed heavily astride his hips, "I want to enjoy myself with you, and I want you to do the same. We have ample time for whatever else may come."

Gregory Ludwig was at a cemetery outside Bristol along with Treva Bulstrode. They walked along the aisles of headstones in the grey drizzle, then finally stopped at one. Gregory set a wreath of white roses against the headstone, then laid a single, red rose across the top of it before he knelt in the grass, his shoulders shaking.

Treva rushed forward, putting her arms around his shoulders. "I know it still hurts, Greg," she said softly. "I know..." she trailed off as he threw his arms around her waist, burying his face in the crook of her neck, sobbing loudly. She sat with him, rocking him gently as he cried for what seemed like a long time, holding him and offering an occasional word of comfort. She'd come to greatly admire the man who was doing all he could for the Muggle-born victims of the law.

They worked together often now, and had seen to it that nearly forty men had been sent to Azkaban for spousal abuse, and nearly thirty more had been separated from their unwilling brides pending hopes of finding reversal spells for the very strong Fidelity Charms used on the ill-fated couples. Unfortunately, the widower of Greg's late fiancée had still not been brought to justice. Her cause of death was listed as accidental, and they couldn't prove beyond a reasonable doubt that it hadn't been murder. She had watched over the months as he held a strong face to the public, to those he worked with, but eventually, his façade had cracked and she'd seen the intense sorrow of a man deep in mourning. She'd become his confidant, and he shared with her the grief and pain he wouldn't allow the rest of the world to see.

"She was so beautiful...she was so lovely...in so many ways."

"I know, and I'm so sorry." She kissed him on his forehead and stroked his shoulders, wishing she could ease his pain. His shoulders shook a bit more with his dry sobs.

He grew very still for a moment. "Tell me, Treva, am I a horrible man for wishing that whoever that killer is had gotten to that bastard she had to marry first?" he asked in a near-whisper.

"No, Greg...no, not at all. I would never think that, you're one of the most honourable men I know," she answered sincerely.

"We're making progress, though...what happened to her, it won't happen again."

"No," Treva agreed, "it won't."

They sat like that, Treva supporting the emotionally drained Greg, for nearly half an hour more. It had begun raining again, and they were chilled, but still, she remained to support him. Finally, he stiffened and pulled himself up, standing and reaching a hand down to help Treva to her feet. "Thank you for being here for me," he said.

Treva and Greg walked to the edge of the cemetery amidst a copse of trees, and he left first, Apparating with a loud crack. Treva looked back towards the headstone where he had poured his heart out to her, which she could barely see between the boughs of a tree. There was a cloaked figure kneeling there now, barely visible through the mist. Just as she was thinking of going to see who it was, the figure stood and walked away quickly in the opposite direction. He disappeared as the rain beat down harder, and she realised it was probably an old friend of hers.

She Apparated back to her house and paused at the bedroom door where she was about to change clothes, when she heard a guttural moan from within. She turned and went into the bathroom instead for a shower to warm up, and she cast a drying charm on the robes she'd been wearing, dressing and going into the kitchen to find something to eat.

As she was eating her sandwich, she heard Barius and his girlfriend talking for a few minutes, and then the loud 'crack' when she Apparated from the house. Barius walked into the kitchen a few minutes later, his hair was tousled and he still had a touch of lipstick on his face. He smiled at her as he went to make his own sandwich, and then sat across the table from her.

"You're home sooner than I thought you'd be," he said.

"We finished early; Greg was having a difficult day. But I think we're a lot closer to getting a lot of this mess sorted out. Next, we have to see about getting a team on reversing the Fidelity Charms."

"Yes, that would be a very good thing. I nearly forgot and slipped with Christine earlier...now *that* would have been a mood-breaker."

"Yes, be careful there. One of the girls from the support group had boils for nearly a month solid. At least it only activates for intercourse. I'm talking to Greg about releasing the details of the Fidelity Charm, too. He doesn't really like the idea; he's afraid it might cause more troubles than it helps if some of the men get upset about their wives being able to have relations with other men, even if it can only go so far, but I've told a few of the couples I'm working with who I thought would be open to making arrangements with each other."

"Well, even in all this craziness, there are sure to be people upset about infidelity, even if their marriages were only from the law for convenience. I'm glad we could come to an agreement on that. Thanks for being understanding, Treva."

"Quite all right. I'm glad you kept me out of marrying that old prick...his wife still comes to the meetings, she's a nice girl, and from what I can tell he hasn't been terrible to her, but still..." She shuddered. "I'm looking forward to throwing the biggest divorce party possible once they've worked it all out," she told him with a smile. "If you and Christine are still together, we can make it a combination engagement party too."

"I'm sure the family will be absolutely shocked; I don't think there's ever been a divorce in the family before." They laughed, then returned to eating for a while. "So...are you and Greg...?"

"No, he's still too upset over losing Stephanie. Besides, I don't think he would..."

"Get into all that freaky stuff you like?" he finished.

"No, I don't think he would, but I don't think he'll be ready for anything with anyone for a long time." Treva sighed, leaning forward and resting her chin on her arms on the table. "Y'know, it's been a long day. I could really do with a good shag about now."

"I'm sure I can accommodate you," Barius replied with a grin.

"You're still wearing Christine's lipstick," she pointed out with a note of humour.

"Ahh, suppose I'll shower then." He rubbed at his cheek, managing to smear the lipstick more as he exited the kitchen. Treva went to the bedroom and changed the sheets with a few swishes and flicks of her wand. While she didn't mind Barius and Christine using their bed, she didn't particularly want to share the other woman's bodily fluids through him. She had been the one to discover the weak link in the Fidelity Charm by listening to several tales from the support group and private counselling sessions with those married under the law. For the few who had gone too far, the spell hadn't activated until the moment of penetration.

She wasn't sure if she wanted to be the one to try and discover if anal intercourse would activate the spell or not, but a few men and women had found success in oral stimulation and the use of sexual toys, and she had finally decided to share that knowledge with her husband and they had come to an agreement that they could see other people. She wasn't in love with him, but she did care about him as a good friend, and knew well enough that both of them were frustrated with enforced monogamy with someone they wouldn't have chosen to marry had it not been for the law. They thought they might get along better if they could at least have some freedom to see other people. It had worked out well enough so far.

Treva was also feeling edgy. The murderer hadn't attacked anyone in over two months. It was highly suspected that he was the one who had tripped the Snapes' wards, which Hermione had written her about, but she wondered what had happened to cause him, or her, to change their tactics; or if, perhaps, the MLE department's patrols had made a real difference.

Another Christmas

Chapter 25 of 31

Domestic disputes lead to Domestic Harmony; a trip with friends leads to a thought-provoking encounter for Hermione, and the elusive killer makes an appearance.

I would like to thank my wonderful beta, Nakhash Mekashefah, for her meticulous beta-reading.

Hermione settled into a comfortable routine through autumn. Her job was enjoyable; the people she worked with were fun to be around, even if the goblins seemed to look at everyone suspiciously; she soon discovered that they had their own positive aspects: they were always explicitly exact about what they expected, and she observed that if they had a problem, they made no bones about getting to the point in no uncertain terms. If they had a problem with her job performance, they wouldn't hesitate to tell her, and since they hadn't mentioned anything, she was confident that she was meeting their expectations.

She usually didn't work alone, and never worked alone when in the depths of the catacombs beneath the bank; it could be too dangerous. She became good friends with Bill Weasley and Edgar Rutledge, her co-workers, often having lunch with them, and even visiting their respective homes and families for small gatherings of friends on occasional weekends. She visited at Harry's a few times a month, enjoying the atmosphere in the house which was much rowdier and fun than at home, though she did enjoy the quiet simplicity of her homelife, as well.

Sometime in October, Severus began cooking most of the time, telling her simply that he preferred to eat dinner at six o'clock sharp, and since she would get home between a quarter after to half an hour after five, dinner on her nights to cook was often closer to seven. It was comforting to come home to the aroma of food roasting in the kitchen. Since he did his work in the cellar, it wasn't difficult for Severus to come upstairs to start dinner, and he didn't seem to mind doing it.

Things were moving along very comfortably in many ways, in fact. The murderer had stopped. The Order had had two more meetings since that first one to discuss the developments on the killer, and the only one who'd had anything he'd thought was worthy of reporting was Mundungus Fletcher, saying someone he knew was trying to procure unauthorised Portkeys for an acquaintance...but further investigation didn't turn anything up. Though she still wondered why they had stopped, she was confident that the extra security provided by the MLE department, and the espionage efforts of the Order, had scared them off. Good.

The day of their one-year anniversary came at the end of October. Hermione came home that evening to find that Severus had made a good roast tenderloin, his favourite, along with asparagus with Hollandaise sauce, one of her favourites. He'd also opened a bottle of wine which he'd had for some years.

He said nothing about their anniversary, though when they sat down to dinner he asked her, "It is my hope, Hermione, that you don't regret your choice."

She looked at him for a long moment, his black eyes seeming softer now than they ever had.

"Given the choices I had, no, I don't regret it," she finally answered truthfully.

"We may not have what you'd hoped to find, Hermione, but don't let that keep you from appreciating what we do have." He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Are you content?"

By Severus's standards he was being terribly accommodating, even thoughtful, of her feelings. She drifted for a moment, just a moment, glancing around the kitchen, the dining area, the view into the living room...it was home. Her home. Their home. "Yes," she answered, nodding slightly as she met his eyes again, "I'm...content."

He nodded stiffly, then picked up his silverware and began to eat dinner. They didn't speak any more of their anniversary or of the progress, real or perceived, of their relationship over the last year, but she did feel things felt more settled, more comfortable. Instead, they discussed whether or not they had seen signs of a lone Mooncalf in the field in front of their house. Hermione thought it would be interesting to see if there might be another Mooncalf and if their mating dance would produce a formation large enough to attract the attention of the Muggle media, as Muggles had varied opinions of what caused those formations: from hoaxers, to aliens trying to send messages to earthlings, to energy vortexes.

"There will be a doco on the telly tonight about crop circles that you might find entertaining," Hermione told him.

And so, Severus sat with her that evening, occasionally snorting with disdain or offering a scathing remark about the brainpower or sanity of theorists, while Hermione

would tell him that if it weren't for the restriction on Muggles learning of magic, they would know quite well that it was simply Mooncalves in their mating dance.

A few days later, Hermione was making a list for her Christmas shopping; her savings were enough that she planned on using half of it for Christmas, and then to leave the rest. It had been a busy week at work, though she had been pleasantly surprised that afternoon to be informed that her job performance had garnered her a wage rise. She was relaxing in an armchair as she made her list, her feet tucked up under her. The scent of corned beef and cabbage was wafting from the kitchen. She allowed her head to fall back a moment, looking around at the walls and shelves of their living room. It was so different than how their quarters in the dungeons of Hogwarts had been.

There, nothing in the main living area, or in Severus's bedroom, had truly been hers. Here, the walls had been painted in colours of her choosing (though she had avoided certain colours which Severus had voiced protest to), and were adorned with many pictures from Hermione's childhood, both before and during her Hogwarts years, and of her friends and family. Her books were intermingled with his on the bookcase, grouped by subject and genre, only the inscription on the inside cover indicating whose book was whose, and the new books she had purchased had no inscription of ownership within.

Upstairs, the second bedroom was still bare, and the bedroom they shared was still furnished with her furniture. She planned to purchase new furniture in the spring, as she didn't want to spend all her savings at once. For now, building up a wardrobe of more professional robes, buying books and other things she liked, and eating lunch with her friends was what she spent the portion of her earnings set aside for personal use.

Hermione glanced up as Severus rose from his desk to check on supper in the kitchen. She'd noticed several times over the last hour he'd hastily scratched out whatever he'd written, and seemed tense about something. Curious about what he was doing, she went to his desk and found a ledger-book open there. She paused to glance over the columns, then, with increasing alarm, read with more attention.

"Hermione, what are you doing?" he asked when he returned from the kitchen.

"Looking at our finances," she answered tightly. "Why didn't you say something?" she asked, looking up at him, brows knit together in concern. "This is..."

"Not your concern," he snapped, closing the distance to the desk quickly and pulling the book from her, shutting it firmly. "I have already told you that I would handle our household expenses, and I will."

"Severus, you've only got twenty-three Galleons left in savings!" Hermione exclaimed shrilly. "Please tell me there's more somewhere? And your income...it's not even enough..."

"Stop! I said I would handle it," he growled through clenched teeth.

"You're being stupid!"

"What did you say?" he hissed, glaring at her.

"You heard me; you're being stupid. All this time, you haven't mentioned, even once, that money was tight. You've let me believe everything was fine! I'm not sure *why* you haven't said anything to me about this, but I have plenty of money in my savings. If I'd known..." she waved her hand in a frustrated motion at the ledger book, "that things were that tight, I would have made quite a few different decisions about things. God, Severus! Why didn't you say anything?"

Severus stood there a moment, seemingly seething in anger. "Hermione...I feel it is my duty "

"Duty? Duty? Would you just...ahhrrrrrrh!" she growled in frustration.

"Yes, Hermione, it is my duty to provide my own wife with basic living accommodations," he said, enunciating every word. "Forgive me if the idea of having you support me, when you should be working to further your own goals, is distasteful to me. I am not a layabout to sit idly by while my wife handles those things which are clearly *my responsibility*."

Hermione crossed her arms, lips pressed in a tight line as she looked towards the ceiling and mentally counted to ten. She repeated the count when she still wanted to shout at him after the first count. Finally, in a very controlled voice, she spoke. "First, the household expenses are just as much mine as they are yours. Secondly, I seem to recall when we first married, that you were adamant I cover my own expenses," she levelled her gaze at him, "and now you seem satisfied, for some insane reason I can't comprehend, to send us into the poor-house while I have plenty of savings to cover this.

"I've been putting aside more than half my income since I started working...I've got nearly three hundred Galleons, Severus. I had *planned* to spend a very large portion of that for Christmas shopping. No," she said sharply when he started to speak again. "If you insist on handling the money, fine. But I'm going to transfer two hundred Galleons into your account first thing tomorrow so that you can at least cover expenses for the next two months."

Severus clenched his jaw, then, after a few moments, slapped the ledger book back onto his desk. "Dinner is on the table," he announced tersely as he stalked back into the kitchen.

They didn't speak at all through most of dinner, each pointedly ignoring the other as they ate. Hermione was frustrated, and more than a little baffled, that he hadn't said anything or asked for at least some contribution to their bills.

"Severus, I got a rise today," Hermione told him as he was clearing the dishes. "They're paying me fifty Galleons a week now. I know you've been brewing a lot of potions, and I'm sure they'll sell more soon. But, for now, there really is no harm in letting me cover the bills."

Severus clenched the edge of the counter, his knuckles growing white as he looked out the window over the sink into the dark back garden. "I can...consider it a loan," he finally conceded.

Hermione sighed. "Is that really necessary? Really, Severus. Have you bought anything for yourself at all since we've been here? Anything?"

"I purchased a set of work robes and some green wellies last month since I was preparing the garden beds for the winter."

Hermione decided not to argue that she thought his meagre purchases didn't really count. "Do you have any regular customers yet?"

After a long moment of staring out into the dark night, he turned and sat heavily at the table, resting his forehead on his hands. "Borgin and Burkes has been giving me sporadic business. The Apothecary in Hogsmeade has been making regular, if small, orders, as has the one in Diagon Alley. I anticipate more orders in the springtime. I've sent letters to a number of former associates who weren't Death Eaters, but have yet to hear anything from them. Perhaps I have sabotaged my business prospects by demanding such high standards of my students. The vast majority of witches and wizards who went to Hogwarts during my tenure should be able to brew most basic potions with little difficulty, and many can brew intermediate and even advanced potions, which means that most everyone between the ages of eighteen and thirty would have little need to contract those potions."

"What about some of the household potions manufacturers? They might need a Potions brewer; maybe, until your individual sales pick up, you could go for a job with one of them if you want. But if you really think things will pick up in the spring, just let me cover the bills. Really, I'm making enough to do that now."

His head raised and he rested his chin on his hands, looking at her as she finished. Yes, her argument seemed logical enough, but it didn't feel right. He should be capable of paying their expenses. "Very well, but only until I can cover the expenses myself."

Severus was walking through Knockturn Alley the next morning on his way to visit Borgin and Burkes shop to see about drumming up additional sales of his potions. A very light, slushy snow was falling; it was early November, and the weather had turned cold, wet, and generally miserable. He had received a letter delivered through Fawkes that morning, too, and would be headed to visit the Headmaster that afternoon, presumably for news regarding the killer, who was still at large, and still mysteriously inactive.

He walked into the shop after casting a quick silencing spell on the bells which alerted the manager to a customer's presence, and looked around, growing agitated that he did not see his potions display. Finally, he found it, nestled near the back of the shop behind a dusty crate. Lips set in a tight line, he walked to the back door and pounded firmly on it.

"Whadaya...oh, good morning, Mr Snape," Mr Borgin said, offering him a slimy-looking smile as he stood in the doorway, blocking the office behind him from view, sliding out and shutting the door behind him. Severus thought the pathetic attempt to hide whatever unsavoury business partner was inside only made the shop owner appear more incompetent. "What can I do for our up and coming potions brewer, then?"

"First, you can take my potions display and place it where customers might actually see it!" he hissed angrily. "Secondly, I have a catalogue which I want available along with the display." He had spent several hours after Hermione had gone to bed the previous night carefully considering which potions to offer, and had made a small catalogue which he hoped would encourage customers to contact him directly.

"Ahh, yes, well, you know...just been doing some re-arranging about the place is all, Mr Snape. We'll have your display out where people might see it soon enough."

Snape reached forward with lightning-fast speed, closing his fingers around the throat of the man before him. "I daresay you will keep it in the front, or *certain parties* might become aware of the cause of a *certain incident* which they are still quite upset about, Borgin." The man's eyes widened in fear, then he nodded in understanding.

Snape released him, then turned to his display, withdrawing his wand and levitating it to a better location. He paused only to leave a stack of catalogues at the display, then walked from the shop, glad that he knew enough of certain people's pasts to give him decent bargaining tools.

In Diagon Alley, he stopped at Slug and Jiggers Apothecary, where he dropped off an order and was pleased to have a good-sized list of orders waiting for him. He spent a few moments talking with the proprietor, whose daughter had graduated from Hogwarts, one of his Slytherin students, nearly ten years before and who had a favourable opinion of her former Head of House due to the special attention he'd given her in adjusting to the difficult time of her mother's passing away.

He decided to go to Gringotts to withdraw enough to cover the current bills. He imagined Hermione must be deep under the bank then; the only humans in the lobby were customers. He discovered Hermione had transferred two hundred Galleons from her savings, and he had the appropriate amounts transferred to Muggle currency for their rent and utilities, then took Galleons and Sickles to pay the monthly Floo connection fee, and picked up several things at the market.

When he'd done that, it was lunchtime, and he decided to see if Hermione was taking her lunch break out of the bank. He saw her as he approached, walking between Bill Weasley and another man who looked to be his age, but Severus didn't recognise him from anywhere.

"Severus, hi!" Hermione called, smiling as she came down the stairs. "I didn't know you would be here today."

"I've had business to attend to and thought to see if you had plans for lunch," he said as he walked close enough so he didn't have to raise his voice for her to hear him.

"I usually have lunch with Bill and Edgar, but if you'd like to go for lunch that would be fine."

"The Leakey Cauldron has a special today which looks good."

"Bill, Edgar, I'll see you guys in an hour," she said, turning to face the two men coming down the stairs. They waved her off, nodding politely but distantly to Severus.

Hermione and Severus walked to the Leakey Cauldron, where they both decided on the day's special, Colcannon and Corned Beef.

"I'm wondering...now, don't say 'no' too fast, Severus," Hermione began over lunch. "Fred and George are doing really well in their business...no, Severus, hear me out," she said, holding up a hand when she saw his mouth open to protest. "I was going to *suggest* that you advertise with them. They have people in and out of their shops all the time. I could talk to them about it, if you don't want to."

"I see, and what should I advertise for their clientele, Pimple Pulveriser Potion?" he said, sneering.

"Actually, that would be a great idea, Severus," Hermione agreed, ignoring his sarcasm. "And besides Pimple Pulveriser Potion, I'm sure you have several other potions that would do well with that market. Also, I imagine with their workload, since they are very careful about letting their particular potions recipes out, they might need additional help from someone who they know is trustworthy. Now, I know some of them wouldn't necessarily want to buy from their former Potions master, but it wouldn't be too difficult to come up with a more appealing market label..."

Severus raised an eyebrow when he came upstairs from the cellar, where he had been brewing several potions, upon seeing Hermione waving her wand at a tree placed along the front wall between the window and the door. Due to Hermione's ideas, Severus had had quite a bit of business...ironically, the Pimple Pulveriser Potion, indeed, had sold very well, and he brewed a very large cauldron full nearly once a week to distribute between the Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes shops. He should have thought of that himself, he realised in retrospect. However, going for help to two of the most annoying students he'd ever had was something he really hadn't wanted to do. In the end, he had spoken to them himself, rather than have Hermione do it. Had she been their intercessor, it would have only appeared that he was unable to take care of those things on his own.

He was now able to cover their household expenses from his sales alone, and felt much better about that. And that morning while making his delivery rounds to the apothecaries and the Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes shops, he had done a bit of shopping of his own.

"How very...festive," he commented.

Hermione turned to him, smiling. "I thought it should look more...Christmassy." She shrugged, then looked around and cast a Dusting Charm on the mantle, bookcases, and the desk.

Severus wasn't particularly looking forward to the coming week; Hermione's parents would be visiting. They were to spend the last day of her parents' visit with the Weasleys, and he hadn't been able to find an adequate excuse to get out of it.

"I just hope my Transfiguration was strong enough to hold for the week."

"If it's not, I'm sure they'll have quite a surprise when the bed reverts to a towel and a few books beneath them." Hermione shot a scowl at him, then went to the kitchen to pull the last batch of Christmas treats from the oven. He followed her silently, waiting until she had placed the hot tray down on the stovetop, before firmly grasping her hips from behind.

"Come to bed, Hermione," he whispered in her ear. "I've an early Christmas present for you..."

"What kind of present?" Hermione asked sceptically.

"Come and find out," he murmured silkily.

Upstairs, he blindfolded her and bound her hair back, then slowly removed her clothing and stood back, looking her up and down as she stood waiting, nerves nearly visibly humming with anticipation. He'd left the protection amulet on her, and he admired how it set off her skin as it hung neatly between her pert breasts. He knew she was expecting a present of a sexual sort of application, what with the way he had chosen to give it to her. He thought she would be surprised.

He removed his own clothes, then stepped forward quickly, scooping her up and depositing her on the bed, swiftly binding her wrists to the headboard. He teased and stroked her body, nipping, then suckling at her nipples, carrying on until she was writhing beneath him in frustration, trying unsuccessfully to grind against him. He would slap her on the thigh and move out of range, laughing at her torment each time she tried.

He drew back after a time, smiling down at her, feeling a strange pressure in his chest and an odd constricting sensation in his throat.

"Severus, please..." she groaned.

"Would you like your present now?" he asked.

"Yes! Stop teasing!"

Severus laughed. He got out of bed, quickly fishing in his discarded cloak pocket for the gift he'd bought her. It was probably more expensive than what he should have bought, but things were going well enough that he felt he could afford it. He got back into bed, then frowned, wondering if he should remove Hermione's blindfold so she could see it, but he decided that it would probably jar the anticipation he'd carefully built.

He draped the gold cord around her neck, allowing the diamond pendant which hung from it to fall in the hollow of her throat. "Lift your head," he murmured. She did so slowly, obviously trying to feel what it was he'd given her, and he clasped the pendant around her neck. This, too, he had already cast a series of protection spells on, which would cause anyone who wished to do her harm to become extremely confused in her presence. It was something he couldn't have given her while they had lived at Hogwarts, as these particular charms would cause enough confusion around some students who might have disliked her that it would have presented an interference in testing and classroom performance, so it wouldn't have been allowed. He should have given her something like it earlier, after leaving Hogwarts, he thought.

"What is it?" she asked in a whisper.

"Something else for your protection," he said, running his fingers over the smooth, flat gold, and fingering the pendant. He lowered his lips to her neck then; his hands moved down her body as he moved over her, slowly entering her.

"I want to make sure no one can hurt you, Hermione," he sighed as he sheathed himself fully in her. "You're mine," he whispered so softly it was barely audible. Severus savoured their coupling, the feel of her body beneath his, her lips and teeth on his shoulder, her nipples against his chest, her legs around his waist. As she neared climax, he realised he wanted to watch her face fully, and he reached up and tore both the blindfold and the bindings around her wrists away.

Their eyes met, and his hands entwined into her hair as he lowered his face to hers, kissing her fiercely; he felt like he wanted the moment to go on forever, to have her body against his forever...it was a feeling unlike anything he'd ever felt for anyone before.

For hours afterward, he felt an odd disquiet, as if something were seriously wrong. It was uncomfortable; he couldn't place the strange feeling he'd felt as he'd neared climax, a feeling which had pervaded him for some time afterwards. Finally, he put it out of his mind, deciding that he had other things which needed his attention, and he lost himself in reading a book, while trying to block out the sound of Hermione watching a show about the history of the myths of witchcraft in the British Isles.

The week before Christmas wasn't so bad as Severus had thought it would be. He would retreat occasionally to the cellar; he did still have potions to brew. He made a few excuses to go for walks, as well. Mostly, he realised that with Hermione's parents there, he felt like a third wheel. It had felt the same the previous Christmas, but he didn't think it was right that he felt like that in his own home. Hermione's mother had practically taken over the kitchen, baking treats, dinners, and large breakfasts. She noticed halfway through the week that the refrigerator was unplugged, and as he happened to be in there at the moment and Hermione was not, he'd had to explain to her the Cooling Charm he used in the refrigerator, and the Freezing Charm he used in the freezer each morning instead of having the Muggle device run and use electricity needlessly.

The transfigured furniture in the guest room did hold out for the week. He employed silencing charms on their bedroom a few nights that week so he and Hermione could enjoy themselves without the need to try to be quiet.

Hermione's father, after the third day, came down to the cellar while Severus was brewing. "Hermione isn't here, if you're looking for her," said Severus, looking up from the large cauldron momentarily while carefully keeping track of the count of his stirs.

"No, I'd come to tell you that...well, it could be better, but since you're just starting out, I think you've done well enough here. I suppose it's different for you magical people."

"Good of you to say so," Severus replied neutrally. Last year, he had seemed more at ease with Hermione's father...he didn't quite understand why it was different this year. Somehow, blithely putting the man in his place didn't seem the correct course of action. "Hermione has taken to decorating, as I'm sure you've noticed, and she seems satisfied with things as they are," he said when Frank Granger continued to stand there.

"What's that you're brewing?" he asked, stepping forward to peer into the orange, gelatinous liquid in the cauldron. Severus bit the inside of his cheek in irritation.

"Pimple Pulveriser Potion. Unfortunately, it seems to be of the highest demand at the moment...I'm sure all the chocolate the pubescent dunderheads stuff themselves with these days has something to do with that."

Frank chuckled. They chatted for several moments about inanities, small talk, the weather, then Frank said he thought he heard Jane calling, and exited the cellar.

Christmas day, they exchanged gifts. He'd bought Hermione some books, in addition to the amulet he'd already given her. Hermione had gotten creative with her gift-giving, trimming her list of people to give gifts to down to close friends and immediate family, sending cards to everyone who'd been on her Christmas list previously.

He appreciated the gift she had for him: a thick, forest green, woollen jumper. It fitted him perfectly, and while not his customary black, was something that wouldn't look unprofessional or tacky under his robes. When they progressed to gifts from friends that were under the tree, he clenched his teeth when he saw what Harry had bought her: hair combs, expensive hair combs, with tastefully arranged diamonds and rubies on gold. Her mother, infuriatingly, urged her to put them on. When she did, he could see that it did look quite nice on her; however, that sort of gift was entirely inappropriate.

Much later that night, as they were getting ready for bed, she noticed his disapproving glance at the hair ornaments when she put them in her jewellery box. "Severus, Harry has a lot of money...really, I'm sure everyone on his Christmas list got something a bit...well, extravagant."

"Of course," he said, obviously not meaning it. He sighed then, seeing her lips tighten as she closed the lid of the jewellery box. "Potter is a young man who has always striven for that which he cannot have; he fits people he knows into the roles he wishes he'd had in his early life. Perhaps you don't see it, but I do." He eased into bed, casting a warming charm between the sheets and quickly pulling them up to his chin. "Aren't you coming to bed?"

"Yes," she answered with a sigh. Once between the warm, flannel sheets, she wondered if maybe he could be right. Harry *had* been spending a lot of time with them. But, she was tired, and it seemed Severus was as well; his breathing changed to a deep rhythmic pattern, the warm caress of his exhalations lulling her quickly to sleep, too.

Boxing Day at The Burrow was as hectic as ever. Hermione's parents, having stumbled upon arrival by Portkey, her mother swearing there had to be another way back home, had a wonderful time. Hermione smiled as her dad was cornered by Arthur, demanding details about Muggle dentistry. Hermione's mum looked with interest at the goings on in the kitchen...Molly had charmed a good portion of the cooking, and bowls with mixing spoons were mixing themselves, potatoes were being chopped with self-propelled knives, pots were being stirred, and a rolling pin was flattening dough all while Molly bustled about, managing to seem to have everything under control in the small, crowded, and loud home. Harry, as ever, seemed in his element amidst it all, and sat on the couch, watching everything happily.

Fleur and Bill were expecting, and Molly seemed to be reliving her own six pregnancies, telling Fleur far more details about the cravings she'd experienced, the swollen ankles, the stretch marks that had started before she'd found a potion to erase them than Fleur seemed to want to hear...but that by the time Ron and Ginny came around, she hadn't bothered with the anti-stretch mark potion any more. Fleur informed her stiffly, after some time, that: "We handle all zat differently back home; my mozzer had none of zose problems." Molly, of course, went back to the kitchen in a huff, and Bill followed to try to make peace.

Fred and George were testing out a new product, and Ginny found herself turned into a walrus temporarily. Unfortunately, they hadn't perfected the antidote, and Ginny still had walrus whiskers when Hermione, Severus, and her parents left The Burrow. She hexed both of them soundly, telling them she'd give them the counter-curse when she was completely cured. However, the elephant ears they wore were a source of amusement for them and everyone else, and not much of a motivation for them to fix Ginny's whiskers.

Hermione caught up with her about how her seventh year was going, though when Ginny was telling her about the new Potions master, who was apparently rather nice, Hermione noticed Severus's lips drawn in a tight line and he found an excuse to go outside for some air.

"Oi! Hermione!" Ron yelled, rushing into the house. There had been so much activity, she hadn't noticed he wasn't there before. "Take a look at this!" he said loudly, holding out a scroll. "I've won a trip in a contest...didn't think I'd win, really...but I can bring five friends along, all for free, too!"

It turned out, three months before, Ron had entered a contest advertised at Florean Fortescue's Ice-Cream Parlour, which had asked for the solving of a riddle. He'd jotted down what he thought it might be after thinking about it a moment, and had pushed the parchment into the entry box. The Grand Prize, a trip to a wizarding hotel nestled in an Alpine ski resort, was something he was excited to share with his friends.

He asked Hermione, after making sure that Parvati and Harry could come. No one else was able to make it, however. Arthur wished he could have, but he'd already taken his allotted vacation time that year, and the trip was for the week before the new year.

Severus Apparated home, alone. Hermione had gone with her parents to make sure the Portkey didn't jar them too much on the way home. While he had, of course, been looking forward to finally having her alone to ravish, he knew that Hermione would be upset if she had missed out on the trip with her friends, which she would be returning to pack for. He had given Potter a severe glare before he left, sending him the unspoken message that he knew very well what was on the boy's mind. The way he had watched Hermione all that day had been pathetic. The boy was obviously in love with her probably, he thought, because he couldn't have her.

He was still very full from Mrs Weasley's cooking, and so decided to forgo dinner.

Hermione came home while he was reading, accompanied by Harry, Ron, and Parvati Patil, and she rushed upstairs to pack while the three others shifted uncomfortably as Severus glanced at them disapprovingly.

"I'll see you at the end of the week, Severus. Are you sure you don't want to come?" Hermione asked when she came back downstairs, a bag slung over her shoulder.

"Yes, I'm quite sure," he answered, levelling his gaze at her. "You will be careful, of course."

"Yes, of course I will." She paused near where he was at, nearly glancing at her friends, debating something internally before she gave him a smile and turned to leave.

The next day he spent brewing potions, and when it came time to make supper, he felt slightly irritated that he was cooking only for himself. Deciding it wasn't worth the bother, he made a simple sandwich, then went upstairs to relax in a bath with a book.

By the time Thursday came, he found himself pacing the house, and decided to go outside and take a long walk, trudging through the biting wind and snow as he worked off excess energy. He was starting to wish he had taken up Weasley's last minute, though reluctant, offer to come along on the trip. He decided he must be accustomed to regular sex, and rather didn't appreciate being deprived of it. When he returned home, and later to bed late that night, he began to try to relieve his sexual tension, but stopped after only a few strokes, thinking of something else he'd rather do. He got out of bed and went downstairs to his desk, quickly writing a letter to Hermione and sending it off with their owl. It should get to her by the next morning, he thought.

Hermione spent the first day of their vacation sightseeing with her friends. They went skiing the next day, Hermione finally agreeing after they had prodded her into the ski-rental shop and cajoled and promised she'd have a great time. Eight hours later, when she finally reached the bottom of the ski slopes, she was tired, wet, cranky, and sore, and wanted nothing more than to get back to her hotel room and relax in a warm bath. If there hadn't been so many Muggles around, she would have Apparated back. As it was, she had to trudge to the ski shop by herself, as she had encouraged Harry to go on since she was slow on skis and kept crashing even as she went down the easiest slopes in a permanent wedge to keep her speed as low as possible. Her thighs ached with the continuous effort of the position. Harry must have passed her, pausing to glide alongside her to talk on each trip down, at least six times. Skiing really was not her thing.

When she exited the rental shop, she ran into the other three, who were just getting back, looking flushed and happy. They all wanted to go out around the town, and so they started out, Hermione thinking of bowing out early, and then they went to eat at a little bistro.

The next day, as they were walking, Ron and Parvati kept getting 'lost' in secluded nooks in the mountain town's shops, and Harry had suggested that they should quit playing around and just go back to their hotel room, as they weren't getting much out of the trip anyway. They agreed gladly, and Hermione and Harry walked together through the town, stopping at a secluded restaurant that specialised in sandwiches for lunch. Harry ordered a Monte Cristo, and, after seeing another customer receiving the same order, offered to split it with Hermione.

They ate together, talking about their years together at Hogwarts, where they thought they might be in ten years, and how they were enjoying their lives so far.

"So, Harry, are you seeing anyone yet?" Hermione asked as she munched a thick chip.

Harry opened his mouth, blushed, then looked down at the table, poking his chip in his ketchup idly. "I, well...I've been on a few dates...but I don't really feel like dating...I suppose my standards are too high..."

"Oh? What are you waiting for?"

"Someone special...someone who cares about me for me, and not because I'm famous for defeating Voldemort...someone who doesn't care about all that...someone who knows me, who is smart and independent and a good listener and who will tell me when she thinks I'm making a mistake...someone like...someone like you, Hermione."

Hermione froze mid-bite, staring at him. Harry raised his bright green eyes to meet hers boldly, even as a red blush spread over his face. She swallowed and blushed herself as Harry looked back down at his plate.

"Harry..."

"No...don't, Hermione. I've just...I know it can't happen, but I'm not going to settle for anything less than someone like you...I think...I think that you're perfect." He reached

across the table suddenly and grasped her hand tightly. "It was about more than I could take when the Marriage Law passed and you had to marry that...when you had to marry *him*. I know there can't...well, that we can be friends, and that if I can't have you like I want to, then I want to have you as a friend and I'm happy with that...I just hope...I just hope he's truly worthy of you, and I hope he appreciates you."

"Harry, this is just..." Hermione trailed off, not sure what to say. If it was true that Harry had feelings for her, that he wanted to be with her, then that certainly put a lot of pieces together. Severus had been right about him. The rest of the meal passed awkwardly, silently, as they picked at their food. Each tried at several intervals to say something, but stopped, neither having words that could describe the situation.

"Harry...I need to be alone now. I'm sorry," Hermione muttered, then made a quick exit from the restaurant, hurrying back to the hotel room. The injustice of the Marriage Law, which she thought she'd dealt with, thought she'd learned to live with in relative contentment, felt as if it would overwhelm her. She *should have* been free to pursue her own relationships...a relationship with Harry, who, though she'd never before thought of him as a potential lover, only as a wonderful friend, she realised she could have been very happy with if she had been free to pursue that.

Back in her hotel room, she found a letter from Severus on her bed.

Hermione,

I have a game for us. Tonight, and for the rest of your trip, I want for you to pleasure yourself. However, you are firmly forbidden to climax. When you return home, your obedience will be well rewarded...disobedience will be creatively punished.

Severus

Hermione angrily crumpled the note, then incinerated it in her hand. Harry would never have demanded any sort of sexual servitude of her. Yes, she'd agreed to it; yes, she'd learned to enjoy it; yes, she had gotten used to Severus, trusted Severus, but at the moment, none of that seemed to matter.

She wasn't sure how much later it was. Hermione had been sitting on the edge of her bed for a long time, feeling blank and numb when there was a knock on the door. She knew even before she opened it that it would be Harry.

"Hermione, please, just listen to me. I shouldn't have said that...I'm sorry, I know you can't..." His apologies, explanations, fumbling for words all ran together as she looked at him, truly seeing for the first time his deep green eyes, the way his black hair stood out in all directions, falling over his forehead and making his eyes seem all the more beautiful. His lips, which he bit and moistened with his tongue in his awkward apology, were so tempting.

"Hush, Harry," Hermione whispered, stepping close to him and tilting her head. Time seemed to hold still as their lips met, arms entwining around each other's bodies. His kiss wasn't nearly as practised as Severus's, his movements were slightly awkward, but Hermione didn't notice that. Instead, she felt how much he truly cared for her, that how he held her was in a way not to elicit a calculated response of lust and arousal in her body, but was an expression of his feelings, his love.

When their kiss finally broke, they drew back, looking in each other's eyes, which were misty with unshed tears. His hand reached up and stroked her cheek; her hand entwined through his tousled hair. Again, their lips met and Hermione felt that she'd never been kissed like this...her stomach fluttered and her throat constricted. Without thought, they moved slowly to the couch in the room; hungrily, desperately, they kissed, embraced. It was joyful and tragic all at once, and both had tears spilling freely from their eyes when they parted again, breathing hard and fast. Hermione became aware that in the position they'd fallen, she could feel that he was very aroused.

Harry, it seemed, realised what she was feeling at just that moment, and pulled away from her. "I shouldn't have..." he muttered.

"Harry, no...it was me, I wanted...I still want...oh God!" Hermione leaned forward, burying her head in his chest. "I'd never thought I didn't know...if I'd known you felt like that...I'm just...and the goddamned Marriage Law! Why did this happen to me?" she wailed. "It wasn't so bad...I mean, it's okay, he took some getting used to; it was actually pretty rough at first, but I just thought that it would work out, that maybe we could be happy...and it's not like we aren't happy or anything...I just...I don't love him, Harry, and I don't think I ever will no matter how much I wish I could...that would make it so much easier."

"It's been over a year now and I don't think I can ever love him. Most of the time, I try not to think about it; it's not like we're fighting or anything; it's actually fairly comfortable. He works; I work; we even share the housekeeping." Hermione laughed through wet sniffles. "He just seems so...so cold...I'm not sure if he's even capable of love...his life has been so different that I'm not sure I could ever understand him."

"He might not be able to love you, Hermione...but I'll always be here; I'll always love you, even if things didn't work out like that."

"But, Harry, you can't! You can't put your life on hold and sit around waiting for me, putting me on some kind of pedestal and never finding someone you can be with. It's not right." After a long pause, she asked, "Harry, have you even ever...um, been with anybody...you know...?"

"Um...no...I tried a few times, with a few of the girls I've been on dates with...it never got very far. It didn't feel right; they didn't want me for me; they wanted me because I was 'The Boy Who Lived' and not Harry...just... Harry." He pressed his lips together, glancing down. "I don't think they really were out to get me like some kind of notch on a bedpost or anything...it was just...not right." He sighed as he held her, inhaling the scent of her hair.

"Right now, I really wish we could..." Hermione said. "They've got a horrible Binding Spell on us...me and Severus, that is...I know someone who tried being with someone else...it was awful for her."

"I'd never want to do anything to hurt you, Hermione. Besides, even if it weren't for that, it would only make things harder with you and...Snape."

"I'm not all that sure it would, Harry." She lifted her head to look at him. "In fact, I really think, if it wasn't for the Binding Spell, he'd be perfectly fine with...well, each of us going our separate ways from time to time, just for the variety," she ended sardonically, scowling as she shrugged. At Harry's questioning look, she added, "For him, sex doesn't really mean...well...for him it's a good time, it's fun, a physical release and..." she paused wondering how much she should say, "he's told me that he's never had a monogamous relationship before we got married; I think he resented it at first."

"Oh God, Hermione...I didn't know...was he ever...hell, I'm not sure what I'm saying. I just want the best for you, and I just couldn't imagine...I mean, maybe since I never have, I might be making more of it than what I should...I just know that when I do, I don't want it to be something that's just for a good time...it's supposed to be special."

Hermione eased back against his chest, holding him as tightly as he held her, wishing she could help him, wishing she could help herself. Harry was silent, simply holding her, while she began working over the problem, justifying in her mind what she wished she could do. After all, hadn't he said he'd never been monogamous, that he'd never demanded monogamy of his sexual partners...all he'd wanted was for them to submit to him while they were together. If it weren't for that Binding Spell...which, now that she thought about it as a problem to work out, she realised it would have weaknesses. She tried to remember that girl who'd activated it...she said one thing led to another, and then it happened, but she hadn't gone into detail about *when* it had happened.

"Harry...I have an idea," she said carefully, looking at him. "The Binding Spell...well, I think, if we set certain limits, wouldn't activate...we might not be able to, well, go all the way...but I don't think that should matter, do you? I mean...if we were creative?" She met his eyes hopefully, with a thrill of excitement, watching as understanding lit up his eyes, too.

"Hermione, you shouldn't do anything you don't want..." He was silenced suddenly as she kissed him.

"I want you, Harry," she whispered fiercely in his ear before she nipped a spot just below his earlobe, which she hoped would work on him the way it did on Severus. He gasped, stiffening beneath her, moaning wordlessly.

At first, he was hesitant in his movements, careful in touching her, not wanting to move too fast for her, but her urgency soon made him forget. For Harry, the feel of her

tongue against his, her lips trailing nips and kisses down his neck...his breathless excitement as she slowly unbuttoned his shirt, nipping at his chest, trailing her fingers around his body, was overwhelming. He wished he'd realised sooner why it was he'd been so upset about her marriage, but gradually, and especially after he'd left Hogwarts, he'd come to realise that she meant so much more to him than just a friend. While he'd masturbated plenty before, lately with the image of Hermione as he took himself in hand, the tightness in his cock was like nothing he'd felt before.

He knew, even if it couldn't be what he'd hoped for, it would still be something meaningful, something memorable, because it was Hermione, not the specific act, that was important.

Hermione was deep in thought the next morning. Harry had left, almost shyly, an hour before, giving her a chaste kiss before leaving, shoulders stooped and feet shuffling as he glanced back at her sadly before he'd closed the door of her hotel room. When they'd both come to completion, they'd fallen into a deep sleep together, wrapped in each other's arms.

What she'd shared with Harry the previous night had seemed to be such a loving, and even special, experience, despite the fact that there had been no direct intimate contact; it had all been through clothing, his thigh insinuated between her legs firmly as she rocked rhythmically, and her hand squeezing the bulge in his trousers as they kissed and touched.

In nearly a year and a half with Severus, and the extremes of sexual experimentation they had gone to, the times that she had felt their sexual congress really and truly had involved any depth of feeling she could count on her fingers. The day before her parents had come to visit was one of those times. Hermione reached into her handbag and pulled out the necklace he'd given her then, following it with the words 'You're mine'. She fastened it around her neck and fiddled with the gold and diamond pendant that fell just at the hollow of her throat, closing her eyes tightly at the burning sensation of tears trying to escape.

Had she cheated on Severus? And if she had, did it really mean anything in their kind of marriage, a marriage brought on because of a law, a marriage neither of them would have sought had it not been for that law, a marriage he had approached, at least for a good portion of the first year of it, as a trade of sexual cooperation for protection? Did his recent behaviour show that he really felt something for her, or was it simply the both of them growing more comfortable in their existence together?

She remembered then what he had told her in their first meetings regarding her decision on who to marry. *As my wife, you would not have a doting husband to buy you gifts, or to read you sonnets...*

He hadn't read her sonnets, certainly, but he had bought her gifts, and a very expensive one, at that, recently, one which showed thought for both her safety and for something nice for her to have. He wasn't exactly 'doting'...but he did cook dinner most of the time, and had made an almost total reversal from his original statement that she would have to cover all her own expenses.

What he'd told her of his family which still wasn't much was enough that she could believe that, perhaps, Severus really had never seen what a loving relationship was about. His father had been abusive, and his mother had been a neglectful alcoholic whom he hadn't spoken to in well over twenty years, and didn't even know if she was dead or alive.

His early sexual experiences, going on what he'd told her, had been casual, meaning nothing more than a physically good time, and in a way in which he had been in charge. Perhaps, given his early life, his lack of control through bullying at school, he had latched on to a method which seemed to give him power, which provided him with sexual pleasure and still protected him from being powerless. She remembered how adamant he had been about requiring her to submit...and had certainly noticed that over the last six months, his harshness in their sexual encounters had waned considerably he was even accommodating; he rarely gave her orders, and when he did, he phrased it more as a suggestion a request than a requirement.

But she knew, especially after what had happened last night with Harry, that she couldn't continue to live in a relationship that was that of housemates and meaningless sex. She needed to feel loved, to feel cherished Harry would cherish her, she knew, but that wasn't possible; she realised with some guilt that though she loved Harry as a friend, she didn't love him like that. In a way, she felt as if she'd taken advantage of him, of his feelings for her, to experiment, to experience something like that with someone who did care for her the way she wished Severus did.

Hermione decided, as she rose and gathered her packed travelling bag, that she would go home, and would have a long talk with Severus. She wasn't precisely looking forward to telling him what had happened with Harry, but she decided that she needed to tell him, to explain *why* it had happened, that she needed more than simple 'contentment'. If he wanted her to be happy as he claimed, and if he wanted her to remain with him, he was going to have to work at opening himself up. It wouldn't necessarily be easy, but it was what needed to be done, and she was going to insist upon it.

If he couldn't do that, she would tell him that even if they couldn't fully have sex with anyone else, there was quite a lot which could be accomplished without completing the act that wouldn't activate the Fidelity Charm.

Hermione was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she didn't notice the darkly cloaked figure in the corner of the otherwise deserted room as she made her way to the Floo. She would go first to the International Floo hub, then Apparate home. As she reached for the jar of Floo powder on the wide mantle, everything went dark as a cloth bag was jerked over her head and a drawstring pulled snug around her neck; strong arms grabbed her suddenly, pinning her arms to her sides. She struggled and kicked, screaming loudly out of instinct, but before she could place an effective blow, her assailant placed something in her hand, and she felt the sudden lurch of a Portkey.

With a thud, they came to a stop, and Hermione renewed her struggles.

"Shh, we'll be there soon," a voice whispered in a low register so that she couldn't recognise it, if, indeed, it was even a voice she would recognise in a normal speaking tone.

"Let me go!" she shrieked, and stomped down on the man's foot, hard. He made a strangled sounding whimper, then pushed her away, tearing her cloak off of her, and pulling her travelling bag away. Hermione reached up to pull the bag from her head, but hands grabbed her forearms in a vice-like grip, and she found something thrust into her hand again, and again, the lurch of a Portkey jolted her.

This time when they landed, Hermione let forth a burst of wandless magic in her panic, and the man was pushed away from her. She tried to reach for her wand again, but before she could she was thrown to the ground as he landed atop her heavily, pinning her arms and legs to the ground with his own limbs.

"Stop fighting!" he hissed. "I'm not going to hurt you; we'll be there soon." As he whispered, holding her down firmly and shifting his grip to hold both her wrists with one hand, he ripped her jumper up over her head, releasing her wrists just long enough to pull the garment from her, and she blindly struck out, a fist connecting heavily with the side of his neck. He overpowered her again, holding her down, and she felt his hand at her throat.

"Stop! Get off of me!" she screamed, panic-stricken and struggling. She tried, even in her panic, to summon the concentration needed to Apparate, but with her assailant holding onto her and her own panic, Apparation was impossible.

"I can't," he whispered back to her, and Hermione thought she heard a slight sob come from above her, then there was a jerk and a snap of stinging pain around her neck; he had pulled off the necklace Severus had given her. She heard it clatter on the ground, then she felt yet another object placed in her hand firmly, and, again, she was propelled through space, feeling sick with fear and motion-sickness.

Severus startled to attention as his wand crackled with energy. Reaching for it quickly from where he was seated in the bathtub, he focused on it, realising the spell on the amulet he'd given Hermione was giving its alert. She was in danger. He leapt out of the tub, not even bothering to cast a drying charm on himself, and quickly pulled on the robes he'd removed earlier which were still covered in potions stains from the morning's work; he'd wanted to bathe before moving on to less messy tasks for the day.

He ran downstairs, a feeling of panic emanating from his wand, and felt a sickening nauseous feeling. Once outside the wards, he focused on her, then Disapparated.

With a sickening lurch, he landed and looked around, just in time to see a cloaked figure on top of Hermione in a hotel lobby clasping her hand just as they disappeared. He stood, and again focused on Hermione's amulet...but this time he felt that she was much further away. He had to focus. Burying all emotion he felt, including the frustration that the process of focusing took precious moments, he Disapparated again.

He found himself in dusty, empty room. There, on the floor, the dust was disturbed, still floating in the air. Her cloak and travelling bag were tossed against the far wall.

Again, he pulled together his resolve, and focused on the spell with Hermione's amulet. He had to get to her, had to find her before she was hurt. He Disapparated.

When he Apparated, he gasped in pain, nearly blacking out. He thought it must have been the furthest he'd ever Apparated in his life. He let out a strangled scream of frustration when he scrambled around just in time to see a blurry shape vanishing not more than five feet from where he'd landed. He gasped when he saw Hermione's jumper, the one Mrs Weasley had given her that Christmas, on the floor...and then a glitter of the necklace he'd just given her as well. "Hermione..." he whispered, nearly choking.

Once more, he focused, and this time, it took nearly every reserve of magical energy to Apparate in one piece. They weren't here here being a hotel room of some kind. Standing up, he tried again to focus on the amulet, but realised with horror that it was laying on the floor of the room he stood in.

Reviews are appreciated! :-)

Shadows Unveiled

Chapter 26 of 31

Severus searches for Hermione, while her kidnapper explains a few things.

Thanks to Nakhash Mekhashefah, beta extrodinare.

Severus couldn't feel Hermione anymore. He felt a cold dread fall over him, almost like a Disillusionment Charm had been cast upon him, as he picked up the amulet, which Hermione had worn since before they had been married, suddenly thinking it incredibly stupid to have tried something so simple to protect her.

He focused, trying to think of anything he could do to follow the trail. Also on the floor he found a baby-rattle...a slight hum of magic was left on it...an unauthorised, one-time use, Portkey. Hermione's kidnapper had used a series of them, apparently realising he would have thought of having a way to track her, and, at each stopping point, had left more of her clothing behind. He hoped, how he hoped, that they weren't removing her clothing for any other reason...especially with the strong Fidelity Charm in place...that would only make something like that even worse for her.

He needed help: Aurors, Magical Law Enforcement, the full force of the Order of the Phoenix. Now. But first he had to figure out where he was at so he could return. He was in a Muggle hotel room in what looked to be, judging from the view outside the window once he got to his feet, somewhere in Russia. He grabbed a pad of stationery from the bedside table and placed wards on the room so its contents would remain undisturbed until Aurors could get to the location to investigate.

Resolve firmed, he focused on pulling himself together and Disapparated. He couldn't do it all at once, and at each location he took a precious few minutes to look around and see if he could discern his location.

He found himself, at the next location, inside a log cabin. Light filtered in through cracks in the shutters on the windows, and he found the door. When he opened it, snow spilled inside; it was nearly chest-deep outside. He Apparated the short distance to stand outside, rather than try to clamber out, and saw that there was thick deep snow as far as he could see and a pine forest in the distance beyond an open plain. The sun was very low on the horizon, though it had been mid-morning back in England; a quick check revealed that it would be sunset soon, though it was only about three in the afternoon. He cast a beacon back inside the cabin.

Next, he found himself in an abandoned Muggle flat. Since he had Apparated to each of these locations only moments before, even though he didn't know the exact location, finding them again was possible. Looking out the windows, a thick hedge prevented him from seeing anything, and when he went outside, it was very cold, but the neighbourhood was terribly non-descript. It could have been just about any residential neighbourhood found in most of Europe or the north UK built about fifty or sixty years ago. He walked further up the street and found a street sign written in Swedish.

The next place would be to the original point that Hermione had been when she'd been attacked that morning. He knew where it was, though he'd never been there. He cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself, just in case he Apparated to a point where he might be seen, and Apparated to the mountain village high in the Alps. He found the hotel quickly by following the signs; he was only a few blocks from it, and bright signs, which could not be seen by Muggles, led the way. Nearly at a run, he went into the hotel lobby. No one was present, but as he entered, a chime sounded and an attendant came out of a door behind the desk.

"Welcome to the Magical Alpine Resort," the lady said, looking around in confusion. Severus ignored her and instead proceeded into the lobby, deciding to remove the Disillusionment Charm, producing a startled gasp from the lobby attendant. He saw the large fireplace at the far wall; the Floo powder canister had been knocked over and had spread powder all over the floor.

"My goodness, someone made a mess!" the lady, who had followed Severus into the lobby, noted.

"My wife was just kidnapped from this very spot. This Floo connection must be closed, and this area sectioned off!" he demanded in his firmest tone.

"What's going on here?" came a familiar voice.

Snape spun around to see Harry Potter standing there, looking around with some alarm at the mess and at him. "When did you last see her?" Snape demanded to know, advancing on him.

"Hermione?" he asked, looking confused. "Just this morning...she was getting ready to leave..." Harry's eyes widened. "What's happened?"

"She's been taken...kidnapped. You stay here, Potter; secure this area. I will return with assistance shortly."

"Wait!" he yelled before Severus could summon the energy to Apparate to the gates of Hogwarts. "How?"

"Portkeys, Potter. It seems Fletcher's report was accurate, after all. I shall have him found, as well," said Severus lowly before he Disapparated.

Harry spent the time after Snape left putting things in order with what little Auror training he'd had already. First, he explained to the lady, who was confused and rather upset, that she needed to call the local wizarding law-enforcement. Next, he began to analyse the scene. Floo powder was on the floor, and a chair had been knocked aside that had previously been sitting against the wall. The Portkey that had been used eluded the tracking spells he knew...and besides, Portkeys were nearly impossible to track, and Apparation was only possible to track if one cast the tracking spell just before the subject Apparated.

The local law enforcement arrived, and he explained the situation to the one who seemed to be in charge, and who seemed to want to make sure he stayed in charge, trying to push Harry out of the way and getting to work. But still, he felt as if he were in a daze. Hermione...how could this have happened to his sweet Hermione?

It made no sense; Harry had just seen her...had just...well, he'd just done a lot with her. How could he have let that happen? He wondered now what Snape might think, but truly, he didn't really care that much about Snape... Hermione was the one who mattered. Even now, thinking of his former Potions teacher who had made Potions into a nightmare of a class for seven years, his yellow teeth, hooked nose and long thin fingers on Hermione made him shudder.

Snape didn't deserve her.

Hermione awoke groggily, feeling stiff and finding herself swaying gently in a hammock strung between two large palm trees. Above her, a warm breeze caused the dark green palm fronds to rock, and she thought she heard a parrot in the distance. She glanced to her right before moving and saw a hut made of palm fronds and bamboo poles nearly thirty feet away. Eager to get away before her attacker could return to her, she sat up too quickly and tumbled out of the hammock and into the sand below, scrambling to her feet and looking around.

Not far away, she heard the sound of surf on a beach, and of birds. It was warm, and everything was cast with the red glow of the setting sun. She wondered if she'd been unconscious all day, or if her attacker had taken her far enough away that it was now nearly night time rather than mid-morning. It certainly was far enough away for the weather to be warm rather than bitterly cold. Hermione instinctively reached for her wand, but couldn't find it, and found instead that she was wearing a light cotton tank top and shorts, both pink. She shuddered as she realised someone had to have undressed her and then put clothing on her.

Creeping behind a short bushy palm, Hermione watched for her attacker, hoping to take him by surprise. However, there probably wasn't much she could do against an armed wizard. She thought about Apparating, but since she had no idea where she was at, and the furthest she'd ever Apparated was about four-hundred miles; she didn't want to risk splinching herself, or Apparating herself into even worse danger than she was now.

Hermione froze as she heard humming and held her breath, waiting and watching. Then, she saw him. Her heart thudded in her chest as her attacker came out of the hut carrying a large plastic cup. She watched as his arched eyebrows knitted together, and he looked around in confusion while brushing his platinum blond hair, which now fell to the middle of his back, out of his face.

Lucius Malfoy.

There was a bamboo pole not too far away that had fallen, its roots still loosely attached to the bunch from which it had grown. She crawled to pick it up, and then heard his voice.

"Hermione? Where are you? Don't be afraid; I'm trying to help you!"

She grasped the bamboo pole and pulled her legs under her in a low crouch, ready to spring up. The words 'Malfoy' and 'help' could never belong in the same sentence.

"Please, come out," he called, turning in a circle. "I've brought you something to drink." She watched him hold up the plastic green cup and turn in a circle. When his back was turned to her, she decided that was her moment to act. As quickly as she could, she rushed towards him, pulling back to swing with the pole. He continued turning and saw her, but she was fast and had him surprised. The bamboo pole broke with a 'thunk' over his head.

Hermione thought, just for a split-second, that it really was too bad the particular bamboo pole she'd chosen had been so weak. Lucius Malfoy dropped the cup, spilling the contents with a splash and rattle of ice; then he looked at her with a stunned expression and stumbled backwards a few steps, raising a hand to his head and rubbing gingerly. Hermione raised the pole again, this time pointing the jagged broken tip of it towards him.

"Where are we?" she demanded to know. "What do you think you're doing with me?"

He blinked a few times; then lowered his hand. "We're safe," he answered after a moment. "You're safe now. It's okay; he won't be able to hurt you anymore. I've saved you."

Hermione stared at his encouraging smile, his pitying grey eyes which were warm now, not cold in disbelief for several moments. She opened her mouth to say something as she lowered the bamboo would-be spear, but she couldn't find any words.

"I know, I know, you're so relieved you can't think of what to say," he said, smiling broadly, showing an expansive flash of straight white teeth. "I understand you might have been scared of me, considering the horrible person I was before, but I've changed, and I'm going to do everything I can to help you recover from your horrible ordeal with Severus Snape."

Severus Apparated outside the gates of Hogwarts in snow that was knee-deep and ran through the gates as fast as he could. The bulk of the students were still not back from the Christmas holiday; that should be tomorrow, he realised. And, as he'd hoped he would, he found Professor Dumbledore in the Great Hall having a relaxed after-breakfast conversation with Flitwick and two other professors he didn't recognise.

"Headmaster, I must speak with you; it is urgent," he said as he quickly walked in.

Dumbledore, recognising that Severus was in a very agitated state, stood and came to him immediately. "It's Hermione, she's been kidnapped; I've failed her."

"I will call the Order immediately, Severus. Come with me and tell me what you know."

They turned and strode quickly from the Great Hall. "It happened earlier today... only... half an hour ago. Before we were married, as part of my protections on her, I gave her an amulet spelled to alert me if she should find herself in danger, and to give me a beacon through which to find her. It was activated when young Malfoy attacked her here at the school last year, then again today. She was on holiday with her friends: Potter, Weasley, and Patil. She was supposed to arrive home this morning. I've spoken to Potter already and he said he saw her last this morning. Before that, though, I followed the beacon to several locations. Whoever has taken her used unauthorised Portkeys to do this. I nearly caught them, but then he - it must have been a man, she could not be so easily overpowered by a woman, I'm sure - he took the amulet off of her. I'm not sure how he knew..."

They were quickly ascending the spiral stone staircase to Dumbledore's office, and soon reached their destination. Dumbledore used his Floo first to make several calls, and then sent Fawkes with a message to Hermione.

Severus noticed what he was doing and stared in shock. "Why didn't I...?" He should have thought of that; he'd never felt so confused before. It hadn't been all that long ago that he'd had a job as a spy, when he'd had to keep his cool, had to think on the run, but right now the thought that someone had Hermione seemed to overpower any

other thought. The tightening in his gut made him feel as if he would be sick, and even the simplest thing he could have done to help find Hermione had passed him by.

"It's quite all right, Severus. You're understandably upset." Severus stiffened as Dumbledore's hand grasped his shoulder, giving him a reassuring pat before he turned back to his office door. "We're to meet some people at the site of the kidnapping. Let's go, Severus. I'm sure we will find her soon."

"Yes, Headmaster... we will find her."

"Oh, wouldn't you like to have dinner? Or did you just have breakfast?" Lucius asked. "It's okay, Hermione; you're safe; I won't hurt you." He offered her a kind smile. "I believe I will get some ice for my head, as well," he added. "This way," he said, motioning towards the hut as he bent to pick up the tray he'd placed on the ground. "I thought you might be confused when you woke up, and thought this would be a better place. It's a peaceful place, don't you think?" He started walking in the direction he'd come from, turning his back to her. Confused, Hermione followed warily, but she kept the stick in hand.

"What did you do with my wand?" she asked suspiciously.

"It's in a safe place. Mine is put away, as well. Of course, I'm still working on recovering my magic, re-learning everything. I've gotten through the third year of the Hogwarts' curriculum; not too bad for nearly a year of work."

Once near the hut, the beach was in clear view. Hermione scanned the horizon, seeing nothing but ocean and the sun which had halfway set. She wasn't sure what had happened with Lucius Malfoy, but something was seriously odd here. She had no idea where she was, and it didn't seem her captor would tell her.

"How long was I unconscious?" she asked.

"Only about half an hour," he answered. "I'm sorry, but I found it necessary to Stun you." His gaze lowered to the sandy beach that they were walking along. "I...I had to make sure you didn't have anything which he could track you with; I've read that Tracking Charms can be placed on clothing and jewellery. I'm sorry I had to...well, I didn't want to scare you, but it was necessary to get you to safety. I've been planning this for months; I'm truly sorry I couldn't help you earlier," he said, looking at her with what seemed to be complete sincerity.

"What do you mean, 'help me'?"

"Luckily, Ronald Weasley did invite you to the trip I made sure he would win, and even better, Snape allowed you to go. That bastard, trying to make things look normal to everyone else..." he muttered, trailing off. Then his face tightened and he looked momentarily pained, partly embarrassed. "I know what he was doing to you," he said in a whisper. "I know...I saw the horrible things he did to you, Hermione. I had to stop him. I tried to do it directly, but I couldn't come upon him like I did with the others..."

"The others? You? You've been killing all those people!" she shouted.

"But you have to understand, *I had* to do it; I had to. Please, please," he implored her as she began to back away, shaking her head slowly, "I only meant to save them; I only meant to keep those who..." his voice broke, and he took a moment to recompose himself.

"It was my fault it happened; I was the one who pushed through the Marriage Law; I had to take responsibility to fix the horrible thing I'd done. I didn't realise how bad it had been for you until... until I got back home, and my son Draco," his features turned hard for a moment, "tried to teach me who I had been; he tried to make me into that *monster* again. I was such," his face crumpled a moment, and he let out a sob, "such an evil, utterly horrible, monster."

"Well, I suppose I can't argue with that," Hermione answered in a neutral tone.

"Once I saw...the memories," he said, pausing for a moment and looking pained, "I knew I had to do something. And then, that sweet, sweet girl; she was my best friend in St Mungo's... she was murdered. But I knew what I had to do; I had to be like that man, *The Shadow*. Oh, yes, I know it was all just a story, but it was a story to learn from. And the more Draco showed me...the more..."

"Is Draco here?" Hermione asked, turning in a circle to look around her. Somehow, she felt safe with Lucius...weird, but safe. He was crazy, but Draco wouldn't be.

"Draco Malfoy will never hurt anyone again," Lucius said. "I..."

With dawning realisation, Hermione turned back to the man before her, the man who was now so very changed from what he had been before. "What...?"

"He was too far gone..." Lucius looked to her with imploring eyes, now rimmed with red and with tears threatening to spill from them. "There comes a point at which a person is so filled with evil they cannot ever recover, much like I was before. Like a rabid dog, they must be put down. I was... lucky. I'd hoped I could help him in the way that Snape ended up helping me, even if he didn't know he was helping me then. I couldn't find a way to do it...I didn't know enough..."

Severus paced the floor in what had been Hermione's hotel room. It had become a home base of sorts from which the investigation into her kidnapping was taking place. He sneered over at Kingsley Shacklebolt, who had informed the rest of the team he needed a nap, and had promptly kicked back on the sofa and had gone to sleep.

How can he sleep at a time like this? The bastard... and to think he would have married Hermione had she chosen him. Yes, such a wonderful protector he would have made...falling asleep when she's in danger...

Snape looked over to Potter, who was pacing on the other side of the room. He yawned widely, and rubbed his reddened eyes. Harry had been granted an extension from his vacation from Auror training school.

"What I can't fathom, Potter, is how you let her be snatched from right under your nose? Were you too busy with some tart to notice what Hermione was doing?" he asked harshly. He should have found satisfaction in the way Potter blushed and then turned to face the wall, but he didn't; until he knew Hermione was safe, he had the feeling he wouldn't take pleasure in much of anything. She had been his duty; a very important duty which he was entrusted to uphold, and he had failed. Then, he remembered, Potter had told him that morning that he'd only seen her a short while before.

"Potter. You saw her this morning? But by the way you act...yes, you're quite readable even without looking into your pathetic excuse of a mind, you were..." Snape broke off as Potter blushed again, then started for the door.

"Fuck off, Snape," he said. Since his back was to his former teacher, he didn't see the man come up right behind him, and was taken by surprise as he was spun around and slammed against the wall.

He found himself quickly facing the harsh face and coldly glinting eyes of Severus Snape. He was too tired, too distraught, to put up the Occlumency shields he should have been able to erect to block him as Snape withdrew his wand quickly and hissed, "*Legilimens!*"

Hermione sat on a futon cushion on the floor of the two-room hut. It was well past dark now, but she wasn't a bit sleepy having just awoken only a few hours before. Neither, it seemed, was Lucius Malfoy. He'd insisted she should eat something, and had roasted fish over the fire outside, bringing it to her along with a side of tinned peas. The plate had sat untouched for ten minutes while Lucius excused himself outside. He'd already shown her where the latrine had been dug...he'd even made a nice little hut

to go around it. An outhouse. He'd kidnapped her, brought her to a deserted island, stolen her wand, cooked her food, dug her an outhouse, and all because he seemed to believe he was helping her. She chuckled as she realised what a cliché it seemed to be.

She stiffened as he came back inside and decided to try to reason with him. "Mr Malfoy, really, you don't understand... Please, take me back. I promise I'll explain it all when we get back."

He looked at her sadly, sitting down across from her on the floor, resting his elbows on his knees. "Hermione, I won't do that. I'm sorry, but you have too much to work through. And," he reached to the side where a small end table had been altered to serve as a bookshelf, grabbing a thick tome that was filled with bookmarks, "I'm prepared to stay here with you until you've come to your senses. Now, where was I going to start...? Ah, yes, here we are." He looked up at her, grinning a moment before looking back down at the book. Hermione read the page header for the title and chapter upside-down from where she sat: "Psychology in Practice: Victims of Abuse: Denial."

"Now, Hermione," he began, reading from an index card which had marked the place in the book, "what happened was not your fault. You didn't deserve it..."

Hermione sighed, rolled her eyes and leaned back against the wall. *Well, at least he's not out to rape and murder me*, she thought sarcastically. *No, he just wants to psychoanalyse me.*

Hermione, now knowing the immediate danger had passed, started thinking about the things she had to get back to. Her friends would be worried, as would her parents, and she was sure Severus would be worried, too. She had to be back to work in only a day. Lucius Malfoy was obviously insane...so probably would be difficult to reason with, but she decided she should try. And if that didn't work by tomorrow, it would be time to try something a bit more forceful.

Snape held the struggling young man by a handful of his tousled black hair as he gazed deeply into Potter's eyes, searching through memories.

...A Basilisk with fangs bared lunged towards the boy...a rotund boy, the same he vaguely remembered seeing during Harry's Occlumency lessons, punched him, while a much younger Potter tried to fend him off...Potter as a snake slithering through a corridor, attacking Arthur Weasley...cold biting wind on his face and snow all around, rushing headlong down a mountain...

Snape was getting frustrated...Potter hadn't blocked him completely, but was obviously hiding something important from him. Swiftly, Snape brought his knee to impact in Potter's groin, eliciting a squeal of pain from the boy. The distraction of pain weakened Potter's Occlumency shields, and Severus dove into his mind...and then wished he hadn't...

...Hermione's lips pressing against a lightly tanned chest, more muscular than Snape's...her deep brown eyes looking into Harry's in a way she had never looked at Severus...Hermione's denim-clad thighs clasp Harry's hips as her hand gripped and squeezed him through his trousers...

"NO!" Potter screamed, and pushed Snape away.

Snape, stunned, fell back against the wall, staring at nothing for a moment before recovering his senses. "So, Potter...found this to be the perfect opportunity to ensnare her, did you? Thanks to your hormones, and Hermione's pity for you oh yes, Potter...she felt sorry for you...that was a pity fuck and you know it not much actual fucking involved. A pity, really; she's good."

Snape seemed to hear the words come out of his mouth as if through a haze...it was a response he hadn't thought about, hadn't calculated. Inside, somehow, he felt a buzzing rushing sensation. He felt like he would be sick, felt like he'd like to rip Potter to shreds, felt like he wanted to find Hermione and make sure she was safe, and then to scream and rail at her until she regretted it...

Regretted what, though? So she'd found a creative way around the Fidelity Charm. Perhaps this was a good thing, all things considered. It wasn't as if any of his former sexual partners had been monogamous to him, nor had he ever demanded fidelity of anyone. It was simply an unusual situation with Hermione due to the circumstances of the Marriage Law; he had been with her, and her alone, since their wedding night... which had also been her first time....

Her first time. That was it!

Without giving a single word to Potter, he summoned his strength and Disapparated. When he arrived at home outside the Apparation wards, he rushed inside and down to his cellar with a surge of hope. As he began sorting through phials, he pushed the images he'd seen in Potter's mind out of his consciousness. He had more important things to focus on now. Whatever had happened between Potter and Hermione, he would deal with later, once she was safe.

Lucius Malfoy looked down upon Hermione as she slept, tears streaming down his cheeks. He was exhausted...physically, mentally, emotionally exhausted. He had done so much to try to help her, and now she was trying every way she could to reason going back to that evil, horrible, sadistic man. He felt a twinge of guilt when he realised that he could place the blame for that man's sexual sadism firmly on his own shoulders. Like all his guilt since discovering the man he had once been, he turned it inward, focused it, shaped it and turned it. While he had once been a man of evil, a man known as slippery, powerful, dangerous, sadistic and cruel, he now was a man who put everything he had towards the forces of good.

He'd even sacrificed his own son to the forces of good. That was simply how it had to be. Draco had become suspicious, had started asking too many questions, and finally, when his plan was only a day from fruition, Draco had discovered him. Lucius hadn't really wanted to do it.

He felt guilty, too, at keeping the young woman against her will. And he also hoped that she would be more amiable about getting to sleep. Hermione had been determined to not sleep in his presence, and so he had basted the fish, which he had cooked for dinner, with a touch of sleeping potion and teriyaki sauce to cover the flavour of it. She seemed to be a strong person, but he knew well enough that there was a part of her that had been defeated, especially in the nights after he'd tripped the wards around their house and had taken up watching in the windows from a greater distance. He vividly remembered watching in the upstairs bedroom window while he sat astride the Thestral who accommodately held her place for him. He had watched in a mixture of horror and fascination as Severus had stripped Hermione, then had bound her and had begun whipping her. And now, recalling the image, he felt a twinge and a tingling in the vicinity of his cock.

NO! I'm not like that! he thought, then quickly got up and left the hut.

Once he was sure he would not wake the peacefully sleeping woman, he broke out into a full run, reaching his hidden place with a painful stitch in his side and legs screaming with the burn of effort. He collapsed outside the door of the hidden place, raking his hands along the rough volcanic rock of the exterior of the cave. He wondered what he should do for penance...

"Shadow...Shadow...what do I do? Tell me? I've had those thoughts again...I can't do that; I can't be like that...."

Lucius waited, rocking back and forth on his heels, for the message he knew would come. He had to listen closely to hear the messages, but if he concentrated on clearing his mind, concentrated on his intent - his true intent to serve the force of good that, while good, was still dark - The Shadow would speak. And soon enough he stilled as he heard the voice.

"Disciple...my Disciple." Lucius nearly startled as the voice spoke. He resisted the urge to look around for the spirit; he felt that would be disrespectful.

"I am here, Shadow. I have taken her to save her, but she doesn't seem to want my help. Please, tell me what I should do. And also tell me," he said in a quieter whisper, hanging his head, "what my penance should be. When I thought of that time I saw him whip... when I... gods no! I felt...*stirrings*."

"So, Lucius, the evil ways have still not been completely purged from your mind? I suppose it is understandable; you do, after all, have great evil in your past to overcome."

"Yes, Shadow... my Lord, I have great evil..." he said, feeling more hot tears of shame and fear slipping down his face. "Give me your wisdom, and give me my penance."

"It will take a long time. Persistence will prevail, however. Keep her here; show her you mean her only good, and she will recognise that you bring her a beacon of hope, a way to escape her former enslavement. As for your penance..."

Nearly half an hour later, just after the sun had risen, Lucius Malfoy entered the hut again, having hobbled gingerly on the way back. Hermione was still asleep. He sat on the futon on the opposite side of the hut, looking again upon the woman whose fate had concerned him for the better part of the last six months. Surely, the fact that he had had so few obstacles in his way in this path was a sign that he was meant to rescue her. His many self-inflicted pains, as he had approached the path of righteousness, were the price he had to pay for a former life of evil and destruction.

Ever since The Shadow had become his guide in that time shortly after the Oblivion, that blessed Oblivion that had saved him, he had worked for nothing but to right the wrongs he had inflicted on so many. It had been difficult to do so, what with the constant deception he'd had to carry on so that his own son wouldn't suspect him and try to stop him.

There were still many, many sins to account for, but, as he lay down and smiled hopefully towards the sleeping figure opposite him, he felt satisfied that he was making progress in rectifying his wrongs. She would thank him later for this, of that he was certain.

He pulled the healing salve from its place under his futon, wondering if it would be wrong to go ahead and use it. The walk back had likely been enough penance. He hoped it had been enough, at least. The memory of the pain would surely drive away his horrible stirrings of desire at such cruel acts. He applied the salve thickly to the blistered soles of his feet, sighing as they eased the burn the hot coals had left. After all, he couldn't be incapacitated if he were to help Hermione.

He wondered if he should show her the memories to convince her...those horrible memories had made him physically ill, even while sometimes stirring a certain desire in him. The more thoroughly he followed his assigned penances set by The Shadow, however, the less he felt any stirrings of desire at those horrid atrocities. He knew, deep down, that besides being evil, he had been truly sick. He'd even found a chapter, in one of the second-hand psychology texts he had, on deviant sexual behaviour.

Lucius decided he would wait to show her the memories. He wanted to keep the magical basins, the Pensieves, safe in the cave. Her wand, too, was there, as was a Portkey to one more location, which he could take them to if he thought this location had been discovered, or in case of a serious storm. He didn't want her to find that and possibly use it against him before he had finished helping her.

Pensieve

Chapter 27 of 31

Shape workes to find Hermione, while Hermione learns more of what Lucius is trying to tell her.

Thanks to my beta, Nakhash Mekashefah, for her meticulous beta-reading work.

A/N: First, I'm very sorry for the very long delay before this chapter. As many of you know, I had some difficulties with this story, and needed a serious writing break, as I've been writing it for over a year now. This chapter is shorter than others, but I am working on the next chapter, and have sorted out some of my issues with the story.

Hermione's teeth felt fuzzy from not brushing, she realised as she woke up. She saw that Lucius Malfoy was asleep on the other side of the hut. She didn't remember going to sleep, and began to wonder if perhaps she'd been drugged.

She had to visit the bathroom and remembered where Lucius had pointed out the outhouse the day before. She found the latrine...and frowned at the 'seat' which she discovered was not at all comfortable. She finished quickly and left, then startled as she exited.

"Oh, there you are," Lucius said. "You worried me. I'll have breakfast made for us in a moment. Would you like tea?"

"Oh...um, yes; tea would be good," she answered hesitantly, feeling rather odd being offered tea and breakfast so politely by a man who had kidnapped her.

"Very good, then. We can speak further after breakfast."

She looked back over her shoulder as she walked past him, and then thought it would be a good opportunity to go elsewhere when he entered the little hut of an outhouse and shut the door. She broke out in a run along the beach, heading towards the east.

Hermione had never been much of a runner, but she was spurred to the fastest she'd ever run by seeing a large, familiar-looking bird in the distance. The familiar reddish-orange plumage of a phoenix soon became clear.

"Fawkes!" she yelled, and heard the trilling tune of the phoenix as it swept towards her.

"NO!" came a shout from behind her. She turned mid-stride to see Lucius running to catch up with her. Hermione mustered all the strength she could, running towards Fawkes, who understood the urgency and went into a dive towards her, feet held forward to deliver a letter.

She snatched it from the bird's talons. Only a second later, she found herself rocked from her feet and on the ground; her breath wheezed from her lungs from a heavy weight atop her. The note was torn from her grasp. How had he caught up to her so quickly?

At first she tried to fight him off, but laying face-first in the sand while he sat astride her back made any effective resistance impossible. He rose slightly, however, to roll her over to her back. She stilled suddenly in her struggles when she looked into Lucius's face and saw an expression of such anguish and determination that it scared her.

"Give me the letter," she cried, hoping he might concede.

"No. Not now," he panted, still catching his breath from the sprint up the beach.

They stayed together like that for a long moment, locked in a still-life of combat, breath coming fast and ragged, staring into one another's eyes. Slowly, Hermione turned to see if the phoenix was still there, and she was surprised to see that Fawkes was standing in the sand nearly six feet away, looking between the two of them warily. He sung a slow, warbling note and, backing away slowly, spread his wings again and took flight.

It felt so unfair to Hermione, as she watched the bird flap away into the distance. That could have been her hope to get away. The note was quickly tucked into one of Malfoy's pockets.

"Why?" she groaned. "Just let me go, please." Her voice was accompanied by the cries of the phoenix as it circled overhead.

"I'm really very sorry," he said, now stroking her face gently as he knelt over her. They were both covered with sand and thoroughly winded. "It's for the best. Come now, we won't be staying here much longer... we have to go somewhere else now. They'll have an idea of our location soon."

An idea of their location was exactly what Hermione wanted 'them' to have. Professor Dumbledore obviously knew she was gone, and they were trying to rescue her.

Severus hadn't slept in over forty-eight hours, but he had no intention of stopping. Before him, five texts were open on the worktable, and there were three cauldrons brewing. He'd had to search for some time to find the potion he thought would be best, but finally had found it. With the virgin's blood, he would be able to make a potion which would track Hermione.

His concentration was nearly ruined, as he added another ingredient, by footsteps coming down the stairs of his cellar. He realised, just before he could pull his wand, that the wards would have activated if it had been someone who shouldn't be there.

He glanced up to see Dumbledore and scowled at Potter, who came down directly behind the Headmaster.

"Severus, Fawkes has returned. There was no return message, but the note has been delivered. I would assume she was well enough to retrieve the note, but was prevented from leaving. We can only hope she was not prevented from reading it. I assume you are devising a method of finding her?"

"Yes, Headmaster, I will be done with this in a few hours. Once this is complete, I will have a better method of tracking her."

"Good then, I'll leave you to your work. Harry and I will be ready to assist you once you've completed it."

They turned toward the stairs to go, and Severus called out, "Potter. I want you here. Some information about what happened with Hermione would assist me in this potion."

He didn't look up, but heard Potter's steps stop.

"I'll leave the two of you to it, then," said Dumbledore, and turned and walked upstairs. As Severus looked up, he couldn't help but take a moment of pleasure at the uncomfortable look on Potter's face. Oh, he couldn't hurt the boy outright, but he would certainly make him regret touching Hermione.

Lucius led her toward the interior of the island while Hermione was running out of ideas to stall him. She'd already taken as long as possible to 'catch her breath', and then to visit the loo again, and then had insisted she was dying of hunger and thirst.

Malfoy, in a show of patience under pressure she wouldn't have thought him capable of, had indulged most of her attempts to stall, and had even spent some time throwing rocks at a bunch of bananas to get them to fall when she'd suggested that if she had her wand, she could get them down easily enough. After that, she'd begged off more walking for the reason of side cramps.

"I understand you want to keep me safe, and you're worried about me," she tried to reason once they were walking again, Malfoy finally having reached the end of his patience. He'd pulled her up by her arms and pushed her along for a few steps until she started walking again. "If we go back to England, I can promise I'll listen to what it is you have to say. I really do need to get back to work, Mr Malfoy." *Yes, I'll listen, she thought, listen to you talk from your holding cell before your trial*

"I can't risk that man getting you back," he told her firmly as he pushed through a thick growth of bamboo, holding it aside for her to step through. "I understand this is difficult for you, but I won't let you go until you've heard all I have to say and have seen what it is I need to show you."

The location they reached was a rock outcropping in a hill. Inside were a number of trunks which were self-shrinking.

"Larger magical exertions are still difficult for me," he explained as he pushed the buttons to activate the Self-Shrinking Charms on the expensive-looking chests. "I've been thinking, once we get to where we're going, you should see just why it is I don't want to let you go yet. You'll see why it is I feel... why it is my fault that you've ended up in your predicament, and why it is I'm willing to go to such lengths to help those who are in the nightmares of marriages I've caused."

There was just no arguing with the man, and though he seemed safe enough now, she realised she probably shouldn't push him much further. He might turn on her; for the time being, since she was his mission, she wasn't in danger... but the man had killed his own son; even if he did seem nice, he wasn't at all right in the head.

"Come now." Mr Malfoy reached out a hand. Hermione frowned down at it. "Please, let's go," Malfoy implored. "Once we arrive, I shall answer all your questions."

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment, wondering if one more effort to overpower the man, or perhaps try a burst of wandless magic, would be wise. He held the Portkey and she could use it to get away to the next location, but by now she felt a responsibility to ensure he was stopped. She was safe from him at least, and perhaps with time she could convince him to give up his vigilante's quest and to turn himself over to authorities.

It was clear that Dumbledore and Severus were looking for her, and she hoped they weren't too worried, and wished she had some way of sending them a message. She decided that once they got where they were going, she would try first to convince Malfoy to let her send a message letting them know she was well, and that they shouldn't worry too much.

Hermione reached out and took his hand, grasping the Portkey along with him.

"So... Professor Snape, how can I help?" Potter asked hesitantly.

"Shut up and sit down, for starters," Severus replied. He sprinkled a powder into the cauldron. "Tell me, Potter... having my wife, or, as far as you were able to get in having her, was that one more thing to add to your list, another notch on your stick of things you could do to me?"

"What?"

"Ever since you first set foot in my classroom nearly eight years ago, you've done nothing but look for chance after chance to steal from me, usurp my authority, and taunt me, often endangering yourself and your fellow students in the process." Severus levelled a cold stare at Potter. "I imagine for you, Hermione was just another thing you could try to take from me... another conquest, another way to get one over on the old Potions master?"

"Hermione isn't a *thing*, you git," Potter growled. "She's a beautiful and amazing person, and it's a crime that she has to put up with *you* touching her. You don't even love her, so what would you care if she found someone who did love her?" yelled Potter.

"Because, Potter, she's mine. And besides, whether or not I love her or not is of no relevance. But if you do care, then you'd best keep your mouth shut and do as I say; I

believe we both want to find her whole, do we not?"

"Yes, we do," Potter said firmly. Severus gave him a quick nod and poised the phial of blood over the cauldron. "What is that?" asked Potter suspiciously.

"Shut up," Snape growled.

"What the hell is that?" he demanded, loudly this time. "This potion..." He moved forward quickly to read from Snape's book, his breathing growing harder as he realised what Snape was doing. "You... you sick bastard!"

"SHUT UP, POTTER!!" Severus yelled, focusing now on stirring steadily while he slowly drizzled the blood into the potion. "If you'd truly like to be useful, get the fuck out now, and go get a Snitch. Bring it back quickly. I am doing this to help Hermione, and it's a good thing I took the precaution of gathering it, even if you think it's sick."

"A Snitch?"

"Yes, Potter, a Snitch. I hope you remember what you spent your first four years of Hogwarts chasing after on your undeservedly expensive brooms? I will dip the Snitch into the potion, and then we will be able to follow it to Hermione. I suggest you bring your broomstick, and find a newer model for me. I'm sure a quick visit to the Nimbus company will give you fast results if you tell them you're in the market for a new broom and would like an extended test-flight, wouldn't it?"

"Oh... oh, of course," he muttered, then turned and raced up the stairs.

When they arrived at the new location, Hermione looked around, trying to see if she could identify anything about it. At first, all was dark, and then lights came on. They were inside a house... a rather new, large, but empty house. The smell of new paint and carpet were strong.

"Where is this?" she asked, turning around in the tiled foyer they were standing in. The front door was behind her, and a staircase directly in front of her. A large empty room was to her right, and another large room to the left and behind the staircase was also visible. To the left was a hallway down which she could see two doors. It was dark outside.

"Someplace we can remain hidden," he answered, dropping the bundle of shrunken chests onto the carpet in the empty room to the right. "In truth, I preferred our last location, but this one will do. There are a few things I would request of you while we are here."

"What is that?"

"Do not attempt to leave for at least a week, and listen to all I have to say. This house is secured both from the outside and the inside, but it's not nearly as secure as the island should have been. I purchased this place in preparation, just in case our last location should be discovered. I did have to take a few chances with it in hiring a wizard to prepare it for habitation, although I'd hoped he would have provided more furniture.

"Now, if you're still hungry there should be some food in the pantry... or, I've been informed that you may order food from local restaurants for delivery. The front door should be..." he walked to the front door and placed his hand on the knob and turned, and Hermione heard several clicks as the locks opened, "yes... the front door is made so that only I can open it. "There are menus in the kitchen as well as some local currency."

Hermione startled as the sound of a large truck outside went by. She went to a window and peeked out of the vinyl mini-blinds to see a driveway, streets, other brick homes, and wood fences of a nice-looking residential neighbourhood, well lit by street lamps and landscape lighting. She couldn't exactly place the style; but all the homes looked very similar, with manicured lawns, shrubs, and trees which were all fairly young.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Far from anyone who could hurt you," he answered. "You may figure it out soon enough, but please, promise me you'll stay long enough for me to explain things to you."

"I thought you'd kidnapped me. Aren't you going to *make* me stay?" Hermione shot back sullenly.

"That would make me no better than *him*, wouldn't it? I want to keep you safe, yes, and at least for now, I don't want you to leave. At least this week, you *can't* leave. But once you've heard all I have to say, you are free to go, or to stay as long as you like. I'll keep you safe if you'll stay with me. I'd hoped the island would be better for a while... but I missed a few details of the security."

"All right, then; I'm not hungry, so show me what it is," Hermione said, wanting to get down to business. If she went along with his plan, he seemed sincere that he would allow her to leave within a week.

"Good. Come over here." She followed him to his pile of chests and sat cross-legged on the floor while he returned them to full size, and then withdrew a stone bowl and placed it on the floor in front of her. It was empty, but soon he reached for another chest. Inside that one were dozens of corked bottles packed with rags to cushion them. He scanned them, and then pulled one bottle from the chest and uncorked it, pouring a shimmering substance into the bowl.

"A Pensieve..."

"Yes. This memory was one of many Draco showed to me upon my release from St Mungo's. It seems that at one time I was fond of keeping this... filth to re-visit," he admitted, shuddering. "I've put one of the most pertinent memories within. I warn you: what you are about to see is... disturbing, to say the least. I was sick... absolutely sick after I saw this myself." He levelled his grey eyes at her in concern. "I'll be right here with you."

Hermione nodded, then leaned over the bowl on the floor, looking inside. It only took a second, and she was pulled into the bowl with a lurch....

Hermione fell to a hard stone floor more softly than she would have expected and began looking around in the dim light. A groan came from behind her, and she turned, gasping at what she saw.

A woman with black hair coming out from under a bag over her head was bound tightly. Her elbows were wrenched behind her back and held up at a painfully awkward angle by a rope suspended from a hook on the ceiling of the dank dungeon. She was nude; shreds of clothing were on the floor around her. Behind her stood Severus. He looked much, much younger here, though somehow more severe and scary-looking than she'd ever thought he'd looked, even in her first Potions class.

The woman screamed, and Hermione saw the reason why. Blood trickled from a wound in her back as Severus, a maniacal grin on his face, worked a long, sharp rod through a fold of skin on one side of her spine, and then proceeded, seemingly enjoying the woman's screaming, to pinch a fold of skin on the other side of her spine and ram the sharp rod through it. The woman thrashed, arching her back and screaming louder as Severus tugged on the rod, stretching her skin, before laughing and stepping away.

He turned to a table upon which were seven more rods, each just as sharp, nearly two feet long and as big around as Hermione's little finger. He took another rod from the table, and this time Hermione could barely watch as he pinched a fold of skin on the back of the bound woman's arm and pierced it, producing another scream.

"God, no," she whispered, not wanting to watch, but unable to pull her eyes away as he drove the rod through the back of her other arm, then stepped back to evaluate his work.

"Well done, Severus. Of course, you'll need at least four more rods to suspend her without tearing her skin. And that would simply be a mess." Hermione snapped her head to the left to see Lucius Malfoy.

"Of course, Lucius, but why hurry the job? I want to see how long I can keep her conscious." He smiled lewdly, then walked slowly around the whimpering woman. "Accio whip," he called, holding his hand out for a coil of leather which snapped to his hand, then proceeded to whipping her.

Hermione had experienced this sort of whipping numerous times, but it didn't stop the sick feeling which threatened to overwhelm her. He was relentless, merciless, as the bound woman, who Hermione was beginning to suspect was not here of her own free will, screamed and thrashed. Welts and cuts blossomed over her skin, her legs, breasts and stomach, and even her back as Severus used the whip to curl behind her before he snapped it.

His face... she couldn't believe his face... his crooked-toothed grin was wide, and an occasional chuckle escaped his lips. This was far beyond simple play; this was torture.

"I want out!" Hermione yelled, backing away. "Let me out of here!" she screamed over the shrieks of the bound woman. She felt a hand grab her arm firmly and pull, and she was once again kneeling on the floor, looking into the bowl of shimmering mist.

"That... he wasn't... was she... did she want to be there?"

"Shh," Malfoy whispered, pulling her into his grasp, trying to soothe her by rubbing her back gently. "I'm not sure. That memory ends when she loses consciousness. You weren't in there very long... and it gets much worse. I can't believe anyone would consent to what was done to her.

"I hope you begin to see now. Ever since I found this out, and discovered he was... doing things... these horrible things to you, I knew I had to help you."

"But it was never like that... never that bad," Hermione whispered, now shocked past trying to deny it or to keep Malfoy out of her 'personal matters'.

"Maybe not, but if it's only a question of degree; it's still not right."

Hermione sighed deeply, relaxing into Malfoy's embrace. She never thought she could feel so safe this close to this man.

"I have some Dreamless Sleep Potion in case this might give you nightmares. You don't need to look at the rest of it today..."

"No. Just give me a bit. I'll see what it is you're worried about," she protested. Even through her shock, she did wonder if perhaps there would be information within Malfoy's saved memories to show that Severus was not the horrible monster he'd seemed to be in that memory. After all, bits and pieces of memories, select moments, might be misleading. Certainly, even times she had enjoyed some rather harsh scenarios would look horrible to an outsider.

"Well, let's take a break from this, then," Malfoy suggested. "I'll show you to your room. I suppose the island had to have some sacrifices in comfort, but you should be fairly comfortable here, if you choose to stay after this week."

"I've brought the Snitch," Potter said, "and a better broom for you. Now, I want to know why it is you've got Hermione's... why you've got..." He shuddered, trailing off.

"Because, Potter, I like to be prepared."

"Afraid she might run away from you from the start?" Potter challenged.

"Actually, no. Virgin's blood has many uses in powerful potions; it just so happens this is one use which will directly benefit Hermione. Now, the potion is complete. We should gather some provisions and prepare to leave. We may have a very long flight ahead of us.

Half an hour later, Potter and Snape had gathered and shrunk food for the journey and had dressed well for the cold, casting Warming Charms on their clothing. They stood in the front of the house, and Snape looked back at it after he'd closed the door. His home. Their home. It had felt too cold and empty since Hermione had left for holiday with Potter and Weasley, and he'd been looking forward to her return. He couldn't help but wonder if she'd followed the instructions he'd given her in the letter, but then he wondered if that had been before or after what had happened with Potter...

Suddenly, he wanted to take the shiny new Nimbus 3000 and beat it to splinters over Potter's head, but he restrained himself. He hated Potter, but he also knew the boy would do his best to help find Hermione.

"Give me the Snitch," said Snape, mounting his broomstick and uncorking the phial of potion. Once Potter had handed the fluttering Snitch over, glaring at Snape all the while, Snape poured the potion over it, and then let the Snitch go. It flew in circles a few times, and then shot off to the east.

Snape and Potter both kicked off from the ground and shot after it. It took only a few minutes for Snape to realise that it wasn't the Snitch he had to follow, it was Potter. Squinting into the overcast sky, he could see nothing but mist and clouds. It was Potter who would be the key here, who would lead him to Hermione. He didn't like the irony.

They had some tinned peas and macaroni and cheese that had come in a blue box. It wasn't exactly fine dining, but it was at least not unsettling to her stomach. Lucius had seemed subdued since she'd come out of the Pensieve a few hours earlier, sitting down seemingly in deep thought in one of the armchairs in what Hermione decided was the casual living room. The empty rooms at the front looked as if they were the formal living and dining areas. They'd eaten at the metal and glass table in the smaller kitchen dining area.

The room he'd shown her was upstairs, and had a comfortable-looking bed and dresser. She'd peeked into the other rooms and had found a bathroom and two more bedrooms upstairs (one of which was apparently Malfoy's) and downstairs had found a powder room and a very large master suite down the hallway.

She'd also looked through the delivery menus (for a Pizza and Italian place, Chinese, and a Deli) and now knew her location from the addresses printed on them. They were in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. It would be dawn soon, but it didn't feel like it.

"I'd like to look at the rest of the memories, Mr Malfoy," Hermione said, causing Lucius to look up at her from where he was seated.

"You don't have to see them all today."

"I need to. Let me see as many as I can today, and then I'll listen to what else you'd like me to hear tomorrow."

"Very well," he agreed gravely.

Hermione went back to the Pensieve and waited as Lucius extracted another bottled memory from the chest. She hoped this one would be milder. It might not be pleasant, but these memories were obviously pieces of Severus's past. Armed with these, she would be able to understand him better, and could decide for herself if Lucius Malfoy was being irrational or not.

Saviours

Chapter 28 of 31

Harry Potter and Severus Snape find who they're looking for, but will they find more than they want to know?

Many thanks to my beta, Nakhash Mekashefah, for her beta-reading and feedback for this chapter.

A/N: In the previous chapter, I made a very silly mistake. When Potter and Snape take off on their brooms, they should be headed WEST, not east.

And again, apologies for the very late update time. I've recently started school, have been in the midst of spring-cleaning and super organising, and am attempting to make my mucky clay soil into something in which a garden can grow; my computer time is very limited.

Severus realised, after what seemed to be hours but was only thirty minutes, their journey would take them across the Atlantic. Even pushing as fast as they could go, this journey would be too long for broomsticks. As the western shore of England approached, Severus leant over his broomstick and sped forward to catch up with Potter.

"Catch it!" he shouted into the roaring wind.

Potter turned back to him, frowned but nodded, then sped forward to catch the Snitch, which reverted to its game behaviour and evaded capture. Rather than watch Potter trying to catch the enchanted Snitch, he slowed and began his descent to a cluster of trees. Once on the ground, he adjusted his trousers, which had ridden up uncomfortably, and re-considered his plan. Of course, she would be too far away, but he had hoped that perhaps she would be in Europe, somewhere they wouldn't have to cross an ocean to reach. Obviously, she was still alive, or the Snitch wouldn't be on such a direct and speedy course.

He allowed himself a momentary shudder, imagining if that had happened. He sank to the ground, feeling a gnawing coldness inside. Not knowing who had taken her, or why, was the worst. What they could be doing to Hermione... he pushed the thoughts from his head.

"Do you actually want to save her or not, you old git?" Potter shouted as he landed a few yards away. Potter. Severus grimaced as he recalled the snatches of memories he'd seen in Potter's mind several nights before. The bastard had touched her... embraced her... caressed her... and Hermione not only had permitted it, she'd relished in it, and he had the impression that Hermione had been the one to instigate it.

But why? Why, when she had seemed so content with their relationship? And since they'd had their own home, things had seemed especially very nice indeed. He wanted her home. But once she was home, what would he say to her? Could he pretend he didn't know? Should he confront her about what he'd discovered? With a snort, he rose, realising that what had seemed to be a happy, peaceful homelife, would again be disturbed by yet another quarrel. That is, once he'd rescued her, once she was safe again.

"Yes, Potter, I do care to save her. And were I you," he growled lowly, advancing on him, giving the boy his most ferocious glare, "I would remember that I am the one who has been with her all this time, and that you understand *nothing* about either of us! You should realise that flying across the Atlantic on broomsticks without more preparation would be insane. We've at least a twelve hour journey ahead if we continue like this, unless you feel up to Apparating to the eastern shore of the States?"

"I could do it," Potter challenged.

Severus glared at him for a moment, realising that Potter was likely powerful enough to make it. But he also had to be reasonable, and while Severus might have been able to make the Apparation on a good day, with adequate sleep and perhaps an Invigorating Draught, attempting it after he was so drained having exerted himself to his limit several days before, Apparating after Hermione's captor, and then spending the last several days without sleep to brew the potion which would enable him to track her, would be asking to be Splinched, and likely spread over several hundred miles of open sea.

"Fine, you find another way, I'm going after her." Potter drew himself up, clutching his broomstick tightly in one hand, the Snitch in the other, and took a deep breath as he closed his eyes, gathering the willpower and the destination and focus needed to make such a long Apparation.

"Potter, no!" Severus shouted. "You might make it, but you will do Hermione no good if you Splinch yourself or end up draining yourself so badly you can't go after her. I trust you know how to make a Portkey? Arrange one to North America, quickly."

Potter clenched his jaws, looking to the leaf-strewn ground for a moment, then nodded reluctantly. "Fine. We'll do it your way," he finally agreed. "I'll need some help with this, then. I'll need to know where exactly we're going, and since I've never been there.... I'll be back in an hour. Here," he said, holding the struggling Snitch out for Severus, "take this and hold it until I get back."

Hermione yawned. She'd only been able to sleep a few hours before the sunlight streaming into the window made it too difficult. The only window coverings were plastic mini-blinds, which did little to block the sunlight. Downstairs, she looked through the unappetising tinned and boxed foods, then turned to the stack of delivery menus, deciding quickly enough that Chinese food would be nice. Malfoy was apparently still asleep, leaving the house quiet inside but with the sound of the occasional car outside.

She decided to order enough food for them both and picked orange chicken for herself, an order of crab Rangoon, egg-drop soup, and an order of broccoli beef for Malfoy. She surprised herself with some hesitation as she wondered if he would really like that or not before calling in the order anyway.

Malfoy, looking bleary-eyed, came into the kitchen just as she hung up the receiver.

"Who were you talking to?" he asked, suspicious, yet trying to be conversational.

"Food delivery; I hope you like Chinese."

"Oh... well, I don't actually recall ever having had any," he said, breathing a sigh of relief that she hadn't called for help of some kind. He was so different from the coldly confident and calculating man he'd once been.

"Anyway," she said, trying to take attention from the sudden tension by turning to the envelope of plain-looking American money and finding a twenty-dollar bill, "it should be here in about half an hour. I could use a shower, so I'll get that done."

They stood looking at one another for a few moments before Hermione went ahead upstairs and started the shower. The soap and shampoo she found didn't smell like her normal brands, and she decided halfway through scrubbing herself that she really didn't like them, but at least they got her clean. Clean, but frizzy-haired, she realised once

she began drying her hair with a towel.

She arrived downstairs, wishing she had some clean clothes to change into, just as there was a knock on the door. Before she could answer it, Malfoy rushed to the front door, giving her a nearly apologetic look while signalling her to go back to the kitchen. It wasn't that big a deal, she decided, so she went. Malfoy entered with a large paper bag, and they began removing boxes, both baffled at the huge amounts of food.

"It does smell rather good," Malfoy said as he took a seat at the kitchen table with Hermione.

"So, now that I've seen some of what you have to show me, I can admit it was rather disturbing," Hermione confessed as she sorted the food from the bag.

"Yes," Malfoy agreed quietly, poking at his broccoli beef with the chopsticks. "So, have you thought of what you're going to do now?"

Just what would she do? She almost didn't want to think about it, wanted to just focus on finding a way to get away from Malfoy, but at the same time, a sort of weariness settled on her whenever she began thinking of a way to get home.

Nearly an hour later, Potter Apparated back to the spot from which he'd left.

"What took you so long?" Snape demanded.

"Kingsley wanted an update on what we were doing, and the Portkey Office required some string-pulling. Ron found me and wanted to join in, but he would have taken too long. Let's go," he said, holding out a soda can. Snape grabbed it quickly, and they were whisked away, flying through space at incredible speed. Because of the long distance, the ride and landing were both rougher than normal.

They found themselves in a large back garden of a house; the weather was much warmer than what they'd left behind. Tall pine trees closed in all around the wood-fenced property.

"Hello there," a voice called, and Snape spun to see a woman in jeans and a plaid shirt sitting at a potter's wheel, spinning clay. "I'm Christina, and this is my backyard. Welcome to Georgia! Do you need any help getting where you're going?" she asked.

"We can find our own way," Snape replied.

"No need to be that way about it, just trying to be welcoming. Enjoy your stay in the States; may I have your names, please?" she asked, after muttering a spell to clean her hands and moving to pick up a clipboard. "We just like to have an idea of visiting wizards and witches."

"I'm Harry Potter, and this is Severus Snape," Harry said quickly, not bothering to watch the woman's expression of surprised recognition and awe. "I'm sorry, but we're in a hurry. Snape, the Snitch?"

Snape was already releasing the Snitch, and they both kicked off to follow it, flying west again. The place they'd arrived at was fairly secluded; there was a neighbourhood, however, in the distance.

"Don't forget your Disillusionment Charm," called the woman, apparently using a Sonorous Charm so they would hear her. As they approached the neighbourhood, Snape and Harry cast Disillusionment Charms on one another, then quickly resumed their pursuit of the Snitch.

Hermione wasn't really sure what to do. She did want to ask Severus to explain the terrible things she'd seen in the Pensieve memories. At the same time, she also wondered what she should do about Malfoy. The man, while obviously not right, wasn't evil; he simply was misguided in his attempts to help. She couldn't exactly blame him, though; obviously, seeing such horrid atrocities shortly after returning to Malfoy Manor had seriously disturbed him. He could be stopped, but she didn't want to see him spend the rest of his life in Azkaban for what he'd done.

"Would you like some chocolate?" came Malfoy's voice. Hermione looked up from where she'd been sitting in the living room to see Malfoy with two steaming mugs.

"Thanks, that would be lovely," she answered. He looked so different now, wearing Muggle jeans and a deep blue sweater; he looked kind and concerned... no, she couldn't allow him to suffer for what he'd done.

"Lucius," she began as she took the warm mug, "I'm worried about what will happen to you. Killing all those people... it wasn't right, but I know why you did it. When this week is up, I'd like to help you."

"It doesn't matter what happens to me. I deserve to be punished for what I did before, when I was part of the Death Eaters."

"But it wasn't really you who did those things. You're a different person now; you should have a new life, one where you can help people without being a vigilante. Don't you think so?"

"Perhaps," he said pensively. "But it's getting late. We should best be getting to sleep."

"You're right," Hermione agreed, stifling a yawn and taking a sip of the rich chocolate. "I think that it would be a good idea to send a message to Severus, though... let him know I'm all right. He'll be looking for me, and my friends will too. They probably think I'm being hurt, or will be hurt."

Malfoy sighed as he looked into the froth of his chocolate, frowning in thought. "Very well," he finally agreed. "I'll get an owl sent." He rose and went to the fireplace in the corner, pulling out his wand and casting several charms to get through the wards, then tossed in a handful of Floo powder. There was apparently an additional privacy charm on the fireplace, so Hermione couldn't hear the conversation. He rose several moments later.

"An owl will arrive shortly; you may send your message, but I will read it first. Don't mention my name."

Hermione rose and found paper and a pencil, and then began to write.

Severus,

I'm fine and am safe. Someone has taken me because they felt I needed to be protected. I'll explain everything when I see you again next week.

-- Hermione.

It was short, but to the point. She handed the paper to Malfoy and he looked it over. "You will see him next week?" he queried.

"That's when you'll let me go, isn't it?"

"Yes... I just thought that after what you'd seen..."

"I've been thinking about all those things, but I want to talk to him about it first."

Malfoy looked disappointed, but nodded, rolled up the parchment, and opened the kitchen window. Moments later, a brown owl arrived, and Malfoy tied the note to its leg.

"Now," he said once the owl was in flight and the window closed again, "let's sleep."

Night fell as they sped across the continent, over large cities and small towns, and dodged aeroplanes when they passed a large airport. Severus's hands and feet were numb with the cold, and he imagined Potter wasn't doing so well, either. He seemed to be struggling to keep the Snitch in sight. The Snitch showed no sign of slowing. Through the day the landscape had changed from heavily wooded, to sparsely wooded areas, and now, by the light of the full moon, they saw few trees as they flew over farms and large herds of cattle, but the coming horizon was bright with city lights.

Soon they were over a large city.

"Snape, look!" Potter shouted, pointing at an owl trying to intercept them.

"Catch the Snitch, then go down!" Snape called hoarsely when he spotted the owl. He landed in what appeared to be a park near a small earthen and stone amphitheatre. A nearby sign showed it to be 'The Norman Community Park.' The owl alighted upon a nearby tree, hooted at Snape, and offered its leg. Snape stepped forward and untied the note, and read it by the moonlight.

"It's from Hermione," he announced as Potter landed nearby. "She says she's fine and safe."

"Let me see," Harry demanded. Snape scowled, but handed the note over. Harry read it. "This can't be right; whoever took her made her write this... why would anyone think she was in danger?" he asked, casting an accusing look at Snape.

"Potter, one would think an Auror in training would know the appropriate spells to cast to determine a note's authenticity." He pulled out his own wand and muttered a few charms at the paper as both Severus and Harry noted the results.

"It's been handled by two people, but doesn't appear to be a forced message, and the mood indicator shows she wasn't afraid when she wrote this... she believes what she wrote. Therefore, we can assume that Hermione is indeed safe for the moment. If we are to rescue her, we should be fresh and well. We'll find a place to sleep for the night, then continue in the morning when we're rested. It'll do Hermione no good to have us arrive to rescue her if we're so tired we can't hold up our wand arms."

"If you actually gave a shit about her, you wouldn't say that!" yelled Harry.

"It is precisely *because* I want her safe that I am saying that. We will need time once we find her location to plan the best means of freeing her. You'll do her no good in your current state." Severus, considering the conversation over, walked to a nearby shrub and transfigured the interior into a shelter and the leaves on the ground into a mattress.

"Give me the Snitch, Potter." Reluctantly, Harry handed it over, and Snape put it inside his pouch. Snape lay down heavily upon the transfigured mattress and immediately fell into exhausted sleep. Harry cast an anti-Muggle ward around the shrub, transfigured a mattress for himself, and followed suit, hoping fervently that Snape was right, that they would find Hermione safe and well in the morning.

"I've a few more memories to show you, Hermione," Lucius said over morning tea. Hermione, who'd slept soundly but with disturbing dreams of Severus dressed as a Death Eater and wielding whips and other dangerous-looking objects, nodded.

"I don't feel I've fully convinced you yet."

"You've definitely raised concerns, Lucius," Hermione said carefully, now wary of Malfoy's thoughtful and somehow decisive tone, as if he had a new plan of some sort. "I'll see the other memories, but after that, haven't you given me the information to make my own choice? That's what all this has been about, right?" She felt it was important to remind him of this, that he'd kidnapped her and shown her memories in order to 'save' her from what hadn't really been a choice of hers.

Hermione placed her cup on the table with a soft 'clank' and ate her scrambled eggs. Lucius merely picked at his own, then rose abruptly and left the kitchen.

There was a sudden crack and Hermione jumped, turning towards the window overlooking the bare backyard. She saw nothing out of the ordinary, other than the sky being grey, even after she got up and took a closer look.

"What was that?" Lucius said, rushing back into the room, eyes wide as he looked around frantically.

"I... something hit the window... probably a bird... maybe a kid in the neighbourhood tossed a rock?"

Lucius flung open the back door and went outside, looking all around for several minutes. He came back in once he seemed satisfied, then returned to the front room after locking the door firmly.

Outside, and up thirty feet, Snape and Potter crouched on the roof, brooms discarded on the rough shingles nearby, and a severely damaged Snitch held tightly by Snape as he glared at Potter.

"You were supposed to catch it! He could have discovered us." Below, they heard a door open, and they crept to the other side of the roof.

"I don't think so. Now, are we going to get inside or not? I want to get a look over here," Harry said, drawing his wand. Snape reached out and grabbed Harry's jumper, giving him a warning glare.

It had only taken them a half an hour to find the house once they'd got underway; Severus had insisted upon breakfast first, and a Confundus Charm as they handed over a few Muggle British coins had sufficed for the already confounded-looking employee who had asked, "Y'all here for Namron Protectorate this weekend?" just before the casting of the charm. They dismissed the question, as the questioner had forgotten asking as he handed over what passed for breakfast. It was sustenance, at least.

"I say we just go in the back door, find her and blast whoever is holding her," Potter said.

"That would be unwise. The captor may have significant wards in place."

"Fred and George's Extendable Ears would be useful now."

Snape said nothing in response and, instead, put away the Snitch and took hold of his broom. "Stay here, I'm going to see inside through the first floor."

"Hermione, I have it prepared," Lucius called. She turned away and walked to the living room, where Lucius was waiting with the Pensieve. Hermione went to the front room and looked down into it, wondering what horrors it would reveal this time.

Just as she leaned over, there was a crash... no, two crashes from above. Hermione and Lucius both jumped, while Lucius looked frantically around.

"Hermione!" called Harry.

"I'm down here... I'm okay," Hermione yelled back, just as Malfoy grabbed her. Before she could react, there was a knife at her throat and she was being pulled towards the

wall. "Let me go!" she cried.

"I won't hurt you; please, just do what I tell you. We're going to get out of this together, I promise," Malfoy said.

Two sets of footsteps grew closer, coming down the stairs, and then Severus, followed by Harry, jumped into the foyer, whirled and registered a moment of shock when they saw Lucius Malfoy and Hermione. He and Harry had their wands held steady as they slowly advanced towards them.

"Don't come any closer, Snape," Malfoy threatened, holding the knife dangerously close to Hermione's throat.

"Malfoy, let her go!" Snape said icily.

"Just stop, everybody!" Hermione screeched. "Stop!"

"I'm not going to give her back to you," Malfoy shouted. "You can't keep hurting her! Oh, don't you think I realised what you've been doing to her, Snape?" Malfoy accused. "I've taken her to save her. Potter, you're helping the wrong man; I know you wouldn't want Hermione to be with that monster."

Harry looked back and forth between Snape and Malfoy. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

"Malfoy, be quiet and let Hermione go," Snape repeated.

"Of course you'd want me to be quiet... you wouldn't want anyone to know about what you've been doing, would you? Potter, he's been beating her-"

"Shut up, Lucius!" Hermione shouted. "Please, let's all just sit down and we can talk. Severus, Harry, put down your wands, now!"

"What's he mean, beating her? Hermione?" Harry asked, looking now between Hermione and Severus.

"Just... please, both of you, lower your wands." She twisted slightly as the blade pressed against her throat. Malfoy seemed to realise he was hurting her, and subtly moved the blade to make her more comfortable, yet trying to appear as if he was still threatening her.

"Snape, have you hurt her?" Harry asked, though his wand was still directed at Malfoy.

"Look in the Pensieve!" Malfoy shouted. "You'll see the kinds of things he does in the Pensieve!"

Harry stilled, looking down at the stone bowl filled with roiling, shimmering light. Hermione felt a lurch in her stomach, and twisted against Lucius's firm hold.

"Potter, don't let him distract you," Severus said, his eyes searching Hermione's for a moment.

"Let Hermione go first," Potter said.

"I won't hurt her, I promise. I'm only trying to save her from that monster," Lucius said to Harry, dropping the blade several inches. To Hermione, he whispered, lips hidden by her hair, "Just stay still; I'll get us out of this."

Harry went down to his knees, looking into the Pensieve while everyone stopped. "Harry, please, stop! It's not what it looks like!" Hermione said. But she was too late. Severus started towards Harry, reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder.

Harry was pulled away from the Pensieve but whirled quickly, levelling his wand on Severus. "Potter, put it down!" Severus ordered.

"No. You... that... Hermione," he pleaded, turning enough to see Hermione, "has he done... that?" He'd only been in the Pensieve a few seconds, but apparently the memory had begun at a particularly 'convincing' scene.

"Malfoy has been using trickery to get his way for decades. We're here to get Hermione. Now, Potter, *turn your wand back to Malfoy.*"

"Now you see why I had to take her, Potter. I'm only trying to help."

"Since when have you ever helped anyone?" Harry demanded, his wand now wavering halfway between Severus and Lucius.

"Since I was made into a new person. Since I came to see my own past actions, and those of my former friends, from a new perspective."

"Lucius, let me go! Severus, put your wand down and *shut up*; Harry, you do the same!" Hermione screamed. Whether it was the decibel or the desperate tone, the three men listened, finally. Cautiously, the three of them lowered their weapons, stepping back warily. Hermione slowly stepped to the side.

"Lucius hasn't hurt me, so please, just let's all calm down here." Hermione just wanted to get control of the situation, diffuse it, before moving on. Harry wasn't helping any.

"You still haven't answered me, Hermione. I didn't get a long look in there, but what I saw was bad enough... and Snape was... what was that?"

"It was a memory of mine," Malfoy supplied. "A memory of a time I'm glad I don't remember first hand. When I left St Mungo's hospital and returned to Malfoy Manor, Draco showed me these former memories of mine, hoping to make me again into the monster I'd been..." Malfoy faltered a moment, "showed me those scenes of torture and rape, which I regret to say was a past activity I shared with Snape."

"Malfoy, your memories are warped," Severus said. "What you saw wasn't what it appears to be."

"Hermione, answer me!" Harry bellowed, now looking at her in a panic. "What I saw, has he done this to you?"

"Harry, please calm down. It's not what it looks like," Hermione answered, thinking while she answered, that it might be better to just deny it completely. Harry would never understand.

"NOT WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE? IT FUCKING LOOKS LIKE TORTURE!!" Harry screamed.

"Potter, shut up now," growled Snape.

"SHUT UP? YOU WANT ME TO SHUT UP? *Is this what's been going on with you and Hermione?*"

Snape levelled his wand at Harry and blasted him into unconsciousness.

"Harry!" Hermione cried. "Severus, how could you?" She rushed to rouse Harry.

"He's fine, leave him. Now, Malfoy, have your brains been addled beyond sanity after our duel?"

"No, my eyes have finally cleared. I've spent the time with Hermione showing her what you are. You can't deny the truth, and however you've been able to keep her quiet, to make her tolerate your abuse...."

Snape snapped his wand at Malfoy, who immediately went stiff and fell over. Hermione recognised a simple full Body-Bind. With Harry unconscious and Malfoy nearly so,

Hermione turned to Severus, surprised to see him much closer as he rushed towards her. He took her by the shoulders, holding her at arms' length as he scanned over her for injury.

"Are you well? He didn't hurt you?" he asked.

"No... he didn't hurt me, Severus. He was trying to help... in his own way, I suppose."

"I'm just relieved you're safe," Severus sighed, gripping her shoulders firmly as he pulled her close. They stood together for a moment.

"I think Harry is going to be upset," Hermione said into his shoulder.

"So be it," Severus answered. He started to say something else, but seemed to change his mind and stopped. "I believe, Hermione, that we have much to discuss." An undertone to his voice suggested he had many things on his mind, not only the present situation.

Hermione sighed.

Collisions

Chapter 29 of 31

Consequences, choices, chances, and changes.

Thanks to my beta readers, Nakhsh and Cythonia.

Due to many reasons, which I'll not go into, this chapter is very late, though it was complete about three months ago. I make no promises on future update times, though I will finish this monstrosity.

She really had wanted him to find her. So why did she now feel as if something dreadful were about to happen? Her best friend was now lying unconscious because of her husband.

Deciding to start with Malfoy she said, "He really wasn't going to hurt me, Severus. He's the one... the murderer. He's also... Draco, he killed Draco. He told me after he took me. But he wasn't going to hurt me."

"Draco?" Snape whispered, his eyes jolting wide. "Why?"

"Draco found out what he'd been doing. He's trying to help... in his own way, I suppose. He feels sorry for what he's done, and messed up in trying to make up for it. He... well, apparently kept memories in store before. Draco reacquainted him with his former memories. From there, it seems he decided to take a completely different path." Hermione turned her attention again.

"Let's at least get Harry more comfortable... wake him up."

"No, I've been wanting to do that to him since several days ago, when I discovered something in his mind..." Snape said with an icy edge to his voice.

"And why were you looking in his mind?" Hermione asked, a bit too angrily.

"I was *trying* to discover if there might be another clue to find you before something truly hideous happened to you! Imagine my surprise when instead I saw Potter's all too real sexual escapade with you!" He took a breath, closing his eyes a moment. "That, we will discuss later."

"Severus... I... I'm sorry, I just..." Hermione stammered.

"Don't make excuses now. We have other things to deal with."

"Yes, of course, fine," she said tightly. Hermione turned and stared at Malfoy for a moment. His nostrils flared slightly, the only sign he wasn't actually a statue.

"I want to help Lucius," Hermione said. "He's been trying to help. That's the only reason he took me, why he killed those people. Not really the best methods, of course... but I really do think he's good deep down now." Then she turned to Harry again, knelt beside him, checked his breathing and pulse. He seemed fine, other than being Stupefied, that is.

"I can imagine what must be in that Pensieve," said Severus, walking over to Lucius. He pointed his wand and muttered a few words. Ropes slithered out of his wand and bound his former friend tightly, then he removed the full-body-bind.

Lucius, twisting to a sitting position, said, "You can't keep her now, Snape. I've shown her what you are, what you've done to helpless victims. She has the power now to leave you."

Severus scowled, then turned to the Pensieve. Kneeling before it, he fell into the image and took a look at where he found himself. After several moments, he pulled away.

"This is what was supposed to convince Hermione?" he scoffed. "I suppose you never would have kept the memories beyond the *exciting* parts, now, would you? You've always been an imbecile, Lucius. Some things never change" Severus put his wand to his temple and ran it over his skull, pulling away a silvery thread and putting it into the Pensieve. "Look at this, Hermione," he said.

Hermione knelt warily at the Pensieve, took a deep breath, and dove into it, immersing herself into Severus's memory. She recognised the scene... she'd seen it only days before and hadn't wanted to keep watching.

"It appears to be quite cruel," said Severus behind her. "I suppose this is one of the first things he showed you?" Hermione took in a shaky breath; the sound of the woman's hoarse screams were awful.

"Don't look away," Severus said firmly. "Watch what happens now."

Hermione turned back to the scene: the black-haired woman was now suspended fully, rods piercing her body, her back, legs, arms even the nape of her neck and she was hung from the ceiling, spinning slowly on the ropes. Blood dripped from numerous lash-marks.

The memory-Lucius, naked now and with smears of blood over his body. He laughed, grabbed the woman by the hair and twisted her head around, giving her a push as he did so and sending her spinning again. Lucius turned away with a satisfied grin. "I believe I'll have a bath now," he said. "Dobby!"

The familiar house-elf appeared, looking about the dungeon in terror. "Y-yes, master?"

"Prepare my bath." Dobby disappeared with a pop. Lucius turned to Severus, who was also naked, but using a cleaning spell to wash away the blood and other fluids on his body. "I suppose you'll take care of her now?"

"Yes. I don't think she'd appreciate too many scars, would you, Bella?"

The woman laughed weakly, giving a sighing moan. Severus pulled his wand from his robes after he'd donned them, and pointed it at Bellatrix Lestrange, casting *Wingardium Leviosa* to make her float, causing the ropes to slacken. Hermione watched, in fascination now, as Severus began to unfasten the ropes from the rods, and then to carefully remove each rod, muttering healing charms as he went. After a short time, he levitated a cushion under Bellatrix, and lowered her carefully. Lucius had already left the room.

Severus proceeded to heal each gash and cut on her back, then prodded her to turn over. The woman was beautiful; her face smooth, thin but not haggard. She wore an expression of tired satisfaction on her beautiful face, a grin pulling up the corners of her full mouth.

"Severus, you're so amazingly creative," she said. "That was... ahh..." she sighed, closing her eyes in apparent bliss as Severus continued healing her, now working up her legs, over her belly, towards her ravaged and abused breasts.

"I thought for a moment it had gone too far for you," Severus murmured.

"You should know better than that," Bella said, then gave another tired laugh.

The dungeon faded to white, and Hermione found herself again kneeling at the Pensieve, looking across it at Severus. "I would imagine that certain details were lacking in what other things he might have shown you. I suppose it appeared that this was some kind of rape... torture of an innocent?"

Hermione only nodded as she began to sort through the things she'd seen. So it had been Bellatrix Lestrange, and apparently, given what she'd seen, something desired by all parties. There had been other women in some scenes, but the scene had never extended beyond the 'exciting' parts. Lucius's memories were incomplete; whether that was all he had kept of the memories or because he'd edited them purposely after seeing them again, she'd been shown an incomplete picture.

"Don't believe him, Hermione. Hasn't he done enough to you? Haven't you had enough? Please, I don't care what happens to me anymore as long as what I've done for you has been worth it..." He was cut off, still trying to speak, but no sound came from his mouth. Severus had silenced him.

Hermione frowned at Severus, wondering why he wouldn't want Lucius to speak. If he was only a raving, misinformed lunatic, what did it matter what he said? Severus stood and turned to Harry.

"Let me talk to him, Severus. I'll try to explain."

"You don't need to explain anything to *him*," said Snape bitterly, fury clouding his features. He glared at Hermione for a moment, then turned back to the unconscious figure. It had been a more powerful *Stupefy* than he'd really meant to cast. "Just like his father, interfering where he has no business, trying to take everything good from me ..." His murmur was nearly inaudible.

"Let's finish this business here, then we can go home. I'll contact Dumbledore; Magical Law Enforcement can handle Malfoy from here. No, Potter can contact Dumbledore..." he murmured. He woke Harry with a flick of his wand.

Disoriented, Harry knuckled his eyes and sat up, then pulled himself together. His wand wasn't far away and he lunged for it, but Snape interrupted him before he could take it.

"Go back and retrieve Magical Law Enforcement and have them take Malfoy into custody; I will take Hermione home."

Harry glanced towards Malfoy and said, "No, you won't. I don't care what either of you say about all that, I want answers *now*."

"*Obliviate!*" Snape whispered.

"Severus, NO!" Hermione yelled, but she was too late. She watched in horror as Snape advanced on a seemingly frozen Harry, his shoulders set, whirling his wand deftly. In a few moments, Harry's eyes refocused.

"What... what happened?" he asked, dazed, as he looked around the room.

"Malfoy hit you with a *Stupefy*, Potter. You let your guard down." Harry gave Snape a sharp glare. "At any rate, you seem unharmed. Go to the Ministry, and return with a team. We will wait here until you return, but I believe that after all this Hermione should go home.

"You're okay, Hermione?" Harry asked, seeing Hermione there. "What's the matter?"

"I... I'm fine," she stammered. What had Severus done? How much had he erased?

"Good." Harry nodded. "Good. *Accio Portkey*," he cast. The battered soda can flew to his hand. "I'll be back soon," he said, and cast another charm. A glowing spot appeared on the floor, then Harry muttered a word and disappeared.

"What did you do to him?" Hermione demanded, her voice shaking.

"I've made it easier for us. He needed no explanations, it's better he doesn't remember what he saw; it will only complicate matters for us."

"You Oblivated Harry! What right do you have..."

"I have every right to do what I must! I've done everything possible this past week to find you, to save you. Now there is still something I must do," he said, turning to Lucius. "*Legilimens*," he whispered. Lucius was caught completely unprepared, and sat frozen as Snape hovered over him like a vulture. Hermione realised he must be searching, trying to find the memories to erase.

"Stop!" she screamed, leaping forward and pushing him. "Why are you so determined to hide everything? So what if he tells anyone?" Reasonably, Hermione knew that Lucius's testimony might spark some interest in what had gone on between herself and Severus, but at the moment, she was more horrified with Severus. "If there's nothing wrong, what are you hiding from?"

Severus looked at her in disbelief. "And I suppose you'd like the details of our private life spread over *The Quibbler*, *The Daily Prophet*, even? I'm sure they'd love to see you back in the spotlight, now with even more interesting gossip than what was printed about you before. How would you like that?"

"You didn't have the right to do that to Harry, no matter what!"

"We will discuss this at home."

"NO!" Hermione shook her head, stepping back. This was all wrong... so very, very wrong. She should have been glad of the thought of going home, but after this... he'd crossed the line.

"What?"

"That was wrong, what you did to Harry. All because of the inconvenience it could cause you. Just like how you Confounded our Muggle landlords to get the house, how you... you've always done this, done whatever you *'had to do'* to cover your own tracks, to get your own way. Maybe Lucius is right. I've taken enough... maybe not in the way he means, but in allowing you to get me to go along with things I knew were wrong. I won't anymore."

She glanced towards Lucius, who was now smiling proudly at her. He mouthed, "Good."

"Hermione," Severus began carefully, "let's talk about this at home. I'm sorry this has been difficult for you, but you must understand that I'm doing this for *us*. I... I can accept that there are some things I've done that haven't been... wise," he admitted hesitantly. "But I do care for you."

Harry appeared in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic, and saw a group of Aurors standing together by the water fountain. "Hey!" he shouted at them. He rushed towards them, glad to see Shackbolt, determined now to make sure he did what needed to be done. He'd had to leave Hermione with Snape, had to pretend that the Obliviate had worked. Harry had used Occlumency in such a subtle way that even Snape, a master Legilimens and Occlumens, had believed he'd been successful in selectively erasing Harry's memories of what he'd seen in the Pensieve, and of what he'd shared with Hermione.

He'd come to while Severus and Hermione were bent over the Pensieve. Malfoy had seen him, but Harry had raised a finger to his lips, nodded to Malfoy, and then lain down again, feigning unconsciousness while he called up everything he'd ever learned about Occlumency. Even Trelawney would have been proud of his almost psychic sense of what would happen next, even if it was just for a moment in his lifetime.

Snape would pay dearly for what he'd done to Hermione. And Hermione... he should have known something was seriously wrong. How could she stand there and say that it wasn't what it looked like, that it wasn't what it seemed... she'd confirmed his worst fears with those words. Fighting back tears of rage and sympathy for Hermione, he began.

"We've found the killer. It was Lucius Malfoy. He's been captured, and is in America. I've left a marker for a Portkey; we need to hurry. Hermione is fine for the moment, but..." he glanced around at the junior Aurors... "Kingsley, a word alone, please." Kingsley Shackbolt nodded and stepped aside with Harry, who quickly cast a Privacy Charm. "We have to take Snape, too," he whispered urgently. "He tried to Obliviate me, and believes he succeeded."

"What?" Shackbolt appeared, understandably, shocked.

"He's been abusing Hermione the whole situation Lucius Malfoy was actually trying to help her, you see. He's killed all those people, but for once I think I understand what he was trying to do. Snape... he's a... a *sadist*...sexually. He's been hurting Hermione... I saw in a Pensieve the kinds of things he's done to someone else, just horrid stuff. We'll have to take him by surprise, wait until we're done with Malfoy; he shouldn't suspect we're after him, he thinks he's Obliviated the memories I had, tried to be selective, but I was prepared this time for him."

"Are you sure about this, Harry?" Kingsley asked gravely.

Harry's green eyes flashed as he answered, "More sure than I've ever been of anything."

He cared for her. Hermione blinked at him. It was almost unbelievable that at this moment he would say something to her in a way she'd wished she could have heard from him for so long. He meant it too, she was sure of that.

Did that change anything though? Did that take away what he'd done to Harry, what he was still planning to do to Lucius?

"Hermione... this past week, with you gone, it's shown me what you truly mean to me. I may not have done things as I should have with you, but... I... do want you to be happy." His voice broke as he whispered the last. "Please, come home with me now," he implored softly, reaching a hand out for her to take.

Hermione stared down at his waiting hand, then back into his eyes, which glistened slightly. He looked haggard and tired she believed he'd been doing everything possible to find her, she believed that he loved her.

With a sinking feeling, she turned away from him. "I... need time, Severus. Just some time to think, at least," she managed to say. Right now she felt she couldn't make any sort of decision at all, such was the whirl of emotions coursing through her.

She realised Lucius was smiling at her, tears leaking down his cheeks. She didn't want him to see this, either. "I need my wand. Severus, please remove the silencing charm from him so he can tell me where it is," she said, her voice hollow.

"Hermione... very well," he agreed, his voice hardening again as he locked away any show of emotion. When Hermione turned to look at him, he seemed as cold and stiff as she'd ever seen him.

"You'll find your wand in the chest over there," Malfoy said, nodding towards the wooden chest. "There's a hidden compartment near the bottom on the left side panel when you open it; touch it and say 'freedom', and it will open for you."

Wordlessly, Hermione followed the instructions, and soon had her wand back in her hand. As she stood, the sound of popping and rushing wind filled the room, and Harry, along with Kingsley Shackbolt and several other Aurors, appeared, all quickly levelling their wands at Lucius.

"Wait!" Hermione said. "He's safe."

"Tell that to all the people he's killed," Shackbolt said. "He'll stand trial now."

"What I've done, I've done because it had to be done," Malfoy said stoically. "I've done this for Stephanie, who first befriended me, and who was murdered, and for all the other victims of the evil laws that I helped to enact before I was reborn."

Hermione thought she heard one of the Aurors mutter something that sounded like 'nutter'.

"He claims he killed Draco Malfoy," Snape said. "Someone should go to Malfoy Manor and search it."

"Rogers, you take care of that," Shackbolt said to one of the two Aurors who were advancing on Malfoy. They nodded their acknowledgement, placed a Portkey in Malfoy's hand, and disappeared. Harry and Kingsley shared a look, then Kingsley turned to Hermione.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I... yes, I think I am. I just want to go home now. Could I rest for a while before... whatever it is that needs doing?"

"Go home, Hermione. I'll meet you there," Severus said.

"Home, yes, of course."

"Hermione, I made you a Portkey. It'll take you to the Ministry, you can Apparate safely from there."

"I'm going home," Hermione murmured, seemingly lost in thought as she took the Portkey and then disappeared.

"And now, Harry, we're about done here?" Kingsley asked.

"Nearly so," Harry said, meeting Kingsley's eyes. Together, they turned and cast *Stupefy* at Snape, who fell to the ground. He'd had no time to defend himself.

"The Pensieve we'll need to take as evidence, too," Harry said. "And all this." He flicked his wand at the Pensieve and the chest, which he saw was filled with bottles of memories. Kingsley had bound Snape with magical ropes.

"I've really gone out on a limb for this, Harry."

"With all this, I'm sure we can get him locked away. Now, let's get him back to the Ministry. I need to go talk to Hermione."

Snape remained unconscious for the Portkey ride back to the Ministry holding cell. When Harry and Kingsley exited the cell, they met Dumbledore.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked, looking with concern at the bound and unconscious Snape.

"What you need to know is in here," said Harry, placing the chest and Pensieve on a nearby table. "He's going to pay for what he's done to Hermione."

"What could do you mean?" Dumbledore asked. Harry ignored him, turning and running from the room, eager to reach the anti-Apparition wards and get to Hermione. Once in the Atrium, he Disapparated, then Apparated with a loud crack outside Snape and Hermione's house. The door was locked, but he unwarded it quickly, and went inside.

"Hermione? Where are you?" he called. There was no answer. A search of the house confirmed she wasn't home.

Walking through the house brought back so many memories. There, in the corner, where her parents had read to her when she was a young child sitting on a lap in the squashy armchair. There, the staircase, where she'd first demonstrated early, barely controlled magic at the age of three after tripping and falling down the stairs. Her parents hadn't seen it happen, and had thought her tale of magically appearing at the bottom of the staircase instead of falling had been a clever story. As she walked up the stairs and into her bedroom, she recalled the last time she'd been there. Severus had slept there, where her bed had been. The bed that was now in their bedroom at what should be her home.

Home.

She'd Apparated there at first, but had only stayed a moment. It was too much. This time, she'd Apparated to what felt more like 'home'. A place to come to, to retreat to and think. Her parents would be surprised to find her when they came home from work, and she wondered if anyone had bothered to tell them what had happened to her, that she'd been kidnapped.

Probably not. There were so many things her parents hadn't been told. They were, after all, Muggles. Like the Muggles Severus had had no problem Confounding to get his way. She'd done it to them herself, but right now trying to do any sort of coming clean about everything would be too much to handle. Ignorance was bliss for a reason the Muggles would have been in more danger from panic if they'd known about Voldemort.

Here at home though, Hermione felt like she'd removed herself from her life, or the life she'd been living. Was it really her life anymore? When was the last time she'd made her own decisions? She sunk to the floor of her childhood bedroom, staring at the indentions still in the carpet from her bed frame. She wasn't at all the person she'd dreamed of being when she was younger. Hermione just hoped it wasn't too late to change that.

Snape came to slowly, painfully. He was uncomfortable, laying on a hard surface, bound. Had Malfoy somehow got away? Opening his eyes slowly, he looked around and saw the water-stained ceiling and bars of a cell, and then, through the bars, saw Dumbledore leaning over a stone basin. The Pensieve.

A gnawing in his stomach began. Something was dreadfully wrong. He watched as Dumbledore rose straight, sighed deeply, then turned to look at him. "Severus, I trusted you," the man whispered sadly. "Please, please tell me that it's not true, that what Lucius Malfoy is saying isn't true."

So he knew, then. "It's not true," Severus said. Somehow, he felt a twinge of guilt. "Not quite true... not in the way he's saying it," he amended, feeling his lips were moving against his will and better judgement.

"So, this is what you've done while I trusted you to keep Hermione safe?"

"Albus, I don't think you can begin to understand the complex..."

"*Silence!*" Though his voice was not loud, it seemed to reverberate through every cell of Severus's being. "I believed you to be the best choice for Hermione. I believed that even if you didn't seem the most romantically minded sort, you would keep her safe, allow her more of a life than she would have otherwise. I will reserve final judgement until I've spoken with Hermione about this, but I am ... very disappointed." With that, Albus Dumbledore turned and walked from the room, leaving Severus alone in his cold hard cell.

Severus closed his eyes. Dumbledore had to believe him. He wouldn't do anything to hurt Hermione; he loved her. Maybe he'd only realised that recently, but he did, and he had cared for her, had protected her, and compromised with her.

He admired her too she was almost everything he could have wanted in a wife, without even realising it. Submissive, but only to a point. Willing to please, even if it was with compromise and assurances. He would have never thought it could have been so wonderful before. He'd hoped only for contentment, but had found much more. Now, he wanted more than that, he wanted her to be not only content, but happy.

He groaned as he thought back to shortly after they married, something he'd said to her that, at the time, hadn't seemed so terrible.

"*You see Hermione,*" he said, *his voice lowering to a whisper as he bent down to graze his lips across her ear, "your pain is my pleasure."*

He remembered wanting to put her in her place, to make clear the boundary between them. She'd come into the shower with him of her own accord, and he had punished her for trying to initiate something closer between them. How could she have interpreted that? Especially at that moment? She must have been terrified of him, even if he had admired her bravery in facing more and more challenging scenarios. He didn't want her to fear him from a distance, at least *now* he didn't want that. He wanted her near him, for them to face a life together side by side, working towards common goals.

"Gods, what have I done?" he whispered.

Harry jumped in surprise at the soft pop, and spun around to see Dumbledore. Harry had been pacing back and forth in the soggy front garden of the stone house, trying to think where Hermione might have gone.

"Professor, she's not here. I'm not sure where she is."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"Home... she said she was going home."

"I see. I believe I know where she might be, Harry."

"Where?"

"I will go speak with her. You're upset now, understandably. I think Hermione needs a cooler head at the moment. Go home, Harry. I will let you know how she is later on." With that, Dumbledore Disapparated.

Hermione jumped, disturbed from her thoughts by a knock on the front door. She stood, then decided to go see who it was. Maybe her parents had a delivery that would need to be signed for? Downstairs, she opened the door.

"Professor Dumbledore," she said. She shouldn't have been so surprised to see him. "What are you doing here?"

"Hermione, may I come in?" Something about his gentle tone and appraising eyes made her stomach lurch.

"Um... okay. Could I get you some tea?"

"No, no, that's fine," he said as he entered. Hermione led him to the living room where she sat across from him awkwardly.

"I got your message from Fawkes the other day. I couldn't send anything back, though. I was okay, really. Just..." she sighed, "it's been a long week."

"Yes, I imagine so," Dumbledore agreed. He pursed his lips. "Hermione, despite Lucius's seemingly delusional state, he's made some... accusations. I would like to learn the truth from you now."

"About what, exactly?" Hermione asked. A wave of alternating hot and cold rushed over her skin.

"About what happened between you and Severus. A Pensieve, as well as numerous bottled memories of Lucius Malfoy's, existing before his full Obliviate, were taken. I have... perused some of these. I assume you've seen them as well, that this was what Lucius wanted to show you?"

"Yes."

"And has Severus inflicted any of this sort of... this activity, upon you?"

Hermione gulped. "What do you mean?"

"Hermione, I understand if you might feel some sort of need to protect Severus, but I must know the truth now." His blue eyes flashed, and Hermione felt the stiffness in her throat loosen. She licked her drying lips and took a steady breath.

"Severus didn't do anything I hadn't agreed to participate in," she said. Why did she feel like this was a lie? "He's probably wondering why I'm not home now, actually. I probably should let him know where I am," she mumbled.

"Severus is in a cell at the Ministry now. Harry and Kingsley took him into custody after Lucius was secured. Kingsley tells me he tried to selectively Obliviate Harry?"

Hermione gasped. It hadn't worked? If it hadn't worked... then Harry had probably told everyone about what he'd seen.

"Apparently, Harry had time to erect effective enough Occlumency shields to fool Severus. An amazing feat, truly. It seems he even convinced you, too." Hermione's heart seemed about to thud out of her throat.

"Um... it's really not what it looks like, Professor. Severus shouldn't be arrested, really. Does it change anything if I actually enjoy some things people might find disturbing?" Her voice had risen half an octave. Her cheeks and ears felt as if they would burst into flame. Discussing her sex life with Dumbledore was the last thing she wanted to be doing.

"Why is it you came here, instead of going back to your house?"

That simple question was the crux of the matter.

Dumbledore stood, looking down at Hermione sadly for a moment. "I will be in my office at Hogwarts if you would like to speak more. The password is Grumpy Gumdrops."

Hermione didn't move as Dumbledore let himself out.

Lucius Malfoy, though he had avoided capture for so long, was cooperating fully with each and every investigator who had questioned him so far. He was tired. Beyond tired, shattered. But he understood why they were doing this. He'd done what had to be done, and he was at peace with himself. The voice that had driven him before, starting out as a whisper and gradually growing to a shout, had disappeared. That, more than anything, assured him that his mission had been accomplished. He could rest now. He wouldn't have to kill anymore.

"And again, Mr Malfoy, just *why* did you take it upon yourself to murder these men?"

Lucius yawned, then answered, "The Ministry of Magic wasn't doing enough. I had to save them." He'd repeated the same answer to that question, and dozens of variations of that question, more times than he could count now.

"How did you get to the locations to perform the murders?"

This question too, he'd answered before. "I own a few Thestrals. They flew me to the locations. I had had the Thestrals since my father gave them to me on my twentieth birthday. I was going to give them to Draco, apparently, before I was reborn. They had been kept secret as a family tradition... though when I was incapacitated, Draco had discovered them."

His rebirth had truly been the best thing that could have happened to him. To be able to turn all those tools that had previously been used for evil, and to use them for good had been the right thing to do. He yawned again, unable to stop himself. He had no idea now how long he'd been awake there were no windows by which to observe the

passage of time, only the continuous barrage of questions from one Auror or MLE officer after another.

The door of the windowless cell opened again, and this time the black Auror entered. Lucius admired him already, even if they did appear to be on opposite sides of the law. "Let's put him away now. We're not getting anywhere new," Kingsley Shacklebolt said.

Lucius was hefted to his feet by the two men and escorted down several hallways, then into another room lined with cells. He recognised the Pensieve and the chest and then saw, inside a cell, Snape. He smiled with satisfaction. Justice, at least partly, would progress. Of course, ministry-issued justice could never truly be harsh enough.

The officers locked him in a cell and left the room. But even though he was tired, Lucius wouldn't sleep. Not yet.

Severus was in jail. How could Harry do this? No, she couldn't blame Harry. He was overreacting, true, but that was typical. She'd been infuriated with Severus for trying to Obliviate him, but at the same time, a part of her had been relieved that there would be one less issue to deal with. Now she had not only Severus to deal with, but Harry, Dumbledore, and who knew who else.

With a sigh, she closed her eyes. She just needed everything to go away and leave her alone... just long enough for her to get her thoughts together.

"Hermione dear! What are you doing here?"

"Hullo, Mum," answered Hermione, opening her eyes.

"Is something the matter? Yes, something is the matter. What is it, Hermione?"

"Would it be all right if I stayed here a while? Just... I can't explain it all. I just need to get away for a while."

"Yes, of course that would be all right." Her mother looked as if she wanted to ask about it, but instead said, "I was planning on ordering curry for dinner, what would you like?"

Home again. It was good. Her father came home not long after that, and after a sharp glance from her mother, he too pretended that nothing was out of the ordinary, making small talk and relating a few dental incidences that Hermione couldn't help but laugh at.

Niggling in the back of her mind, however, was the fact that Severus was in jail. Because of her. She really should get up there and straighten it all out, she knew. It wasn't right for her to be here with her parents, the three of them pretending that the looming issue (which her parents were blissfully unaware of even if they knew something was up) didn't exist while he was being held by the ministry at Harry's behest. Why couldn't she bring herself to get up and go get it taken care of?

All through dinner she thought the same, and then after dinner, watching the telly with her dad (mum had gone to bed, Hermione suspected to restrain herself from asking about why she was home). Monty Python's flying circus brought back memories of her life before she knew she was a witch, a time when she'd had the world to look forward to and found it fascinating. So many things to do, places to see, books to read.

It had only become more fascinating when she'd learned of the Wizarding world.

Why then, was the life she led now so very different? Was it simply that when she was a child the world had seemed to be so much more? Did everyone else find the reality of day-to-day life the same, like there really wasn't anything else fascinating to see or do? Or perhaps it was facing such spectacularly dangerous adventures at such a young age. How could she top having been involved with defeating one of the most powerful Dark Wizards in history? And especially how could she, after having had so much hope for the future, surrender herself to an insane act of law and a man she never would have given a thought to as any sort of romantic possibility? How could she just let her life go like that?

She transfigured a book into a mattress when it came time to sleep, but despite that, sleep eluded her. It was well into the wee hours of the morning before she finally found it.

"Be sure your sins will find you out," said Malfoy.

"Don't start quoting the bible, Malfoy. It's not your style, even now."

"No, but it's fitting, isn't it?"

"As is 'take the beam from your own eye'." Snape rolled off the shelf that passed for a cot to walk to the edge of the cell and face Malfoy. The man looked tired. Snape, at least, had slept. He'd been here too long; Hermione should have come. It had been nearly two days it was now evening of the second day. No one had been in to see him though a few had come to retrieve the Pensieve and chest.

What if Hermione were being kept from him, or worse, what if she wasn't? What if she didn't want to see him. What had Malfoy done to convince her of anything in so short a time? She'd been with him for fifteen months; a week away two, counting her vacation with her friends should have had no effect on her opinion of him.

"I should thank you, Severus, for instigating the change I went through. I would say that I owed you my life, if you weren't also one I had to stop."

Severus gritted his teeth. Arguing with this man would accomplish nothing. Just as he turned to sit on his bunk again, the hinges of the main door opened. He turned back again.

"Hermione..."

"Severus, hello," she said quietly, meeting his eyes fleetingly. She stepped out of the doorway to allow Kingsley Shacklebolt through, who withdrew a ring of keys, and set Severus free.

"It's been decided that you may go. There may still be charges brought, so do not attempt to leave the country, Snape," Shacklebolt said, looking beyond Severus at the stone wall with an inscrutable expression. Severus stepped out of the cell, not bothering to respond to Shacklebolt.

"Hermione, shall we go home?" he said as she took up stride beside him. She was silent as they walked through several corridors, waited for another door to be unlocked, and then walked down the ministry basement corridors toward the exit. Severus wanted to say more, but not here.

"Let's... go for dinner somewhere," she said finally.

"Very well," he agreed. He felt filthy from too long without a bath, and his hair was even greasier than usual, but something about her tone convinced him that now was not the time to insist.

Outside the Ministry, Hermione paused in thought. "There's a nice place I know. You haven't been there before." She held out her arm, and Severus took it, allowing her to lead the Apparation. They arrived in an abandoned alleyway. A tuggish-looking young man saw them, but before he could do anything, Hermione brandished her wand and Confounded him.

"Good work," said Severus.

Inside a dimly lit Italian restaurant, they were seated. Severus stayed silent, looking towards Hermione, whose brows were knit in concentration, her mouth drawn in a thin line. Severus's stomach lurched. She quickly and subtly cast a privacy charm around them.

"I'm sorry I didn't get you out sooner," she began, fiddling with the tablecloth, eyes cast on the votive candle lighting the table.

"I'm sure you did so as quickly as you could, Hermione," he said softly. He felt sure that something was wrong and wanted to reassure her.

"No... I didn't, actually." She sucked in a breath and exhaled heavily, then looked up to meet his eyes.

The waiter interrupted them. "Your menus," he announced, thrusting menus in front of them. "Would you like to order your drinks now?"

They both were jolted by the interruption, but accepted the menus. The waiter, seeing he had interrupted, said, "I'll give you a moment to decide what you'd like, and will be back in a moment."

Severus wasn't hungry. Hermione gave a cursory glance at the menu and placed it on the table, and Severus decided it would be best to order something. Surely, simply staring at her wouldn't be productive. Everything would be fine, he just had to play along right now. She'd been through a lot over the last few weeks. He was still a bit angry about what she'd done with Potter, but would address that later. Perhaps, once she'd said what she wanted to say, it would be the right time to let her know some of the things he'd come to think of over the last two days while he'd been incarcerated.

"I'm leaving."

Her lips returned to a thin line, and after several moments of silence she looked back down at her menu.

"You're... what?" he whispered.

"I've moved my things into my parents' house. I'll be staying there for a while." Her eyes were still on the menu.

"Have you decided on what you'd like?"

"A Cesar Salad," said Hermione to the waiter. "And a bottle of the house white."

"And you, sir?"

Severus continued to stare at Hermione.

"Sir? Did you decide what you would like to have?"

He wanted Hermione to stay with him. That, of course, wasn't what the waiter wanted to know.

"He'll have the penne rustica," Hermione supplied in the following silence.

"It'll be out soon," the waiter said, "I'll bring your wine directly," then left. Severus was still staring at Hermione, his mouth hanging slightly agape, when the waiter returned with the wine, uncorked it and poured it into their glasses. Hermione took a gulp, drinking the entire glass, then refilled it once the waiter was gone.

"This may be temporary, I don't know right now. I need some time to think about things."

"Hermione..." His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat, beginning again. "Hermione... if this is about something Malfoy showed you..."

"No. Not anything he showed me. I've had time to think some things over, however, and I need more time to think."

"Let's talk about this at home, please," he murmured, suddenly aware, even with the surrounding shield from eavesdroppers, that their location was painfully public.

"My parents are expecting me in an hour."

That seemed to be the end of it. There was a certain note of finality in her tone. But it couldn't be. It just couldn't be. Unless...

"Hermione, please... don't do this now. You've been through a difficult week, and even... well, what happened with Potter, I am... willing to discuss it. I am... am, honestly, angry about it; but I've had time to think too. If you really felt the need..." He faltered, trying to search for the right words to go on. She couldn't be leaving him over that he wasn't really *that* angry with her. "I wouldn't do anything..."

"I know you wouldn't," Hermione cut in. "I know it's not like that. Right now I can't really explain it all, I don't really *want* to try to explain it all right now. I didn't really choose this, any of this."

She didn't choose this? After all this time, she had the nerve to say she hadn't chosen this? Severus's nostrils flared and his molars ground together, though he kept his mouth tightly shut. After several moments, during which Hermione seemed to understand he needed silence to think, he realised she had a point, albeit one he didn't agree with.

What he really needed now was a change of tactic.

Their meals arrived, and neither of them had said anything for a while. They shared the awkward silence... well, awkwardly. Both had seemed about to say something at various points, though they didn't. What could be said?

Severus, most of all, felt he had to convince her this wasn't right, but had no idea how to say it. Hermione took out some Muggle currency and paid for the meal.

"I'll... I'll write you sometime this week," she mumbled, starting to get up.

"Hermione, wait!" His hands darted out, capturing hers. "Hermione, please. *I love you!*"

There, he'd said it. He'd never told her that, but he did now, and not because he wanted to just say something. For the first time in his life, he did love someone. It wasn't a lie; he loved her.

She stared at him, her expression inscrutable. His heart pounded. Severus knew he had to say something else, but didn't know what to say, and as he saw tears well up in her eyes, he felt like he was going to be sick.

"I have to go now," she mumbled, pulling her hand away and quickly leaving.

Severus could do nothing for a long time but stare at the seat she'd occupied.

"Sir, can I get you anything else?" Severus looked up at the waiter, who was obviously aware this could be a delicate situation. Perhaps he'd seen break-ups take place there before? Perhaps they even had a protocol to follow in the event that one person left while the other remained, looking as if their heart had just been ripped out. Of course, he certainly didn't look as if his heart had been ripped out. He would never look like that.

"A bottle of whiskey," Severus answered curtly.

Three hours later, when the manager came to ask if they needed to call him a cab, he mumbled something in the negative and stumbled out of the restaurant, far too drunk to Apparate.

Hermione had to walk down the street for nearly a mile before she felt she could Disapparate. His last words echoed in her mind, along with the image of his eyes. She tried to tell herself that he was just saying that, he didn't mean it, he only wanted to manipulate her, but she couldn't help but believe that he was telling the truth.

Would it change anything? He'd said he'd done some thinking too... could it be that he had made some connections? Could he have realised at least a little bit the kinds of things he'd put her through? Still, he didn't seem to get why she was doing this. And even if he did on some level, maybe he wasn't making the connection of what it was all about.

Her choices had been taken from her. First, when the marriage law had passed, and then again, when he'd made such an issue over sexual control. She'd gained some level of self-determination later on with him, but the overall situation hadn't been her choosing. She would be twenty that year and more than anything, what she wanted was a self-determined life.

She'd gone along with too many things, accepted having too many freedoms taken from her when she should have fought. She needed a time that was completely of her own choosing in every aspect: a time to find herself.

If Severus really did love her, then he would wait for her and accept her decision, whatever it would be.

Retreat

Chapter 30 of 31

Hermione and Severus spend some time apart.

Severus,

I've thought a lot about what you said to me; that you love me. I never thought I'd hear you say anything like that, but I believe it's true. I can't honestly say I feel the same for you though, I'm sorry. I do care about you, and I want you to be happy.

I wanted to let you know that I'm still not sure what I want to do, but that I do know I need more time. It seems like my life hasn't been my own for too long, that I haven't really had the chance to do what I want, or go where I want.

It started with being Harry's best friend adventures and danger followed him. Then, later on, his fame made it difficult, not that I blame him for that, it's just the way it was. Then there was Voldemort, the war. Then the marriage law and you. It's as if I've had too many situations making decisions for me, and you've only added to that. I hope you can understand that. I think I understand a lot of why you did what you did, if it helps.

I'm not 'leaving you for Harry' or anything like that at all. What happened with Harry... well, it wasn't exactly the best choice for a number of reasons, and I'm sorry if that hurt you.

I've decided to go back to school. I always felt like I was truly at home while studying, but this time I'll be going to Muggle university. I haven't determined a course of study just yet, for now I'll likely just be taking an elective module, but I don't think that's really important. I really just want to do something different, have a life that seems to be my own, that feels normal.

I've talked to Harry, and to Kingsley, though not to Dumbledore. I can't seem to figure out how to say it to him, but I've made sure that no charges will be brought against you.

If you really do love me, don't try to come and see me now. You can write. I'll be living at Uni though, so owls would be suspicious.

Sincerely,

Hermione

Severus wanted to wake up, for this nightmare to be over, but it wasn't a nightmare. *If you really do love me, don't try to come and see me now.* What the fuck kind of reasoning was that?

He half-screamed, half-yelled as he wadded then ripped Hermione's letter, throwing it across the living room, and then reached for the half-empty bottle of whiskey by his chair on top of several dirty dishes. He drank himself into oblivion. This had happened far too many times in the week since Hermione had left him.

Why the fuck, of all the women he could have finally loved, did it have to be her? Why couldn't he have fallen in love with someone easier? Someone who would simply be content to do as they're told? Someone who would recognise that a life of simple contentment is far more than anything most people ever get to have, and who would be grateful for at least having that?

He'd fallen in love with an ungrateful, self-serving, bitch.

Love? Was it really love? He hadn't taken to expounding upon his feelings in flowery poetry, but that ache in his heart he was young enough, it shouldn't be heart troubles was something he thought directly correlated to Hermione's absence, her rejection.

He wanted to hunt her down and scream at her for what she'd done to him. He wanted to seek her out and implore her to return home. He wanted to fuck her like he'd never done before. He wanted to hold her and tell her she was safe with him, that he'd help her through this, that he understood, even if he didn't fully.

If he didn't get this straightened out soon, she'd be petitioning the Ministry for an annulment. He drained the last of the bottle. The room was spinning, and he decided

halfway across the living room that going upstairs was more trouble than it was worth. He collapsed in front of the fireplace, and stared into the dying embers as unconsciousness took hold.

"Severus..." A familiar voice called to him. The light coming through his closed lids hurt.

"Go. Away." Even half unconscious, the voice of Dumbledore trying to rouse him only made him want to go drink himself back into oblivion.

"Severus, drink this." Dumbledore, ignoring Severus's words, held a phial in front of Severus, stopping short at helping him sit up to drink it. His eyelids stuck together slightly as he tried to open them, and saw the phial, a blurry shape. He didn't question drinking it. At least he'd have a clear head for the dreadful conversation which was about to come. Dumbledore would not be deterred by being told to go away.

"Fine," he gurgled after he'd downed the potion, the blurriness leaving him. "What do you want?" He realised he looked ridiculous, still sprawled on the floor where he'd passed out the night before. Hermione's badly repaired note was clutched in his hand. He stuffed it into a pocket when he noticed Dumbledore's scrutiny of it.

"I want to talk to you. About Hermione, amongst other things... such as Lucius Malfoy."

"Very well," Severus said, getting up and going into the kitchen. He cracked the last two eggs into the skillet and began cooking. Dumbledore followed him into the kitchen. "If you think you can talk me into an annulment, stop right now. Hermione will be back once she's had a break."

"And is there a reason she would want to return?"

Severus glared at Dumbledore. "Whatever it is you've got to say, say it and be done with it."

"As you wish, Severus. Let's get the Lucius issue out of the way. He'll be on trial in the springtime. Until then, he'll be held in Azkaban. You and Hermione will both be called to testify against him. I spoke to Shackbolt this morning, and Hermione has made it very clear that nothing is to be done with you. I can't say I agree with her. I trusted you to keep Hermione safe, not to take advantage of her. I misjudged you. I thought perhaps that you were..."

"Shut up, Dumbledore. Shut the fuck up and get out of my house. What has happened and will happen between me and Hermione is none of your business. I will only say that she was fully informed before her decision to marry me about what I wanted with her, and I make no apologies for my... desires. Now GET OUT!" he bellowed, throwing the cast-iron skillet at Dumbledore, who easily deflected it with an unspoken spell.

Hermione hugged her mum and dad, then picked up her suitcases and went into King's Cross station. This brought back memories, though it wasn't platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$ she'd be going to it would be platform six. Her parents didn't know quite what had happened, though she had told them that she and Severus were 'taking a break'. They'd been supportive about her idea to attend university, and Hermione had been happy to discover that her timing was just right (with a deft spell or two to put paperwork in places they needed to be weeks before) for enrolling in the spring term. At the last minute, she'd decided to study Mathematics. It would compliment her Arithmancy studies.

She thought about Severus, too, wondering what he might be doing, if his Potions consignments were working out well. At least the matter of possible criminal charges had been taken care of. The letter she'd written to Severus the previous evening had taken some time. On the one hand, she'd wanted to be firm about the fact that she needed time, but on the other, she couldn't help but want to soften it. Hermione found a seat on the train by the window.

Maybe this wasn't the right thing to be doing now? What if it wasn't? Severus had been there for her to protect her when she needed him, but at the same time, he'd made more than sure he was compensated for that. So, did she still owe him anything? Could things still work between them? Whichever way she came from it, the only thing she kept thinking of was that she wanted a break, time to herself. It was time to stand up and be herself, *for herself*, not for anyone else. She'd spent enough of her lifetime being and doing for others. What was wrong now with taking the time she needed for herself?

There was a slight lurch as the train began to move, and people scrambled for seats. The seat beside Hermione was filled by a grungy looking man in his thirties, who was engrossed in a book.

Nothing at all was wrong with taking a break for herself, she finally concluded. And so, as the train rolled out of King's Cross Station, she had put some doubts to rest... at least for the moment.

Hermione looked around the campus. Had she more time to prepare, she could have gone for one of the famous colleges, but for now, this would do. No, it wasn't ivy league, but a year here, and she could surely transfer. Once again, she would be studying, learning. The thought of losing herself in studies was appealing, though the preoccupation of unfinished business bothered her.

She'd sort it out by summer, she assured herself as she looked around, trying to figure out where she needed to go. A table was set up, and she stopped for directions to what would be her dorm. The dorm she would be living in was on the other side of the campus, and on the walk there she wished she could cast a charm to lighten her rolling trunk. But it would be fine. The campus was a nice one. Lots of old trees, manicured brown lawns with patches of snow, and she found a bursting sense of ... something she couldn't quite place, while on her way. It made her forget her heavy trunk, and pulled the corners of her mouth into a smile as she looked around.

She was glad for the elevator when she got to the building; her room was on the fourth floor. There were two beds in the dorm room, but no-one had settled in yet, so she chose the bed on the right and sat on it, exhaling a happy sigh. She could see out the window as she leaned against the headboard, and watched the people walking around below. Inside the room, the walls were a dingy sort of white, but it was nothing some good posters and perhaps a hanging or two wouldn't fix. The desk, too, was smallish, but there were two of them.

Hermione wanted to unpack all of a sudden, and flipped open her trunk, starting to empty things onto the bare mattress and sort out what she had. Soon, things all had places, the bed was neatly made, and she was just wondering if she should try to decorate.

"Wow, you must have been here a while," said a voice. Hermione turned, surprised.

"Oh, I just got here... not long ago, I think." The time had flown by, but she must have been there a while. The bed was neatly made with white sheets and an afghan her grandmother had made, her notebooks, pencils, and so forth were neatly arranged on the desk, her clothes were mostly put away in the provided drawers. She was just in the process of stacking her jumpers in the top drawer. "Hullo, I'm Hermione Granger," she said to the young woman.

"Clarice Brunson," she said, giving a friendly smile while heaving her luggage into the room. "I 'spose I'll be your roommate."

Hermione then realised her mistake. She wasn't 'Granger' anymore. She was Snape. Correcting it now would be awkward though. "Right. That's good. This is my first year here."

"My second... well, should have been third, but I took a year off after my first, went on a walkabout." She flashed a wide smile. "I'm back now, ready to take on school again," said Clarice. She was very thin with short, spiky black and blonde hair that had a touch of lime green in spots. When she turned to dump the rumpled contents of one of her bags onto the bed, Hermione noticed a tattoo on her waistline, peeking between her jeans and shirt, a navel ring decorated the front side of her midriff. She might be an interesting roommate.

She was studying Medicine, so they had no lectures together. From the first day of lectures, Hermione threw herself into studying just as she always had at Hogwarts. She wasn't too far behind, her summer studies she'd kept up with meant she was on par with her Muggle classmates. In all, she found it easy. Soon enough, she'd read all her books, and had begun studying ahead, losing track of time in the library until late at night.

A letter arrived after she'd been there about three weeks. Severus's spidery handwriting on the envelope caused her breath to catch. She didn't want to open it, but at least he'd written her instead of just showing up. She finally opened it and read.

Hermione,

I've been waiting for you to come home. At first, I thought this must simply be the after-effects of your ordeal with Lucius Malfoy. I was sure that you would come to your senses quickly. After two months, however, that was obviously not the case.

I'm not sure how running away to attend Muggle university will help you, but I suppose you think you're exploring yourself. You can accomplish this at home, even if you are attending university. After all, it wouldn't be difficult at all to Apparate to and from school. I do not want to stand in the way of you doing whatever it is you want to do, I simply want you to come home.

At any rate, eschewing the magical world altogether won't solve anything. If you do not want to come home, will you at least meet me so we can speak together?

Regards,

Severus

He'd obviously spent a lot of time on the letter, Hermione realised. She wondered if the cold tone was on purpose, or was because he was unsure about writing about his feelings in print, or because his feelings had only been brief, perhaps not even genuine.

"Can I pinch a fag?"

"What?" Hermione looked up to see her roommate, closing the letter.

"A cigarette? Have any?"

"I don't smoke," Hermione said, putting the parchment into the bottom drawer of her nightstand.

"I suspected as much," sighed Clarice. Hermione shrugged and grabbed a book... study time. After reading several paragraphs, she looked up again, feeling that Clarice was still watching her. "Um... something else you need?" Hermione asked, discovering her feeling was accurate.

"I'm just wondering, don't you like to do anything but study?"

"Well..." Hermione shrugged. There wasn't really much else she *wanted* to do. "I enjoy learning," she explained.

"You really should get out some more. Me and some friends are going to see a band play a friend of a friend is in it and he's supposed to be good. So what do you say?"

Hermione looked down at her History of Mathematics book for a moment. Clarice interrupted her internal deliberation, "Come *on*, Hermione. All you do is study, and you always make A's, and mid-terms are still two weeks away. You need to have a social life too."

Hermione put down her book. "Yes, you're right. I'll get showered and changed." She rose and went into the bathroom, took a quick shower, and fixed her hair. When she came out, Clarice was all ready to go too, wearing shocking lime-green eye shadow.

It was less than two months of her absence before Severus decided he could no longer bear Hermione being so far away and knowing nothing of what she was doing. He gathered some Muggle clothing and went to see her. Of course, she wouldn't see him. He considered Polyjuice to disguise himself, but the month it would take to brew the stuff was too much; he'd waited enough already.

Once on the campus of her school, he searched the grounds and library regularly. He knew where she lived, but thought it was too risky to simply go up to her door. At this time, he only wanted to gather information so he would go into the next stage of negotiating her return home more fully prepared.

It only took a few days before he saw her in the library, and from that point, he found her schedule was oddly familiar. Her time seemed equally divided between classes, reading in the library while scribbling on papers, and time spent in her dormitory. He wondered once if her professors dreaded her excess verbosity as he had when she was his student. She seemed to have no friends. Perhaps boredom and loneliness would hasten her return.

He decided to write her a letter, charming it to show the proper postal marks. He placed it into her mailbox on the ground floor of the dorm himself.

The next day when he was ready to find an Apparation point home, he saw her leaving her dorm with an odd-looking young woman. She was smiling, and the two were talking, though he was too far away to hear her. He followed. They walked to a bus stop and got on. Severus scowled after the bus. Perhaps a change of tactic was in order.

It was hours later when Hermione and Clarice returned to the dorm. They were both intoxicated. The evening had been a confusion of loud music, drinks, dancing, and strobe lights. Not her style at all, but it had been an experience, for sure. She might even want to try it again... in a few years.

"Shhhh, or we'll wake everyone," Hermione whispered loudly as they stumbled down the corridor after exiting the elevator.

"Not if you'll quit saying 'SHHHH' so loudly, Hermione," Clarice answered, giggling. "But you had fun, right?"

"It was good, yes," Hermione agreed.

Once they'd closed the door to their room, something didn't feel right to Hermione. She turned on the light and looked at her bed for a confused moment, blinking through the blurriness brought on by alcohol. She wished she had a Sobering Potion.

"Hermione, who brought you this?" Clarice asked. A cold tendril crept through Hermione's stomach. A huge bouquet of roses was on her bed. "That's so romantic! Who is it, Hermione? Do you know..." She trailed off as she saw the stunned expression on Hermione's face. "What wrong?"

Hermione walked to the bed, feeling cold inside and flushed hot outside. *How dare he?* She'd told him to keep away. It couldn't be from anyone else. There was a note attached. It was enough to have received a letter from him the day before; this was much too fast.

Time you've requested, and time I've given you. Do you remember the last time I gave you a rose? Accept these, Hermione, as a sign that I am not inflexible. I've never loved anyone before. Mild affections in the past were nothing like what I learned to feel from you, even if I never expressed it well enough.

Love, Severus

"How sweet!" Clarice had read the note over her shoulder. "Who's Severus? You've never told me about him."

"Someone I'd like to forget," Hermione said through gritted teeth. She took the bundle of roses in her hand, unsure what to do with them. As she stared at them, she was pricked by a thorn. Just like the last time he'd given her a rose. The sharp jolt of pain clearing her intoxication for a moment. She winced as it pierced her ring-finger, then, decision made, she strode to the window, flung it open, and threw the roses out into the chilly, damp night.

Clarice stood in shock, suddenly sensing something about Hermione was not as it had seemed. Hermione sat down on the bed, head in her hands, the slight spin of intoxication multiplied the dread gnawing at her. He had been *here* in her room, in the life she had wanted to hold separate from anything associated with him.

"Hermione, what's wrong?"

She looked at Clarice, wondering if she should say anything, but she did seem genuinely concerned. "I'm married," she stated bluntly. "I'm married and I don't want to be. It's complicated..." There was no way to explain anything remotely close to the truth. The Wizarding world's Marriage Law seemed absurd enough in the enclave of the magical, and here in the Muggle world it was downright absurd. "It was something I was rushed into," she explained weakly. "A mistake. It was really supposed to be more of a marriage of convenience than anything else, but we decided to try and make it work, but I don't think there's anything to be done for it." Clarice looked confused. This didn't make any sense even when Hermione tried to explain it in simpler terms.

"So... Severus is your husband?"

"Yes. He used to be my chemistry professor."

"Weird." Clarice's brows were knit, as she seemed lost in thought.

"Tell me about it..." Hermione wondered how much she could say. "But it's over now. I came here to have time away to think, and I enjoy being on my own. The marriage was a sham, even when we were trying to make it work. It wasn't really meant to be."

Clarice nodded, now looking at Hermione intently. "When did you get married?"

"Last November." Clarice's eyes grew larger. "Why do you ask?" Hermione asked.

"Just curious... but, do you know of a boarding school in the highlands?" Clarice looked at her intently. "It's a school for a private community..." Clarice supplied.

"Yes," Hermione answered carefully.

"A private community which has had some unusual *marriages of convenience* in the last, oh, more than a year or so."

Hermione felt slightly dizzy as she stared at Clarice, blinking. Was she saying what it sounded like she was saying?

Clarice seemed to take her silence for confirmation. "You're a Muggle-born Witch, aren't you?"

"How do you..."

"My cousin is a Muggle-born Witch, too. We grew up together, well, for most of it I was her kid tagalong during summer hols. She's twenty-five now, but she went to that school, and she's told me all about it. She's been in Australia to get away from it... I went with her last year. I haven't ever told a soul, I know how important the secrecy is."

"What's her name?"

"Zoë. She was in house Ravenclaw.. Wait... your chemistry professor, Potions, right? Severus... Oh, fuck... Professor Severus Snape?" Hermione saw from the horrified expression that Clarice had heard all about him.

"Yes, that's the one."

"Shit, is he anything like what I've heard about?"

Hermione nodded. "What a coincidence," she said. They stared at each other a moment. Hermione wondered just how many family and extended family of Witches and Wizards were out there, and the odds at running into one for a moment.

"I'm sorry, I've just heard nightmare stories about him," Clarice said, shaking her head and looking down at her hands. "Zoë said he wasn't too bad to the Ravenclaws, as long as you worked hard in the class. But anyway, I've heard all about the crazy Marriage Law..."

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. "So, you're married to Professor Snape... From what I've heard of him, I guess I see why you're here now."

Hermione giggled. Then laughed. Soon she was crumpled in a ball, laughing to the point tears were coming out of her eyes. "Hermione?" Clarice came over and put her arm over Hermione's shoulders, and the hysterical laughter changed to hiccupping sobs. "Shhh... it's okay, Hermione."

"I tried to work it out," Hermione cried. "I tried and tried and everything's been such a mess and I've just been pretending it's okay. I just want to have my own life. I don't hate him, I really don't, I just want my own life!" Clarice continued to rub Hermione's shoulders, waiting for her to settle down. She did finally, sniffing loudly and wiping her face on her coat, which she still hadn't removed.

"God..." she sighed. "Just... it's been a very interesting time, this last year and such."

"Well, if you made it for that long, he's probably not as horrible as I've heard."

Hermione laughed. "Yes and no. I just don't want to try anymore. I've always tried to make everything work, and I did try on this. Severus always seemed like such a deeply horrible person when I was a student. I stuck up for him, he was our teacher and all, but the Marriage Law coming up was a sticky situation, and at the time he was the only safe option for me. I'd almost say he was doing me a favour, but he made damn sure he was repaid in full for that. After a while it seemed like my life wasn't my own anymore. Then some other stuff happened... it's just been a little crazy.

Clarice nodded, sitting back on the bed, ready to listen. Hermione talked. She'd held so much back for so long that it all came out in a long flood. She didn't get into details, but she mentioned what had been the major sticking point of her and Severus's issue, his inability to be flexible, how he'd surprised her at times. She told Clarice things she didn't even know she wanted to talk about.

The sky grew grey with dawn before she finished, and Hermione's voice was tired and cracking. Other than to occasionally make a supportive comment or to ask a brief question for clarity, Clarice said nothing, listening intently.

"So, now he's still determined to get me back. He says he loves me... and I believe him, but I just don't love him, and the thought of being with him for years, much less the rest of my life just seems like I'm falling into a deep, black pit. I have to have my own life!"

Down in the street-lamp illuminated courtyard, a still figure had watched the window, and the gift he'd left fall to the ground. He strode silently to where the bundle lay and picked it up. It was certainly not a good sign that she'd thrown it away. He held them for several long minutes, when he noticed a glint on the end of a thorn... a bead of blood. His face tightened in determination. He looked up to the window. "You are mine," he muttered. "And soon, you'll know it for sure." He strode quickly to a shadowy

grove of trees and Disapparated.

He rushed inside once he'd Apparated into the front garden, descending quickly to the basement, where he placed the roses onto the worktable. A fire and a cauldron were quickly readied, and he began scanning the shelves of potions ingredients, bringing an armload of them and depositing them near the cauldron. Next, he examined the rose, and found the thorn with the clotting spot of blood. It wasn't much, but it was enough.

He removed the thorn, and then carefully plucked the petals from it, counting them as he placed them on a nearby parchment. He then poured clear rainwater from a large jug to make the base of the potion, and lost himself in the brewing process until the next morning. It was nearly complete at dawn when he finished the last step, stabbing his finger-pad and watching a single drop of his own blood spatter into the Potion. A cloud of deep maroon steam roiled from the cauldron, engulfing him. Once it had cleared, he carefully poured it into a bottle.

Now all he had to do was get her to drink it.

Hermione was worried following the night of finding the roses left by Severus, but after several weeks of her full schooling schedule, she didn't look over her shoulder quite so often. Severus hadn't written or showed himself. She thought of writing him, but wasn't sure what to say. But one thing was clear now to her: she would not go back to him.

She and Clarice hadn't spoken about the incident any further after that long night, but they had gotten to know each other better. Since Clarice already knew about the Wizarding World, Hermione was able to open up some about her life. She had Clarice in stitches with stories of Fred and George Weasley. Clarice also had some interesting second-hand stories from her cousin's time at Hogwarts. By unspoken agreement, they avoided the topic of Hermione's marriage, Severus Snape, Potions, and other topics that would easily connect.

Spring was in full bloom before she heard from Severus again in the form of a letter.

Dear Hermione,

I hope you are enjoying your time at University. You always did seem most at home when studying, so I can imagine these last several months have been enjoyable for you. I had hoped to hear something more from you before now. I hope you received the roses I left for you last month. If you felt it was an intrusion into your space, I apologise. I wanted only to let you know that I was thinking of you.

I miss you, Hermione. I would like to see you again. Would you agree to meet with me at some time? We may go anywhere you wish.

Yours truly,

Severus

She read the letter over again several times. She had come to the conclusion that she wanted to have the marriage annulled. A letter would have to be written to the Ministry of Magic. They should be able to annul it by now; the abusive marriages had been of primary importance, but that should be all taken care of by now.

Still, she didn't feel right not even talking to Severus about it. She would meet with him; at least give him that much. It wouldn't be right to have him find out through a third party. At least he sounded as if he was ready to be reasonable, even if he hoped they would still be together. She decided to write him back.

The End

Chapter 31 of 31

A decision is reached.

A/N: You might notice that a story ending seems different, depending on where you read it. Just a thought. ;-)

My fanfiction will be up until August, at which time I will delete all my fanfiction under the name RachelW.

Thanks to everyone who stuck with me through finishing this story. It was a wild ride at times. The last year has been a rather tumultuous one for me, and I shelved the fanfiction to deal with things that had to be dealt with. Real life is priority, but now I give you the end of my story, such as it is. It won't please everyone, and it may not even please most... but it is what I feel to be a true ending to this story.

Severus,

I've thought it over, and I can meet to talk with you. How does this weekend sound, Saturday at four? There is a coffee shop near a bookstore in town I go to sometimes about a mile north of the university. I'm sure you can find it.

Hermione

Severus read and re-read the letter. She would meet him. Finally. His eyes drifted to the locked box on his desk where the Potion waited. It might not be a permanent solution, but it would set things straight for a while until he could discover a more permanent solution. There would just be the matter of slipping the potion into her drink. Her chosen location caused him some concern. This wasn't a drawn out time for extensive conversation she was planning on. It was a place to meet him quickly, probably to tell him to bugger off. Once she drank the Potion though, that would change.

He shouldn't have to be doing this, but he loved her enough to help her through what really was only brought upon by Lucius's actions. Everything had been fine before Lucius Malfoy had got hold of her. Everything would be fine again, and they would be happy together again.

Hermione thought back to the time she'd made her decision to marry Severus. She wasn't sure that things would have been better with Kingsley Shacklebolt; at the time,

her Arithmantic equations had favored Severus. Arithmancy was only as good as the information supplied in the equation, though. Severus had helped her with it, telling her to factor in her feelings on subjects in the equation, but she had substantially underestimated the impact. She hadn't had all the information. Facts, yes, but she hadn't fully understood what being in a relationship with Snape, acquiescing to his demands, even if she enjoyed it on some level, would do to her. It had had nothing to do with her enjoyment of his sexual preferences at all, and that's what she had based her calculations on. That was the crux of the issue. Control. It wasn't about sex, it was about control.

The law, though it had been altered from its original form and the coitus clause was no longer enforced, set up the relationships with a substantial power imbalance. A relationship formed under those circumstances would be colored by them, no matter how nice or how much a pureblood partner attempted to make the situation tolerable, they would still be in a position of authority over their Muggle-born spouse. She wondered, had it not been for the Marriage Law, if she would have ever been in a relationship with Severus of any sort other than that of student and teacher. The answer, no matter how she tried to look at it, was no.

Promises had been made, and she never wanted to break her promises, but standing by a promise made under duress and in a hurry when it was a bad promise to begin with was not honor, it was stupidity. Severus had used her sense of honor against her in reminding her time and time again that she had promised him, that she had agreed to everything in their relationship, even as he made concessions to her over time. She shouldn't have to feel grateful simply to be allowed to make a choice.

Hermione checked herself in the mirror, mentally picturing the coming scene. She would tell him, calmly, after cordial greetings, that she thought that it was best that they permanently separate. She would not accuse or attempt to draw out a conflict or confrontation. This was her decision. Once made, attempting to apologize for or justify it would only cloud the issue. She had tried to make it work, but living a life that wasn't truly her own was no longer an option. She felt she appeared calm and confident, as she quelled even the slightest internal tremor or doubt. She could not let herself be drawn into another battle of subtle manipulative deals and appeals for her to simply see reason... from his perspective. Even her perspective hadn't been her own, she realized. It was time to take her life back.

"Hermione, are you sure you want to do this alone?" Clarice asked.

"I'll be in a public place," Hermione answered.

"Yes, but do you trust him not to do something... magical?"

Hermione thought for a moment, she didn't believe he would go so far as to use a potion or spell on her, but there was a niggling doubt in the back of her mind. She wasn't completely sure he wouldn't if he saw an advantage in it. "I don't think he would..." she said, "but then, I haven't seen him in a while... he's done some things already I didn't think he would."

"I can go with you. I don't even have to sit near you, just somewhere nearby, just in case, you know."

Hermione considered it. It wouldn't hurt, but something about someone watching from her new life on her old life, especially the part of her old life she wanted to excise, seemed too naked.

"I should be fine, but if I'm not back by..." she glanced at the clock seeing it was six and she was to meet Severus at six-thirty, "ten, at the latest, there's a problem."

"And if there's a problem, just *how* am I supposed to do something about it?" Clarice asked pointedly.

"Oh, good point. Well..." Hermione thought it over. She could summon a general postal owl and pre-write a message to someone... Harry, perhaps, or perhaps Kingsley Shacklebolt, but involving either of them didn't seem right. Then she remembered Treva. Treva would be perfect. Actually, she shouldn't have let things drift so badly between them. "I'll summon an owl, if I'm not back by ten, you can send a letter for me to a friend."

She wrote quickly, and muttered an incantation to summon the owl, opening the window, and hoping no one would notice it approaching. It was still daylight, after all. She finished the note, only a brief paragraph that Clarice would explain to Treva and that she might need help just in case. Just as she was going to be nearly late for her meeting with Severus, the owl flew through the window. It wouldn't like having to wait so long to possibly just be dismissed; she would have to pay an extra fee when she returned. But better safe than sorry. Clarice was in the bathroom at the moment.

"I'm going to be late," Hermione muttered to the owl. Hating to be late, even for something she was rather dreading, Hermione decided to Apparate. She checked that she had everything, then disappeared with a pop.

She Apparated near a garbage dumpster which she had kept in mind from when she discovered it. It was walled in on all sides around the dumpster to make the area not seem run-down. Stinky, but private, and only a very short walk to the coffee-shop. She didn't see him, so took a seat at one of the outdoor tables to wait for him.

Approaching the coffee-shop, Severus looked over the outdoor tables first for Hermione. He saw her, and his heart clenched. She looked wonderful, but as he circled round to see her face, his stomach clenched and throat constricted to see the firm expression on her face. She had nothing in front of her yet. He approached her slowly. He'd prepared well, dressing his best in a deep green shirt, the color he'd worn for their wedding, and had pulled his hair back into a neat queue. She glanced up and saw him, and he realized his efforts were not for nothing.

"Hermione, thank you for meeting me," he said smoothly, despite the pain in his throat. He had an urgent feeling that this meeting must go perfectly, else their marriage truly would be finished. "Would you like me to get us something to drink?"

She nodded at him tightly. "I'd like a mocha- latté, please, Severus," she said tightly. He noticed, but said nothing about, the stiff posture she sat with.

"Very well, I will return momentarily." He smiled softly at her, and was pleased to see her respond, even if it was only slight. He turned and walked inside, grateful that this was the perfect opportunity to slip the potion into her drink. His knees seemed to tremble as he walked inside the shop, glancing back to where Hermione sat to be sure she wouldn't leave. There was a short line, blast the classless, assembly-line style Muggle trend of coffee-shops, and he stood at the end, reaching into his trouser pocket to finger the phial. So close, so very close.

He ordered two mocha lattés, not really caring what he had to drink. He stepped aside when they were given to him, muttering a quick spell to divert attention, and poured in the potion. The drink fizzed for a few seconds, then went still. He sniffed at it, satisfied that it was undetectable. Perfect. He took the drinks back outside, placing the spiked latté before Hermione.

As he sat, he saw Hermione straighten, brows furrowed and lips tight. She was going to say something soon, and he had to stop her saying it... she would change her mind after the drink, but she had to actually drink the damned thing.

"I've missed you," he said simply in opening. "I saw some interesting patterns made by the Mooncalves in the field last week after the full moon. I think they're growing in numbers. I thought you would have loved watching them."

"Oh, really," she said, blinking.

"Yes. I'm sure they're only going to get more interesting here on out." He wanted to pull her away from her original thoughts first, get her to relax a bit, to remember the good times they'd shared.

"Next thing you know, Muggle Ufologists will be all over the place," Hermione joked, slightly relaxing. She reached forward and took a sip of her drink. Severus tried not to appear as if that was exactly what he was waiting for. She took a deep breath.

"I think being on my own has given me a lot of time to work out some things I really needed to work out, Severus," she began, sounding as if she had rehearsed this

opening a dozen times.

"I understand," Severus interjected, needing to slow her rehearsed speech. "Your life has been rather eventful. You've done more in the last ten years than many people do in a lifetime. Needing to take a break from it all and sort things out is natural. I was upset at first, but I've come to understand what it is you needed to do."

Yes, well, thank you for understanding," Hermione said, unbalanced by his confirmation of having read and understood her first letter to him on the subject. Looking as if she meant to steady herself, she took a large gulp of the coffee, opened her mouth as if to say something, then closed it again.

"I've also realized several other things, and I would like to make a proposal I believe would help, if you would hear me out?" he asked deferentially. His dark eyes seemed open and honest.

"I... well, okay," Hermione conceded, watching him closely now.

"The root of the problem was that our relationship progressed too quickly. We went from being strictly student and teacher, and not a well-liked teacher at that..." he smiled slightly at his own self-deprecating remark, happy to see the corners of her mouth lift slightly with mirth, "then directly to engagement and marriage, with little time to adjust. Looking back, I would have approached a relationship differently. I've learned a lot since we've been together, realized things that have changed my perspective. I've made too big an issue of things that weren't that important in the bigger picture because I've never experienced what I have with you." He reached forward and took her hands in his. "I've never loved anyone before you, Hermione. That has changed everything for me. Living without you has been hell. Right now, I think if only we could spend a little time together, go out on real dates, perhaps twice a week, over the next few months, we can progress on firmer footing from there. Would you be comfortable with that, Hermione? Remain at school, and see me twice a week. We'll go do things together that should have been done long ago."

Hermione felt confused as she gazed into his eyes. He seemed so sincere, and face to face with him, somehow all the happy memories came rushing back. Her rehearsed speech faded in her memory, and she found herself wondering what it would be like to actually date him. Did he truly regret the way he'd set their relationship at the start?

"There's no need to answer just yet, but please think about it." He squeezed her hands, then let them go, retreating to sit back in his seat so as not to make her feel crowded or pushed. "Have you been enjoying school?" he asked, changing the subject again to distract her.

"Well, yes, I have been." She gave him a smile. "I'm pulling good grades. Actually, focusing on bare mathematics has given me some insights on Arithmancy that I plan on exploring more in the future. I feel like it's very balancing in a way, and I wonder if some study in physics wouldn't be called for sometime, too." Hermione smiled despite herself, feeling relief to be speaking with Severus nicely. She drank some more of her latté. Severus drank some of his as well, and made a sour face.

"You enjoy this? It's entirely too sweet." *Keep the conversation light*, Severus reminded himself. She was going to be his, and it was taking quite a bit of effort to force himself to appear collected. This seemed even more difficult than keeping himself collected when he'd been a spy amongst the Dark Lord's followers. Somehow, hope and love seemed a greater emotion to bury than fear. Once it had been sparked, it had grown to the point that it seemed a wildfire was consuming him. Seeing Hermione before him now, all the hateful thoughts he'd had of her when she first left him seemed to fade in the light of that fire.

"I've gotten into the habit with all the studying again. At Hogwarts, it was massive amounts of tea, but the coffee seems easier now. But I'm really enjoying this; it's almost like how learning should have been before, without the rise of Voldemort and all the things happening."

"Yes, those were difficult times. But now it's good that you're enjoying yourself."

Hermione nodded, and a moment of silence passed nearly comfortably. She drained the rest of her drink. "I hadn't really thought of anything else to do here today..." she said almost apologetically. "I'd actually come thinking... well," she glanced toward him momentarily, "that I didn't want to spend that much time with you, that things between us would be too strained."

Severus looked down at his wedding band. When he spoke, his voice was thick with emotion. "I think it's time... to make an effort to truly live up to the hopes we declared with our rings, Hermione. I realize a lot of that work must be mine now. I feel like I want to take so many of the things I said to you early on and erase them..." He'd thought long and hard about what he would say, and what he would do in the future. It really was true that he wasn't so concerned anymore with their sexual relationship being precisely as he had set up. It was all about priorities, really. Having her at all was more important than having her complete sexual submission. Patience on her return home was worth it if it meant she *would* return home. His hand tightened around hers. "For both of us, serenity and peace was our highest hope, perhaps we should cultivate that, before we move on to further things?"

It seemed a whirl of emotions was ready to overwhelm Hermione. He was being more than reasonable, he was being downright understanding and caring. Perhaps she had judged things too harshly once her ordeal with Lucius was over? It hadn't really been that bad, in retrospect. "I think that might be acceptable," Hermione finally said, now with a surge of hope that things would be fine after all.

"Hermione, everything okay?" Clarice asked.

"Yes, fine, actually," she answered. She walked to the owl and gave it an owl treat and a Sickle for the time-fee, and it flew back out the window. "I think this break has been good, actually. Let me clear my head, get some distance for a while, but seeing him again now has just brought back so many things." Hermione kicked off her shoes and placed them in her wardrobe, sighing. She grabbed her robe and turned, thinking a hot shower would be great, but then she saw the stricken look on Clarice's face. "Are *you* okay, Clair?"

"Yes... um, sure. I've... just remembered I was supposed to call my mum this week and I forgot is all." She was looking out the window at the owl flying away.

"Oh, well, I'll be in the bath for a while, I think, so you'll have plenty of time to talk privately." She went into the bathroom and ran a bath, enjoying a truly relaxing, luxurious bath. She'd been getting by with quick showers for quite a while now... in fact, the last time she'd had a long, luxurious bath was months ago, with Severus.

Those baths with Severus really had been lovely, she thought. As she sank into the hot, aromatic water, she thought back to those times, her hands creeping down to stroke herself, pinch herself the way he used to. She bit her lip as she brought herself to orgasm, moaning quietly, imagining his hands, his cock, and how much she wanted him again.

Outside the bathroom door, Clarice was pacing back and forth, knowing for certain that something terrible had happened to Hermione. Though she hadn't known her for all that long, only a few months, she felt that this was someone who she would know, would like to know, that is, for quite some time.

Severus Apparated home elated. She'd drank the potion, and it had worked. He'd suggested that she remain in the dormitory so that they could take it slow. Within a few weeks she would be insisting she return, and that's exactly what he wanted. She would see then that he cared.

"Lumos!" he cast, and the lights and candles around the house lit themselves. It was a shambles. He set to work in a frenzy, undeterred by the late hour, by his own exhaustion, he worked well into the evening scouring, organizing, straightening, and repairing. By sunrise, the little house gleamed like never before. He wasn't done. Outside, he trimmed the bushes, mowed the yard, and cleaned the garden. He pictured Hermione through the process, as she might be as she walked around the hedge, sat on the rock by the fence, or leaned out the dining room window to grab the cooking herbs which had grown there. He made a list of plants to acquire. Exhaustion and elation combined to form a drunkenness he'd never really felt before. He laughed aloud, relieved and blissful that Hermione would be returning home. Something else though, something dark seemed to cast a shadow on his joy, but he pushed that far away. It was time to think on the future, not the past. Their future together could still be good. The fact that they had a future at all was good.

"Hermione! We really *have* to talk!" Clarice called loudly as she caught up with Hermione on the pathway around the Mathematics building.

"Clarice... I've told you a dozen times already. I really am fine. Now really, I'll be late for class." Hermione hurried forward, aggravated. She was on the verge of moving back with Severus, but he was insisting that they take things slowly, not rush too much. At any rate, Clarice had been neurotic ever since Hermione had come back from that first meeting with Severus. She could almost think Clarice was jealous... she didn't... no... probably not.

"Being late one day won't hurt you. In fact, skipping one lecture completely won't hurt you. Hermione, stop and listen! Look at yourself. You've changed completely in the past few months; you're not yourself."

"Yes," Hermione said hotly, "because you've known me, oh so very long." She regretted it the moment the words had slipped from her mouth. "I...I'm sorry, Clarice. I didn't mean..."

Clarice had looked hurt for a moment, but recovered quickly. She took a deep breath, and in a cool, level voice said: "He's done something to you, Hermione. Why are you acting like this if something isn't seriously wrong with you?"

"No." Hermione shook her head. "He hasn't done anything to me. Clarice, I'm sorry, but you've got to quit this. I just don't need this now, and you're not helping. I know you mean well, but just, please, quit it." She stood stiffly, her arms crossed tightly in front of her.

"Hermione... well, fine." Clarice looked dejected, but turned and walked away. Hermione watched her go, wishing she didn't have to be mean, but at the same time glad she wouldn't be bothered anymore.

Hermione started avoiding Clarice after her next meeting with Severus; she'd become obsessed with interfering with Hermione's personal life and decisions and Hermione had decided enough was enough. She finished filling out the change of address form at the post office, and then took all her belongings and checked into a new flat of her own, where she'd be able to concentrate. As she moved her stuff in, she couldn't help but imagine that perhaps in the new flat, she and Severus might have a chance to talk together privately. He'd refused to let her see the house, saying only that there would be a surprise for her when she was ready to return.

"I don't think I'll be going to school next semester." They were walking down a pebbly beach. The sun was warm though the water was quite cold still. They'd spent the night together in her flat.

"Don't you?" Severus asked. "What shall you do, then, Hermione?"

"I'm not sure. I've always wanted to travel the world. In fact, I think it might be a good idea for the two of us to do that together, wouldn't you?"

"It's a possibility, yes." His dark hair fell aside as he turned to smile at her.

"Then let's do it once the semester is up. Let's travel the world, go see all the great things. Haven't you been to any interesting places?"

"No... I never had the chance... but it's time that was corrected. What do you want to see first?" he asked, then smiled.

Hermione laughed. "Fiji... then... well, wherever we feel like next."

"I can have all our loose ends tied up within the week." Snape said.

"And I'll be done with testing in two weeks." Hermione smiled. She didn't feel so tense about the upcoming tests as she had at Hogwarts. She felt a sort of peace had settled around her, making the world feel calm and make more sense.

"So, we have it then?" he asked. "Away to see the world, two weeks from today? Just a vacation, let's not think of things further than that for now."

"I think it sounds lovely." Hermione smiled, her brown eyes twinkling with laughter.

Two weeks later two figures stood on a pebbly, mist-shrouded beach, looking westward over the Atlantic ocean. They looked around for the Portkey that was to be there, and found it. One passerby had looked at them as if they were crazy, standing there on the misty morning dressed as if they were at a tropical beach. Once the Muggle was out of sight, they both grasped the Portkey and disappeared together.

The beach they landed on was warm and sunny. The next year was one of excitement and adventure together. They took many pictures of happy times. And it was a lovely life they led afterwards. They developed a small circle of friends though their old connections from Hogwarts and the Order fell away slowly, moving on to other things, other goals. Some stayed in touch through a seasonal letter.

Every so often (every six to nine months), Hermione grew restless, and she started to spend more time with friends, her moods would grow erratic again, and she would think of changing her career or going back to school, and Severus knew it was time to give her the potion again. She was happier that way; life was more calm. He loved her enough to help her like that. She would settle right back down afterwards and enjoy their quiet routine again. The garden needed tending; the potions needed stirring. Their life together was simple. Their life together was good.