

Improbable Felicity

by Subversa

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Chapter 1: How We Come to Be Here

Chapter 1 of 11

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A/N: First of all, this story was written for the Live Journal SS/HG Exchange, as a gift for the incomparable Ginny_Weasley31. It was written between March 1, 2007 and May 12, 2007. I say this because a story with a similar plotline by another author is currently posting at another archive. I just want to say that the other author and I came to our ideas independently.

To my beta, Snarkywench, I owe immeasurable gratitude, for she asked questions and poked and prodded until the story was coherent. To my beta, Keladry Lupin, I owe an undying debt for all the sentences she unravelled. To my Britpicker, MagicAlly, I owe everything I got right about Potterverse Britain. To my alpha readers, sshg316 and DeeMichelle, I owe love and lots of chocolate for all your enthusiasm and input. To SubHub, my touchstone, I owe everything - that's very simple, really.

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Chapter 1

How We Come to Be Here

The prisoner signed the parchment before him in his spiky script and pushed it across the table, saying calmly, 'Is there anything else?'

The elderly woman sitting opposite him collected the parchment and slid it into the tartan-covered briefcase in her lap. She eyed the man speculatively for a moment, then removed a folded newspaper. 'The have passed the measure.' She laid the paper on the table where he could read it.

The prisoner's expression became guarded; one eyebrow rose steeply. 'You are aware, perhaps, that this news is of no interest to me?' He emphasised his indifference by pushing the newspaper back across the table with one long digit, never even glancing at the headline.

'Don't be stupid!' The Scots burr in her voice became more pronounced when she was discomposed.

Her companion crossed his arms across his narrow chest and stared at her stonily, the abrupt movement of his arms causing the heavy chain to clank loudly in the stillness of the dank, daunting room.

She seemed to cringe from the wordless reminder of his fettered state. In a voice of impatient irritation which her companion recognised as a veritable coax she snapped, 'Hestia Jones would be perfectly willing to do it. I've spoken with her about it myself.'

A barely perceptible shudder of distaste crossed his face. 'Absolutely not.'

'You can't be so obstinate!' the old woman snapped, clearly agitated. The faintest pleading coloured her tone. 'There aren't that many possibilities at our disposal!'

A sneer was her only answer; the prisoner appeared unsurprised to hear that there were few candidates for a presumably distasteful task with lasting consequences.

'I can see there is no point in attempting a civil discussion with you about this,' she said, standing and fastening her cloak.

'I am not famed for my civility,' he agreed with her, deadpan.

Her dark head, streaked liberally with grey, was bowed to her task, and her fingers could be seen to tremble with age as she fumbled with the clasp. His remark earned a snort from her. She said wryly, 'Your sense of humour is intact, at any rate.'

'I am entirely intact, I assure you.' The forbidden topic past, the prisoner appeared somewhat conciliatory.

The woman leant suddenly across the table and placed a veined hand upon his arm; the muscle leapt beneath her touch before he controlled himself. 'Please consider it,' she murmured.

He stood and turned his back to her, demonstrating his intractability in spite of his inability to walk away from the table to which he was chained. With a sigh of resignation, the woman withdrew, pointedly leaving the newspaper behind.

Hermione sat at the age-scarred wooden table in the kitchen at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, her cheek resting on her palm. She stared at the wall, absently twirling a lock of bushy brown hair about her finger. The *Daily Prophet* lay upon the table before her, a photograph of Rufus Scrimgeour gesticulating from the front page.

The door opened and Harry Potter entered, moving to join her. 'Morning,' he said, reaching for the box of cereal and bottle of milk in the middle of the table. 'No library today?'

Hermione glanced at the clock. 'Yes, my study group meets today, but not until ten.' She gestured at the paper. 'They're sending them home.'

Harry became very still, his eyes following her outflung hand to fall upon the newsprint. After a few breathless seconds, he grabbed the paper and began to read, his lips in a terse, angry line.

DARING NEW PROGRAM FOR AZKABAN INMATES

by RITA SKEETER

Ministry of Magic, London *The wizarding world was shocked Friday to learn that the Wizengamot has passed a new measure which will permit many convicted criminals to be released from Azkaban.*

As detailed by this reporter in an earlier story, the Wizengamot has admitted the maintenance of Azkaban Prison to be a drain on Ministry resources. With the departure of the Dementors, members of Magical Law Enforcement have been detailed to guard the prisoners.

'Well, who wants to live on a rock in the North Sea?' one officer demanded. 'You try it for a while see how your family likes it!'

With the discontinued use of the facility of Azkaban as a prison, eligible prisoners are being offered a strictly monitored probation program.

'Those prisoners who have qualifying family members to sponsor them will be permitted to live again in society,' stated Percy Weasley, Special Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic. 'There will be meetings with special Facilitators at specified intervals for each prisoner, to monitor their progress as they are reintegrated into the public. After a period of time, ranging from six months to two years, each prisoner will either be released from the parole program as a fully rehabilitated member of society, or they will remain subject to supervision for a period of time to be determined by an independent and impartial panel. Prisoners who violate the terms of their probation will be remanded into custody and removed to a prison upon the Continent.'

Harry tossed the paper from him, disgust on his face. 'Two lousy years they've served since the end of the war, and the Ministry is that eager to let them out?'

Hermione nodded. 'At least it will be fair for one prisoner.'

Harry poured milk into his bowl, some of it splashing onto the table top. 'Oh, please don't start up with your defence of Snape, Hermione. I'm trying to eat.'

Hermione stood, carrying her bowl to the sink and setting it to washing with a flick of her wand. 'Aurors use Unforgiveables in the execution of their duties, Harry, and it's not always on Death Eaters! It is *invariably* unpleasant. I'm sure that Professor Snape didn't find it any less horrible when he used the Killing Curse on the headmaster but it *had* to be done!'

Harry dropped his spoon into his cereal. 'You weren't there! You didn't see his face when he did it. He probably enjoyed it, the slimy bastard!'

Hermione whirled around angrily. 'I heard your testimony at the trial, Harry. You don't need to repeat it.'

He rose to his feet, his fingers flexing. 'I heard yours, too, Hermione! I heard you up there defending him! I don't care if there's evidence that Dumbledore ordered him to do it he killed *our friend*. I can *never* forgive that.'

Hermione surveyed him soberly. 'The headmaster was dying it was a kindness.'

'Euthanasia is still a crime in this country, whether you're Muggle or magical!' Harry shouted, gesturing wildly with his hands for emphasis. 'That bloody wanker murdered Professor Dumbledore without a second thought. *Now* he acts like he's sorry, but he's a damned Death Eater to the core, and you lot you, the Order, the Wizengamot seem to have forgotten all about that!' As if for emphasis, Harry shoved his chair with his foot and sent it skidding over the old stone floor.

Hermione bristled at this show of unrestrained temper. In a voice vibrating with anger she said, 'Snape gave his entire life to this war. He's been paying his debt to society since he was *our* age.' She moved past Harry to the door, her nose in the air, supremely disdainful of his outburst. 'I would let it go, if I were you.'

As the door closed behind her, she heard his outraged, 'Well, I won't!'

'Ginny!'

The redhead looked up, a smile breaking over her freckled countenance. Hermione wove her way through the crowd and slid into her seat. A passing waiter nodded when Ginny waved at him, indicating two more drinks.

'What are we having?' Hermione asked, reaching over to pluck the pineapple chunk from Ginny's nearly-empty glass.

'It's an Avada Colada,' Ginny responded, breaking into a peal of laughter at the look of indignation on Hermione's face.

'That's not funny!' Hermione said, before giving into Ginny's irrepressible mirth and smiling, as well. 'How was your week?' she asked when Ginny subsided.

'Not so bad. Fred hired someone to help with the books so that I'm able to concentrate more on marketing. We've planned three more branch stores can you believe it? That will make a total of twelve!'

Hermione shook her head. 'It's amazing what you lot have done with a thousand pounds of start-up gold.'

Ginny's lips thinned and her brown eyes narrowed; Hermione kicked herself for mentioning Harry, even indirectly. The Boy-Who-Lived had stubbornly clung to his determination to remain detached from the Girl-He-Loved whilst the war had gone on. By the time it was over, Ginny had taken up again with her old flame, Dean Thomas. The relationship had not lasted, ending scarcely a month after the defeat of Voldemort, but an unreasonably jealous Harry had rejected Ginny's every overture in the last two years. Hermione had long ago learnt not to bring up either of them with the other. Although Ginny was determinedly single, and Harry was over his one-year stint of sowing wild oats in every available furrow, each still closed down at the mention of the other.

Grasping for a new subject, Hermione said, 'So, did you see the news?'

Ginny nodded. 'I suppose you're glad Snape will be released?'

'It's only fair!' Hermione said. 'It's too bad that the rest of them will benefit as well, though.' Shifting topic again, she said, 'How are your parents?'

Ginny shrugged, reaching up to accept the two drinks from the smiling waiter. 'Put these on my bill,' she said to him, turning away from his admiring gaze.

Hermione accepted her Avada Colada, a preposterously green concoction with a silly paper umbrella protruding from it. 'I think he fancies you,' she said mildly, watching the handsome young man move to the next table, still casting covert looks at Ginny.

'Mum is ecstatic to know that there will be two new Weasleys before long,' Ginny said, answering the question and ignoring the comment. 'Dad is thinking about standing for the Wizengamot,' she added.

'Your dad will be excellent for that!' Hermione said, her eyes lighting up. 'Please tell him I would be happy to help in any way I can if he decides to stand. If he succeeds, the Order will finally have a real voice in the Ministry.' She plucked her fruit-laden toothpick from the green liquid, letting the alcohol drip away before removing a cherry. 'Who's having new Weasleys?'

'Charlie and Penny are due in October, and Bill and Fleur are expecting at Christmas.'

An expression flitted quickly across Hermione's face before she said, 'That'll make three for Bill and Fleur, won't it?'

'Four,' Ginny said. 'One a year. Phlegm is like a French baby-making machine.'

Hermione did not answer, and after a moment, Ginny took her hand. 'I'm a stupid cow, Hermione. I'm sorry.'

Hermione shook her head, forcing a smile to her lips. 'Don't be thick! I'm happy for them, if they want a large family. More and more couples are waiting to have children, and loads of them decide to remain childless. Fleur and Bill are paying no mind to that, and they're just forging ahead with what seems right to them, going against the tide of popular opinion ...'

Ginny seemed to hesitate a moment, then squeezed the hand she held. 'You've never told me what happened with those Muggle Healers you were going to see last autumn.'

Unconsciously, Hermione's free hand spread protectively over her abdomen.

At Harry's side, Hermione had stood her ground in that carefully planned last confrontation, until Antonin Dolohov had Apparated before her. His 'Expelliarmus!' had beaten her 'Protego!' by a fraction of a second, and then her wand had been in his hand.

'This is a special gift just for you, Mudblood,' he had said, levelling his wand at her. 'Fundo Maximus!'

The agony within Hermione's body had gone on and on. Her legs had folded, and her body had fallen, her bones seeming to melt within her flesh. A rush of sound had heralded a flash of green light, and a black-cloaked figure had scooped her up and Disapparated. The next moment, she had been thrust upon a litter in a blindingly lit room and a harsh voice had shouted, 'You! This girl was hit by the Dissolution Curse! Act NOW or she will die!'

The torture had seemed endless. Horrid, nasty potions had been forced down her throat by lime-green robed Healers who had worked tirelessly over her, regrowing the bones which had been dissolved and halting the disintegration of her internal organs with aggressive spellwork of their own. It had not been until the day before her release that a Healer had come to her late in the evening, after the supper trays had been removed, and in bracing tones had explained the hospital's only failure at completely regenerating Hermione's internal organs.

Gently disengaging her hand from Ginny's, Hermione pulled her book bag into her lap, rummaging in the side pocket. 'I thought I had some tissues here ...'

Ginny thrust a soft, clean handkerchief into her hands and Hermione dipped her head, discreetly drying her cheeks, saying, 'I'm being stupid.'

'I think that probably means their Healers couldn't help, either?' Ginny maintained a level tone, watching her friend closely.

Hermione kept her eyes averted, her bushy hair swinging forward to cover her face; her head moved in an infinitesimal negative shake. After a moment, she blew her nose, tucked the handkerchief in her pocket, and straightened her shoulders. 'How's Ron?' she asked, her voice strained but determined.

Ginny's eyes closed for a moment, as one might do to avoid witnessing an approaching mid-air broom collision. 'He's fine. He's become as much of a Muggle technology-lover as Dad. We don't see him very often, but he answers his e-mails faithfully, so Fred and I manage to keep up with him.'

'And has he found a nice American witch to settle down with?' Hermione stared at the melting ice in her glass until she realised her friend had not answered her. 'Gin?' She looked up and saw the answer to her question in Ginny's face.

'Her name is Lola,' Ginny said hollowly. 'Her father owns a large interest in the company Ron works for.'

Her name is Lola. Hermione frowned, trying to make sense of Ginny's news. Ron was getting married. *Her name is Lola.*

Her shaking shoulders alarmed Ginny. 'Hermione, don't he's not worth it, the stupid git!'

But Hermione wasn't crying she was laughing. 'Her name was Lola!' she gasped.

'What?'

'She was a SHOWGIRL!'

Ginny watched the new tears flowing down her friend's cheeks. 'What are you *on* about?'

'It's a s-song,' Hermione hiccupped, 'my parents used to listen to it. A really, really silly song.' She wiped her streaming eyes. 'Oh, that's better. I needed a good laugh.' A hand signal caused the good-looking waiter to approach them, although he did so cautiously. 'Another round of Avada Coladas, please,' Hermione said. As the waiter turned to go, she added to Ginny, 'If we're going to talk about Ron and his Copacabana girl, I'm going to need much more alcohol.'

Chapter 2: The Ministry of Magic are Morons

Chapter 2 of 11

We visit Snape in prison, Hermione receives a job offer, and Harry and Hermione have a talk.

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Chapter 2: The Ministry of Magic are Morons

Hermione hefted her book bag over her shoulder and pushed her way through the glass door into the office. A pretty girl looked up from her computer, a practiced, professional smile upon her lips.

'Good morning,' she said. 'Welcome to Security Solutions. How may I assist you?'

The reception area was tastefully decorated, much like a top barrister's office, with dark wood and thick carpet. The elegant chairs in conversational groups held two people who had picked up magazines from the carefully fanned selection on the coffee table and who were reading whilst they waited.

Hermione stepped up to the chest-high counter behind which the receptionist sat. 'Good morning,' she responded pleasantly. Dropping her voice to a whisper, she added, 'Chocolate Frog.'

The receptionist handed her a plastic badge attached to a metal clip. 'Third door on the left,' she said softly, returning her attention to her computer keyboard.

Hermione walked purposefully down the hallway to the third door on the left and placed her hand on the doorknob. Almost instantaneously, she felt the detection ward as it washed over her skin. In the next moment, the doorknob turned beneath her hand and she entered the room beyond.

The look and feel of a Muggle legal firm fell away and she was in a comfortable wizarding environment. Parchment airplanes of different colours winged down the corridor, disappearing through doorways, and another receptionist, this one a handsome wizard, looked up from the Quidditch magazine open on the desk before him. 'Good morning,' he said brightly. 'Welcome to McGonagall, Moody and Associates. Do you have an appointment?'

'I'll take it from here, Bunting,' a stern voice said, and Hermione and the receptionist turned at the same moment to see an unsmiling Minerva McGonagall approaching. 'You see to the appointment book and pop around to send the statements by Muggle post, Bunting. I am not paying you to ogle the Kenmare Kestrels!'

'Yes, Professor McGonagall,' Bunting replied, blushing and closing the magazine, looking for all the world as if he were a third year caught with a magazine hidden in his Transfiguration textbook. 'Right away, ma'am.'

Hermione smiled warmly and took the hand held out to her by her former teacher.

'I'm so pleased to see you, Miss Granger. Thank you for coming. Shall we go to my office?'

Hermione agreed and followed McGonagall down the corridor. As they passed doorways, Hermione glanced in curiously. In the second office on the right, she saw two wizards struggling with a device that resembled a deployed airbag in an automobile except that it was continuing to grow and expand. One wizard stood at the wall with a long metal pole, poking at the rapidly growing airbag, whilst another had leapt up onto his desk and was ineffectually stabbing at the airbag from above. Hermione bit her lip to keep from laughing out loud and glanced at the sign on the door as she hurried to catch up with McGonagall; the sign said, Department of Alternative Measures.

At the end of the hallway, Hermione and McGonagall entered a large room flooded with sunlight from the floor-to-ceiling windows occupying two walls.

'I would say Security Solutions is doing well,' Hermione said admiringly.

'Very well,' McGonagall agreed, indicating that Hermione should sit in one of the straight-back wooden chairs before the large, tidy desk. 'I don't need all this space, but the larger clients appreciate the appearance of prosperity, so it is necessary.'

Hermione nodded. 'Do you have an alternate office in which you meet with the Muggle clients?'

McGonagall seated herself behind her desk, shooting Hermione a sharp glance from her beady eyes. 'You know about that, do you?'

Hermione shrugged. 'You have premises with an entrance on Diagon Alley and another on Charing Cross Road; you have a Muggle reception area and a Muggle receptionist as well as wizard ones. You're obviously doing business on both sides of the street and succeeding admirably.'

'Yes, we have a generic office in which we meet with the Muggle clients. Mr Finch-Fletchley and Mr Thomas are quite useful for those contacts; both Muggle-born, you know, and quite comfortable crossing back and forth between the worlds.' The door behind McGonagall opened, and a house-elf entered, carrying a tea tray.

'Hello, Winky!' Hermione said with genuine warmth.

The elf placed the tea service on the desk before McGonagall before curtsying to Hermione. 'Good day, young miss,' she squeaked. Winky did not tarry, but left again the way she had come.

'Winky and a few of the older house-elves elected to come with me when I left Hogwarts,' McGonagall said matter-of-factly, pouring tea into the china cups. 'They decided to interpret their service as to me, as headmistress, rather than to the school. I can't say I blame them; I could not bear to remain, either.'

Hermione nodded mutely, accepting her cup from McGonagall. The final confrontation of the war had laid waste to many areas of the castle, for it had been fought on the Hogwarts grounds. It was very difficult to imagine going back there. When Professor McGonagall had decided to retire from teaching and move to London, the rebuilding project had been left safely in the hands of the new headmaster, Filius Flitwick.

The former headmistress cleared her throat and readjusted her square-framed spectacles upon her nose. 'Hermione, I understand that you are studying at Muggle university.'

'Yes, professor Birkbeck College in Bloomsbury. Muggle maths is my primary subject. I am quite interested in working out how to integrate the theory of differential equations into the study of Arithmancy.'

A small smile tugged at McGonagall's lips as she observed Hermione's bright-eyed response. 'Your passion for learning warms the heart of an old teacher, you know.'

Hermione flushed at the praise. Professor McGonagall was a terrifically clever witch in her own right, and she did not hand out compliments very often. 'Ideas are exciting to me I like chasing an idea the way Harry likes to chase the Snitch and I'm fairly sure I get just as excited when I catch it, too.'

McGonagall chuckled. 'I think I have a proposition which may interest you.'

Hermione put her teacup on the desk. 'What kind of proposition?'

'I believe that someone with your skills would be a valuable asset to our team here at Security Solutions,' McGonagall said. 'Furthermore, I think you would find the work endlessly fascinating.'

'But I have another term of study before I leave uni,' Hermione protested, her mind already racing ahead to consider the possibilities. 'How can we provide wizarding solutions to Muggle security problems? Isn't that in violation of the Statute of Secrecy?'

'It would be in violation if we used magic to provide the security, yes,' McGonagall replied. 'However, we use Arithmancy to predict likely problem areas for the Muggle businesses and our Muggle computer programmers design the necessary deterrents.'

'You employ computer experts?'

'We have Mr Finch-Fletchley and Mr Thomas, who are both competent in that area, and we also contract work to an outside Muggle source when necessary.'

Hermione's eyes had taken on a far-away cast. 'There are so many ways Arithmancy might be used to project the probable areas of concern for both Muggle and wizard businesses not to mention the application of theory to designing magical wards ...'

'I hope you'll consider our offer, Hermione,' McGonagall said. 'I have found it something of a comfort to work surrounded by and associated with members of the Order people who understand and know the life I've lived. You might benefit that way, as well.'

Before Hermione could answer, the door through which Winky had disappeared opened and Alastor Moody entered, talking. 'The first batch was released today, Minerva. Six of them! The Ministry of Magic are *morons*!'

He stopped when he saw Hermione and surveyed her carefully, his magical eye spinning rather wildly. Hermione resisted the urge to cross her arms over her chest and lifted her chin to meet his gaze. 'Good morning, Mad-Eye,' she said politely.

'Good morning to you, missy,' he grunted. 'Are you going to come to work with us, then?'

'Alastor!' McGonagall interrupted sharply. 'We've only just begun to speak of it. Don't press her for an answer now!'

'Who has been released, Mad-Eye?' Hermione asked curiously.

'Six convicted Death Eaters,' he snarled, stumping across the room and stopping to stare out of the windows. 'Your old school friends Malfoy, Crabbe, Zabini and Goyle were all released into the custody of their mothers isn't that *touching*? He turned his head and spat with force into McGonagall's waste paper basket. 'Scum!'

McGonagall's face screwed up in distaste and she waved her wand, Vanishing the contents of the bin. 'Really, Alastor,' she scolded.

'Who were the other two, Mad-Eye? The Death Eaters who were released?'

'Gibbon and Jugson; released to their wives,' he sneered.

'But what about Professor Snape?' Hermione demanded. 'Hasn't he been released?'

McGonagall sighed and removed her glasses, rubbing her eyes with one age-spotted hand. 'There is a slight technicality preventing Professor Snape's release,' she said. 'He has no family.'

'No *no family*?' Hermione shook her head. 'They can't keep him for that! Surely he has a cousin or something ...'

Moody laughed sourly. 'His Muggle relations, the Snapes, are useless. They aren't magical folk, and so don't meet the requirement for custody.'

'But what about his mother's family?' Hermione said fiercely.

'He's the last of the Princes we haven't been able to find so much as a distant cousin living in all of the United Kingdom.' McGonagall replaced her glasses. 'And we have truly tried to find one,' she added quietly.

'Then he has to get married,' Hermione said. 'If he marries, he can be released to his wife.'

Moody barked a harsh laugh, and McGonagall shook her head in the negative. 'Thus far, we have been unable to convince him that this is a viable alternative.'

Hermione looked from Moody to McGonagall and back again. 'No one will marry him?'

Moody shrugged and McGonagall followed suit, although she did it more slowly. 'Perhaps someone would agree to marry him, Hermione but he will agree to marry no one.'

'But that's just stupid!' Hermione said earnestly, unconsciously wringing her hands. 'It's so unfair for him to *be* in prison to begin with it's just wrong and it would be a *tragedy* for him to stay there all because of some senseless, picky rule! In his case, it's simply pointless!'

Moody stared at her. 'Do you care about old Snape, Miss Granger?'

'He is a hero!' she said hotly. 'He never did anything but try to teach us things we needed to know, and he always protected us, even when we didn't know he was doing it!' Unaccountable tears sprang to her eyes. 'No one seems to understand how his life has been ruined by a stupid decision he made when he was seventeen years old yes, it was a big mistake, but he's done more to rectify it than most people *ever* do in their entire lives. He lived a constant lie from the moment he swore allegiance to Professor Dumbledore until the day Voldemort died, and then, even when we gave evidence from the headmaster's records of all those years, no one cared! They still sent him to Azkaban!'

Hermione stood and walked to the window, staring at the street below, as if to hide her distress. When she spoke again, her voice was so soft it was as if she spoke only to herself. 'He *loved* Dumbledore anyone who watched the Pensieve memories could see that. Why couldn't they understand that Professor Snape has been in prison his whole adult life?'

Moody and McGonagall exchanged a significant look, entirely unsure of how to answer the simple question.

The prisoner laboured over the parchment, the quill in his hand scratching relentlessly across the paper. Conditions at Azkaban Fortress had improved immeasurably since the defection of the Dementors, and the prisoner's advocate had been fierce in fighting for privileges for him. Due to her efforts, he had a small table, a chair, parchment and a self-inking quill only one at a time, of course, and it had to be left on his table at all times, or he would lose the privilege of using it.

Not all of his advocate's efforts had succeeded she had failed in obtaining more than twice-monthly showers, or the use of a wand or a razor for shaving. His beard was wild, itchy, and down to his chest; his hair had grown halfway down his back and was worn tied back from his face with a strip of cloth he had torn from his robes. His cell, in addition to the table and chair, held a pallet on a metal shelf chained to the wall and a chamber pot, which was emptied at the discretion of the guards. Not surprisingly, he was not a popular person with the men set to guard him; most of them had been his students and had from five to seven years of loathing to repay, with interest.

Doggedly, he completed the written part of the proposition and began to sketch; his freehand drawing was not the best, but he was certainly not permitted a straight edge or a protractor. He glanced at the roughly hewn window; if he stood upon the metal shelf and leant perilously to one side, he could look out and see the angry sea crashing against the unforgiving rock upon which the prison sat. His intimate knowledge and months of study told him that he had less than an hour of daylight left, and prisoners were not permitted candles, lamps, or torches. He redoubled his efforts; Minerva would arrive tomorrow for her twice-monthly visit which coincided with his shower days, oddly enough and he wanted to have the report ready for her.

Harry let the heavy front door close behind him and dropped his bag by the ugly troll's leg umbrella stand before heading down to the basement. When he came into the kitchen, it was to find his housemate seated and pouring pumpkin juice into goblets.

'What happened to you?' she demanded, abandoning the jug of pumpkin juice and crossing to him. 'You look terrible!' Harry's face was scratched and battered; one eye was spectacularly blackened.

He grinned tiredly and made a comical face. 'We had Stealth and Tracking today. I tripped over the hem of my Invisibility Cloak and landed on my face.'

She gave him a swift hug, then released him. 'Shall I heal you now? Or after we eat?'

Harry's stomach rumbled audibly. '*After* we eat,' he said. 'Is that shepherd's pie?'

She smiled indulgently as he fell into his chair and took up his fork with a little moan of pleasure. He was still such a boy sometimes.

'Hermione,' he said, after swallowing a mouthful of pie, 'have I told you I love you lately?'

Hermione huffed but looked pleased, nonetheless. She seated herself and studied him. 'At least you can repair your own glasses now,' she observed. They ate in companionable silence for a while, until she put aside her fork and said tentatively, 'Harry, I saw Professor McGonagall today.'

Putting down his goblet of juice, he grinned. 'Did you run into her in Diagon Alley?'

Hermione shook her head. 'No, she asked me to her office she wanted to talk to me about a job.'

'A job at a security company?' Harry frowned. 'You've still got a year at uni.'

'Only one term, Harry and it's about time I started paying for some things around here.'

Harry frowned. 'Why? Everything's working all right we're right on schedule, doing what we said we'd do. You have one more year of school, I have one more year of training, and then we'll be productive members of society.' He grinned; she knew he wanted to distract her from this well-worn argument.

Hermione shook her head stubbornly. 'Yes, but we were just out of Hogwarts when we made those plans, Harry. It's not right for you to support me like this. I should be paying my way.'

Harry pushed his hair off his scar-free forehead, staring at her as if she made his head hurt. 'What good is a vault full of gold if I can't use it to help my friends?' he asked reasonably.

'Two years of room, board, uni fees and books Harry, I'll never be able to pay you back as it is.'

Harry pushed his plate aside. 'Hermione, if our situations were reversed if my parents had died bankrupt and yours had died leaving you a fat bank account would you just go on about your business and leave me on the street with nowhere to go?' Not surprisingly, Hermione teared up and Harry knelt, putting his arms awkwardly around her. 'You know you wouldn't do that to me. Please believe that I'm doing this because I want to that it makes me happy to have you here and worry about how to combine Arithmancy with calculus or something, instead of this, all right?'

He never had a handkerchief when he needed one, but he Summoned a box of paper tissues, and Hermione blew her nose and wiped her face. After a moment, Harry stood and pulled her out of her chair to give her a proper hug. 'I'm a terrible friend,' he murmured into her bushy brown hair. 'You're missing them again, aren't you?'

Hermione buried her face in his neck and nodded, sobbing. He stroked her back. Three years before, Hermione's parents, three of their patients, two dental assistants, and two office workers had been killed and burned beyond recognition by what the Muggle law enforcement officers had termed 'terrorist activity.' The entire building that had housed their practice had burned to the ground. Harry had known the 'terrorist' in question was Voldemort, who had been making every effort to draw the Order into the open.

Harry's rage and agony of remorse had only been intensified by the knowledge that Hermione's parents had just taken out a second mortgage on their home to pay for the recently upgraded equipment at the Granger Dental Clinic. Life insurance had been eaten up by paying the creditors; the bank had repossessed the house, and Hermione had been lucky to be able to remove her own personal belongings and mementoes of her parents' lives which were felt to be of too little value to be auctioned for their

debts.

Harry had bought Hermione's books and supplies for her last year at Hogwarts, and had eventually induced her to agree to live with him at Grimmauld Place, whilst she finished her Muggle education. He had rather thought at that time that Ron would be living with them as well that Ron and Hermione might even have been married.

But Harry had forced himself to acknowledge that Hermione and Ron would never be a couple. Soon after they had brought her home from hospital, Hermione had poured the Healer's parting news into the willing, if squeamish ears of Harry and Ron. Harry had given her a comforting hug, reminding her that she could always adopt a baby.

Ron had said nothing, not for several weeks. Harry had not found out until later that Hermione had been in the first floor sitting room the night Harry had invited Ron to find someplace else to live that she had heard everything as their voices had clearly carried from the entrance hall.

'I'm not engaged to her!' Ron had shouted.

'I bloody well know where you sleep at night, mate!' Harry had retorted. 'You're her *boyfriend*. How would you feel if she was chatting up other blokes at the pub?'

Soon after moving back to the Burrow, Ron's renown as the chief designer of their battle strategy had brought a job offer from an American computer software company; he had moved out of the country and was now designing war games for which others wrote the computer programs. Harry had forced himself to know that Hermione and Ron would never be a couple when Ron had gone to America.

Yes, Harry had thought Hermione and Ron would marry but then, he had also thought he and Ginny might have been married, too, and that hadn't worked out either, had it?

'Do you want to go to the cemetery to visit your parents' graves?' he asked quietly, stroking her hair. 'I'll take you tomorrow, if you want.'

Hermione stepped away from him and grabbed another handful of tissues, mopping up her face. 'Thank you, Harry, but no. I'm going to the Ministry library tomorrow to do some research for a petition to the Wizengamot committee on Law Enforcement.'

Harry stared, dumbfounded, at her back as she walked to the kitchen door. 'Why?' he said.

Hermione turned at the door and gave him a misty smile. 'Oh, it's nothing that would interest you. Would you see to the washing up?'

Harry Levitated the supper dishes into the sink and set them to washing themselves, wondering if he would ever understand women.

Chapter 3: The Stupidest Idea Ever

Chapter 3 of 11

Hermione's research project does not prosper; Harry inadvertently provides Hermione with new information and unwittingly gives her an idea; Lupin is consulted for his opinion; Hermione makes a visit to Azkaban.

Chapter 3

The Stupidest Idea Ever

The prisoner studied his visitor keenly. 'Do you have any questions?'

The old woman frowned at the meticulously drawn diagram on the parchment in her hand, then referred again to the written explanation on the parchment on the table. 'This is brilliant, Severus. I would never have considered the vendors' entrance to be such a weak point for Parkinson Industries all of the doors leading from the loading docks are heavily warded.'

His self-satisfied smirk would have irritated his erstwhile classmates no end, but his former teacher and current business partner viewed his arrogance with complacency. 'The doors are warded against people attempting to gain entrance, Minerva, not against people concealed in crates or other packing materials. It would be all too easy to smuggle in a spy to steal their product formulas.'

A rare smile graced McGonagall's lips, echoed by an equally rare smile from Snape. 'The Parkinsons will be happy to pay a king's ransom for this,' she said.

'Of course,' he responded. 'Especially after the unsolicited demonstration provided for them by our field agents last month.' A far-off look touched his glittering eyes. 'When we open our American office, we will offer such incursions as a service for a fee. Our own countrymen are too backward to appreciate the Muggle perspective at this juncture.'

McGonagall straightened her shoulders and took a deep breath. Snape recognized the signs she was preparing to bring up a subject that she knew he did not wish to discuss. 'Leave it, Minerva,' he said shortly.

'You *will* listen to me!' she snapped, her brows contracting. 'You cannot continue to be so bull-headed!'

'Adopt me,' he said promptly, dropping his bombshell with a feigned look of innocence. 'Make me your son, and you can take me away from this bad old place as my loving mum it worked for Draco, after all.'

'Oh, really, Severus!' she said repressively. 'Do you honestly imagine that I have not already thoroughly investigated that avenue?'

At this revelation, his next acid comment was stilled on his lips. 'You *have*?' he said instead, somewhat incredulous.

'Do you think me incompetent? Of course I have. Adoption of an adult person for the purpose of obtaining probation is prohibited.' She retrieved her handbag from the floor by her chair and snapped it open, withdrawing an envelope, inscribed in a feminine hand. 'I knew it would be much easier to induce you to become my son than it would be to induce you to take a wife.'

He scowled. 'Oh, for the love of Merlin, Minerva,' he said peevishly. 'Must you speak in this Victorian fashion? Take a wife? You might as well be saying, "Take a bath" that's how easy you make it seem!'

McGonagall pushed the envelope across the table to him. 'If you would pull your head out of your cauldron, you would see that it *is* that easy! Hestia Jones is more than willing, Severus. She's even written to you about it.'

He looked at the blameless vellum envelope as if it was a venomous snake. 'Please tell me that you're joking.'

'She's only ten years older than you are. She's been married before she likes and admires you, and she's appalled that the Ministry ever saw fit to imprison you in this way. She won't be expecting anything *distasteful* from you.'

He muttered something and pushed the envelope back to her.

'Speak up! How can you expect me to hear you if you mumble?'

'I said, "Nothing more distasteful than consummating the marriage,"' he snarled.

'Oh.' For a moment, McGonagall stared at her hands, then she looked up into his eyes with her piercing gaze. 'It is time to stop playing at this, Severus. The Ministry is bent on closing this facility on the first of July those who have not been paroled will be transferred to the wizarding correctional institution on Zhokhov Island.'

He sneered. 'You say that as if I'm supposed to be impressed.'

'It's in the Eastern Siberian Sea!' she shrieked. 'Siberia, Severus!'

He sat back, his lips pressed firmly together.

McGonagall took a steadying breath. 'Surely you can see that it would be impossible for us to continue conducting business in this fashion from that distance. Even if Alastor or I were physically up to making the journey as often as once a month, there is no guarantee that the prison administration would permit you to receive such frequent visitation and certainly no guarantee that you would be permitted to have parchment and quills for writing. I have no influence with the Russian Ministry of Magic, Severus.'

He stared at her stonily. 'I would be unable to continue making creative contributions to the business, then,' he said. 'I don't suppose you would begin to steal from me and halt your monthly deposits into my Gringott's vault.'

'Do you know who the last person was to receive time off for good behaviour from a Russian prison? I believe his name was *Rasputin*!'

'That Muggle-sympathising twit?'

'My point is, Severus, that a twenty year sentence on Zhokhov Island will actually go on *forty-two years* here, you might have hoped to be out sooner, but the former Soviet Union is still rather hard on wizarding criminals.'

He turned his head; in profile, the sharp planes of his cheeks and his jutting nose contrasted with the surprisingly sensuous curve of his lips. 'What are the requirements for the marriage to be considered valid for the purposes of probation?'

'Consummation, which will be verified in the usual fashion, and you must cohabit your probation officer will make sure of that.'

He did not answer, and several moments passed with each of them wrapped up in their own thoughts. At last, McGonagall began to gather her things together. When she stood to fasten her cloak, she spoke to him again.

'Six weeks, Severus. In six weeks, you will either have married and been released into the custody of your wife, or you will have been sent to rot in a Siberian prison north of the Arctic Circle! If you truly wish to throw your life away in that shameless fashion, it is certainly your own affair, but I hope you will consider one thing: the business which I began at your behest, using your inheritance from Dumbledore, has prospered more than either of us could have predicted. You, Alastor and I will never want for another thing in our lives, and if we continue on as we have up until now, we may retire as wealthy people. But Security Solutions is not just about the three of us there are no fewer than forty-seven wizards and witches whose livelihoods are tied up in this business, and if you choose to allow yourself to be shipped off to a Russian prison, we will lose the benefit of your expertise and wickedly inspired security schemes. The business may founder for that reason and if it does, you will have thrown away not only your own future, but those of the forty-seven people who have put their faith and trust in your company.' She strode to the door and rapped on it twice to summon the guard. Whilst she awaited her release from the visiting room, she turned to pin him with her sternest glare. 'Think about *that* the next time you're feeling so bloody sorry for yourself.'

The guard opened the door and she swept out of the room without a backward glance.

Hermione stormed through the front door of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, pushing the door closed with a slam. Hurling her book bag to the floor, she pounded down the stairs to the basement kitchen.

Harry looked up from his bowl of tinned soup and frowned when she wrenched open the door to the fridge.

'Bad day?' he asked cautiously.

Hermione slammed the door of the refrigerator so hard the bottles within rattled and glared at his supper as if it were a personal affront to her. 'Why are you eating that slop?'

'Erm ' he began his brilliant defence, but she had already snatched the bowl from the table and carried it to the sink, rinsing it out with a ferocious twist of the tap. 'Hermione?' Harry stood and held his hand up in a 'stop' gesture. 'Why don't you sit down for a minute and tell me why you're so angry with my soup.'

'The stupid Wizengamot!' she cried. 'How can they be so heartless?'

Harry frowned. 'Is the Wizengamot even in session? What have they done now?'

Hermione subsided into a chair and Harry sat down beside her. 'I spent all morning waiting to see the Committee for the Probation Program and they wouldn't even let me finish my presentation! I researched this for ten full days and all to no avail. They wouldn't listen to me!'

Harry buried his face in his hands with a groan. 'The Probation Program? This has something to do with Snape, doesn't it?'

Hermione touched his arm. 'I know you think I'm daft '

'Bloody *mental*, more like!' he snapped, shaking her hand from his arm.

'but I maintain that it was a complete miscarriage of justice for Professor Snape to be sent to prison for obeying Professor Dumbledore. He had promised, Harry, just like *you* promised to obey the headmaster before you went to the cave, the night he died. It's not so very different.'

'My obedience didn't take his life, Hermione!' Harry shouted. With a curse he stood and began to pace the kitchen. 'It's not the same thing at all!'

'If Professor Snape had been tried at another time, in a different atmosphere, he might have been exonerated but the public mood was so against the Death Eaters that his heroism didn't even earn him a reduced sentence!'

Harry stopped across the room from her, his voice quiet. 'He didn't receive the death penalty, did he? Not as Lucius Malfoy and Antonin Dolohov and Augustus Rookwood did. He only got twenty years for cold-blooded murder. I'd say he got off light.'

'Well, he doesn't qualify for the probation program, anyway,' Hermione said, her shoulders slumping. 'He has no magical family into whose custody he can be released, and the committee isn't willing to consider making an exception in his case. He could be released to his wife if he was married, but Professor McGonagall says that he won't even *contemplate* marrying.'

'Well, at least you haven't lost your mind to the extent that you're ready to start Snape-S.P.E.W. or to marry him to get him out of prison.' Harry took a deep breath, calming himself. 'Come on, let's go get some curry you'll feel better after you've eaten.'

The night air was cool upon their cheeks as they strolled together along the street to pick up their Thai take-away. Hermione walked with her head down, there and back, her hands shoved into the pockets of her hooded sweatshirt; over and again, Harry's words played in her head.

Harry let her walk in silence until he opened the door of number twelve on their return, allowing her to precede him into the interior. 'A Knut for your thoughts,' he offered.

Hermione shrugged out of her jacket and took the bag of food from him, leading the way down to the kitchen.

'You know, Harry, it's not a bad idea,' she said, taking plates from the dresser and setting them on the table.

'What isn't?' he asked, grabbing silverware from the drawer.

'Marrying Professor Snape so he can leave the prison,' she replied.

'Dammit, Hermione!' he bellowed, allowing the spoons and forks to fall onto the table with a loud clatter. 'You're going from mental to certifiable. That's the stupidest idea I ever heard. You just feel sorry for him because he saved your life!'

Hermione froze, her hands desperately clutching the plates she held. 'He *what*?'

'How do you think you got to St. Mungo's?' Harry demanded. 'You were in no case to Apparate there by yourself.'

'I don't know I never thought I *never* thought about it.' She put the plates on the table and stared at him accusingly. 'I can't believe you never told me before now!'

Harry thumped himself on the chest and continued to shout, 'I never wanted you to feel any obligation to the greasy git. He had his own filthy reasons for it, you can be sure of that. I just wish to God I had killed him when I killed Voldemort!'

'Harry!' Hermione gasped, horrified. 'That's a terrible thing to say!' She sagged into her seat at the table, her brain seething with confusion. Snape had *saved* her?

Harry sat down as well, still angry, but chastised by Hermione's reproof. Grabbing a spoon, he began loading his plate with pad noodles. 'Now, stop talking *crap*, and let's just eat our dinners, all right?' he snapped, his voice still rather loud in the otherwise quiet room.

He ought to have been more wary of the small voice in which Hermione answered, 'All right,' before filling her own plate with yellow curry.

Friday night, Hermione Apparated to a small garden enclosed by a box hedge and walked up to the back door, knocking quietly upon the wooden panel. She had an appointment to keep, and she was right on time.

A moment later the door opened, and she was standing in the flood of welcoming light emanating from the house.

'Wotcher, Hermione!' said the young woman in the doorway. She had a spiky hairdo of soft brown, a heart-shaped face, and great, dark eyes. In her arms, she cradled a bundle in a blue blanket. 'Come in! It's great to see you!'

Hermione followed her friend into a cramped and clean but disorderly kitchen.

'Come into the lounge,' Tonks invited, leading the way into a cosy sitting room. 'Remus will be home soon.'

Hermione glanced around at the slightly shabby room, at the shelves of photographs topped by the lovely wedding portrait of the Lupins waving to her from over the mantel, and felt a pang of envy. 'May I hold the baby?' she asked.

Tonks smiled and shifted the blue-wrapped baby into Hermione's arms. The sandy-haired infant opened his wide, blue eyes and looked intently at her face. 'Hi, Alfie,' she said, running the back of one finger lightly over his velvety cheek.

'Isn't he a love?' Tonks said complacently, sitting on the sofa.

'He's perfect,' Hermione assured her, sitting down and taking the opportunity to bury her nose briefly in the baby's downy hair. 'I love how they smell.'

'Straight out of the bath, he is,' Tonks told her. 'That's when he smells best.'

The back door opened and Tonks bounced out of her seat. 'Remus is home!'

Hermione kept her eyes on Alfie, although she heard the kiss the Lupins exchanged in greeting; after a short time of whispered conversation, they came into the lounge, Remus' hand at the small of Tonks' back.

'Hermione,' Remus said in his hoarse voice. 'It's wonderful to see you! How's Harry?'

Hermione stood, offering his son to Remus. 'Harry's doing very well really loves the Auror Academy.'

Remus accepted the baby from Hermione, pausing to address to his son a few perfectly nonsensical questions of the type an adult is likely to speak to a baby before he settled Alfie in Tonks' arms.

'Shall we go into my study?' he asked, smiling at Hermione in an inviting way. Hermione nodded and followed Remus into a tiny book-filled room, taking the armchair he indicated and waiting for him to settle himself behind his desk. 'How can I help you, Hermione?' he asked, his steady gaze fixed upon her face.

Hermione sat forward a bit. 'You've heard about the Probation Program being offered by the Ministry of Magic?'

Lupin nodded without speaking.

'Professor McGonagall tells me that Professor Snape isn't eligible for the program because he has no magical family,' she continued. 'I spent ten days researching this in the National Wizarding Library; it seems to me that there was a definite precedent for a prisoner being released on his own recognizance following the War of the Ring in

1376. A wizard who had used killing curses during the war and had been imprisoned for his acts was pardoned in a mass release in 1384. That wizard was released on his own recognizance and went on to lead a perfectly law-abiding life. I took this case before the Wizengamot committee and they wouldn't even listen to my full presentation! Hermione scowled as she felt her indignation rising again. 'It's so unfair, Remus!'

Lupin cocked his head slightly to one side as he watched her. 'I can't say that I am surprised to hear of this, Hermione. Severus is universally disliked, scorned, even for the number of ex-students and their parents he has offended during his teaching career. Add to that the murder ' he paused as Hermione opened her mouth to argue, 'no matter how seemingly justified his action may have been as I was saying, add to that the murder of the universally-loved Dumbledore, and you have a very difficult situation indeed. Severus has made many enemies but has cultivated few friends in his adult life.' He seemed to be lost in thought for a moment before bringing his attention back to Hermione. 'I am, of course, sorry to hear this. In what way does it concern you personally and how can I assist you with it?'

A slightly fanatical light came into Hermione's eyes. 'I have an idea that may help, Remus, and I want your opinion ...'

Tonks lay the sleeping Alfie in his cot, covering him tenderly with a soft yellow quilt embroidered all over with tiny red lions, and crept out of his nursery, pulling the door gently closed behind her. She had just poured a glass of elf-made wine and cranked up the gramophone to listen to the latest offering from the Weird Sisters when her husband's muffled shout caused her to abandon the wine glass on the nearest table and scramble to his study.

Without knocking, she opened the door and rushed into the room, finding Hermione sitting on the very edge of her chair looking mutinous and Remus with his face buried in his hands.

'What is it?' she asked breathlessly, one hand pressed to her erratically beating heart.

In stark terms, Remus told her.

'Hermione!' Tonks gasped, turning to the younger woman. 'That's the stupidest idea I ever heard!'

Hermione folded her arms across her chest. 'That's what *he* said!' she huffed, jerking her head in Remus' direction.

Tonks marched out of the room and returned with a tray of glasses and the bottle of wine. 'We'll just have a drink and discuss this like adults,' she said, pouring wine and handing out glasses.

'If we can just *find* some,' Remus muttered as he accepted the glass offered by his wife.

On Saturday morning, the prisoner stood beneath the luke-warm spray of the communal shower and assiduously scrubbed with the soap provided by McGonagall. The industrial strength green soap bars provided by the prison were good for cleaning the floors and for burning the skin off human beings; the mild white bars of bath soap had been one of the first privileges McGonagall had fought for and won on his behalf.

A dispassionate observer would note that the prisoner was gaunt to the point of being skeletal, the sharp bones of his hips jutting painfully through his pale, yellowish skin, each of his ribs as clearly delineated as the vertebrae of his spine. What little muscle tone remaining to him was due to his stubborn daily pull-ups and push-ups. The guards mocked his industry, but it was easy for him to ignore them. Discipline had kept him alive to this point in his life; he had every intention of living to walk out of this prison and to begin his life on his own terms, even if he was nearly sixty years old when he did it. Planning Security Solutions, arranging with McGonagall how to run it, mulling over the puzzles with which she presented him and devising answers to those puzzles kept his intellect keen. Pushing his malnourished body to maintain some level of fitness was part and parcel of his overall plan: to survive, as he had always done, using the tools at his disposal.

Minerva could not understand his disdain of her plan to marry him off to the willing widow Jones, but then Minerva had enjoyed many friendships in her life. She had often granted her trust and seen it honoured; she had even loved and had a long, committed relationship. Severus had none of these things in his past. Friends were people who needed your help with their homework or their job assignments. Trusting someone ended in betrayal and heartbreak. Committed relationships were for those with enough physical beauty and beguiling charm to merit such devotion.

Would he choose twenty years in prison, isolated from everyone and everything he knew over marriage to a woman who offered the relationship to him out of pity? Yes, he would. He had nothing to trade in such a transaction; he had never accepted charity from anyone in his adult life, and he did not intend to begin to do so now. Hestia Jones offered him a chance to escape being moved to Zhokhov Island because Minerva had compelled her to do so; there was no other explanation. The woman was undoubtedly driven by appreciation for his contributions to the Order of the Phoenix during the war. She could certainly have neither any attraction to him physically nor any liking for him personally.

In his years as a free man, he had never permitted himself to imagine that he might one day marry, as other men did. In his youth, his heart broken, he had been sure he was forever unworthy of such a thing. As a young adult, he had sworn to serve two very different masters, and his duties to them had absorbed all of his passion, all of his energy. Only since his incarceration had he possessed the leisure to consider the matter. Knowing that he was imprisoned until the dawning of his seventh decade, he reasoned that a family, with children of his own, was out of the question. He had decided that he might, upon his release from jail, be able to find and marry a woman near his own age one who had been married before, was past the age of romance, but who knew how to make a house into a home, and who knew how to be a woman in her man's bed yes, he could imagine that he might one day have such a woman in his life.

Taking up the rough towel provided for him, he briskly rubbed the moisture from his skin before completely saturating the thin fabric by squeezing his hair with it. He forced the comb through the tangle of ebony strands, then tied them back from his face with the strip of cloth. Finally, he pulled the prison-issue striped brown robes over his head, his mind now mulling over his coming meeting with Minerva.

Back in his cell, he read over the security proposal for the Brocklehurst Company, making notes in the margin with his quill. He was quite startled when the guard entered his cell ten minutes later.

'Visitor for you, Snape.'

As it was not his custom to engage the insolent guards in conversation, he kept his surprise to himself, simply standing and allowing the guard to shackle his arms before being led down the dark, dank hallway. Minerva never arrived before lunch he wondered if something was wrong.

He was escorted into the visiting room; the metal manacles were removed from his wrists and new ones were fastened to his ankles. He settled upon his chair and removed the Brocklehurst proposal from his sleeve, perusing it again as he waited for Minerva to be admitted to the room.

After a few minutes had passed, he heard the door open. 'Early for you, isn't it?' he said nastily. 'Do you have a hot lunch date with Moody?'

The girlish gasp which greeted this sally informed his quick brain that he was not addressing Minerva McGonagall even before his snapping black eyes rose to the pink-cheeked face of Hermione Granger, the Girl-Who-Abetted-the-Boy-Who-Lived-to-Annoy-Us-All.

'Is McGonagall recruiting you to do her dirty work now, Miss Granger?' he asked in voice of quiet menace.

'McGonagall?' Hermione said stupidly. 'I don't know what you mean, Professor Snape.'

It was upon the tip of his tongue to castigate her for using his former title but did he want her calling him Mister? Or Snape, with no honorific? 'Why are you here?'

The tinge of colour receded from her face and she stood before him whey-faced and obviously apprehensive. 'I wanted to speak with you, sir,' she said.

"You *are* speaking with me or did that minor detail escape your notice?"

He watched her lips press together as her chin rose; she was quicker to anger than she had been as a student and somewhat more difficult to intimidate. Without asking his permission, she sat at the table across from him; as she took her seat, his senses were bathed in her scent. He could detect oranges from her hair, tea roses from her throat, and a light note on top, which smelt simply clean and fresh her own, unadulterated scent, no doubt. He filed the information and went on the offensive.

"Please, make yourself comfortable," he purred. "It's not as if I have any say regarding who can show up demanding to waste my time, after all."

The girl flinched as if struck, and Severus enjoyed a vicious stab of satisfaction.

"I hope I will not be wasting your time, sir," she said, looking into his face.

"We all have futile hopes, Miss Granger."

"Why won't you let me tell you why I've come?" she blurted angrily.

Severus watched her fluctuating colour, noting the flush of anger spreading up her throat. "I have no choice, you silly little girl!" he hissed, leaning forward menacingly. "I am *chained to the table*." To emphasise his words he jerked his legs, causing the table to vibrate with the motion and the chains to clank upon the stone floor.

She recoiled slightly and the door opened, a guard entering.

"Is there a problem, miss?" the guard asked.

Hermione stared into Severus' eyes; he leant back in his chair, crossing his arms over his narrow chest and raising a mocking eyebrow at her. If she complained of him, they would escort him back to his cell and her errand would have proven fruitless.

"No problem, officer," she answered levelly. "Professor Snape was just demonstrating for me how efficiently you have chained him to the table."

"All you have to do is call if you need help," the guard reminded her as he left.

The deafening silence between them went on for quite some time, as each waited for the other to be the first to speak. Severus was wondering if the guards would put the girl out at lunch time or if they would simply allow him to miss the meal, when she put her hand upon the parchment containing the Brocklehurst proposal and pulled it towards her.

With the speed of a striking snake, his hand darted out and imprisoned her wrist in a merciless grasp. "Speak your piece and get *out*, Miss Granger," he grated, tucking the parchment away again and flinging her hand from him with barely contained violence.

She did.

Severus sat listening to her in gathering indignation, wrath keeping him mute through her recitation of her reasons and her conclusion, torn between the notions that she was either taking the mickey or that she had lost her mind.

When she finished her monologue, her anxious, dark eyes searching his face as if to gauge his reaction, he spat, "That's the stupidest idea I ever heard. You're raving."

Hermione nodded and stood. "I thought that might be your first reaction. You just need some time to think about it, sir."

The violence of manner with which he stood and bellowed for the guard caused the girl to flinch and step back involuntarily; she was waiting at the door when it was opened, and it seemed to him that she bolted from the room like a rabbit fleeing a raptor.

Back in his cell, he paced as he had not done since the early days of his incarceration. McGonagall had a *lot* of explaining to do.

Chapter 4: Consults, Insults, and Results

Chapter 4 of 11

Hermione reconsiders her proposal to Severus, but arrives back at the same conclusion; Severus confronts Minerva, only to discover she had no hand in Hermione's plan; Minerva and Hermione talk; Hermione pays a fruitless visit to the prison, then has a strange dream; Minerva informs Severus of Hermione's circumstances; Hermione receives a letter from Severus.

Chapter 4

Consults, Insults and Results

Hermione Apparated into the tiny back garden of number twelve, Grimmauld Place with an audible *pop* and collapsed onto the eroded stone bench set beneath the solitary beech tree. Her hands had been shaking since she had recoiled from the table to which the loudly shouting, derisive Severus Snape had been chained in the visiting room at Azkaban Prison. It had taken all of her resolution to visit him and to make her proposition. She had expected him to scoff, but she had not expected him to rage. She could hold her ground in a contest of wits, but she was not comfortable in the screaming presence of a man of whom she had been in awe since she was eleven years old. Did he hate and despise her so much as that? She had never known!

His appearance alone had been troubling. His always thin frame could only be described now as emaciated, his cheeks sunken, as Sirius' had been when she had first seen him in the Shrieking Shack. She had coached herself to remember Sirius' state after years in Azkaban to prepare for her first sight of Severus Snape since his trial. The accustomed curtains of black hair had been pulled back from Snape's face and bound in a queue and not at all greasy, oddly enough and his yellowish teeth had been, strangely, no worse than before. He had not been as physically horrid as she had expected but at the end of their interview he had radiated such loathing that she felt quite defeated.

Hermione closed her eyes and breathed deeply, making a concerted effort to calm herself. When she had begun speaking to him, his black eyes had been strangely intent upon her face, and she had thought he was listening to her, evaluating her suggestion. Now, she was merely confused. How had he moved from that quiet, speculative

stare to the burst of violence with which he had driven her from the room?

Her mind was suddenly filled with her best memories of Professor Snape. In '92, he had disarmed Gilderoy Lockhart with such violence at their Duelling Club that her schoolgirl fancy had transferred itself for the duration of nearly an entire week from the golden beauty of her Defence instructor to the magical superiority of her taciturn Potions master. In '95, he had pulled up the sleeve of his robes to display his Dark Mark to the Minister of Magic, and Hermione had been rendered breathless by his bravery. That summer, he had flitted in and out of Grimmauld Place like a phantom, and she had been riveted by her imaginings of his danger at the hands of the Death Eaters as he gathered information for the Order. When the full story of his involvement in the war had been revealed, she had been moved to approach Professor McGonagall to assist in his defence; she would never forget the enigmatic expression upon his face as she had testified at his trial. The day he had been sentenced, his face impassive as the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot had read of his twenty year incarceration in Azkaban, had been the last time she had seen him ... until today.

Her breathing normal again, her hands steady, Hermione squared her shoulders. She was a determined witch, a characteristic which had always stood her in good stead perhaps it would benefit Professor Snape, as well. Her memories of her admiration for him had firmed her resolve again. She was not a quitter, and she would not give up.

Standing, she made her way to the back door and let herself into the house. Her brow was furrowed as her mind worked over the events of the day. What was the first thing he had said to her something about a lunch date? And then something about how Professor McGonagall was having her do dirty work ... how was Professor McGonagall involved with Severus Snape now?

A look of determination crossed her face. Perhaps a visit to McGonagall's house was in order.

Minerva McGonagall entered the visiting room of Azkaban Prison carrying her briefcase. She was met by the sight of Severus Snape pacing the room to the extent permitted by the chains which bound him to the table leg.

'What are you doing, Severus?' she demanded as she took her seat.

The prisoner halted and turned to her, his face twisted with fury. 'How *dare* you set that insufferable know-it-all on me?'

McGonagall's hands stilled upon her bag, a fleeting look touching her eyes, then gone. 'What are you talking about now?'

'That Granger girl, Minerva how *could* you send her out here to proposition me in that ridiculous way? Have you *no* regard for my dignity?'

McGonagall watched him with sharp, beady eyes. '*No one* could ever possibly have enough regard for your so-called dignity to satisfy *you*, Severus Snape. Now, sit *down* and behave like a man instead of a caged animal!'

The two former professors engaged in a silent battle of wills until the younger perceived that he would receive no answers until he obeyed her command. With ill grace, Severus flung himself into the chair across the table from his business partner.

'Thank you,' McGonagall said politely. 'What are you raving about? Has Hermione Granger been here to see you?'

Severus glared at her. 'Have I not *said* so?'

McGonagall raised her eyebrows at his petulant tone. 'If you wish for me to remain and speak with you, Severus, you had best mend your manners. I am not here to witness one of your temper tantrums.'

Severus gritted his teeth and inhaled noisily. His anger tightly reined, he grated, 'Hermione Granger arrived this morning, unannounced, and proposed marriage to me to obtain my release on the probation program. Do you mean to tell me that you had no hand in her preposterous proposition?'

'I had no idea that Miss Granger meant to visit you at any time, Severus.' McGonagall cocked her head to one side, watching him and mulling over the information he had given her. 'What did you tell her?'

'I sent her running back to London with her tail between her legs!'

'Pity.' McGonagall looked down to hide the flash of elation she felt. If Severus suspected her of being pleased, it would simply drive him more forcefully in the opposite direction. She removed paperwork from her bag and set it on the table. 'Do you have the Brocklehurst proposal completed?'

Snape glared at the top of McGonagall's head as she bent over the parchment before her. 'Is that all you have to say?'

McGonagall sat up slowly, removed her glasses and polished them with a handkerchief from her pocket, then replaced the glasses and folded her hands on the table top. 'All right, Severus. I will discuss Hermione's proposal of marriage, but only because you have asked me to do so.'

Snape sputtered at her indignantly. 'There is nothing to discuss! The little swot is obviously imbalanced!'

Dispassionately, as if she was discussing a matter of little importance, she said, 'Miss Granger is well past the age of consent, intelligent, attractive she is a fellow Order member, a fellow war veteran, and capable of understanding more about you than any other woman you are likely to come across. She possesses qualities *not* possessed by Hestia Jones in short, she is an exemplary candidate for a wife for you.'

'I have no desire to have a wife!'

McGonagall glared at him. 'Then can we continue with our business discussion?'

Severus threw her a filthy look and pulled the Brocklehurst plan from his sleeve.

Harry opened the front door and stared at Minerva McGonagall. 'Professor! What a surprise!'

'Good afternoon, Harry,' the old woman responded, entering as he stepped aside for her.

'Professor McGonagall!'

Harry and McGonagall turned to see Hermione descending the staircase, zipping up her jacket as she came.

'I wanted to speak with you, Hermione,' McGonagall said.

Harry looked from one to the other. 'Is it about the job?' he asked. 'Don't you think Hermione should finish at uni first, Professor?'

Hermione laid a quieting hand on Harry's arm. 'I was coming to see you, ma'am.'

McGonagall nodded. 'That doesn't surprise me. Let's go down to the kitchen I could use a cup of tea.'

Harry stared after them as they retreated to the basement. 'Don't mind me,' he said with good-natured sarcasm.

'We won't need you, Harry,' McGonagall called back to him, a small smile softening her words.

'I'll just see if I can amuse myself, shall I?'

Hermione had the good grace to look apologetic as she gave him a wave and followed McGonagall downstairs.

Two weeks later, Severus was not surprised when the guard came for him whilst his hair was still wet from the shower. If McGonagall and Granger had not been in the plot together before, they had undoubtedly discussed it since last visiting day and would now present a united front to him.

He was ready for them.

The Granger girl looked wary but determined as she walked into the visiting room and seated herself across the table from him. He did not speak to her, but held her gaze, one mocking eyebrow raised.

'I understand that you spoke with Professor McGonagall about our last visit,' she said.

'I thought she had sent you.'

'She didn't. I came to my decision independently.'

Severus nodded. 'You are wont to do that.'

Miss Granger visibly relaxed at his reasonable tone. 'There are some points in favour of our marriage that I didn't have an opportunity to discuss with you before,' she said, her gaze now moving to her hands, which were clasped on the table before her. He did not speak, so she continued. 'I think our interests are well-suited, that our values are similar, and that we could live with one another companionably.'

The girl raised her gaze again to his face, her soft brown eyes now very wide in her sombre face. 'I think it is only fair for you to know that I am sterile and unable to conceive. I will not be able to provide you with any natural children. If, however, you should wish to adopt a child, I would be more than willing to do so.'

Severus was aware of an uncomfortable sensation in his chest and wondered briefly if he was taking ill, then put the idea from him to respond to her. 'I see.'

A faint look of relief touched her face; he noted that she had taken some pains with her appearance, wearing the bushy hair plaited down her back and applying cosmetics before she came. He had not detected the tea rose scent upon her when she had seated herself; instead, she smelt of the preparation she had used to tame her hair enough to braid it. The roundness of face and figure she retained in his memories were gone in reality; the schoolgirl had become a young woman of resolution.

He *had* to get her out of there.

'And how shall we live?' he asked her suddenly.

She looked guarded. 'Live?'

'Where will we reside? What will we use for gold to buy food? You aren't under the impression that I have any gold, are you, Miss Granger?'

She shook her head vigorously. 'No. I well, I have had a job offer, and I will work. It won't be much at first, but I'm sure it will be enough for a small flat ...'

He interrupted her. 'What do you imagine that I shall do in this small flat?'

Before she could reply, he continued, 'Whilst you are working, what shall I do? I don't think a convicted murderer and former Death Eater will be able to get paid work, do you?'

She opened her mouth and he said disingenuously, 'You wouldn't have any objection to me spending my days down the pub, would you?'

'I ' she began.

'Wouldn't that be fine?' he inquired conversationally. 'You could work to support me, and I could work at becoming a useless drunk.' He leant towards her, causing her to move back instinctively, until she caught herself. He sneered at her recoil, then his lids drooped, and he darted a frankly appraising leer from the corner of his eye. When he spoke again, it was in a disturbing purr. 'Of course, then you would come home from work, wouldn't you? You could do the housework, fix my supper, and then we'll go to bed. Do you like it on top, Miss Granger? I don't have a preference, as long as it is *often*.'

She blushed furiously and turned her face away from him.

'You are aware that the marriage must be consummated, are you not?' he continued, never looking away from her. 'Consummated and irrevocable. The Ministry won't settle for less in this circumstance, you know can't have people marrying simply for the sake of being released on probation. There will be unbreakable fidelity charms placed upon us. You will not be able to move on to another man once you have done your *good deed* and my probation is over you will be tied to *me forever*.' His voice had begun to rise with each new sentence, the false affability falling away to reveal his rabid disdain. 'You didn't know *that*, did you? Stupid girl what if I had accepted your ridiculous proposal?' He slapped the tabletop and spat, 'This isn't a schoolgirl plan to free the house-elves.'

She stood, a look of blazing fury upon her face, and Severus was pushed back in his seat by the uncontrolled burst of magic radiating from her. The previously soft brown eyes were alight with anger, and the stray tendrils of hair about her face seemed to crackle with the energy of her umbrage.

'How dare you speak to me like that?' she demanded in tones throbbing with indignation. 'Have you ever known me to do incomplete research to turn in less than top-rate work? No, you never had a kind word to say to me, but I *shone* in your classes, both in Potions and in Defence!'

In her ire, she knocked her chair further back, beginning to pace in a way which Severus recognized well.

'Of course I know that the marriage must be consummated and that we will be married for the rest of our lives! *I'm* not afraid of that, Professor are you?' She stopped where she stood and glared at him fiercely, the brown eyes snapping, her lips set in a firm line. Her simple black robes parted over her plain grey trousers and tailored white blouse, showing him for the first time the woman's body into which she had grown since her Hogwarts days.

Severus watched her, that roiling feeling in his chest intensifying, becoming worse. *Was he becoming ill? Never mind that, fool get her OUT of here!*

'Get out, Miss Granger,' he snarled. 'Go back to London. I have no need of your charity.'

'If I were feeling *charitable*, Professor, I would volunteer at St. Mungo's!' she retaliated. 'I never dreamt you would be such a coward would you truly choose banishment rather than risk a liaison with me?'

His face darkened, and he looked daggers at her before standing and walking to the wall, where he stood, staring at the stone, until he heard her call the guard and depart without addressing him again. Mortified that she had wrung an emotional outburst from him, he leant against the wall as the door clanged shut behind her, his mind in turmoil.

Severus sat upon the thin mattress which comprised his bed, awaiting the inevitable. He had a dim hope that Minerva would accept the rebuff and return to the mainland without disturbing him, but he had known the old woman for thirty years; she was not one to take a repulse unchallenged.

The door opened and for the first time in his two year residence, someone other than a guard entered his cell. Resolutely, he kept his eyes on the wall.

'What is this, Severus?' her querulous voice demanded. 'I have come all the way here; the least you can do is have the courtesy to keep our appointment.'

'Not today, Minerva.'

He heard the chair scrape along the floor and the rustle of fabric, then felt a hand upon his back.

'What has happened to upset you?'

'Why could you not have discouraged her when she came to you about it?'

'Ah Hermione has been here, then.' The hand was removed from his back. 'Turn around and we can discuss my rationale for not discouraging her.'

Severus moved to face her and raised an insolent eyebrow. She sat at her ease in his prison cell, the tartan accents to her robes and hat the only splashes of colour in the dreary space.

'I have a number of reasons, which I will list in no particular order,' she said. 'I want you out of prison. Hermione wants to marry you. She admires you, is intelligent and is capable of appreciating you as the woman who is to be your wife ought to do. In addition, this marriage will be of benefit to her, as well.'

Severus cut across her impatiently. 'In what way?'

McGonagall frowned. 'You can provide her with a home, Severus, and an education.'

He snorted. 'You make her sound like a homeless orphan.'

Her frown deepened. 'You had already left the school when Hermione's parents were killed. Did you know that her inheritance went to pay their business debts?'

He shot her a sharp look. 'Who supports her now?'

'Can't you guess?'

'Potter,' he spat.

McGonagall nodded. 'It bothers her, though. Harry would willingly give her the key to his vault, but she worries about infringing upon his good nature.'

'If Potter is that besotted with her, why is she willing to bind herself to me? Or does the Boy-Who-Lived-to-Annoy-Us-All know the Granger girl cannot provide a nursery full of screaming Potter brats?' He glowered at her. 'The last thing I need is a wife who is pining for a man who wouldn't have her.'

'There has never been anything other than friendship between Harry and Hermione, Severus, and anyone who has paid any attention to them could tell you that. They love one another as siblings do, but they have never been romantically interested in one another.' McGonagall's voice lowered and she leant towards him. 'You told me that you would not marry Hestia Jones because you had nothing to give in exchange for your freedom. Well, with Hermione Granger, you have something significant to offer her financial security.'

The discomfort behind his sternum fluttered again; Severus did not speak, but looked over McGonagall's shoulder, his eyes focussed on nothing, his mind busy. After several minutes had passed, McGonagall stood and paced over to the wall opposite his pallet. When she reached the wall, she turned back to him, her wand in her hand.

Severus watched, his eyes riveted upon her wand, feeling the yearning rise in him as it did at his worst times how he longed to hold his wand again!

'You will get your wand back, you know, when they let you out on probation. You will have to turn it over to your Probation Supervisor at each meeting for *Priori Incantatem*, but that will end when you satisfactorily complete your probation period. Don't you want that, Severus?'

His glare would have frightened a sensible person, but Minerva McGonagall had experienced the full range of Severus' artillery too often to be impressed; she was also unmoved by the way he swore at her before he took up his quill. She simply seated herself upon his pallet and waited for him to complete his letter.

After all, there was a great deal of planning to do.

That night, Hermione dreamt of Severus Snape.

She was in a wild country, a wind-swept moor; ahead of her was a rocky promontory, the approach to which was strewn with huge boulders. Shading her eyes against the glare of the bright sun, she saw him standing at the summit of the outcrop. Shading his own eyes, he looked out over the vista spread before him, which was hidden from Hermione's eyes by the rugged peak. What did he see? His long black hair streamed in the wind as he tilted his face to the sunlight. Then he looked down, his gaze seemingly fixed upon her. Her breath caught in her throat and she felt her heart begin to beat faster. She had to get to him she had to stand with him, looking out at the valley on the other side she had to be closer to him the next time he looked at her with such compelling intensity. As one does in dreams, she knew that if she could climb over the slabs of rock and reach the pinnacle upon which he stood, she would see what he was seeing. Desirous, she began to walk, only to be balked by the first boulder in her path. Frustrated, she looked up again, closer now, and found he was still watching her. She attempted to call to him, but her words were carried away by the wind. He looked away at the panorama before him, then again down at her. Hermione was conscious of a fierce dynamic flowing between them, tinged with hunger and urgency. How desperately she wished to be on the mountain top with him! For what seemed an endless time, their eyes were locked. At last, he reached his hand to her.

She woke, thirsty, and padded into the bathroom for a cup of water. What an odd dream! What had it meant? Why had the sight of his lean, unfettered figure standing on the cliff moved her so? What would have happened if she had managed to grasp his outstretched hand?

With a sigh and a shake of her head, she moved back to the bed, falling asleep and dreaming no more.

The next morning she opened her eyes to see a handsome tawny owl pecking at her bedroom window. Hermione rose and opened the window, removing the heavy vellum envelope with **Security Solutions** in the upper left corner. The owl flew away and she tore the envelope open to find a note.

Dear Hermione,

Please find enclosed a note from Severus Snape, which he requested that I send to you.

Best wishes,

Minerva McGonagall

Very curious now, Hermione removed a piece of parchment bearing Professor Snape's familiar spiky handwriting.

Miss Granger,

I would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience to discuss the matter we broached at your last visit. I believe some accommodation may be reached.

S.S.

With echoes of his disturbing presence in her dream still reverberating in her mind, Hermione felt her sudden shortness of breath and her increased heart rate as an extension of her dream-state. It was a perfectly natural reaction. She hurried to her bath, and beneath the needle-like spray, she came fully awake and determined to separate the confusing emotion of her dream from the well thought-out proposition she had presented to him. Swiftly cleansing and scenting her body, re-plaiting her hair, taking pains over her make-up, she mentally reiterated her resolve: she would show him the mature woman she had become, who was entirely sure of what she was getting into and felt completely prepared to take him on.

She was gone before Harry woke up.

Chapter 5: What's Love Got To Do With It?

Chapter 5 of 11

Severus and Hermione meet to plan their wedding; Hermione has a hen party with Ginny and Harry, who seem quite interested in one another; Severus and Hermione are married.

Chapter 5

What's Love Got To Do With It?

For the third time in two weeks, Hermione entered the visiting room at Azkaban Prison. Severus Snape sat at the table, his black eyes coolly assessing her as she crossed the floor. Feeling herself to be in a position of some power with him for the first time, Hermione slipped into the seat across from him and gave him a face of polite attention. Neither of them spoke and the minutes ticked past.

Staring across the Rubicon of the visiting room table at Severus Snape, Hermione knew that a part of her determination to help him was that she was still trying to win his approval. There was a portion of her brain screaming that it was insane to enter into an Unbreakable Marriage Covenant for such an end, but she didn't care, because it wasn't her *only* reason. She had always thought there was something a little too calculated in his insults, as if there was less emotion and more contrivance involved than others realised. For that reason, she had taken his derision as her teacher with a very large pinch of salt. In a vague way, she had supposed that one day, when she was an adult and the war was over, when he no longer had to dissemble and to pretend to be a loyal Death Eater, that she and he would be natural friends. Both of them were of a serious turn of mind, light years ahead of their contemporaries in sheer intelligence, neither of them had many friends and she fancied him.

All right, she *fancied* him. Not in a heart-stopping, die-one-thousand-deaths sort of way, but matter-of-factly, as Muggle women fancied cinema stars and pop singers. She wasn't so dim that she didn't realise that no one else she knew saw Professor Snape in that way, but she wasn't fussed by it. She valued many things that no one else of her acquaintance could understand. She knew that in a roomful of her peers – other straight, smart women with healthy sex drives and an appreciation of devastatingly intelligent men – that her calm assumption of Severus Snape's charisma would be promptly vindicated.

Given the opportunity, she believed that they could have a pleasant relationship. She wasn't fool enough to sacrifice herself to an untenable life of misery with someone for whom she could never envision feeling attraction or affection.

'Miss Granger.'

He spoke with some force, and she realised that this was not the first time he had spoken her name. 'Yes?'

'Perhaps you could summarize your proposition again.'

'I don't believe that's necessary.'

One eyebrow rose.

She added, 'I was perfectly clear the first time.'

He leant back and studied her again, the tip of his index finger tracing his thin lips. 'I see,' he murmured. 'Perhaps, then, you would not be averse to outlining your expectations for such a union.'

Hermione considered for a moment. 'That's a very broad question,' she said, holding up a hand to forestall his acidic rejoinder. 'Nevertheless, I will attempt to answer you.'

'I expect that we will be married, you will be released from here, we will go to our flat, we will consummate the marriage, and our lives as married persons will begin. I will go to work for the company which offered me employment and you will ... do as you see fit.'

For the first time since she had known him, Hermione felt as if she had Severus Snape's full attention. His gaze was fixed unblinkingly upon her face and there was no suggestion in his manner that he was either wishing she would stop talking, or that his mind was mulling over something other than what she was saying. She found the spotlight simultaneously riveting and unnerving.

After a moment, he inquired reasonably, 'What are your expectations of me, Miss Granger, as your husband? What do you expect for me to do?'

Hermione looked into the fathomless dark eyes and saw only inquiry. 'I expect for you to treat me with civility and to make an effort to make our partnership a successful one.'

'Is that all you require?' They might have been discussing the assignment of a complex homework project.

Hermione sighed and said, 'It is a broad sketch; until we have lived together for a while, I don't see how I can be expected to anticipate everything I might want or require from you.'

'You did not, perhaps, expect romance?'

Hermione felt the flush rise up her throat to her cheeks, but she held her ground, keeping her eyes on his. 'I do not expect romance; we are not marrying for love. I do not, however, despair of us coming to feel affection for one another.'

He continued to watch her, his expression unchanged. 'May I tell you my tentative plans?'

Hermione swallowed hard and nodded once, steeling herself for his comments.

'We will be married here; it is a Ministry requirement. The Ministry official will perform the binding. It is customary for a time period of twenty-four hours to be imposed upon those who enter into the Unbreakable Covenant, in which the Covenant is to be ratified by the consummation. In our case, however, Minerva McGonagall has used her contacts at the Ministry to receive an extension for us; we will have seven days to effect the consummation.'

As Hermione listened to him, she began to feel somewhat light-headed; Severus Snape was speaking to her about *the marriage* it was nothing less than surreal, really. It had been one thing to make her proposal to him as one might present a paper to one's professor; it was entirely another to hear him speak to her of such an intimate thing as consummating a marriage between them. She wished desperately that she could whip parchment and quill out of her bag to take notes, for she feared that she would not remember everything he said to her in this state of unreality.

'The reason for the delay is to give me an opportunity to acclimate myself to being out of Azkaban for a day or two before we begin to accustom ourselves to marriage. Are you amenable to this plan?'

Hermione nodded once it sounded like a rational request ...

'I will go to stay as a guest at Professor McGonagall's flat in Kensington; as it is in the period of our honeymoon, my whereabouts will not be investigated by the Ministry. You, on the other hand, will go to my to *our* home and begin to make yourself comfortable. I will come to you there before the week is out so that the Covenant can be finalised.'

Hermione bit her lip and began to feel flustered. Now that *his* mind was made up, things were moving ahead too quickly there were preparations to be made which she could not even begin yet not without borrowing yet *more* money from Harry. In a voice which demonstrated her agitation, she said, 'Wait I haven't even accepted the job offer I received, and I haven't begun to work yet I don't have a place for us to live...'

'Miss Granger.'

He spoke forcefully and she quieted immediately, somewhat amazed to find that she still responded to that tone in his voice as a student responds to her teacher. *That will have to be sorted*, she thought. *I can't be snapping to attention like a schoolgirl every time he grumbles which is likely to be often.*

There was the tiniest glimmer of amusement in his eyes, as if he was aware of her chagrin. 'I own a house in London; it is in Spinner's End. If it is not to your taste, we may consider procuring a different house in the future but it will suffice to be getting on with.'

'Oh well, that's a relief,' Hermione said, the conversation seeming more surreal than ever. 'Then all I need to do is accept the job that was offered to me ...'

'No, I would rather you did not.'

'Why not?'

'It is my wish that you continue your education, Miss Granger. There is no immediate need for you to begin to work. In fact,' he added his gaze becoming more speculative still, 'you may, if you wish, choose not to work at all.'

Hermione stared at him for a moment; she was beginning to doubt her hearing. 'I'm sorry I don't mean to be slow but are you saying that you are independently wealthy?'

'Not at all,' he replied. 'I do, however, have savings which will allow us to set up house, as the saying goes and I have a job, which will provide for us adequately.'

Now Hermione's mouth dropped open. 'You you have a *job*? What about spending your days "down the pub?"'

In a rather captious tone he said, 'I was exploring how far your imaginings had brought you in your plan to "save" me from prison. Not very far, as it turned out.'

It was the first hint of disparagement she had heard from him, and she fired up immediately. 'Yet I believe you will find that our marriage will be sufficient to procure your salvation from prison regardless of how poor you consider my planning to be.'

She noted a narrowing of his eyes which, in the past, had often presaged the loss of his temper, but after a moment, he simply sat back, his voice becoming once again smooth, his manner detached.

'Let us be clear, Miss Granger,' he said, his nostrils flared as if in distaste. 'I am marrying you to get my wand back that is your worth to me. You are marrying me for a home and a living that is my worth to you. We are intelligent adults and will both, I trust, endeavour to behave civilly. I am a man who keeps his word even when striking a bargain with the devil himself. I will uphold my end of the agreement.'

Even though she knew his words were just and true, Hermione was slightly hurt by his personal indifference to her and stung by his total lack of regard for her feelings in the matter. She pressed her lips firmly together, preventing herself from blurting the angry words seething in her mind. The man was infuriating!

He startled and further enraged her by chuckling, a sound which she had never heard from him before. 'Come we have reached an accommodation let us shake hands and call friend. For magical folk, we are young, yet one hundred plus years is a long time.' He stood, causing the leg chains to clank together, and extended his hand to her.

Her emotions swinging swiftly from anger to confusion, Hermione stood as well, nonplussed. Because he had stepped to the side of the table, she did as well, and for the first time, there was no barrier between them. She tilted her head to look up at his face, placing her hand within his. As if to complete her befuddlement, he raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

The wiry black hairs growing above his lips all but hid his mouth from her sight, and they rasped roughly against the skin on the back of her hand. 'Will you will you shave the beard?' she asked tentatively.

He was openly amused now. 'What is your preference?' he asked her, the silken intimacy of his words rippling unexpectedly down her spine.

'I like your face clean-shaven,' she answered, feeling the unwelcome blush burning in her cheeks.

'Then you are the first,' he murmured.

Without resuming their seats, they amicably set the date for Sunday next, and Hermione left, in far more turmoil now that her plan had succeeded than she would have believed possible.

On Saturday night, Harry opened the door and stared into the pretty face of Ginny Weasley. 'Hi,' he said stupidly, thinking he would kill Hermione for not warning him of their visitor.

'Hi, Harry,' she said, breezing past him.

He closed the door and turned to look at her, the achingly familiar flaming hair shining like copper in the hallway candlelight.

'Hermione invited me,' Ginny explained, returning his gaze with a frank appraisal of her own.

'Right,' Harry said. 'How have you been?'

Ginny shrugged. 'Oh, busy at work, you know. And you?'

'I'm good,' he assured her, his mind flailing for another topic to keep her in the entrance hall. 'Are you going to Ron's wedding?'

'Yes you know Mum the whole family is going, even the kids; she won't take "no" for an answer. You're best man, right?' Ginny showed no embarrassment; she seemed quite content to stand about in the hallway chatting with Harry.

'Yeah Lola seems like a nice girl.' Harry tried to keep his eyes on her face, but her casual Muggle clothing emphasised the ways her body had matured since the last time he had held her, four years before. When he dragged his gaze back to her face, Ginny's lips were twitching oh, God, he was rumbled but she didn't seem to mind. Impulsively, he blurted, 'Ginny, do you think you might '

Steps sounded on the basement stairs and Hermione appeared, carrying a tray laden with drinks and snacks. 'Hi, Ginny!' she said brightly. 'Shall we go to my room?'

'You'll be more comfortable in the sitting room,' Harry said quietly. 'I'll stay out of your way.'

Hermione's mouth twisted in a moue of slight distress. 'You are very welcome to sit with us and drink and talk, Harry but I can't have you bad-mouthing my husband.'

'He's not your husband yet, the slimy git!' Harry said in the tone of one who has had this discussion before. 'It's not too late to give up this stupid scheme, Hermione.'

Ginny stepped between them as Hermione shrugged and headed up to the sitting room. Ginny said, 'I think that's the kind of bad-mouthing she was talking about.'

Harry transferred his angry look from Hermione's retreating back to Ginny's freckled face, and his glare faded.

She continued, 'Hermione has to settle for just me for her "hen party." If you can be supportive rather than a prat well, you've been her *best* friend since first year there's no one else she'd rather have with her tonight.'

Harry dragged his oft-mended spectacles from his face and rubbed the place his scar used to be. 'She's throwing herself away.'

Ginny crossed her arms. 'I'm not disagreeing with you but she's going to do it, no matter what we say. Both of us have told her why we think it's a bad idea now it's time to stick by her, anyway. How many times did she do that for you?'

Harry's mouth dropped open. '*Shite*,' he whispered.

'Exactly,' Ginny said, turning from him to lead the way upstairs.

The three friends snacked, drank, and talked well into the night, lounging about the dimly-lit sitting room.

'But how does the Ministry *know* when Hermione shags Snape?' Harry asked, setting down his glass of firewhisky and slopping some of it onto the table. He ignored the spill and grabbed a handful of crisps.

Hermione lobbed a small cushion at him, barely missing the glass and knocking the crisps onto the rug. '*Don't* say it like that!' she protested.

'You lot had best behave, or I'll separate you,' Ginny bossed, Vanishing the crisps from the floor and passing the packet to Harry, who had looked up in alarm, thinking that Molly was in the room.

'He's being lewd,' Hermione objected, accepting another Avada Colada from Ginny and taking a fortifying sip.

'Well, you know you have to shag him, or the Ministry will put him back in prison,' Harry pointed out, retrieving his firewhisky again.

'The way the Ministry will know,' Ginny said firmly, speaking over Hermione's new objection, 'is similar to the way it is known when a magical child is born.'

'Magic qu-quill?' Harry inquired knowledgeably with only a small hiccup.

'Not exactly,' Ginny replied, settling back in the corner of the settee, drawing Harry's unabashedly admiring gaze. 'There are two forms of marriage for wizards and witches: the Unbreakable Covenant, which involves fidelity charms and is irrevocable, and common marriage. The common marriage doesn't require consummation to be considered valid, and it's not tracked by the Ministry. The common marriage certificate is just filed in the Ministry Bureau of Statistics, and the marriage can be terminated by divorce.' Ginny paused to sip at her goblet of honey mead. 'All of the people in my family are bound by the Unbreakable Covenant; the other form of marriage is considered to be little better than a Muggle union to most pure-bloods and to other old-fashioned folks. With the Covenant, the marriage certificate is filed with the Ministry Bureau of Statistics in a pending folder; when the consummation takes place, the Ministry seal magically appears on the parchment and a Bureau of Statistics employee removes the certificate to the permanent file. The marriage then appears on the Registry of Marriages.'

Hermione frowned, fishing a piece of pineapple out of her Avada Colada and popping it into her mouth. 'What happens to the certificate if the marriage isn't consummated?'

Ginny's eyes reflected the light from oil lamp as she gazed into the flame. 'At the very moment when the time period for consummation expires, the certificate explodes into flames and disappears. At that point, if the couple wants to be united under the Covenant, they have to begin the entire process over again.'

Harry hiccupped again. 'But how would anyone know? Anyone who wasn't there when the thing explodes?'

Ginny shrugged. 'No one would know, but if the Registry was checked, that couple wouldn't be on it.' She placed her goblet on a side table and stood, stretching her hands to the ceiling with a sigh before speaking again. 'With Professor Snape, you can bet that people will be watching for any excuse to put him back in jail. There are plenty of people who would be only too happy to see him shipped off to Siberia for the next twenty years sorry, Hermione.'

Hermione nodded morosely. 'It's all right I know some people want to see him stay in prison. But they're wrong he's a good person.'

Harry and Ginny exchanged long-suffering looks.

'I saw that!' Hermione said, tossing an olive at Harry.

'Me?' Harry objected, snagging the olive neatly and dropping it into his mouth. 'What about her?' He indicated Ginny, who was staring at him.

'If you can catch something that small *inthis* light, drunk off your arse, think what you could be doing in professional Quidditch,' Ginny said admiringly.

'What, shagging his way through the groupies?' Hermione said waspishly.

Ginny turned a measuring eye on Hermione, then walked over and took the empty glass from her, tugging her up from her chair. 'It's to bed with the bride,' she said, a loving smile upon her mouth. 'Come on up, and I'll tuck you in.'

Harry watched the girls as they walked out of the room, his gaze lingering over-long on Ginny's swaying hips.

'We're leaving at nine in the morning, Harry,' Ginny said, turning and catching him checking her out. She gave him an impudent smile. 'Don't oversleep!'

The next morning, Severus sat patiently in the warden's office as Minerva fussed over him, a mocking expression in his eyes. 'You know there's not a blasted thing you can do about my appearance, old woman give over!'

Minerva huffed at him and resumed her seat as the sycophantic warden entered with the Ministry official in his wake. Severus felt, rather than saw Minerva's reaction to the entrance of none other than Cornelius Fudge.

'You!' Minerva spat contemptuously.

'Good morning, Minerva,' Fudge effused, behaving as if she had not spoken. He turned his officious attention to Severus then and said, 'Snake.'

'Fudge,' Severus acknowledged evenly.

Fudge, who now bore the title of Special Advisor to the Minister of Magic, seated himself at the warden's desk and placed a briefcase of lime-green dyed dragon hide before him. He removed several documents, then looked up at Severus. 'I have here the probation agreement, as well as the paperwork for the Unbreakable Covenant.'

'And my *wand*, Fudge?' Severus interrupted in a low, menacing tone.

Fudge shifted nervously, avoiding Severus' eye. He reached back into his case and removed a length of rowan wood.

Severus saw the pale-coloured wand fourteen and one-quarter inches, dragon heartstring core with a physical pang of longing which took all his skill to conceal from the avid attention of Cornelius Fudge. Nodding once, Severus said, 'You may proceed,' and the tedious business of going over the paperwork commenced.

Hermione entered the visitor's room, her heart flopping uncomfortably in her chest. The table and its chains had been removed; the room was bare save for the people present. Standing at the top of the room, looking self-important in his pin-striped robes, was Cornelius Fudge. To his right stood the warden. Professor McGonagall, dressed in tailored black robes, stood before Fudge, beside the groom.

Hermione's soon-to-be husband turned when she entered the room, his glittering black eyes pinning her where she stood. The slick appearance of his hair was not due to wetness; apparently the every-other-Saturday-rule for showers held, regardless of whether one was to be married that weekend. The prison-issue robes adorned his person, as on each of her other visits; the only difference was his feet, which were bare in deference to their binding ceremony.

She was only too aware of the way his eyes travelled slowly down her body to her feet. Her hair bore a wreath of white wild flowers, set about her brow and in no way controlling the unmanageable mass of her bushy brown hair, loose down her back. She wore a simple calf-length garment of white, heavily embroidered at the hem and the sleeves in silver thread with ancient wedding runes. Her feet were bare, although Ginny had been unable to dissuade her from wearing a thin gold anklet about her left ankle; Hermione was certain that Severus' eyes lingered on her ankle before rising again to her face. At that moment, Harry spoke and Ginny placed a hand at the small of Hermione's back, urging her to move into the room so that they could follow her in and close the door.

With her friends trailing her, Hermione crossed the room to stand at the side of her groom, who acknowledged her with a polite nod of his head, which she returned.

In times to come, it would be difficult for Hermione to remember much about her wedding. She was acutely aware of the near-stranger standing on her left, who spoke his responses in a firm, resonant voice, but she was barely cognizant of the words spoken over them by Cornelius Fudge. At one point, Fudge told Severus to place a ring upon her finger, which he did, speaking his vow.

'I, Severus Xerxes Snape Prince, do take thee, Hermione Jane Granger ...'

Her hand tightened upon his so convulsively that Severus looked down into her eyes, comprehension coming immediately. With a very nearly apologetic look, he returned the pressure of her hand and gave an imperceptible nod she had heard the name correctly.

Ginny dropped Severus' ring into Hermione's hand when she reached for it, a simple band, plain but for the engraving within: **SS/HG 24/6/2001**. She slipped the ring upon his finger, obediently reciting, 'I, Hermione Jane Granger, do take thee, Severus Xerxes Snape Prince ...'

At last the ceremony ended and Fudge commanded the groom to kiss the bride. Briefly wondering if no shower meant no toothbrush, as well, Hermione braced herself for her husband's first kiss, leaning willingly into him as he reached for her. The scent of cloves told her that he had been able to obtain *something* to freshen his breath, then his lips were pressed firmly to her own, for a period long enough to escape the stigma of being too short a time, but not long enough for her to obtain any sort of idea regarding his kissing skills.

When Severus released her, Ginny stepped in and hugged her fiercely, whispering, 'You'll make it good, Hermione.'

Then Harry pulled Hermione into his arms and pressed a kiss to her hair. 'You will *always* have a home with me,' he murmured to her, loudly enough for those who were paying attention to hear him.

Minerva McGonagall next claimed Hermione in an uncharacteristically emotional embrace. As Hermione returned McGonagall's hug, she saw Severus and Harry staring into one another's eyes from the distance of ten paces. Nervously, she detached herself from her old Transfiguration professor, but it was needless; Cornelius Fudge had claimed the entirety of Severus' attention by placing a thin length of light-coloured wood in his out-stretched hand.

The look upon her husband's face as he regained custody of his wand was like a crash course in Snape or should she say Prince? study. For the first time in this entire ordeal she considered what must have been his feelings about relinquishing his wand into the keeping of people whom he despised, and she was stricken to the core.

'Hermione?' Harry was at her side, his hand upon her arm. 'Are you all right?'

'Perhaps you would allow me a moment with my wife, Mr Potter.' The cool voice spoke from behind them.

Harry moved his hand from her arm to her shoulder as he turned to address his former nemesis. 'She is my best friend, Snape. I will be watching her very closely for any sign of unhappiness.'

For a moment, Severus regarded Harry and Hermione before saying, 'That is only to be expected.' Then he took Hermione's elbow and steered her away from the knot of murmuring people.

'This is the key to my to our home,' he said, pressing it into her hand. 'It is at number eleven, Spinner's End, in Hackney. You will need the password, as well, to enter. It is "piaculum." Do you need to write it down?'

Hermione shook her head.

'Go there now it is your home, as well as mine. You have my leave to make whatever changes you wish, although I will ask that you not remove anything from the house without consulting me about it first. I would prefer that you not invite guests until after I have returned. If you need me before then, an owl will find me at Minerva's flat. Do you have any questions?'

Hermione looked up at the man's lank, greasy hair; piercing eyes; long, hooked nose; Hagrid-like wild beard and felt a bubble of near-panic rising within her. This was her *husband* but this was like no wedding night of which she had ever dreamt.

'If I think of any questions, I will owl you,' she said faintly.

The warden escorted Fudge from the room, leaving the door open. McGonagall moved to the door, conversing quietly with Harry and Ginny, and Severus indicated that Hermione should precede him into the corridor, which she did, still feeling as if she was in a dream.

After traversing two further corridors and passing through no fewer than five locked and warded doors, they stood in the small Portkey area before the prison entrance. As they had progressed through each door, Hermione had sensed Severus growing more confident, until he stepped into sunlight for the first time in two years. It seemed to her that he took a very deep breath of the salty sea air before he looked down at her with something very near a smile in his eyes.

'Let's go, Hermione,' Harry called. 'Portkey leaves in two minutes!'

The smile disappeared and annoyance touched Severus' eyes as he glared at Harry. Hermione made as if to move away, but Severus detained her with a touch to her shoulder. She stopped and looked up at him, feeling bewildered and inexplicably near tears.

'Fifty points from Gryffindor,' he snapped.

'What?' Hermione gasped, every fibre of her being infused with sudden indignation.

An odd expression of satisfaction touched her husband's face. '*There* she is,' he purred. Very deliberately, he took Hermione's hand and brought it to his lips, never taking his eyes from hers. 'I will come to you at our home before the week is out, Hermione,' he said softly. 'Until then, I am only an owl away.'

He released her and stepped over to join McGonagall, then the two former professors Portkeyed away.

Hermione allowed Harry and Ginny to place her hand upon their Portkey, and with a jerk behind her navel, she left Azkaban Prison her wedding chapel far behind.

A/N: The English to Latin translator says that *piaculum* is the Latin word for 'atonement.' I have placed Spinner's End in London in spite of all evidence to the contrary.

Chapter 6: Howling Owls

Chapter 6 of 11

Hermione goes to Spinner's End and meets someone unexpected; Severus goes to Minerva's flat and begins to regain his strength; the newlyweds exchange owls.

Chapter 6

Howling Owls

Hermione slipped out of her wedding dress and hung it away in the cupboard of her bedroom at Grimmauld Place. Most of her packing was completed, save for the toiletry items she had used that morning. She slipped the last of these into her trunk as she pondered her next task.

Professor McGonagall had told her that the house on Spinner's End had not been inhabited since Severus had gone to prison and had only been used on holidays for several years before that well, no one had lived there continuously since his mother had died. As a wedding gift, Professor McGonagall had assigned Winky to assist Hermione with bringing the old house into habitable shape; Hermione had only to call for Winky, once she was ready to begin. It would be nice to have her own home, she supposed even if it was a derelict old heap in *Hackney*. The east end of London was not known for its nice neighbourhoods, after all.

'I'll be back for you in a day or two, Crooks,' she told the ginger tomcat. He blinked his yellow eyes at her once and flicked his tail to indicate his understanding, as well as his displeasure. 'Remind Harry, if he forgets to feed you,' she added, knowing her best friend's forgetful ways. Crookshanks turned in a circle upon her pillow and lay down with his back to her. Hermione laughed softly and stroked his head in farewell.

With a non-verbal '*Locomotor* trunk,' Hermione moved down the stairs to find Harry and Ginny waiting for her in the hall. Ginny held a cage containing a snowy owl which Hermione first took for Hedwig, though when she drew level to her friends, she could see that this owl was smaller than Hedwig. Harry had a small black leather case in his hands.

'I'm ready to go,' she said unnecessarily, trying to seem upbeat.

Ginny smiled at her. 'This is my wedding gift for you and Professor Snape,' she said, extending the birdcage. 'His name is Snowe. This way we can stay in touch every day.'

Hermione felt a lump form in her throat as she took the cage and used the other arm to embrace Ginny. 'Thank you!' she whispered into the red hair. Ginny had offered to come with her to set the house to rights, but she had been honour bound to turn her down. Severus had asked her not to invite guests to his house to *their* house until he came home.

When she released Ginny and placed the birdcage on top of her trunk, Harry showed her the rectangular black case with a clip on it. 'This is my gift to *you*. It's a fully

charged mobile phone. I have one, too.' He showed her the case now clipped to his belt. 'It's faster than the owl, if you need me right away. My number is already programmed in on speed dial.'

Hermione hugged him for rather longer than she might have done in less emotional circumstances. When she released him, she clipped the phone to her jeans.

'We want to hear from you every day, mind!' Ginny said as they helped her out to the back garden with her luggage. 'At least until we're sure you're settling in all right.'

Hermione held onto her trunk and Snowe's cage. 'I'll send word,' she promised. 'Bye!'

And concentrating carefully on her destination, Hermione Disapparated.

Severus stood before the full-length mirror in Minerva's spacious dressing room and surveyed his reflection for the first time in two years. Although he had expected his appearance to be bad, he had not expected it to be quite *this* alarming.

He had never been so thin; the delineation of his skeleton through his pale skin was slightly shocking. He realised that the unkempt hair and beard could be dealt with quite easily; he had his wand again. Remembering his wand cheered him immediately. Anxiously, he glanced to where he had perched it on the corner of the dressing table – ah, it was still there. He stood straighter and returned his gaze to his reflection. After all, he had never been a beauty, and Miss Gr *Hermione* would not be expecting him to be handsome. If he could not bring off good-looking, he could certainly manage dignified – perhaps even elegant.

Taking the shaft of rowan wood and feeling it as an extension of his left arm, he began to cut the tangled mass of black hair hanging down his back, feeling a grim satisfaction as the clumps of hair fell to the carpet. When his hair brushed his shoulders, he desisted. It was long enough to be tied back from his face – and long enough, when left loose, to swing forward and cover his expression when he so desired. He had been using it thus all his life. That sorted, he undertook the arduous task of removing two years' growth of beard from his face. When the skin of his cheeks and chin was smooth and hair-free, he felt quite tired.

'Professor, sir?'

Severus looked away from the mirror and saw a house-elf standing in the doorway, his tennis-ball sized eyes averted.

'Your bath is ready, Professor,' the elf continued in his high-pitched voice, careful not to look at the naked wizard. 'Can Dobby bring you anything else now?'

'You may clear away this mess,' Severus said, indicating the heap of ebony hair upon the floor. 'That will be all for now. I shall call if I need you again.'

Dobby scuttled forward, keeping his eyes on the hair to be Vanished. Severus picked up his wand and moved into the near-decadence of Minerva's pink marble bathroom. The sunken tub with its many foam-producing faucets steamed with hot water. He slipped into it, suppressing a groan of sheer pleasure at the sensation of warmth as the water rose to his chin. It had been over two years since he had last had the leisure to soak in a bathtub.

Closing his eyes, he considered his immediate plans. He meant to eat, read, and rest for the next few days. He had needed to replenish his wardrobe, but had not cared to venture into either wizarding or Muggle London to shop. The week before, Minerva had accepted the written list he had given her and had assured him that the items he had requested were now in the cupboard in the spare room. The midnight blue dressing gown with which she had presented him before shoohing him into the bathroom had been a tad large on his diminished frame, but he felt confident he could fill it out again, in time.

As he relaxed, he found himself thinking of visiting the premises of Security Solutions for the first time. He had planned the business for years as he bided his time and dreamt of the time when he would serve no master but himself. The horrific necessity of killing Albus Dumbledore had altered his plans somewhat ...

As always, the memory of the death of his friend and mentor at his own hand brought in its wake a flood of grief and remorse. His usual method of dealing with excessive emotion was ruthless repression, but in his fragile state on this day of regaining his wand, leaving prison, and binding himself for life to a former student, he found the necessary discipline to be beyond his abilities.

When he had added a bit of salt water to the warm depths in which he lay, he felt better, knowing that Dumbledore would be pleased with the success he and Minerva had made of Security Solutions. His discovery that the old man had left him a sizable amount of gold, held in trust for him by Minerva, had encouraged him to proceed with his plans in spite of his own uncertain future.

'He wanted you to have the gold, Severus,' Minerva had told him the day four years before, when she had shown him Dumbledore's will. 'He left it in trust so that the Ministry could not take it from you, in the event that they found you guilty of his murder.'

Severus had broached the idea of the business to Minerva, and they had planned it together, agreeing to involve Alastor Moody, as well. Severus had been the silent partner whose participation was not commonly known, but whose ingenuity had provided the hallmark of innovative solutions which had made the business a success in a very short time. The problem of corporate and industrial security in the twenty-first century was a thorny one, for both Muggle *and* magical clients.

Of course, the use of field agents, whose job it was to infiltrate businesses and leave evidence of their intrusions, had been rather helpful in drumming up business, as well.

With a loud *crack*, Dobby appeared near the edge of the tub with a crystal snifter of cognac in his bony fingers. 'Mistress said Dobby was to bring this to you in the tub, Professor, sir,' the house-elf said nervously, extending the glass in Severus' general direction, his eyes tightly shut. 'Mistress told Dobby that today is sir's wedding day, and that all men need a stiff drink when they get married.'

Severus sat up and took the snifter, his sensitive nose already informing him that this was from Dumbledore's stock of De Fussygnay Tres Vieille. 'Mistress never spoke a truer word,' he rumbled. 'Now, get out.'

The house-elf promptly disappeared.

Severus settled back again and took a sip of the wine, savouring it with near-orgasmic pleasure.

Married. Dear Merlin. Trust Minerva a ruin a perfectly relaxing bath with unpleasantness.

Hermione cast a Disillusionment Charm on her trunk and on Snowe's cage before leaving them in the small, overgrown back garden and slipping out the gate and around to the front door of number eleven, Spinner's End. She placed the house key in the door and turned the lock, then surreptitiously took her wand in hand and said, 'Piaculum.'

The door to the house creaked open and she slipped inside.

She stood in a small, stuffy sitting room, with tatty old furniture and walls of books.

'Hello?' a voice called.

Hermione brought her wand up and froze in place, listening. The voice had come from inside the house, but she could see no one. Stealthily she crept forward, past the sitting area with the sofa, coffee table, and armchairs, and the room opened up slightly to the right. Keeping close to the wall, Hermione peeked around the corner of the ell-shaped room into a book-lined alcove holding two additional armchairs at the end, with the opposite wall containing the portrait of a heavy-browed woman beside the open doorway to the kitchen beyond.

'Who are you?'

Hermione flinched, and her heart leapt into her throat, racing with alarm. The voice had come from almost right beside her. Her wand at the ready, she made a slow circle, but the room was empty; she was the only one present.

'For Merlin's sake, girl, can you not look at me when I speak to you?'

The portrait the woman in the portrait was talking to her.

'I'm sorry,' Hermione said with some asperity, sheathing her wand, 'but I didn't realise you were the one speaking.' She turned her full attention now to the painting. The woman had lustrous black hair, coiled into a bun at the back of her head, and large, dark eyes above her thin-lipped, unsmiling mouth.

'Well?' the portrait demanded unpleasantly.

'Good afternoon, Mrs Snape,' Hermione said as politely as she could, wondering why Severus had neglected to mention the presence of his mother. 'My name is Hermione.'

'Is that supposed to mean something to me?' Eileen Snape demanded waspishly. 'What are you doing in my house? Where is my son?'

'I am your son's wife,' Hermione told the scowling portrait. 'This is *my* house, now. Your son has been in prison, but he will be here in a few days.'

Her duty to the old woman's portrait now complete, Hermione moved into the cramped kitchen, which contained Muggle appliances dating back fifty years, if her estimate was correct. On the right was the single sink with counters to either side and open cupboards above; on the left was the stove and the refrigerator. At the far end of the room, a small dining table and four chairs were pushed to one side; on the far wall was the door out to the back garden. Above the dining table was a pastoral painting of cows grazing in a wildflower-filled meadow.

Hermione flinched when one of the cows began to rail at her.

'How dare you walk away when I'm speaking to you, girl?'

Wrenching her neck to the right, she saw Severus' mother standing behind one of the cows with her hands on her bony hips.

'I'm here to clean the house and to prepare for Severus to come home from prison,' she explained patiently. 'I need to look at the rooms and to see what needs to be done.'

The sound of an owl hooting reminded her that Snowe and her trunk were still in the garden.

'I'm coming, Snowe,' she called, disengaging the lock on the back door and going down the steps into the garden. The trunk and birdcage were where she had left them, but her new owl was looking rather disgruntled. 'Let's go inside and find a place for your cage,' she said, gathering her things and heading back to the steps.

As she reached for the doorknob, she heard the unmistakeable sound of the lock turning. To be sure, she turned the knob, but the door would not open; somehow, it had locked again.

'How strange,' she murmured, taking out her wand and saying, *Alohomora!* but the door remained locked. Grumbling to herself, she took up the birdcage and dragged the trunk around to the front of the house. The front door was locked again, as well. Thankful that she had put the key back in her pocket rather than laying it down in the house, she dug it out and unlocked the door, but it did not budge. 'Piaculum!' she said with great annoyance, and the door opened. Irritated, she lugged the trunk inside, set the birdcage on top of it, and closed the door.

'Back so soon?' a sly voice taunted from across the room.

'I didn't leave I just went out to bring in my luggage but the doors locked,' she said, wondering why she was explaining herself to a portrait.

'Oh, self-locking doors,' Mrs Snape said snidely. 'Why didn't I think of that?'

Ignoring her mother-in-law's portrait, Hermione called out, 'Winky! I'm ready to get started!'

The diminutive house-elf in a tartan tea towel Apparated into the room. 'Winky is here, Mistress Prince,' she squeaked, bowing low.

'*Her* name isn't *Prince*,' the portrait said obnoxiously. 'I don't know what the little upstart has told you, elf, but she is *not* a pure-blood. *She* can have no authority over you.'

Hermione turned angrily to the portrait of the sour old woman. 'Don't call her "elf," as if she has no name! Her name is Winky. And we'll skip the talk about bloodlines, Mrs Snape.'

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Hermione addressed Winky. 'I haven't been upstairs yet, so I'll do that next. I think you can begin by taking down the dishes from those open cupboards in the kitchen. Wash the dishes and clean the cupboard shelves, all right?'

'Yes, Hermione Prince,' the house-elf said and trotted into the kitchen.

Hermione picked up Snowe's cage and inspected the bookshelf covered wall behind the sofa, looking for the book entitled, *Rome: Gateway to the Antiquities*. Just as Professor McGonagall had told her, she found the large green tome right next to *Hogwarts: A History*. She grasped the spine of the green book and a portion of the wall swung inward, revealing a set of stairs. Hermione climbed to the first floor.

The first door to the right led into a small room dominated by a handsome rolltop desk. To the right, shoved into a corner, was a camp bed with a cardboard box poking out from beneath it. On the wall above the desk was a family portrait which must have been painted when Severus was a small child certainly before he was old enough for Hogwarts. Child Severus slouched sullenly next to his mother, who stood behind his seated father. Tobias Snape was the only unchanging figure in the painting; as a Muggle, he had been unable to infuse the portrait with a touch of his personality. Austerely handsome despite his hooked nose, the dark-haired man gazed aloofly out of the frame. The younger Eileen, decidedly homely, hovered solicitously over her much better-looking husband, ignoring the glowering child.

'It is not nice to stare,' the portrait Severus stated with precise diction.

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but a shriek from downstairs sent her flying back down the staircase and sprinting into the kitchen, where she found Winky cradling her hand, with tears in her huge brown eyes.

'What happened?' Hermione cried, kneeling beside the distraught house-elf.

'Winky is cleaning the shelves, just as Hermione Prince asks, and that wicked picture-witch burned Winky!'

'Wait here, Winky,' Hermione said, storming out to the sitting room and opening her trunk, rifling through it and pulling out a pouch of basic first aid supplies.

'Perhaps *now* the elf will know who the witch of the house is,' the smug portrait gloated.

Hermione snatched the burn-healing paste and a roll of gauze from her kit and stalked past the portrait without a glance, muttering, 'No, she only knows who the ~~witch~~ of the

house is.'

Eileen Snape's outraged squawk did not deter Hermione; she continued into the kitchen and knelt by Winky again, casting a general healing spell before spreading the paste and gently binding the elf's hand in the gauze. 'Would you like to go back to Professor McGonagall's house, Winky? Your hand must really hurt.'

'Winky is not going back to her mistress!' Winky exclaimed, scandalised. 'Winky is here to help prepare the house for the Dark Professor Winky will work!'

Putting word to action, the little elf promptly Levitated herself onto the counter top, but Hermione placed a hand on her arm before she touched the cupboard frame again. 'Not yet, Winky maybe you could go upstairs and clean the bathroom for me? It's up the stairs and at the end of the hall, I believe.'

Winky pattered willingly through the sitting room and up the stairs, with Hermione in her wake.

'Don't you walk past me, girl!' Mrs Snape's portrait screeched, but Hermione ignored her.

In the study, Hermione sat down at the rolltop desk and settled the birdcage on a nearby bookshelf. 'We'll just send a letter to your master,' she said to Snowe, pulling out a piece of parchment and a quill. 'I will not be bested by a portrait.'

Her missive written, Hermione opened the bird cage, allowing Snowe to step out. 'Aren't you a beautiful owl?' she said caressingly, stroking the feathered head. 'I've never had an owl before, you know. I'm very happy you've come to live with me.' Snowe hooted softly and offered his leg for the letter to be affixed. 'This is for Severus Prince, at Professor McGonagall's flat in Earl's Court Road, Kensington, all right?'

Snowe stepped readily onto her forearm and she took him downstairs, opening a sitting room window and allowing him to take flight into the cloudless blue sky.

'Don't ignore me!' Mrs Snape's portrait screeched when she walked past again and tugged a book at random from the shelf, flopping into an armchair and opening to the first page. 'I'll drive you out of here!'

'We'll just see about that,' Hermione said, without looking up. 'I've sent an owl to my husband.'

And she buried her nose in the book, easily tuning out her mother-in-law's voice.

Fresh from his bath, Severus leant back in his chair at the dining table, replete from a luncheon of good English roast beef with Yorkshire pudding. The digestive potion Minerva had forced upon him before he ate had actually been quite beneficial; the abrupt change in diet from prison-fare to plenty had not upset his stomach. He took another sip of the fine burgundy he had been served with the meal and smirked at her.

'Keep feeding me in this manner and I will need to obtain the name of Horace Slughorn's tailor.'

'If you keep eating like this, we'll have you back on form in no time.' Minerva surveyed him critically. 'Why did you shave the entire beard? I thought you meant to keep it to alter your appearance.'

Severus shrugged. 'Miss Gra Hermione requested that I shave the beard. It seemed a small enough concession to make.'

Dobby appeared in the doorway, a snowy owl perched rather precariously on his scrawny forearm. 'Excuse me, Mistress, but there is a letter for Severus Prince.'

Minerva looked surprised. 'Isn't that Harry's owl?'

Severus signalled Dobby to approach, and the owl stepped off the house-elf's arm onto the tablecloth, extending its leg.

'It's from Mi my wife.' He covered quickly, catching himself. When would he become accustomed to calling the girl by her given name? He unrolled the parchment and began to read it. 'No, it's not Potter's owl it's mine.' He looked up from the parchment at the owl. 'His name is Snowe.'

The owl hooted and clicked his beak.

'Yes, you may drink from the water glass and have the rest of my beef.' The owl thankfully dipped his beak into the water goblet, and Severus began to read again.

Seconds later, he shouted, 'Dobby!'

Dobby dashed back into the room, quickly enough that he sent a small area rug skittering behind him.

'S-sir?' Dobby inquired.

'Fetch me parchment and quill,' he commanded, his brow thunderous.

'What is it, Severus?' Minerva inquired, somewhat alarmed by his dark look.

'*My mother*,' he snarled.

'Oh,' Minerva said, sitting back again, satisfied. That answered everything, really. She had heard rather often about Severus' difficulties with his mother's portrait.

Severus wrote a reply with much swearing under his breath, the quill scratching quickly across the parchment. Without pause, he completed the letter, folded it and tapped it with his wand, muttering an incantation. Instantly, the piece of parchment was encased in a red envelope which smoked slightly.

'Severus!' Minerva said, shock and amusement warring in her voice. 'To your *mother*?'

'She has already locked Hermione out of the house and burned your house-elf,' he informed her, turning his attention to Snowe. 'Please deliver this to Hermione Prince in Spinner's End, Hackney,' he told the owl. 'She'll see to it that the message arrives at its destination.'

With surprising gentleness, Severus smoothed Snowe's head before attaching the envelope to the owl's leg and sending him on his way. He glared at Minerva, knowing she had seen the uncharacteristic action, but she simply returned his look. Severus then glared at his plate, his fingers drumming on the tabletop.

'Come,' Minerva said, standing. 'Let me show you where you will be sleeping and where I have put your clothes. You can look through them and see what else you might need before you go to Spinner's End.'

Minerva led the way into the nicely appointed spare room. The chamber held a burnished cherry wood sleigh bed, a matching dresser, a table and armchair, and a wardrobe. Severus noted that the room was bare of personal items, save for an elegantly framed wizarding photograph reposing on the dresser. When Hermione, in her full bridal regalia, waved to him from the frame, he shot Minerva a suspicious look.

'Isn't that a lovely likeness?' she said fondly. 'Ginevra Weasley sent that along whilst you were in the bath.'

Severus sneered. 'Miss Weasley has been very busy.'

Minerva did not respond but opened the wardrobe doors, revealing hangers full of numerous sets of robes, dress shirts, trousers, and a black wool suit. Severus stalked

forward, his worst fears realised. Snatching a shirt from the rail, he thrust it at her.

'What is this, Minerva?'

'Blue, Severus. That colour is called *blue*.'

He threw it on the bed and pulled out a forest green shirt and a pair of grey trousers and shook them. 'I do not wear these colours!'

Minerva narrowed her eyes at him. 'You told me that you wish to alter your appearance. How do you expect to do that if you dress as you have always done?' The indignant older woman retrieved the maligned blue shirt from the bed and hung it again with the others. 'Your wardrobe was as much a part of your Potions master persona as your obvious dislike of any student from a House other than your own. If you wish not be identified from a quarter-mile away as Severus Snape, you must change the way you dress!'

His lips pressed in a terse line, Severus replaced the garments. She was right, of course. He was simply unaccustomed to wearing anything other than black, white, and Slytherin green and that only on special occasions.

Stepping back from the wardrobe, he closed the doors. 'I believe I will rest for a while,' he said quietly.

He waited until the door closed behind Minerva before he took the silver picture frame in his hand and sat down in the armchair. The picture had been taken on the staircase in Grimmauld Place; he recognized the banister. Hermione was smiling. Barefoot, clothed in white, with the wreath of wildflowers in her unruly mane of hair, she looked like a dryad maid a wood nymph.

... a wood nymph with an intriguing golden chain upon her slender ankle.

Replete with good food and wine, Severus drifted to sleep upright in the squishy armchair with the picture of Hermione clasped in his hand.

Snowe flew through the window and alit upon the arm of Hermione's chair.

'That was quick!' Hermione eyed the letter warily. It was red and smoking. Detaching it from the bird, she read the name on the envelope and stood to face the portrait of Eileen Prince Snape.

'Ah hah!' the old woman said. 'Look at that! Now you'll get sorted.'

Hermione smiled sweetly at the portrait. 'Yes we'll get this all sorted out, now. I'll just leave you alone to read your mail.'

As Hermione let go of the envelope and walked into the kitchen, the Howler burst into flames, and the voice of Severus, magnified several times its angry-classroom volume, filled the small house.

Hermione leant her hip against the kitchen counter, her arms crossed over her chest, and smiled. The old bat was getting only exactly what she deserved and even better, Severus had passed the first critical test of a newlywed.

He had sided with his wife against his mother.

Chapter 7: Only An Owl Away

Chapter 7 of 11

Hermione settles in at Spinner's End, Severus makes a job of becoming more fit, and the newlyweds continue to become acquainted by the exchange of owls. Soon, the long-delayed wedding night is upon them.

Chapter 7

Only an Owl Away

Hermione waved her wand and lit the candle-filled lamp hanging from the ceiling. Night had fallen and the windows of the sitting room were open, letting in the soft evening air. Winky had Apparated to Professor McGonagall's home with instructions to return in the morning. Although Winky had reported that she had made the bed with clean sheets, Hermione was strangely loathe to climb the stairs to her husband's bedroom and to sleep in his bed. It felt invasive to her and wrong, somehow. It was a line that she found she was not ready to cross.

Fresh from her bath, comfortable in her oversized tee-shirt and pyjama bottoms, she browsed the bookshelves of her new home, at last choosing a volume of Machiavelli and stretching out on the sofa to read it. From within, soft snores issued from Mrs Snape's portrait, indicating that she was sleeping. From the park around the corner, the sound of cricket song came to her ears. She felt oddly at peace, in spite of the fact that she had, that morning, married a man she scarcely knew.

Hermione's eyes had become heavy before Snowe flew into the room, lighting upon the back of the sofa and hooting.

'Hullo, Snowe,' she said softly, stroking the bird. 'How was he?' She had sent a note earlier in the evening to let Severus know his Howler had accomplished its purpose; although Mrs Snape had not deigned to speak to Hermione again, she had stopped causing the house to resist Hermione's efforts at making all tidy.

Breaking the seal upon the parchment, Hermione read the note:

Hermione,

I am pleased to hear my mother's portrait has caused no further disruption or mayhem. I hope that you have been able to make the place habitable enough to enjoy a decent night's rest.

SXP

Hermione smiled to herself. The note, while not at all lover-like, was perfectly civil and possessed an additional virtue: it was entirely unnecessary, and therefore the

product, if not of *thoughtfulness*, then at least of courtesy.

Hermione sat up and Summoned a quill from her bag, which was still propped against her trunk on the sitting room floor. She wrote an answer and gave it to Snowe, then settled again with The Prince and read until she could keep her eyes open no longer.

Severus had dozed all afternoon, both surprising and disgusting himself he had never been the type to drowse an afternoon away! Minerva had told him that he would have to rebuild his strength after his confined existence of the last two years. Although he had outwardly scoffed at her notion, he was forced to acknowledge that she had been correct. She had gone so far as to suggest that he be checked over by a Healer upon his release, but he had flatly refused.

'Even after all those years of enjoying the particular attentions of the Dark Lord, I never required the ministrations of anyone but Poppy Pomfrey,' he had snarled at her. 'As she has now retired, I'll be damned if I will become a hypochondriac at this late date!'

They enjoyed a dinner of roast chicken and a table full of starchy foods which Minerva had insisted he eat to build his strength. It had been no hardship; the food was excellent. They had taken their after-dinner coffee into the lounge and were sitting companionably when the doorbell rang.

'I'll get it, Dobby,' Minerva called, crossing the room and moving into the hallway.

Severus sat forward to add a touch more whisky to his coffee cup, hearing a susurrant of voices approaching the room. Dear God, was he to be called upon to endure visitors upon his first night out?

He was not left to wonder for long; Minerva entered the room looking immensely pleased with herself, a familiar figure in her wake.

'Poppy!' Severus said.

The former school matron crossed the floor and pulled him to his feet, embracing him. 'I am so *glad* to see you free,' she said into his chest, her usually gruff voice further roughened by unshed tears.

Severus awkwardly patted Poppy's back once or twice, glaring at Minerva over the head pressed to his shirt front, torn between annoyance and dismay.

At last Poppy released him and stood back, studying him. Out of the matron's uniform he had seen her wear for his entire acquaintance with her, she looked strange to him. Instead, she wore simple summer robes of mauve with a matching hat upon her head.

She, in turn, was looking him up and down with professional interest. Swallowing his equivocity regarding his new wardrobe, he had dressed for dinner in a forest green dress shirt and charcoal grey trousers, his hair bound in a queue. After two years of wearing it tied back by necessity, he now found it annoying to have his hair hanging in his face.

'Stringy and peaked, but food and some exercise in the fresh air will mend that,' Poppy said. 'Business or pleasure, first?'

'Sit down, Poppy,' Minerva said quickly, coming forward with a cup. 'Have some coffee.'

Severus' eyes narrowed as he watched the women, wondering what business he had with Poppy Pomfrey, but he followed their lead, sitting and taking up his cup again. The women began to chat about Poppy's cottage in Hogsmeade and the news each had of other former colleagues. Severus drank his coffee and relaxed, this scene so reminiscent of evenings in the staffroom at Hogwarts that he felt somewhat comforted. Free once more, he enjoyed the luxury of the first coffee and whisky he had tasted in two years. Let the women chatter; he would sip and savour.

Half-an-hour later, Dobby slipped into the room, bearing Snowe upon his arm again. Minerva smiled when she saw him, commenting to Poppy, 'Look! Hermione has sent Severus another note. They have been corresponding all day.'

Severus snorted at this; Minerva made it sound as if he had been exchanging billets-doux with Miss Gra ~~with~~*Hermione* as if that was a remote possibility! Dismissing Dobby, he took custody of the owl. Wondering what the girl wanted now, he opened her note.

Severus,

I am curled up with a book from your shelves, about to go to sleep so, yes, I am fine.

I am curious, though why have you taken the name of Prince?

Wishing you a night of peaceful repose,

Hermione

Tucking the note into his shirt pocket, Severus offered his forearm to Snowe and stood with the bird perched there. 'You will excuse me, please?' he said to the witches, then exited the room, bearing Snowe to the kitchen and its open window.

'Come back for my reply early in the morning,' he murmured to the owl, stroking the sleek feathers. 'She's tired now, and she will worry about you if you do not return.'

Snowe hooted and took off; Severus stood at the window, gazing out at the night before going back into the hallway, meaning to slip away to his room for the night.

'There you are!' Poppy said, obviously waiting for him. She had her wand in hand, a purposeful look upon her face. 'Come along to your room now so I can examine you unless you'd prefer we do it in the lounge?'

Severus briefly considered refusing, but his memories of previous refusals to cooperate with the matron and the results ~~othose~~ encounters suggested this would be an exercise in futility. Wordlessly, he led the way to his bedroom, glaring daggers at Minerva when she dared to fall into step behind Poppy.

An hour later, standing before the mirror in his room, Severus contemplated his reflection. Poppy had pronounced him fit, if underweight and weakened. Then she and Minerva had broached another subject with him one he had endured from Poppy more than once in their long association. Before, his refusal of her skill had always come from pride first, in his youth, wishing to pretend that it was his choice to remain as he was; later, as a teacher and Head of House, he had refused because to make such an obvious change would have exposed him to the derision of his students.

Tonight, the blasted women had worn him down.

'You're a married man, now, Severus it's time to consider what will please your wife instead of yourself,' Minerva had said.

'This ought to have been done long since, young man, and you know it!' Poppy had scolded. 'Now, hush and open your mouth, like a good boy.'

The process had been time-consuming and not entirely painless, but Poppy had left him with a decently-brewed potion for his discomfort and a rare kiss upon his cheek.

Without looking away from his reflection, Severus popped the cork from the phial and bared his newly-straightened, much less yellow teeth. He looked ... better. Much

better.

People who knew him would laugh.

Minerva insisted Hermione would be pleased.

His enemies would openly mock him.

Hermione would be pleased.

Potter and Weasley would snigger behind his back.

It altered his appearance dramatically one of his stated objectives.

He would be an object of ridicule.

Hermione would be pleased.

Turning his back on the mirror, Severus downed the potion and threw himself upon the bed, taking up the silver-framed photograph of his bride from the bedside table. The picture-Hermione gave him a happy smile and a tentative wave. As weariness overcame him, he studied her, his eyes lingering upon the saucy anklet what sort of young witch wore such an adornment? What did it tell him about her? And did she wear it in the bath? Thus engaged, his exhausted body dragged his mind into the Lethe of sleep.

Hermione woke when something skimmed across her face. Raising her hand, she brushed it away, only to feel the object slide over her cheek. She opened her eyes and saw Snowe upon the back of the sofa, watching her with his bright yellow eyes. Hermione sat up, wincing at the slight pain in her neck from sleeping with her head upon the sofa arm and saw a sealed piece of parchment float to the floor.

Bending, she retrieved the letter. 'You've been busy early this morning,' she said to the owl. He clicked his beak and fluttered his wings. Hermione smiled and went to fill his tray with water, murmuring, 'I believe there are loads of mice in the garden.'

Pattering into the kitchen, past the silent, glaring portrait of Eileen Snape, Hermione quickly made a pot of tea and a slice of toast, then sat down with her new letter from Severus.

Hermione,

Because my name is, unfortunately, rather well-known in the wizarding community, I had it legally changed at the time of my incarceration. It was done privately and is not common knowledge. I apologise for not telling you of it before the marriage ceremony.

Winky will bring with her some gold when she comes to you today; please use it in any way you wish, and notify me if you require more.

SXP

Hermione Summoned a quill and parchment and made a list of things to do as she had her tea and toast. It surprised her that her new husband had answered her question. Briefly, she wondered if he would continue to reply to queries she sent through owl post.

The morning passed quickly as Hermione and Winky worked to clean the kitchen from the floor to the fitted wood mouldings about the juncture of the walls and ceiling. Hermione caught Eileen Snape lurking amongst the cows in the pasture a time or two, but she did not speak, so Hermione ignored her. After a lunch of goodies sent via Winky from Professor McGonagall's kitchen, Winky was sent to bring order and cleanliness to the upstairs study; Hermione's next project was the sitting room bookshelves. Before she began pulling books from the shelves, she wrote a quick note to Severus and sent Snowe winging back to Kensington; then she began the pleasant task of becoming acquainted with her husband's library.

Severus slipped back into Minerva's flat, feeling enervated. A 'nice brisk walk in the fresh air' had been Minerva's suggestion of a way to spend the morning, and he was surprised by how much it had tired him. On the positive side, his progress through the streets of Minerva's neighbourhood had not brought any particular attention to him from other pedestrians. Dressed in Muggle jeans and a slate blue Oxford cloth shirt, he had passed amongst the Muggles as if he belonged there. He revelled in the freedom, but he now needed to rest.

Minerva came to the doorway of the lounge as he went by.

'Your owl brought another letter for you,' she told him.

Severus went into the kitchen, where Snowe drowsed upon the windowsill in the warmth of the summer sunlight. The owl stirred upon his entrance and offered the parchment, which Severus exchanged for an owl treat. 'I'll have an answer for you later,' he murmured, bearing the letter off to his room.

Collapsing into his armchair, he broke the seal and read Hermione's note.

Severus,

Thank you for explaining about the name change. You also mentioned that you have a job, but I don't know what it is. Are you teaching? Or working somehow in potions?

Thank you for the gold. I'm sure it will be sufficient until I see you again.

~Hermione

Severus smirked and allowed the parchment to fall to his lap. Leaning his head to one side, he picked up the silver-framed photograph, but picture Hermione had wandered off.

'The only thing different between now and then is that you do not wave your hand incessantly before peppering me with questions,' he informed the empty staircase in the photograph.

*Oh, and you're also married to her now,*his over-helpful brain reminded him.

'Sod off,' he muttered, his eyes closing for another nap in the soft armchair; he was unaware when Hermione came back into the picture and seated herself upon the steps, watching him sleep.

The heat of the summer afternoon was making the chore of pulling the dusty books down, cleaning the shelves, and wiping each book individually before replacing it an onerous one. Hermione reflected again that it was a good thing the summer term at uni had ended the previous week, for getting this house properly cleaned and sorted was going to be a time-consuming task.

Sagging to sit upon the floor, she cast a cooling charm upon herself before beginning to remove the books from the bottom shelf. These appeared to be centred in the life sciences. Hermione noted that one of them was an old Muggle book with colour photographs of unborn babies in progressive stages of development within their mothers' wombs. With a pang, she put the book aside and continued to empty the shelf.

The last volume was a thick organic chemistry textbook. As she lifted it, she noted that the book *felt* differently than it *looked*. Taking up her wand, she murmured, '*Finite Incantatem!*' With the charm lifted, the book was revealed as a Muggle-style picture album, with metal rings holding the cardboard-stiff pages, covered on both sides by plastic film which could be lifted to insert and remove pictures.

Intrigued, Hermione glanced over her shoulder, but the portrait of Eileen Snape was empty; she must have gone up to the family portrait to devil poor Winky. Leaning against the back of the sofa, Hermione opened the album, wondering what sorts of photographs needed to be charmed to resemble a chemistry textbook.

The first two pages were empty, but the third contained an illustration that looked as if it might have been drawn for a Muggle fantasy story. It portrayed some sort of water sprite, a creature resembling a human woman. She was walking from the water onto the shore and the water was falling from her body as she walked. Her long auburn hair hung nearly to her waist and was plastered to her body by the water streaming from her simple white robes. The sodden robes clung to the water nymph's body; the darkness of her nipples and pubic hair was visible in the drawing. She held her hands out as if to grasp the hands of the one waiting upon the shore. Hermione found the picture strangely erotic.

The next page appeared to be an illustration drawn for a graphic novel. It was a roomful of girls in various stages of undress. The room itself had at its centre a pool. Some of the girls lounged about the pool, but others were within, bathing. All were beautiful, with their long, flowing hair and voluptuous bodies. The caption at the bottom of the drawing said, *The Bathing Room at Castle Anthrax*. The name of the place sounded familiar to her, but she could not place it.

The third page surprised her. Gone was the fantasy drawing; here was a wizarding photograph of a woman in an old-fashioned claw-footed bathtub. The woman reclined in the bubble bath, her long dark hair spilling over the back of the tub and hanging down to the floor. Her eyes were closed and the finger of one hand rested between her lips. The other arm was immersed in the water, though it appeared to be moving, for the water seemed to ripple with mild agitation. In the next moment, the woman moved her fingers from her lips to her breasts, and Hermione's mouth fell open as the woman began to pinch her own nipples, moving her hand from breast to breast. She opened her dark eyes and turned her face to Hermione, her eyes fogged with pleasure, and her knees came up out of the bubbles, splaying to either side of the tub, the hand beneath the water beginning to work there more vigorously. Very soon she seemed to arch a bit out of the water, her pretty mouth in an 'Oh!' of pleasure. Sated, she turned a lazy smile upon Hermione and then appeared to drift to sleep.

Feeling as if she were spying, but unable to resist the temptation, Hermione continued to go through Severus' collection of erotic pictures.

Later, Hermione closed the book and picked up her wand, replacing the charm with which it had been disguised. She was not shocked; she was, after all, a Muggle-born witch living in the twenty-first century. She knew very well that most men kept such items nearby but in spite of the fact that she had, with single-minded determination, pursued a marriage to Severus Prince, she still had not yet managed to picture him in a sexual situation with *her*. Here, however, was incontrovertible proof of his existence as a sexual being.

Her mind buzzing with the discovery of her husband's secret stash, Hermione returned to her task. She was wiping down the last of the shelves and had made mental note of many books she wished to read, when Snowe flew into the room.

'You were gone a long time,' she commented, accepting the new note from Severus. The owl fluttered to his cage for water as she broke the seal and began to read.

Hermione,

My job is not teaching, nor do I have a job connected with potions making. I am a silent partner in a business venture which is succeeding quite well.

I hope this note finds you well, also.

SXP

Hermione pursed her lips. That was a rather evasive kind of answer, wasn't it? Shrugging off her mild annoyance, she finished reshelving the books before rising and going to take up her list and her quill again. Marking the bookshelves as sorted, she sat down and composed a quick note to Harry to let him know she was well, and then she sent Snowe off to Grimmauld Place.

On the third day, Hermione and Winky completed the tidying of the house. Winky reported the bedroom as clean and organised, at least; Hermione had yet to cross the threshold of Severus' bedroom. After her discovery of what she had begun to think of as his water-pictures, she felt even more uncomfortable about the notion of nosing around in there.

After lunch, Hermione said, 'I would like to see if something can be done to shape up the back garden, Winky. Would you be willing to assist with that, as well?'

Assured that Winky could think of no greater joy than weeding the overgrown flower beds, Hermione led the way into the small jungle-like area. Clearly, the flower beds around the fence line had been carefully planned and planted by someone who cared for flowers. A second patch had been dug and planted in an area against the back of the house. Hermione was not surprised to find a garden of commonly-used potions ingredients was planted there. Setting Winky to work at bringing order amongst the rose and hydrangea bushes, Hermione happily toiled in the more practical herb patch, making an internal inventory of all the types of potions she could brew from them.

Severus came in from his afternoon walk, thinking that a whisky and a kip before dinner would be just the thing. Before going to the lounge, he detoured into the kitchen on the off-chance that Snowe would be awaiting him, and he was not disappointed.

'Took you long enough,' he grumbled at the bird, offering an owl treat in exchange for the note from Hermione. This he slipped into a pocket before strolling into the lounge and helping himself to a whisky from the drinks tray.

'You were gone a long time,' Minerva said, looking up from her book.

'I'm building up my stamina,' he replied testily. 'Isn't that what you keep harping on about?'

'Is that a note from Hermione?' Minerva inquired, staring at his shirt pocket.

Damn he hadn't tucked it away completely. 'Mind your own business, woman.'

The old woman did not speak again, but looked unbearably self-satisfied.

'I'll be in my room,' he said tersely, striding into the hallway.

'Yes, it's time for your nap,' the smug voice agreed as he left.

Nosy old witch.

Closing himself into his room, he opened the note and read.

Severus,

Winky and I have begun to tidy the back garden and I have found your herb patch. I am sure you must, therefore, have an area set up for brewing. Where is it? I would like to make all tidy whilst I have Winky to assist me.

I hope you are enjoying the nice weather.

~Hermione

'Hah!' he said aloud, addressing the girl in the silver picture frame. 'You haven't found the cellar entrance. Good.' He didn't know why this knowledge pleased him; he supposed it might be because it was rather unnerving to imagine anyone going through his home room-by-room. 'Serves you right,' he added darkly, taking a long swig of whisky and glaring at the picture.

Picture Hermione put her hands on her hips and glared back, causing him to gasp and inhale whisky. Cursing loudly, he took out his handkerchief and mopped himself up. Placing the photograph face down on the bedside table, he stretched out on the bed and stared up at the ceiling, trying to dislodge the notion of a pissed-off know-it-all wife from his mind.

Hermione was finishing up her dinner when Snowe returned with Severus' answer. Pushing her plate to one side, Hermione broke the seal and read.

Hermione,

The cellar door is located in the back passageway between the kitchen and the staircase, just behind the sitting room door. The password is 'Evans.'

The weather is quite fine. Do not overtire yourself bringing order to the house.

SXP

Hermione stared at the parchment. *Evans?* The password was *Evans*?

She sat for a long while staring at the candles upon the tabletop as they burned lower. She was not upset that would be silly. In ways, though, she felt as if the revelation of the cellar password had been the most personal act she had yet witnessed from her enigmatic husband, including their marriage vows and closed-mouth wedding kiss. It seemed as if Severus might have had more than one reason to loathe Harry's father so utterly.

Thoughtful, she chose a new book from the sitting room shelf and curled up on the sofa to read before sleeping.

Over the next few days, Hermione sufficiently tidied the front and back gardens and dispensed with Winky's assistance, turning her attentions indoors once more. She wandered from room to room, studying and thinking, making a list. She even forced herself to enter the bedroom she would soon share with Severus, making notes to herself as she went. A trip to Muggle shops and then Diagon Alley with the funds Severus had sent was quite enjoyable for her. For the first time in years, she was shopping and the gold had not been given to her by Harry. Surely when one's husband gave one gold to shop it was different than living upon the kindness of one's friend?

Apparating back to Spinner's End with her purchases, Hermione busied herself making a home of the house which had become hers by the act of marriage. With furniture polish rich with beeswax, she tended to the furnishings, rubbing until her arms ached and the seasoned wood shone with her efforts. Taking the brass fittings from the fireplaces in the sitting room and the bedroom, she cleaned and buffed the metal to a fine burnish. Using a trick of her mother's, she put old cotton socks on her hands and rubbed the newly-waxed hardwood flooring until it shone, as well.

Occupying herself in this way made her feel closer to her absent mother, who had managed to be an excellent dentist and an exemplary homemaker. After the limbo of living in Harry's home, on his charity, it filled Hermione with a deeply peaceful self-satisfaction to convert her living space into a home reminiscent of the one in which she had been raised.

She draped the old cloth of the sofa and matching armchairs in a corded dark blue fabric and laboured for hours over an upholstery spell until the ancient battered furniture looked as if it had been recovered by a professional. As the rooms became more her own, her spirits rose; Hermione loved taking the skills she had learnt and applying them to the previously neglected old terraced house. In the evenings, muscles sore from the work of loving the old house into submission, she wielded her wand and sewed cheerful cushions to add colourful accents to the carefully chosen, House-neutral palette she had selected to decorate her home.

Two or three times a day, Snowe flew between Earl's Court Road and Spinner's End, carrying messages between the newlyweds. There was nothing romantic in the content of these notes, yet the manner in which they wrote to one another became more relaxed as the days passed.

Severus attacked the job of becoming fit and strong again as a task to be accomplished as speedily and efficiently as possible. He ate three meals a day, as well as ingesting nourishment when he took tea with Minerva in the afternoons and the late evenings. By his fourth day out of Azkaban, he had increased his walks to two per day and felt he could safely say he was thoroughly bored with Kensington, its High Street, its Gardens, and Holland Park. He attempted to read for pleasure, but found it difficult to concentrate; his mind often wandered to Spinner's End, wondering what the girl was getting up to there, all alone. He also found himself spending increasing periods of time gazing at the photograph of Hermione and more frequently than he truly wished to admit, he addressed comments to the silver frame as if she actually resided there. As his strength began to return to him, other drives began to assert themselves as well, and he began to think that ratifying the marriage covenant might not be such a burdensome chore, after all.

On the morning of the fifth day, he was in the hallway when a knock came upon the door. Striding forward, he opened it.

'Severus!'

'Lupin,' Severus drawled, failing to notice the extended hand and stepping aside to allow the werewolf to enter. 'Was Minerva expecting you?'

'She asked me to come, yes,' Lupin replied, good humour evident in his face. 'You're growing bored with your walks, and she asked me to provide an alternative activity.'

Severus sneered. 'I'm sure that will not be necessary, Lupin.'

Lupin grinned. 'Grab a jacket you'll want one.'

Severus opened his mouth to deliver another refusal, but Minerva forestalled him, appearing at his side and thrusting a lightweight denim jacket into his hands. 'I'll see you back for luncheon, Severus. Now, shoo!'

With ill-grace, Severus allowed Lupin to Apparate them both and soon found himself standing upon a windy moor. Lupin released him and strode behind a nearby tree, returning with two broom sticks. Severus was prepared to utter a snide remark until he saw that one of the brooms Lupin held was his own Nimbus 2001, given to him by Lucius Malfoy the year the Slytherin Quidditch team had been supplied with them.

Lupin put the lovingly maintained broomstick into Severus' suddenly eager hands. 'Come on, Severus how long has it been since you've had time for flying, purely for pleasure?' Lupin mounted his Cleansweep Eleven, a boyish grin making him look young. 'I haven't been flying for fun since before Tonks got pregnant. Can you still outfly

me?’

Severus watched as Lupin kicked off, producing a red Quaffle from within his travelling cloak.

‘The Cannons’ practice pitch is directly over the rise fancy a bit of one-on-one?’ Lupin grinned and rocketed into the air, the Quaffle tucked correctly under his arm.

‘You could never play Chaser, Lupin,’ Severus snarled, mounting and kicking off, in hot pursuit.

The Lupin family shared breakfast with Minerva and Severus two days later, before the wizards departed for another game of one-on-one on the Chudley Cannons’ practice pitch. Severus surreptitiously watched Lupin and his wife as they interacted with one another and with their infant son. As Nymphadora laughed and leant up to place a kiss on her husband’s face, Severus felt as if lips had pressed spontaneously to his own cheek, and the skin there tingled for a moment. He had never been the recipient of that type of impulsive tenderness. In fact, he had usually found such displays disturbing, but Remus Lupin had no apparent qualms. What would it be like to have that type of easy, affectionate action bestowed upon one? What if he and Hermione ...

Alfie Lupin, transferred from the arms of his father to his mother, gurgled in babyish pleasure, and Severus was torn from his insane reverie. He and his anklet-wearing wood-nymph of a wife were entered into a marriage of convenience, wherein he received freedom in fair trade for financial security it was a sign of mental imbalance to imagine there was anything else on offer.

‘Finish your kippers and come along, Lupin,’ Severus drawled, standing and placing his napkin upon the damask table cloth. ‘Unless, of course, you thought you would prefer not to receive another thrashing on the Quidditch pitch?’ In truth, Severus had only just managed to score more goals than Lupin had done. He was abysmally out of practice for such antics, but the flying had been exhilarating; he was eager to be on his broom again.

Lupin took his leave of the witches and the two men Apparated again to the practice field. Severus was pleased to find that he had managed the Apparition without feeling weak afterwards. He was much stronger, both physically and magically, than he had been a week before.

After a match in which Severus managed to best Lupin by a score of six goals to two, the wizards sat upon benches on the empty pitch to catch their breath. Slanting a look at Lupin, Severus said, ‘So, you’ll be in Bristol tomorrow.’

Lupin looked at him in some surprise. ‘Yes, but I’m not sure why you know that.’

‘Because you are my field agent, Lupin. I am the founding partner of Security Solutions.’

Lupin gaped at him. ‘Minerva and Mad-Eye have kept that bit rather close, haven’t they?’

‘I saw no point in making it known whilst I was incarcerated. But, since you may stumble across me in the office next week, I thought I would break it to you now.’ Severus smirked.

‘Next week?’ Lupin frowned. ‘You’ll be on your honeymoon next week, surely? I understood you are going to Spinner’s End tomorrow.’

Severus ignored the comment and question. ‘I have heard rumours that the Bristol company you will be visiting has motion sensors. Be careful to use *Specialis revelio* before you enter the premises.’

Lupin nodded. ‘Yes, I will.’

Severus detected a troubled air about the werewolf, but he had no intention of discussing his marriage particularly not his honeymoon, or lack thereof with Remus Lupin. Standing and taking up his broom, he said, ‘Good. Shall we return?’

Lupin nodded and Severus turned on the spot and Disapparated.

Saturday morning, Snowe delivered a note by dropping it on Hermione’s face, bringing her out of a deep sleep. Struggling into a sitting position, Hermione saw Severus’ spidery handwriting on the envelope and smiled, feeling at the same time a flash of apprehension. The deadline to consummate the marriage and to ratify the Covenant was midnight on Sunday night; they had less than forty-eight hours left to make that happen.

Breaking the seal, she read the note.

Hermione,

I will be arriving this evening in time to dine with you. You need not send a reply; I will be out of pocket today and Snowe would have difficulty finding me.

I hope you are well.

SXP

Hermione stared down at the parchment in her hand. Today. Tonight.

Standing, she wandered through the kitchen and out the back door, seating herself on the steps and gazing unseeing at the profusion of colourful flowers. Severus was coming home, finally. A week after their wedding, and he was coming home. Her husband. A strange mixture of terror and exhilaration flowed through her body, and the small back garden echoed with the utterance, between a laugh and a scream, which came from her throat.

She had a thousand things to do!

Late that afternoon, Hermione made one last circuit of the downstairs. Inexpensive vases, full of fresh flowers from the garden, adorned table tops, and a special arrangement sat in the middle of the dining table. Everything gleamed and sparkled, dinner was cooking in the oven, and she was ready to bathe and dress.

Climbing the stairs, Hermione paused for a moment in the doorway of the bedroom, pleased to see that the newly-sewn cushions brightened the plain white bedspread, and that the vase of flowers on the dressing table reflected nicely in the mirror. She could not prevent herself from staring at the bed, trying to imagine being there with him, but her imagination failed her. She couldn’t begin to picture herself in such an intimate situation with Severus Prince, the husband whom she had never even embraced.

Moving on into the bathroom, she took a series of deep, steadying breaths to calm her nerves.

Severus stood again before the mirror in Minerva’s dressing room. Though his body was by no means completely recovered from two years of imprisonment, he no longer appeared quite so emaciated. Tonight, he would take his bride to bed and ratify the Covenant, sealing the two of them into a lifetime of fidelity. The idea of consummating the marriage was no longer alien to him. He had deliberately studied the girl in the photograph and had given himself permission to think carnal thoughts of her. Clearly now, he could envision himself rising above her, taking her, completing the charm which would keep him free of prison.

Then, he would step back and occupy himself with work. He would sleep in the study on the camp bed he had provided for Peter Pettigrew during the horrible summer the Dark Lord had forced Wormtail to remain at Spinner’s End to spy upon him.

A terrible thought assailed him. What if she had already claimed the study as her own? Perhaps the girl was, even now, thinking of ways to avoid having to sleep with him after the necessary deed was done. His lips twisted in self-derision. Women had always made perfectly clear to him precisely in what ways he was useful – an adequate bed partner, providing he was gone before his face could be clearly viewed by dawn's early light.

His expression hardening, he turned from the mirror and moved into the bathroom. He did not tarry and soak this time; he was all business. Deftly, he washed himself from head to toe before rinsing off and stepping to the mirror to shave. Sneering at his reflection, he applied the aftershave lotion Minerva had pressed upon him, insisting that the child would like it if he smelt of the scent. The sneer revealed his teeth, which still took him by surprise when he saw his reflection. To be honest, allowing Poppy to correct the mess that had been inside his mouth had made a noticeable difference in his appearance. Taking up his toothbrush, he cleaned his teeth, feeling somewhat more optimistic.

Dobby had packed his new clothes in his new trunk, save for the garments he had kept out to wear home to Hermione. The midnight blue shirt was sharply tailored and open at the throat; his trousers and boots were black. He had the ebony-backed brush in his hand to smooth his nearly-dry hair when Minerva burst into his room without so much as a knock upon the door.

'Severus – thank God you haven't left!'

Quirking an inquisitive eyebrow, Severus bound his hair back into a queue. 'What brings you into my bedroom, Minerva? You do remember that I am a married man, now?'

Her colour unnaturally pale, the old witch sagged onto the edge of his bed. 'It's Remus Lupin. He sent his Patronus; he has tripped an alarm on the premises in Bristol – he's trapped inside and surrounded, Severus.'

Only the violence with which he slammed his trunk and engaged the latch suggested his anger. 'What have you done, in the past, when this has occurred?'

Minerva shook her head. 'It hasn't happened before – not on this scale.' She closed her eyes. 'What if he's taken into custody by the Muggle authorities? We can't call upon the Ministry for assistance – we can't use the Obliviator Office – it's not as if his activities are legal in the wizarding world, either.'

Severus sheathed his wand. 'Where is Moody?'

'He will meet us there.'

'No. *You* will go to Nymphadora and make sure she does*not* attempt to "assist" us. I will meet Moody.' His brow furrowed in thought, he strode past Minerva. 'It may be necessary to create a diversion. This could take a while.' He stalked out of the room.

Minerva followed him. 'But, Severus!'

He stopped and turned, scowling. 'What is it?'

'Hermione!' Minerva reminded him.

'No! I will not have her involved in this.'

Minerva rolled her eyes. 'She is waiting for you at Spinner's End.'

Comprehension dawned upon him. 'Bugger!' He drew his wand and a large four-legged creature erupted from its tip in a burst of silver. 'I will be delayed. It cannot be helped,' he said, and the Patronus leapt out of sight.

Minerva opened her mouth to wish him luck but he was gone; had he been wearing robes, they would have been swirling about him as he departed.

Hermione sliced the lemons in precise one-eighth inch rounds, her mind running through her schedule. The lamb shanks were in the oven; the ingredients for the red currant glaze were lined up precisely to one side. The fruit for the gooseberry fool had been fresh-picked that afternoon, simmered and mashed, and was in the fridge awaiting its inclusion with the whipping crème; on its side beside the gooseberry purée was a bottle of champagne.

Satisfied with her mental check list, Hermione carefully arranged the lemon slices on the platter with the Scottish smoked salmon, praying for the hundredth time that her menu would meet with his approval. She certainly was not in a marriage born of love, but that was no reason why she should not put one hundred percent of her effort into making the best of it. This was, for want of a better word, their wedding night. Proper respect for their marriage called for some observance of the rites.

Satisfied with the presentation of her appetizer, Hermione placed the platter carefully into the fridge and washed the lemon juice from her hands. Moving into the sitting room, she tried to imagine sitting with him there on the sofa where she had slept for the last week. Would they make small talk? Would there be long, painful silences? Would they just eat their dinner and march up to bed to get the business over with? Feeling momentarily ill, she sagged onto the sofa cushion and her fingers went to her hair, feeling for renegade bushiness.

In deference to her first night with her husband, Hermione had made a special effort to look nice. She had taken the tremendous trouble of applying copious amounts of Sneezezy and had arranged her hair in an elaborate chignon. Her make-up had been painstakingly applied, with all of Parvati's and Ginny's maxims in mind; the result was an emphasis on the size and brilliance of her brown eyes, a light blushing of her cheeks, and lips glossed with a pale pink. The simple pink peasant blouse and matching full skirt were cool enough for the summer evening, while also being dressy. Her legs were bare, and she wore plain pink flats; her only jewellery was her wedding ring and her anklet.

She was staring at the plain gold band upon her finger when the figure of a silver panther leapt into the room through the open window. Hermione cowered back in her seat momentarily, her heart in her throat. The panther came straight towards her, the muscles rippling beneath its sleek, silver-vapour pelt. It was a Patronus! Who did she know who had a panther Patronus?

'I will be delayed,' the panther said, pacing before her as a big cat will do. 'It cannot be helped.' Then the Patronus sat before her, staring at her with its great silver eyes.

'Thank you for letting me know,' she said, reaching a hand as if to pet her husband's Patronus, but it turned and leapt away into the night.

Delayed! Hermione looked at her wristwatch. It was eight o'clock; the lamb shanks would be finished cooking soon; she could place them under a warming charm and delay preparing the potatoes and asparagus until she knew when he would arrive. Surely, he would come to her as soon as he could.

At ten o'clock, she opened the sherry and enjoyed a glass, thinking it would help her to be relaxed when he arrived.

At midnight, after her fourth glass of sherry, she made one last unsteady trip into the kitchen to ensure that the warming charm on the lamb was holding. She then settled on the sofa with a book open upon her lap, and was soon fast asleep with her head against the cushion, the pins securing the elegant chignon loosening as she drowsed.

Chapter 8: Tonight's the Night

Chapter 8 of 11

The long-anticipated consummation takes place.

Chapter 8

Tonight's the Night

Just before dawn, Severus arrived on the doorstep at number eleven, Spinner's End. Quietly, he spoke the password and passed into the sitting room with his trunk. There he found his sleeping bride.

Several impressions struck him at once as he came in the door, and in his state of physical and magical exhaustion, his senses were assailed. The room itself was changed. Even in the candlelight, he could see that all had been dusted, cleaned, and polished to a gleam. The nearly-reflective table tops held crystal bowls of fresh flowers, the scent of which brought a sharp feeling of *home* to him; when she had been happy, his mother had filled the rooms with the flowers from her garden.

Moving stealthily, unable to resist the urge to get the lay of the land before facing his rightfully upset wife, Severus moved past the sofa where she slept and crept past his mother's portrait, as well, into the kitchen. He found the now-shriveled lamb shanks under their warming charm; a glance into the fridge showed him the remainder of what he had missed: Scottish smoked salmon, potatoes and asparagus, with a gooseberry fool for pudding and a bottle of chilled champagne. He frowned. This was no dutiful preparation of an acceptable supper. It was a very special meal prepared with an eye to celebration—a celebration which he had ruined when Lupin's mission had gone pear-shaped. With a regretful shake of his head, he closed the fridge and saw the table, set with the nicest dishes and napery, with a rather more elaborately contrived flower arrangement as a centrepiece; the candles with which the table had been set had burnt until they guttered.

Severus returned to the sitting room and stood before his mother's portrait as she slumbered in the frame. This portrait had been painted during the early years of his teaching career. His father had been deceased, and his mother had gone around the twist, living alone in the house. She had found a portrait artist who was not above using a bit of Dark magic in his work, and she had surrendered a portion of her magic to imbue the portrait with powers unnatural even in the wizarding world. She had lived out the remainder of her life with diminished magical ability, but upon her death, she had been able to act within the house as a bit of a poltergeist. There had been times in the past, particularly when Severus had been all but confined here, after the death of Dumbledore, when he would have cheerfully ordered his mother to go visit another portrait—or when he would have thankfully placed this portrait in the attic—but she had only the two portraits hanging in this house, and he found that he did not possess the necessary nerve to consign his mother's portrait to exile.

As if she felt him watching her, Eileen Prince Snape stirred from sleep and blinked once before whispering, 'Essex?'

'Hullo, Mum,' Severus said gently, touched by her use of his childhood nickname, born of his initials, S.X.

'You've been gone so long ...'

'Yes, but it couldn't be helped—and I'm back, now.'

'I don't like that girl, Severus—what were you thinking? We don't need her here! Send her away.' Speaking to her only child, Eileen's voice held more of a pleading tone than a demanding one.

'I shan't, Mum. She's my wife. But I do want to have a nice long chat with you. Will you go up to the study and wait for me there? I would like to be private with Hermione, just now.'

He spoke with firm resolve, and Eileen could not argue with him. She walked out of the picture frame, and Severus walked around to the front of the sofa, where Hermione slept on. She had slipped down until her head rested upon the arm of the sofa; in the night, she had kicked off her shoes, and her feet were resting upon the cushions. He could see that she had made up her face and done up her hair as if she wanted to make herself attractive to him. The soft pastel colour of the ensemble she wore washed out in the candlelight to an off-white, reminiscent of her wedding dress. The skirt had rucked up somewhat in her sleep; her smooth legs were bare to his eyes up to mid-thigh. And there, upon her left ankle, she wore the ubiquitous gold anklet.

He sat down in the armchair closest to where her head rested, and he watched her sleeping until his eyes grew heavy, and he dozed.

Hermione awoke when the first beam of morning sunlight hit her eyes; she blinked once, then again, sure that the vision of her husband, asleep in the chair before her, was a lingering dream. The night-black hair was tied back from his face, which bore a distinct shadow along the jaw line and over the chin. Whereas she had very much disliked the unsightly, unkempt beard he had been forced to wear in prison, this stubble of beard upon his clean-shaven face was attractive to her in a rather visceral way. A sudden memory of Ron's attempt to affect an unshaven look caused her to emit a giggle, which she quickly suppressed—the orange fluff Ron had managed to grow had simply caused him to look as if he had forgotten to wash his face.

At the sound of her giggle, Severus opened his eyes, instantly alert. Nervously, Hermione sat up, her hands flying to the falling chignon. Futilely, she attempted to jab a few of the hairpins back in place whilst saying, 'Good morning.'

'Good morning,' he replied, his eyes following the movement of her hands in her hair with lazy interest.

Feeling simultaneously a flush of colour stain her cheeks and an anticipatory tingle dart along her nerve endings, Hermione dropped her hands into her lap. He was looking at her so oddly; she wondered if her hair looked that bad.

'I apologise for ruining the exemplary meal you prepared,' Severus said, his gaze never leaving her face.

'Where were you?' she asked, her memory of the night before returning to her, along with her indignation and insecurity. Her last thought, before she slept, had been that he so much disliked the notion of marriage with her that he was willing to go Siberia rather than go to bed with her.

For an instant, his eyelids dropped, then his gaze shifted to the vase of flowers on the table at his elbow. 'I had a bit of a situation involving my work—something that could not be left for another time.'

Hermione waited for more information, but none seemed forthcoming. 'You stayed away because of a "bit of a situation?"' she demanded more forcefully. 'Do you know how much gold I spent—how much *time* I spent preparing for your arrival for our wedding supper?'

Severus sat forward then, his elbows resting on his knees, and looked her straight in the eye. Hermione had the very strange sensation that she was conversing with someone she had never seen before—although that person bore a striking resemblance in both appearance and voice to her former Potions teacher. It was his manner which was so different.

'I apologise, Hermione,' he said soothingly. 'I can see to how much trouble you've gone. I don't know if this old house has ever been so warm and inviting.' His black eyes flitted from her eyes to her mouth, watching her reaction very carefully. 'I would never have been absent last night had not a co-worker of mine required assistance that only I could provide.'

Hermione felt her upset subsiding in the face of the effort to which *he* was going to mollify her. 'Please tell me it was nothing illegal,' she said wearily.

An expression much like a smile touched his eyes. 'The probation officials will *not* be arriving to ship me off to Siberia,' he said.

Hermione made a decision to accept his apology. After all, it was his life on the line – they had until midnight to ratify the Unbreakable Covenant, or all bets were off. Attempting to sound sensible, she said, 'Well then, you must be hungry. Shall we have breakfast?'

Before she could rise, he placed his hand fleetingly upon her knee. 'No – don't go. I ate before I came. I was quite hungry and did not think to find you awake when I arrived.'

Although he removed his hand almost immediately, Hermione could yet feel the pressure of his fingers there, as if her skirt was not covering her knee at all. She did not at all understand why she suddenly felt so short of breath – almost as if she was moved simply by the touch of his hand. She was curious to test that notion – she wanted him to touch her again. Perhaps he wanted her to go to bed with him now. Her palms felt suddenly damp, and her heart seemed to plunge within her chest. In tone of forced practicality, she said, 'Well, if you aren't hungry, what would you like to do now?'

As she watched him, a sudden glint came into his dark eyes, but was just as suddenly gone, and he stood. 'We must, of course, ratify the Covenant today,' he said smoothly, looking down into her upturned face. 'Before we do, however, it will be necessary for me to sleep.' He reached his hands down to her and Hermione allowed him to pull her to her feet. 'Please forgive my indelicacy, but it will be helpful for me to be aware beforehand – have you done this before?'

Hermione felt a small flash of annoyance. 'Could you be more precise?'

The hands which had held hers were now loosely wrapped about her upper arms, his thumbs moving in light, soothing circles. 'Of course.' The pitch of his voice lowered, and it seemed as if he also lowered his face closer to hers, watching her very closely again. 'Have you had intercourse before with a man, or will the consummation of our marriage be your first time?'

Hermione swallowed, hating the burning in her face, which meant that she was blushing again. 'Not the first, no. Ron and I ...'

One of his hands moved quickly to place a single finger across her lips. 'No need for details – it is not my intention to pry. I simply wished to be apprised.'

Hermione nodded minutely, the motion of her head causing her lips to slide up his index finger; the lower lip caught on his knuckle and pulled her mouth down slightly, the moist heat within leaving a slightly wet trail upon the flesh of his finger. Hermione knew a crazy urge to part her lips and take the digit into her mouth, but she was forestalled as he jerked his hand from her face, almost as if he had been burned.

In one swift move, his lips were at her ear, and he said, 'You don't know how sorry I am that I was not here last night.' Then he released her and took up his wand, levitating his trunk and causing the hidden door to open upon the staircase. 'After I sleep and shower, we shall have a meal together, if that will be acceptable to you?'

He watched her only long enough to see her accepting nod, and then he followed his trunk through the door and up the stairs.

Hermione scrubbed the make-up from her face and pulled the pins from her hair, brushing it until it crackled, all of the Sleekeazy Potion removed. She had eaten toast and ingested the best part of a pot of tea; now she was trying to decide how to spend the day. The idea of sitting in the house, waiting for him to wake up and have Ministry-mandated sex with her, was unpleasant in the extreme.

After tying her hair back, Hermione cleaned her teeth. As she brushed, she thought. He would probably sleep until late afternoon. She could roast a chicken to replace the poor, abused lamb shanks – but that wasn't the most important thing, was it? She had to get him into bed and complete the charm – he had to penetrate her, to spill his seed within her – and he didn't seem too eager about that. Up to this point, she had held the optimistic opinion that men like to have sex with women – and she was certainly *that*.

After rinsing her mouth, she patted her lips with a hand towel and considered her reflection. She wasn't very pretty. Her features weren't ugly; they just weren't remarkable in any way. Her body wasn't bad, though. She had breasts – more than some and less than others – and there was a definite difference between her waist and her hips. Her bottom wasn't too big, and her legs were slender. Her chin came up. It was pointless to catalogue her attributes at this point. She needed a foolproof way to get him into her bed – into her body – and she didn't have time to play at it.

Moving past the room where he slept, she descended the staircase to the sitting room. Thankfully, his mother's portrait was empty; apparently Eileen was watching over her sleeping son. Setting her lips in a grim line, Hermione began to pace, setting her formidable intellect to the task of determining how best to accomplish her goal.

Harry Potter opened one eye experimentally, closing it again almost immediately against the bright sunlight pouring into the bedroom. It was Sunday – he had a lie-in on Sunday mornings. Why should he have to get up?

But the persistent ringing would not leave him alone. Sitting up with a groan, he squinted around the room, trying to work out where the sound was coming from – it didn't sound like the doorbell.

'Shite! The phone!' He lunged across the room and grabbed his jeans from the floor, wrenching the mobile phone case from his belt. 'Hello? Hermione?'

He clutched the small mobile to his ear as he staggered back to the bed, collapsing on the edge as he listened.

'Oi, Hermione! No! I didn't need to know that!' He put his free hand to his stomach, as if to quell a bout of nausea. 'Why can't you just buy it at the Apothecary?' His brow creased. 'Oh, come on, Hermione – not that fat old fraud! He'll want me to stay to tea!' He stood and began to pace. 'Oh, all right. But you will *so* owe me.'

He flipped the mobile closed and glared at himself in the mirror, one word escaping his lips like a filthy epithet.

'*Slughorn*.'

With a pop, Hermione Apparated to the small garden behind the terraced house on Spinner's End. Clutched in her fist was the tiny phial Harry had procured for her.

'It wasn't so bad,' he had told her with an eloquent roll of his eyes when she had rushed into the sitting room on Grimmauld Place that afternoon. 'I only have to attend his soirée on Tuesday night to meet some of the "right" people.' Hermione had giggled and Harry had pulled her into a hug. 'It's not too late, Hermione. If you don't do it, the marriage certificate will just burn, and you'll be free again.'

Hermione had returned his hug, knowing that he meant well – she had no doubt of Harry's love or loyalty – but he would never understand her feelings on the matter. This way, her life debt would be paid, and she would have a home of her own.

'Thank you, Harry,' she had said, pulling back just enough to kiss his cheek. 'I'll let you know how it goes.'

'Oh, *please* don't,' he had muttered disgustedly. 'I don't need *that* image in my head.'

Hermione had just wrinkled her nose and Disapparated.

Glancing at her wristwatch, she saw that it was nearly four o'clock; Severus would be up and about any time, now. Pocketing the phial, she marched up the back steps and into the kitchen to put the chicken on to roast.

Just as she closed the oven door, she heard the shower begin to run in the bathroom upstairs. Feeling slightly sick with apprehension, she slipped up the staircase and into the bedroom. She pulled the phial out and held it up to the light; the liquid was a molten gold. It was nearly impossible to believe that the miniscule bottle held twelve hours of luck, but she knew very well how it worked the tiny amount she, Ron, and Ginny had ingested the night of Dumbledore's death had protected them all.

Without further ado, she uncorked the phial and swallowed the Felix Felicis; almost immediately, the thrill of possibility thrummed through her.

Right. She needed to get ready and she knew just what to do.

Kicking off her trainers, she stripped out of the jeans and tee-shirt she wore and snatched a bottle of nail varnish from her cosmetics bag. She sat upon the floor and meticulously applied vermillion polish to her toenails. That completed, she cast Parvati's best varnish-drying charm and forced herself to sit perfectly still for three minutes. Next, she extracted from her trunk a scarlet peasant blouse and matching skirt, similar in style to the ensemble she had worn the night before. She had planned to don one of her sexy bras, but Felix told her to dispense with it. She tossed her plain cotton bra into her trunk and pulled the red top over her head, slipping the stretchy top of the blouse off her shoulders. She reached for tights, but Felix told her no to leave her legs and feet bare. With a philosophical shrug, she reached for the Sleekeazy then laughed aloud when she realised she was to leave the hair down. She slipped a clip in her skirt pocket, applied a coat of red to her lips, and ran lightly down the staircase, through the kitchen, and into the early evening fragrance of the garden. With a Severing Charm, she cut a fully-bloomed red rose; with the clip in her pocket, she secured the flower in her hair, just above her left ear.

When she re-entered the kitchen, the shower had ceased to run. She pressed the play button on the battery-operated CD player she kept on the kitchen counter and set about placing the food on the table, the music seeming to pulse in her blood with the unlimited opportunity of the liquid luck.

Severus cocked his head when the music came on below stairs; it was his first indication of the whereabouts of the elusive Hermione. He had gone looking for her when he had awoken, but she had been nowhere to be found within or without the house. He took a deep, relieved breath. He had feared that she had come to her senses and run away from him. He was very glad she had *not* done so; not only did he have no desire to take up residence at Zhokhov Island, but he now felt a sense of responsibility towards the girl. It would have been his duty to go find her if she had run off.

Moving into the bedroom, he stood before the full-length mirror to appraise his appearance. He wore a severely-tailored charcoal grey shirt, open at the throat, and dark denims with his usual black boots. The black hair was bound in a queue. He had shaved with painstaking care and applied the aftershave pushed upon him by Minerva. He was not handsome he would *never* be handsome but he was clean and sharply dressed.

And he wanted the girl.

Oh, yes, he wanted her.

He would enjoy sex with his wife on this, their wedding night and he would do his dead-level best to make sure she enjoyed it, as well.

Descending the staircase, he quietly approached the kitchen and froze at the door.

Barefoot, Hermione stood at the table with her back to him; she was fussing over the table setting but she was also dancing. The music was a hot jazz number, and she danced where she stood, her hips gyrating, her bare shoulders moving sinuously to the beat of the music. As she twisted to reach across the table, he saw with a shock that went straight to his groin that she wore no brassiere, and that her breasts were bouncing with each move she made. The brown hair spilled down her back in its unmanageable mass of curls; the tips of the hair reached nearly to her bum when she arched her neck back in response to the music. Nestled in the curls was a red rose, the same shade as the skirt which swirled about her knees as she moved to the rhythm of the music.

And upon her left ankle was the provocative anklet.

He knew an urge to take her upon the table top, the china shattering as he fucked her amongst the fallen flower petals of the overturned centrepiece.

'Severus?'

He dragged his eyes from her arse to her face as she looked over her shoulder and smiled at him.

'Could you open the champagne, please?'

He nodded and set about his assigned job, carrying the bottle back to the sitting room doorway to give her unimpeded access to the stove. He removed the wire caging over the deeply imbedded cork and began to work it slowly from the deep green bottleneck, never taking his eyes from his wife's form as she moved from the stove to the table, from the table to the fridge, from the fridge to the sink, her body continuing to move in rhythm with the music.

Was she ready for him? Would he have to woo her? Was she resolved, or had she become eager, as he was eager?

The cork escaped the bottle with a loud *pop*, drawing her smile to him again, and he lowered his eyes, schooling his face to impassivity before moving into the room and pouring the foaming wine into the crystal flutes on the table.

'Shall we eat?' she asked, standing behind him with a platter of roast chicken.

He nodded, taking the platter from her and placing it on the table before correctly holding her chair for her, just as his mother had taught him to do, so many years before.

The conversation over the meal was light and enjoyable. Hermione knew which subjects to broach and which to leave, and was pleasantly surprised by the apparently sincere interest Severus evinced in her studies and the astute questions he asked as she expanded upon her subject.

With a combined effort, they cleared the table and moved into the sitting room with their wineglasses and the champagne bottle. Severus stood, watching to see where she would sit, and Hermione knew she had successfully passed the test when she sat upon the sofa. She then dumbfounded him by patting the seat for him to join her; he returned the favour by staying on his feet and studying her over the rim of his wineglass as he drank.

'You look very nice tonight,' she said, knowing she would have to defend her words, but also knowing it was the right thing to say.

'In what way do I "look nice," Mi- Hermione?' he asked.

'You've gained some weight back, your colour looks as if you have spent some time outdoors, you are rid of the scruffy beard, you've cut your hair, and you've had your teeth fixed,' she replied with a small smile. She saw his lips tighten. 'I had Madam Pomfrey fix my overbite when I was fifteen, and it was the best thing I ever did for my appearance.'

One of his eyebrows rose. 'I must return the compliment and tell you that you are quite fetching, tonight.'

Hermione felt her cheeks flush in unabashed pleasure at the flattering remark. 'Thank you that's the nicest thing you have ever said to me.'

He stepped forward to pour more wine into her flute, then tilted the last of it into his own glass. 'Will you raise your glass with me?' he asked, looking into her eyes, his voice soft and compelling.

Hermione stood and raised her glass, which he touched with his own. 'To us to tonight,' he intoned, and they each drank.

Hermione held his gaze. 'Will you raise your glass with me?'

Severus lifted his glass again, and Hermione touched it with her own, her eyes never leaving his, as she said, 'To our marriage and our home.'

She was sure she saw surprise before he drank again.

Then, Felix prompted her, and she set the half-full glass on the side table. 'Will you excuse me? I believe I'll have a bath, now.'

She smiled at him as he inclined his head in acknowledgement and waved his wand to open the door to the hidden staircase; she could feel his eyes upon her as she sashayed out of the room, deliberately exaggerating the natural swing of her hips.

Some of his favourite erotic pictures featured women in bathtubs she could certainly reproduce that.

Severus sat in the armchair facing the open doorway to the staircase, listening to the water running in the bathtub. The knowledge that she was up there, removing all of her clothing before slipping into the water, had him half hard as he sat, waiting.

He drained the last of his glass of wine, wishing it was something stronger. Was she making herself clean before slipping into an insubstantial nightdress and taking him to bed? Or was she stalling, avoiding his touch until the last possible moment?

He nearly jumped when she called to him.

'Severus?'

He stood and walked to the doorway, where he could clearly see the light at the top of the stairs she had not closed the door. Half-hard twitched up a notch.

'Yes?'

'Could you bring my wine? I left it on the table.'

She was inviting him into the bathroom while she was bathing?

'Would you mind?' she added, her voice floating down to him like a Siren's call.

He did not answer, but retrieved the glass and hastened up the staircase, approaching the doorway with some caution. Her back was to him as she reclined in the old-fashioned tub, her dark hair spilling over the side and hanging nearly to the floor. The surface of the tub was full of bubbles.

'Shall I levitate it to you?' he asked, allowing his voice to illustrate his amusement.

She sat up slowly, turning her face to him, her smile inviting. Her hair swung forward, some drifting into the water and some seeming to float atop the bubbles. The displaced water streamed down her throat and her arms, washing away some of the bubbles which obscured her breasts from his eyes.

'From dryad to naiad,' he murmured, approaching her, unable to stay away.

'It's nothing you won't see soon, anyway,' she said, sounding a touch breathless.

He offered the glass, which she took, the smile lingering upon her lips. Mightily, he kept his eyes upon her face.

Hermione sipped delicately at the flute of champagne, her eyes travelling intentionally down his body. Severus took the opportunity to check her out, but the magical bubbles in the bath were doing their job; her body was not visible behind the impenetrable bubble guard. When he returned his eyes to her face, she handed him the now empty wine glass.

'Would you wash my back?' she asked, extending her hand and Summoning a large bath sponge from the shelving on the wall.

He stared at her, wondering at her motives, but her expression was entirely guileless. He Vanished the wineglass and unbuttoned his sleeves, beginning to deliberately roll them up his forearms. Hermione watched his every move, and she did not seem to be breathing. *Good*, he thought. *I'm not the only one who's nervous*. He took the sponge from her and knelt on the bath mat.

'It will be necessary for you to move your hair, Naiad, if you wish for me to wash your back,' he said, and she gathered the hair into her hands and twisted it into a functional, if untidy, knot upon her head, held in place by a non-verbal charm.

'Like that?' she asked, her voice subdued.

'Exactly like that,' he agreed, admiring the graceful curve of her neck and beginning to rub the sponge over her skin. 'Did you wish for me to apply additional soap?'

Hermione took a tube of scented bath gel from the edge of the tub and passed it back to him. He squirted the orange substance onto the sponge, recognising it as the source of the mandarin orange scent he had detected on her skin more than once. The gel promptly lathered on her back as he rubbed with the sponge, wishing simply to touch her with his bare hands. When he could stand it no longer, he allowed the sponge to fall into the water and scooped water in his hands to pour down her back, rinsing the suds and smoothing them away with the palms of his hands.

'Don't stop,' she whispered.

'Turn to me,' he responded, his voice caressing. He retrieved the sponge, and when she turned her torso to him, he began to wash her throat, then her shoulders, his hands moving in slow circles over her skin. She closed her eyes, as if luxuriating in his touch. Emboldened, he ran the sponge over her breast, eliciting a small pleased exhalation, so he repeated the action with the other breast. She surprised him then, by opening her brown eyes, which were no longer brilliant and alert, but which were slumberous and unfocussed. She looked directly into his face with trusting expectation.

He dropped the sponge and used his hands to caress both breasts with the lightest of touches, watching her face as he did so. In one languorous movement, she closed her eyes, arched her neck, and thrust out her breasts. Instinctively, his head dropped and he caught her lips in a kiss. She seemed to sigh against his lips, impossibly responsive, her mouth open to his. His tongue slipped between her parted lips and she hummed, reaching for him with her bubble-wet hands, dampening first his cheek, and then his hair as she caressed and clutched at him. Their tongues touched and tangled. His hands gently palmed her breasts and squeezed them before reaching his thumbs to rub her pebbled nipples simultaneously. She actually cried out, then, and he inhaled the cry, his tongue invading further into the warm cavern of her mouth.

One hand abandoned her breast and slid down her rib cage and over the expanse of her lower abdomen. She did not resist him, but allowed his exploring finger to gently delve between her nether lips. She was slick even in the bathwater, he could differentiate the viscous fluid of her desire. Tentatively, he rubbed the protrusion beneath his

fingers and, capturing her tongue with his lips and sucking it gently into his mouth, he teased the tip of her tongue with the tip of his own, mimicking the action with the fingertip teasing between her thighs. In very short order, she was attempting to pull him into the bathtub with her.

He pulled back from her, the finger buried beneath the water continuing its caressing. 'My apologies, Naiad, but the tub is not big enough for what I have planned for you. Will you come with me to the bed?'

'Yes,' she breathed. 'Yes, please.'

He released her and stood; she barely had an opportunity to protest before a non-verbal spell brought her out of the water and into his arms; she was slippery from the bubble bath and deliciously smooth to the touch. None too strong, he carried her immediately to the bed and deposited her there, remaining on his feet and beginning to unbutton his shirt. He bent to pull off his boots and socks before stepping out of his trousers and pants in one go. He saw Hermione shiver and he Summoned a towel from the bathroom, bending over her delectable, naked form to rub the water from her body. 'How rude of me to invite a Naiad to my bed and to forget to dry her.' He dried her arms, her torso, her hips, and each leg, ending at her left ankle, where he rolled the delicate golden chain between his fingers. 'I wondered if you wore it in the bath.'

She sat up and reached for his face, pulling him down into a kiss which went on and on as their hands travelled over one another's bodies, stroking, caressing, touching, teasing, and exploring. Then she had a grip on his shaft, carefully investigating his length and girth, and he felt his control slipping.

'Does the Naiad remember the Covenant Charm?' he asked her, his voice roughened with need.

'Sic nostrum veneficus redimio nos et unus,' she replied. 'Please.'

He moved over her, looking down into her face. 'Yes, Sprite now. But we must remember the incantation.'

'Yes,' she agreed, gladly parting her thighs as he positioned himself. 'Yes come to me, now.'

And he accepted the invitation, thrusting surely into her body.

Hermione moved up to meet him as he entered her, and she was shocked to hear the groan that she uttered as he filled her. It was as if she had never done this before almost none of the sensations he had elicited from her thus far were familiar from her times with Ron. Severus touched her as if the feel of her body beneath his hands was an end within itself; Ron had touched her as if there were certain actions he was required to perform before he could get down to what he was there for.

She forced herself to open her eyes and found her husband's face suspended over hers, his eyes closed, with a look of exquisite agony as he moved within her. She, her body, was giving him this pleasure, was wresting this extreme show of carnality from a man whose humanity had been doubted by everyone she knew for all the years she had known him. The emotion which welled up in her was foreign to her, and completely divorced from the effects of the Felix Felicis; she knew now, with complete certainty, that the potion had been unnecessary. He had wanted her wanted to stroke her body with his. An entire new set of responses thrilled through her at this knowledge, and she reached one hand to stroke down his gaunt cheek.

The midnight eyes opened then, seemingly surprised by the tenderness of her gesture. 'Can you move with me, little Naiad?' he purred, rotating his hips as he moved within her and being rewarded by her gasp.

'I can,' she said, concentrating to match his rhythm. He stroked and stroked and watched her face, and Hermione felt as if the very blood in her veins was afire.

It startled her when he began to speak. 'Sic nostrum veneficus redimio nos et unus,' he chanted, infusing each word with strength and clarity, never slacking his pace. The darkened room was illuminated by a glowing, silvery arch, which began at Severus' shoulder and reached up into a demi-arc over their bodies.

'Concentrate, Sprite,' Severus murmured, resting his weight on one elbow and dipping his head to nip once at her lower lip. Her hands came up to tangle in his hair just as he slipped two fingers between them and stroked the bundle of nerves at her apex.

'Sic nostrum,' she gasped as his fingers teased the fire in her veins to spread out, burning everything in its path, 'veneficus redimio nos et unus!'

Several things happened at once. A glowing, silvery arch emanated from within her very core, it felt, and grew up and over, until it touched the demi-arc Severus had made. The two equal, matching sides came together and locked, forming an unbreakable bridge, and the colour changed from an insubstantial silver to a solid gold. Simultaneously, a surge of power not dissimilar to the hook-behind-the-navel sensation of travelling by Portkey ripped through her, a streak of red magic which twined about the golden bridge like a flowering vine; somehow, she knew this was the discharging of her life debt to Severus, made manifest. She was astonished when a streak of green magic erupted from the wizard buried within her body; the green joined the red as it coiled about the constructs of the golden bridge. The golden, red and green seemed to twine together to create an unbreakable cord.

Now, it felt as if her soul was rushing headlong out of her body, pulling her consciousness with it; the focal point of the journey was the face of Severus Prince, her husband, who watched her with eyes so intense he seemed oblivious to the crackling magical energy filling the air above their coupling bodies. With a final, insistent pluck at the nub beneath his fingers, Hermione felt the giant wave of her climax hit her body, dampening the inferno in her blood as it washed over her, sweeping her, unresisting, out to sea. Only the striving body of her husband kept her anchored to their bed; with a final guttural cry, helpless against the force of the passion and the combined magicks, he climaxed as well, proving, in the end, that he knew very well who held him cradled in her body.

'Hermione,' he said before he sagged to one side, his head coming to rest upon the pillow beside her.

'Severus,' she responded, turning on her side and pressing her sweat-damp body to him.

'Sleep,' he gasped.

'Yes,' she crooned.

The physical and magical exhaustion carried him into sleep almost instantly; Hermione held out long enough to cover their bodies with a light blanket before she slept, as well.

Dennis Creevey, youngest clerk in the Ministry Bureau of Statistics, looked up when the marriage contract on the desk before him shimmered; the Ministry seal appeared and he stood to move the parchment into the permanent file. The Ministry offices were closed on Sunday, but he had been well paid to come in on the weekend and to monitor this particular situation.

He let himself out of the office and locked the door behind him before moving down the corridor to the Ministry Atrium. With a wave of his wand, a silver Patronus appeared and was sent on its way.

Minerva sat straight up in her bed when the silver Yorkshire terrier burst into her room. 'The Covenant is ratified,' the enthusiastic little Patronus reported, and chased its tail in circles for a moment before prancing away.

'I told you,' the gruff voice rumbled from the other pillow. 'She's a comely lass you worry too much. Snape is too much of a man not to bed her.'

Minerva lay back down, moving into the circle of the arms ready to receive her. 'You don't know him as well as I do, Alastor he ties himself in knots with his over-developed sense of honour.' She laid her cheek upon his chest and took a shaky breath. 'I am *that* relieved to have it all over although Remus was perfectly prepared to forcibly

abduct him and smuggle him out of the country, if necessary, to keep him out of harm's way.'

Mad-Eye Moody snorted in amusement. 'I would have paid real money to see him try, anyway.'

Even Minerva laughed, then, and the two settled back down to sleep.

Two hours later, Severus awoke from a dead sleep to find Hermione Granger no, Hermione Prince clinging to him as she slept. He smirked to himself. Well, it had been damn good sex. It probably had given her fond inclinations towards him. Naked, he slipped out of the bed and padded into the bathroom to empty his bladder.

As he washed his hands at the sink, Severus stared unseeing at his reflection and mused over the events of the evening. He had not been alarmed by the green emanation which he had created; he had recognised what it was as it passed through his body like the jerk of a Portkey. He had felt the same sensation when he had stepped in front of Harry Potter during the last confrontation with the Dark Lord, casting a Shield Charm which had held off other attackers until Potter's final business with Voldemort was complete. That action had finally paid the life debt he owed to James Potter, for which he was enormously thankful. He had known that he would owe Hermione a life debt for saving him from prison but he had possessed no idea that the consummation of their marriage would somehow satisfy that debt. The life debt could only be laid to rest by saving the life of the other person, or in the case of Potter, saving the life of their nearest relative or by some other signal service so significant that the other person's life was forever changed and improved. The implications were too large for him to contemplate now. He was too tired to think or do anything else, for that matter.

He dried his hands and moved quietly back into the bedroom. Hermione was sitting up in the bed, her wild hair a tangled nimbus about her head, looking forlorn.

'I woke up, and you were gone,' she said in a voice of desolation. She rose to her knees, her breasts and the triangle of her mons clearly visible to him in the candlelight.

Severus was astounded when his groin twitched. *Oh, really?* he thought, looking at the plaintive creature in his bed. *After all, old man, it's still your wedding night,* his stirring erection informed him.

'Severus?' she said.

He moved back to the bed and sat beside her; he was astonished when she came instantly into his arms. He stroked her hair. 'My little Naiad,' he whispered. 'Do you think you can Transfigure the bath? Make it twice as big?'

Hermione tilted her chin to look up at him. 'If I do, will you do that to me again?'

His lips twitched. 'Some variation of *that*,' he agreed.

Wordlessly, she stood and took his hand, pulling him along to the bath.

A/N: The Latin roughly translates to "the joining of our magic unites us as one."

Chapter 9: In Which There Was a Misunderstanding

Chapter 9 of 11

The morning after; Severus meets his employees; Hermione seeks activity to occupy herself; time spent together, and realisations.

Improbable Felicity

Chapter 9

In Which There Was A Misunderstanding

The light of dawn seeped into the bedroom at the top of number eleven, Spinner's End, faintly illuminating the couple in the bed. The man lay splayed out in the middle, his inky black hair an oily tangle upon the pillow. In the stuffy heat of early July, the bedcovers had been pushed to the foot of the mattress. His only adornment was the wild-haired girl, who sprawled over and twined about his naked form like an errant sprig of Devil's Snare. In sleep, their faces were completely bereft of care; each slept the sleep of the just and pure and the well-shagged, of course.

Severus woke, convinced he was only dreaming that he was awake. First of all, he was in his own bed, in his own room that was impossible. He was in prison. Second of all, there was a naked woman draped over his body. Such things only ever happened in his dreams.

The truth of his assertion was proved out when the woman's eyes fluttered open and she smiled at him, with such a combination of lust and affection that he was deprived of breath. Such wanton incitement warranted that he should tumble the provocateur onto her back and kiss her as she so plainly deserved. One thing led to another, as often happens in dreams, and soon they made slow, languorous love. The dream-Sprite for the creature was obviously a Nereid raked her nails down his back in her extremity, wrapping her licentious legs about him and dragging him down to the dangerous warm depths where dwelt such depraved delights.

He remained buried deep within her until she shifted, murmuring that he was a bit heavy which seemed an unusual complaint from a dream-Sprite. He slipped to one side of her, falling asleep again with his face buried in her orange-scented throat and with one arm pinning her to him, as if he could bring a dream into his waking reality.

Severus woke up with something tickling his nose. Ah he had ended up the night holding onto Hermione as if she was a teddy bear, and her bushy mane was irritating him. Thank God he had been the first to wake what would she have thought of such blatant clinging on his part? Rolling away from her, he sat up on the side of the bed. It was after eight o'clock, an outrageously late hour for a man who had to get to his office. Without glancing back at Temptation Incarnate, still sleeping in his bed, he stalked off to have his morning shower.

Each move he made accentuated the soreness of muscles long unused. He tipped a foul-tasting general pain-relieving potion down his throat, grimacing at the taste. He was filled with conflicting emotions of extreme smugness, for having successfully bedded a twenty-one year old girl, and alarm, lest she notice his weakness. It was one thing to do one's duty to complete the charm and to seal them in the marriage which ratified their bargain: his freedom for her financial security. It was another thing entirely

to be plagued with the notion that it would be a marvellous idea to go back in there and see if he could convince her that another go would be just the thing.

Adjusting the spray from warm to cold, he stepped resolutely into the shower, determined to cool his libido and to wash away such absurd plans in one chilly go.

Hermione woke with a smile upon her face and a feeling of deep self-satisfaction. Smirking in a way which was entirely unlike her, she had a delightful stretch, making note of the parts of her body which were a bit worse for wear after her wedding night with Severus Prince. Just as she had heard whispered years before amongst the women in the Order, the man shagged like a daemon. At first she had been disgusted to hear Emmeline Vance say it to Hestia Jones and Tonks, one late night at headquarters when the mead was flowing a bit freely. Later, she had simply been curious to know if it was true.

Now, she knew.

Smirking again, she rolled over to wish her husband a good morning, but his pillow was empty. 'Severus?' she called, looking around the room as if he might be lurking in a corner.

Throwing the covers off, Hermione slid to the floor and groped in her trunk for her dressing gown. After a necessary pee and a vigorous teeth cleaning, she set out to look for her bridegroom.

The spare room was empty, save for the presence of Eileen Snape in the family portrait. Eileen inclined her head in a silent greeting, and surprised, Hermione returned the gesture. Mother and son must have had a talk before his nap the day before.

Hermione moved down to the sitting room, which was uninhabited, then looked in the kitchen, hoping to find her taciturn husband drinking his tea and scowling at the *Daily Prophet*, but he was not there. With very little hope, she opened the door to the back garden and glanced about.

Where had he gone? Why had he not spoken to her before he left, even if it was only to go down the corner shop for bread or milk? Feeling a bit miffed, Hermione set about preparing the morning-after breakfast she had planned. In thirty minutes, the kitchen table was covered with scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, fried tomatoes, and adorned by new flowers from the garden and still, she had no company.

Having progressed from miffed to disappointed, Hermione sat down to her lonely breakfast, struggling not to feel like an abandoned bride in some tacky Muggle novel. Determinedly, she enjoyed a rather larger meal than she usually indulged in for breakfast, also indulging herself in remembering the happenings of the night before in nerve-tingling detail.

Severus sat behind the lovely old mahogany desk in his corner office, feeling as if he were in another dream. The desk itself was his very own, from his dungeon office at Hogwarts; Minerva had undoubtedly counted it amongst his personal effects when she was choosing what things she would remove from the school. The rest of the room, however, was like something out of the fantasy of a school teacher who dreamed of bigger things. Two walls were glass, looking out over both Diagon Alley and Charing Cross Road. One wall was covered with his framed diplomas and honours from twenty-plus years in academia, beginning with the full certification he had received after taking his N.E.W.T.s. Before the desk were two elegant leather armchairs. In the outer office was the secretary Minerva had assigned to him; she had promised that if the person was unacceptable, he could choose his own assistant, but that Daphne Greengrass would do to be getting on with.

She had called a general office meeting and all forty-seven of the staff members of Security Solutions had crowded into the meeting room. Introduced to the assembled persons as Mr Prince, Severus had received the applause of the roomful of his former students with a blink of surprise.

'Well, what did you expect?' Minerva had demanded later in her best no-nonsense manner. 'Did you actually imagine that Alastor and I would hire the other sort?'

Walking quietly through the different departments, watching his people at work, Severus had been gratified at the murmured, 'Welcome back, Professor,' and, 'Thank you, sir,' he had heard from more than one employee.

'Your role in the war was detailed for these people, Severus,' Minerva had explained over a shared luncheon in her office, where they were joined by Alastor Moody. 'When I was sure you were going to be released, I had a meeting where every pertinent detail of your involvement was shared with your employees.' She added primly, 'For company morale, it is imperative for there to be a unity of spirit.'

Moody had snorted. 'It also didn't hurt that this old tartar invited anyone who didn't concur regarding your heroic part in the war to pick up their severance pay and leave and it was downright amazing how she made it sound like an offer to step outside and settle it like wizards.'

Severus had actually grinned. 'You're a scary old girl, Minerva.'

Now, he paged idly through the current list of their clients, attempting to concentrate on the details of the contracts, but he was feeling the need of his now customary afternoon kip and he was having a damnably difficult time keeping Hermione out of his mind. Muttering a curse, he decided a walk would not be amiss, and he strode out, telling the efficient Miss Greengrass that he would not be gone long.

Out in the warm afternoon sunlight, his long legs carried him down the walkways, and he pondered his problem. After a full week of staring at the wedding photograph of Hermione and giving himself permission to indulge in sexual fantasies about her, he was finding it difficult to stop doing so. He did not have the photograph it was hidden amongst his shirts in his still-packed trunk but he no longer needed to hold it to see every detail of his bride's appearance in his mind's eye. The fact that he now had first-hand experience of what her skin felt like beneath his hands of how the anklet tasted on his tongue as he laved her leg from her toes to the sensitive back of her knee to the tangle of brown curls at the juncture of her thighs of where she liked to be touched, kissed, and licked now that he was in possession of these damning pieces of intelligence, it was proving arduous to honour his plan. And it bloody well didn't help matters that every time he moved he hurt, and every time he hurt, he remembered what activities had brought about his sore muscles.

Dammit! After consummating their marriage, he had resolved he would not bother her again that he would not inflict his attentions on her. She had done enough, after all she had saved him from being sent to Siberia; she had tolerated his sexual advances he would allow her to get on with her life as she wished.

But was it mere toleration? his treacherous libido demanded, aptly assisted by the slight twinge between his legs. *She called you into the bathroom deliberately and asked you to touch her naked body she kissed you and stroked you and clung to you she asked you to do it again ...*

He shook his head and swore aloud, and a single woman walking alone down the way crossed the street to get away from him. And what the hell was this confusing, roiling ache in his chest? It had first assailed him when she had come into his prison cell and explained that she would marry him, but that he would be getting a bad bargain because she was infertile. It felt like pity, but he knew it was not, because pity woke in him a desire to annihilate its subject. This was something different something new and he did not like it.

Turning abruptly, he headed back for the office.

By mid-afternoon, as she potted about the back garden, Hermione was near tears. Obviously, she had misinterpreted the happenings of the night before. She thought she had connected with Severus on a level other than the purely physical. The way he had touched her, looked at her, kissed her, made love to her it had all seemed so remarkable and extraordinary to her but it had obviously been nothing more than the necessity of sealing the Unbreakable Marriage Covenant. He had never pretended to feel anything for her; he had never shown the least sign of attraction to her. She might be in the unfortunate situation of fancying her husband, but he obviously did not return the favour.

But we did it more than once, her inner strumpet pointed out. *He wasn't perfunctory he went out of his way to make it amazing.*

'Oh, sod off,' she muttered grumpily to her inner voice as she pulled weeds in the herb garden. "'Perfunctory" is a bit of a mouthful for a sex-crazed trollp.'

But, really if he didn't want her to become foolishly infatuated with him, why had he driven her to such heights of pleasure? What the hell was he playing at? If she fell like an idiot for her tall, lithe, snide bastard of a husband, he had no one but himself to blame and he would just have to suffer the consequences.

She took special pains over preparing their dinner that night. She had no intention of serving champagne and Scottish smoked salmon every day, but she had learnt from her mum a number of ways to smarten up a plain supper; her favourite had been freshly baked homemade bread.

That sorted, she showered, shaved, and applied orange-scented lotion to every inch of skin she could reach. Remembering Felix's instructions of the day before, she left off her bra and donned a thin white blouse and a pretty flowered skirt, leaving her legs and feet bare once again.

At six o'clock, she arranged herself carefully on the sofa and picked up her book.

At eight o'clock, she ate a piece of bread and butter to stave off the worst of her hunger pangs.

At nine o'clock, she sent Snowe with a tersely-worded missive:

WHERE ARE YOU?

At ten o'clock, Snowe returned with a tersely-worded reply.

I am at work. Do not wait up.

SXP

Hermione crumpled the piece of parchment and closed her eyes, trying to swallow past the painful lump in her throat. Why was he avoiding her? And why did she care so damn much? Why did life have to be so *stupidly* complicated?

Trying not to cry, she stormed into the kitchen to see to the uneaten supper, then she flew up the stairs and threw herself upon the bed, succumbing to a bout of tears. She swore to herself that she would not make a habit of it but hadn't she had earned a good cry?

At two o'clock in the morning, Severus crept into the bedroom to make sure she was breathing; he had been unable to make a determination from the doorway. Standing over her, looking down into her tear-streaked face, he could clearly see the rise and fall of her chest. Why had she cried? Had she been worried about him? He extinguished the candles and went down to grab a bite to eat from the kitchen.

He could understand that she might be a bit miffed to have prepared a meal which he did not return home in time to eat, but he thought the clear message of the carving knife which pinned the blameless loaf of home-made bread to the wooden cutting board was a bit much.

After tossing and turning on the camp bed in the study for the best part of two hours, he gave up. All he could think of was Hermione, lying in the bed across the hallway. He wanted to go in there and wake her, to explain it was best this way, to avoid any unnecessary emotional entanglements he wanted to undress her and touch and kiss her entire body he wanted to join with her and to find that peace which had been his the night before.

In desperation, knowing it was an act of rank cowardice, he cast a cleansing charm on himself, dressed, and Disapparated back to the office.

Hermione found his discarded clothes in a heap upon the camp bed the next morning. He had been here, but she had not known it. He had been here, but he had slept alone. He had been here, but he had no interest in seeing her.

Clearly, she was in need of further occupation. If she did not find something to do with her time, her husband's lack of interest in her, in their home, and in their marriage would break her as surely as if she had been taken captive by a Death Eater.

Unable to ignore the implications of *that*, she flung the clothing which smelled of him onto the unmade camp bed and flounced out of the room to get her shower.

Hermione gave the skirt to her business suit one final twitch before entering the office and approaching the good-looking young wizard at the reception desk.

'Good morning, Bunting,' she said when he looked up from his magazine and opened his lips to speak. 'Hermione Prince, here to see Professor McGonagall. I don't have an appointment, but will you please ask if she can see me, anyway?'

Bunting paled slightly. 'P-Prince?' he asked nervously. 'Here to see McGonagall, though right?'

Hermione nodded, wondering what she had done to make the young man appear so anxious. He stood and hurried down the hallway, returning almost at once with Minerva McGonagall.

'Hermione!' the older witch exclaimed, taking her hand with a smile. 'How good to see you! Are you all right?'

Hermione returned the clasp of Minerva's hand thankfully. 'Yes, but I would like to speak with you. Could we go to your office?'

'Of course!' Minerva said, standing back and indicating that Hermione should precede her down the hallway. 'You know your way I'll be with you in just a moment.' As Hermione walked away, Minerva bent to speak to Bunting in a whisper. 'Tell Mr Prince that I said he should stay in his office until I tell him the coast is clear.'

'But he's off taking a walk, Professor,' Bunting said. 'Is that Mrs Prince?'

Minerva closed her eyes in exasperation. 'Yes, Bunting, that is Mrs Prince, but she is not yet aware of her husband's occupation. Please, when he comes in, give him my message straight away.'

She left the erstwhile Hufflepuff watching the office door for the return of his employer and followed the pride of her former House down to her office. Entering, she found Hermione looking disconsolately out the window. The girl looked up as Minerva entered, and she seated herself before Minerva's desk with a business-like air. Minerva took her seat as well before saying, 'You look very well. I trust you got the house sorted out as you like?'

Hermione nodded. 'Yes, I have the house all arranged and that's why I've come, Professor. I'm here to accept the position you offered to me.'

Minerva blinked. 'I'm afraid I don't see how the two things are connected, my dear,' she said, stalling for time. She had offered Hermione that position without the whisper of a notion that she might one day marry Severus, and wasn't the issue now moot? Surely the girl meant to finish her graduate degree at the Muggle university before she began her work career?

Hermione's lips compressed. 'I find that I don't care to sit about the house like someone's housewife, Professor after all, *you* didn't do that, did you? I want to have a career

of my own. I have better things to do with my time than to wait for someone to come home from work.'

Minerva nodded, trying to look as if she were thinking things over. Severus was obviously making a right cock-up of his marriage if his bride was in Minerva's office less than forty-eight hours after the consummation, looking for something to get her out of the house and away from him. 'Yes, my dear, but I had understood that you meant to finish your last year at the university before you began your career?'

Hermione sat forward. 'I have thought of that, ma'am. I only have the one term left it isn't a full year and I don't see why I cannot finish the coursework and hold a job, as well. I am perfectly up to the task, I promise you.'

Minerva allowed a small smile to touch her lips. If anyone was up to the task of taking a graduate course of study whilst working a full time job, it was Hermione Granger. 'I am so very pleased that you have decided you wish to work with us,' she said, sitting forward and folding her hands before her on the desk. 'Nevertheless, there have been some changes around her since last we spoke about it.'

Almost as if on cue, the inner door to her office, accessible only to house-elves and fellow executives, burst open and Severus walked in, a sheaf of parchment in his hands. 'Minerva, what is this bollocks about a second proposal for Brocklehurst? The first plan was perfect for them I designed it myself! Do I need to pop around and have a word with ...?'

He stopped talking when he looked up from the parchment and saw the rigid form of his wife rising from the seat before him.

'You!' she spat with every evidence of great loathing. 'What are *you* doing here?'

He stood suddenly straighter, glaring at her as if she was a firstie who had forgotten her Potions homework. 'This is where I work, madam,' he said in arctic accents. 'Perhaps you would be good enough to explain what *you* are doing here?'

She laughed once, plainly incredulous. 'This?' She waved her hand about the office. '*This* is Professor McGonagall's office!'

He sneered, as he might if the firstie in question had insisted that someone else's Patronus had eaten her homework. 'Obviously, not this specific room. It is, as you have brilliantly noted, Minerva's office. Nevertheless, this is my company. I *own* it.'

Hermione's jaw dropped, and Minerva stood hurriedly. 'Please, Severus, you are welcome to use my office for as long as you like.'

Slipping out, she closed the door and marched down to Nigel Bunting's desk. 'Mr Prince is in my office, Bunting was I not quite clear that I did not wish to have him there?'

Bunting looked horrified. 'He hasn't passed my desk, Professor perhaps he came back from his walk when I was on my tea break ...'

Minerva just waved Bunting off and went in search of her own cup of tea, wishing she had thought to disarm the Princes before she had left her office; she was quite fond of her furnishings, after all.

Severus felt oddly wrong-footed, and he had no idea what to do to put things right. Why was Hermione here? And why was she so angry? And, did she have the carving knife with her?

'This? This is your company?' Hermione all but shouted. 'How could you not tell me that?'

He stalked past her and discarded the parchment on the desk. 'I scarcely see how that is pertinent,' he snapped.

'No,' she cried, 'I suppose you don't. I have no right to know where you go or what you do *in spite of the fact that the Ministry released you into MY CUSTODY*'

His brows contracted. 'You knew I was at work. Where else would I be?'

She seemed to swell with fury. 'I didn't have a *clue* where you were until I sent an owl to you last night! I'm responsible for you *you cannot* behave as if you answer to no one!'

His eyes narrowed. 'That does not explain why you are here now.'

She turned her back on him and went to look out the window. 'That's none of your business.'

He felt a flash of anger which he knew to be irrational. 'Look at me when I'm speaking to you, girl.'

She remained where she was. 'Go to hell, Severus.'

He closed the distance between them in three strides, pulling her about by the arm to face him. 'What you do *is* my business,' he hissed. 'I am your husband.'

She flared at him so violently that the pulse of magic pushed him back; she completed the job by jerking her arm away from him. 'Oh, so you're my *husband* when it gives you an excuse for doing whatever you bloody well want to do but the rest of the time I can go hang!'

He glared at her. 'What in the world are you on about, girl?'

Another bit of uncontrolled magic pushed him farther back. 'My name is *Hermione*, if you don't mind or Mrs Prince and isn't *that* amusing?' She took a deep breath and walked away from him, beginning to pace behind Minerva's desk. 'I am of so little importance in your scheme of things that I don't even rate being told the name of your company or the business in which you are involved.'

Knowing full well he was at fault, Severus picked up the parchment again from the desk and turned a shoulder to her. 'My office is no place for this display of hysterics. Go home. I will speak with you there.'

'Oh, really?' she said, her voiced seeming to throb with indignation. 'When will that be? When I'm sleeping? When you come by to drop off your dirty laundry and pick up clean clothes?'

He kept his eyes averted, staring at the paperwork in his hands, unseeing. It took everything he possessed to keep from jerking her up and kissing her senseless, kissing her until she forgave him, kissing her until neither of them could think of anything besides the other.

'Fine.' She spoke the word with great finality, which dragged his eyes from the paperwork to her retreating back as she marched to the door. 'This was such a huge mistake. I'll get out of your house so you can stand to be there.'

'No!' The word felt as if it was jerked from him.

Hermione did not slow or turn to him.

'Hermione! No!'

He dropped the papers, and they fell to the floor, scattering over the carpet, but he walked right over them to put one hand firmly against the door to prevent her from opening it. He was standing inches from her; the business-like knot of her hair left her lovely neck bare to him, and the scent of her orange bathing gel floated up to him. A sudden image of her, naked and needy in the bathtub, speared his consciousness and his hands closed over her shoulders, his head dipping so he could take a breath of her hair.

'Naiad,' he murmured, nuzzling the hair above her ear and pressing hot, greedy kisses to the back of her neck. 'You mustn't speak of leaving me.'

She twisted in his grip, and she was unaccountably clinging to him, crying, great bunches of his shirt being crumpled in her fists. Thinking only of soothing her, he swept her up and sat in Minerva's desk chair, settling her in his lap. 'No, Sprite you mustn't cry,' he murmured, kissing the tears from her cheeks.

'W-was it so bad?' she sobbed. 'Was I so awful at it?'

He cradled her against his chest with his right arm, rocking her gently back and forth. 'I've never known you to be awful at anything you've ever done,' he assured her, wondering what she was on about.

'Then why?' she cried, turning her tear-drenched face to look up into his eyes. 'Why did you run away from me? Don't you want to be with me? Don't you want to m-make love again?'

Gobsmacked, he stared at her, frozen in the act of murmuring another meaningless reassurance.

'I can l-learn to be better at it,' she assured him. 'I just need to practice. I always learnt more from practical sessions than f-from classroom lectures.'

'Practice?' he repeated stupidly. 'What is it that you want to practice, exactly?'

'Everything,' she said and astonished him by pressing a very wet, but very demanding, kiss to his lips.

For several minutes, there was nothing but the woman in his arms, inciting him past the point of reason. A noise in the hallway brought him back to a sense of their surroundings, and he released her lips, closing his eyes and pressing his cheek to the top of her head. 'This is not a marriage of love, Hermione,' he reminded her gently. 'I don't expect you to be a dutiful wife.'

She pushed on his chest until she was more or less upright, and she accepted the handkerchief he offered her. 'Sod dutiful,' she said baldly. 'It may not be a marriage of love, Severus,' she added, wiping her cheeks, 'but it *is* a marriage for life.' She completed her use of the handkerchief with a blow of her little nose, then she tucked the linen away in the pocket of her navy blue over-robe and looked at him sternly. 'So, if love comes of our marriage, you'll just have to be brave about it. You're stuck with me.'

The only answer to this idiocy seemed to be to kiss her again. He had scarcely begun to do so properly when the inner office door opened again, and Lupin and Moody appeared in the doorway.

'Hello Severus good to see you, Hermione where is Minerva?' Lupin lounged in the doorway, smirking at them.

'Get lost, Lupin can't you see I'm on my honeymoon?' Severus growled. 'Tell Minerva she'll see me when she sees me.'

And clutching his prize to him with desperate tenderness, he Disapparated directly to their bedroom, where he proceeded to investigate her assertions of a desire to 'practice.'

The next month was a very happy one. Severus could not shake the feeling of unreality which assailed him when he stopped to think about it so he didn't. He experienced it. His Sprite wished nothing more than to feed him, read with him, talk to him, and take him off to bed and have sex with him. The enlarged bathtub became a permanent feature of their bathroom, and creative uses were found for it. He felt the occasional twinge of guilt for his prolonged absence from Security Solutions, but as Minerva had tartly pointed out to him, the business had run smoothly for two years without his daily presence it could undoubtedly stand for him to take a proper honeymoon.

Even his mother seemed happier, participating in perfectly civil exchanges with Hermione and humming to herself at odd moments.

The little terraced house on Spinner's End had never known such idyllic days. One summer afternoon, Hermione lured him out to sip Pimm's beneath the shade of the old tree in the back garden; as was wont to happen, her chair was soon abandoned in favour of his and they cuddled together there, the drinks glasses forgotten, the ice melting in the heat of the August sun.

Pushing the blasted red peasant blouse up, Severus buried his overlarge nose between her breasts, which seemed even more succulent to him of late. She twisted and sighed at his ministrations to her nipples, and he said, 'Is it only with this shirt that you never wear a brassiere? If so, I should order you one in every colour of the rainbow.'

Her gurgle of laughter filled him with that roiling, burgeoning feeling in his chest; he felt it nearly every day now, though, so it did not alarm him as it once had done.

'I wore this shirt on our wedding night,' she said.

'I know,' he interpolated, lazily nibbling again at the soft underside of her breast.

'Well, I left off the bra then because I was trying to lure you to bed,' she said.

He raised his head to look into her eyes; they had discussed this before. 'I still can't believe you thought I needed to be lured.' Hermione flushed, something she had done frequently in the beginning of their honeymoon, but which she did less often now, six weeks on. 'And what brings this colour to your cheeks, hmm?' He rubbed his thumb over her nipple, one eyebrow raised interrogatively. She shivered, arching into his touch; he moved his hand away. 'Tell me, little Sprite, or it's no more petting for you.'

She took his hand and brought it back to her breast. 'I was so worried about getting you into bed,' she confided, 'that I had Harry procure some Felix Felicis potion from Professor Slughorn, and I took it before we went down to dinner that night. The Felix told me to wear this top and to leave off my bra.'

Severus stared at her, stunned. 'You took *Felix Felicis* before we had sex?'

He had abandoned her breasts, so she pulled her shirt down and stood up. 'Yes I told you, I was determined, but had no confidence that I could seduce you.'

Severus burst out laughing, reaching up and pulling her back down to his lap. 'You are the most redoubtable girl; I'm thankful you were on our side in the war,' he said, before kissing her to breathlessness. Releasing her lips, he murmured in her ear, 'Don't you know that infertile women take Felix Felicis to increase their chances of pregnancy?'

Hermione sat back and stared at him. 'Slughorn never told us that!'

'Well, it's not one of the advertised uses of the potion, but it is a well-documented side-effect. It's a good thing your fallopian tubes were damaged beyond healing, or you'd be shopping for a cot, by now.' He pulled her more securely against his chest, sliding his hands up her bare back beneath the red peasant blouse. 'We'll do very well without sprogs, you and I. The little buggers are hell on one's sex life.'

Hermione slipped away from her satiated husband and closed the bathroom door behind her. After emptying her frequently-full bladder, she stared in the mirror at her swollen breasts and counted again in her mind the weeks since her last period. It had been about a week before her Azkaban wedding two weeks before her wedding night

which would place her ovulation right around the time of their Felix Felicis-enhanced wedding night.

The tubes are ruined, she reminded herself. *The Healers said that even though my womb was intact and my ovaries were unharmed, a fertilised egg could never make it into my womb to implant.*

She closed her eyes and gathered her courage. Why should this be more frightening than standing with Harry against Voldemort and the Death Eaters? Because she desperately wanted it to be true and because she desperately hoped it was not true.

She took a deep breath, stood up straight, and cast a pregnancy scan on herself. Before her wondering eyes, a golden aura emanated from her. Ah, she was in good health! Excellent. She had lowered her wand when the faint echo limned her aura, then formed a perfect oval before her lower abdomen.

It was pink.

Her knees seemed to weaken, and she clutched the sides of the sink, sagging.

She was pregnant. She was going to have a baby girl.

She had sworn to Severus that she was unable to bear a child promised him that he would not be called upon to be a parent to a baby. He had told her how that pleased him that he liked being alone with her and they were happy together why did this have to happen *now*?

Stumbling to the toilet, she fell to her knees and was sick.

A/N: Nereid In Greek mythology, a sea-nymph, one of 50 or (in some accounts) 100 daughters of Nereus and Doris. They lived with their father in the depths of the sea. Thetis and Galatea were Nereids.

SubHub told me that Hermione breaks Severus in this chapter - that when she turns to leave him in Minerva's office, he is driven to pursue and restrain her. Happily for us all, she didn't mind.

Chapter 10: Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone

Chapter 10 of 11

Hermione runs away to think, Eileen Snape has a word to say to her son, Harry and Ginny have a special night, and Severus and Hermione discuss their future.

Chapter 10

Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone

Severus sat on the sofa in the sitting room at number eleven, Spinner's End, watching Hermione as she arranged fresh flowers from the garden in a vase on the table across the room. Her wild brown curls were unbound down her back; she wore a simple, loose-fitting blouse and a matching, flowing skirt. She had grown so lovely in his eyes that she often took his breath away simply by entering a room. He had heard all his life, and for as long he had disdainfully dismissed the notion, that happiness in love makes a woman radiant yet the old cliché was made evident in his wife. There was a luminescence about her that was impossible to miss.

Hermione crossed the room and sat down on the sofa beside him, placing her cheek against his heart when he put his arm about her shoulders. 'Dinner will be ready soon,' she said, closing her eyes.

Severus set his book upon the side table and stroked her cheek. 'Shall I open the wine?'

She tilted her face to look up into his eyes. 'Would you mind very much if we don't have wine? I have Pimm's and lager in the fridge, if you like. I'm having pumpkin juice.'

'You've stopped drinking wine altogether,' he murmured, raising a rakish eyebrow. 'How am I to get you tipsy and have my way with you if you don't imbibe alcohol?'

Hermione sat up and pushed her hair behind her ear. 'It's just so hot,' she said vaguely. 'Too hot for wine.'

She stood and wandered aimlessly to the window, gazing out on their neat but non-descript front garden. He watched her, wondering about the change in her lately. She was quieter, speaking more softly and less often. She responded to him as readily and in some ways was more aggressive sexually than she had been before; orgasm had moved her to tears more than once in the last few days. His concern had been allayed when she assured him that it was a reaction to being very deeply and profoundly moved by their lovemaking. It had seemed rather odd to him, but then, the entire phenomena of having this vital young girl accepting him wanting him was so bizarre that he was scarcely able to comprehend it.

'What news did you receive of Miss Weasley today?' he inquired casually. She had exchanged notes by owl with Ginevra Weasley several times in the last month and had explained that the notes were full of 'girl talk.' One such note had been delivered by Snowe earlier that day.

'She's back from Ron's wedding in America,' Hermione said, moving away from the window and beginning to browse the bookshelves.

His eyes narrowed, and he watched her closely. He knew the Weasley whelp had abandoned her after the end of the war due to her inability to provide him with a houseful of redundant, ginger-haired trouble-makers. Was news of Ronald Weasley's marriage to another witch making her unhappy? He ignored the flare of jealousy that rose in his chest, seeming to do battle with the now-familiar roiling unquiet which she elicited in him. She had confided it all to him with complete trust, confessing that she had never felt for Weasley what she felt for him, Severus yet a lifetime of insecurity was not easy to overcome; he could not bear the idea of another man with his wife.

Hermione jumped when the kitchen timer dinged and she hurried across the room, saying over her shoulder, 'Dinner is ready!'

He stood and followed her, with a mental vow to be vigilant. After pudding, he led her up to bed.

Hermione turned her face away as the tears overwhelmed her again, clinging to Severus with her arms and her legs. With an insistent push, he rose on his elbows, displacing her arms from his shoulders. Still panting from the completion of their love-making, he looked down at her, clearly alarmed.

'Why are you crying?' he asked softly, dipping his head to nuzzle her cheek.

'I'm fine I'm sorry it's probably just that time of the month, you know,' she babbled, desperate to appease his curiosity.

He moved his weight from her body and stretched out beside her, propping his head on his hand. 'You have those? I thought that your injury and you haven't had one in all this time, now, nearly two months.'

'It's irregular,' Hermione lied, closing her eyes, wishing she had not said anything. She did not want him curious about her cycle, or lack thereof oh, dear God, how could she bear to give up what they had found together?

Taking her chin in his hand, he turned her to face him. 'I wish you would tell me what is distressing you,' he said, looking into her eyes.

Hermione pulled away from him. 'Don't even think about using Legilimency on me, Severus.'

He pushed himself into a sitting position. 'Don't tempt me by hiding things from me,' he snapped.

'I'm not '

'Don't lie to me. Tell me you don't wish to speak of it, but don't insult my intelligence by pretending you are not upset.' He stood, retrieving his trousers from the floor and stepping into them. 'Is it because Ronald Weasley married that American woman?'

'No!' She sat up and crawled to the side of the bed, reaching her arms about him and pulling until he permitted her to embrace him, her lips moving over his chest. 'I don't care about anyone but you and I never will.'

Severus looked down at her, pleased by her declaration, yet still somewhat doubtful. 'Well, what is there to cry about in that?' he asked, wiping a tear from beneath her eye with the pad of his thumb.

She did not answer him, but unbuttoned his fly, murmuring a cleansing charm as she did so. He stood as still as a statue as she braved new territory, pushing the trousers off his hips and down his legs, her face following down to nuzzle about in his groin. Her voice floated up to him.

'Come back to bed, Severus.'

He did not wait for a second invitation, but lay upon his back, his hands buried in her unruly hair, as she reignited his passion.

'Naiad!' he gasped.

Hermione held him to her as he slept, tears rolling down her cheeks. It had been nearly a week since she had seen the truth of the pregnancy scan, and still she could not bring herself to tell him about the baby. Each day she promised herself that she would, and each night she lay awake castigating herself for her cowardice.

She did not know how it had happened - how she had fallen so completely and irretrievably in love with Severus Prince - but she had done so. Two months ago she would have sworn she could bear any loss, if only she could feel life quickening within her womb that having a baby of her own would be such a joy that it would cancel out any off-setting unhappiness. Now, she had found something even more important to her than motherhood the man sleeping in her arms.

And miraculously, he returned her love. He had never said so, and perhaps he did not even think in such terms, but his actions spoke loudly enough for her to be convinced. She could not abide the thought of giving up one iota of her joy in their marriage. But he had roundly admitted that he preferred a life with no children, had whispered to her that he would never have to share her breasts with a suckling child, had exulted in their perfect completion in one another.

She did not know what to do and obviously could not come to a rational conclusion when her days were saturated with him his voice, his eyes, his hands, his lips, his body filling hers soon, he would return to work, and then she would have time to think. She could wait to make a decision until then.

On the next Monday morning, seven weeks after their marriage, Severus forced himself to go back to work. He kissed Hermione fleetingly, bade her to be a good girl whilst he was away, and Disappeared.

He had had much to bear in the way of congratulations from his colleagues and employees, but he endured it with equanimity. The day passed quickly, and after an afternoon meeting with Moody and Lupin regarding the next field agent incursion, he elected to go home early.

He was only mildly surprised when he arrived home to find her gone. It was only four o'clock, after all, and she would not have been expecting him for another hour or two. He checked the back garden and the cellar for her before going upstairs and finding upon the rolltop desk in the study a note addressed to him in her neat handwriting. He sat down and opened the note.

Dear Severus,

I have never in my life been as content as I have been here in our little house with you. I have never understood why life has to be so complicated, but it seems something as simple as happiness is not meant to be, in this world.

I have something I need to think about and I don't seem to be able to make myself concentrate on it when I am near you it's not your fault, I just don't seem to be able to think about anything but touching you when you are in the room.

So, I've gone away for a day or so. Please don't worry about me; I am perfectly safe. I will be home soon, and when I am, we can talk.

~Hermione

Severus remained immobile in his chair for a long time, the parchment clutched in his hand.

She had left him.

His brain tried to remind him about the fond assurances she had written, but his heart was too frightened to listen. She was unhappy, and she had left him and she was trying to gather the courage to break it to him gently. She had waited until the first day he was gone, and she had fled.

Folding the note as it had been, he slipped it carefully into the inner pocket of his robes, then he strode into their bedroom. He flung open the clothes cupboard, expecting to see all of her clothes gone, but it appeared exactly as it had done that morning, when he had dressed. A quick prowling around the room and into the bathroom proved that her cosmetics and personal items were all in place. Where had she gone, then, taking nothing with her?

He snorted. Away with a lover is where a woman could go without taking anything with her. He knew only too well how long Hermione could happily be persuaded to go about without clothing, under the proper supervision.

The feeling of possessive rage which swept through him at the thought of Hermione with another man sent him out of the room with an inarticulate roar of fury. He pounded down the staircase into the sitting room, with no clear idea of how to proceed.

'Essex?'

He drew up short when addressed by his mother's portrait. He turned to find her scowling at him.

'What is it, Mother?'

Eileen's thin-lipped mouth became quite pinched. 'Don't you take that tone with *me*, young man. Is that why she's gone? Did you take out your dreadful temper on her?'

Severus gasped at the indignity of the accusation. 'I have never so much as raised my voice to that girl!'

'There are other ways to break a woman's heart,' Eileen persisted inexorably. 'Cold silences are every bit as damaging as unbridled ranting. Were you unfeeling? Did she have the slightest notion of how you care for her?'

Severus turned his back to the portrait, his mind scrambling fiercely to recall any instances of unkindness of any sign of unhappiness on Hermione's part. 'We've been ' his face contorted as he spoke the banal word, 'happy. Until ...'

Eileen allowed him to pace twice before her portrait before she prodded him. 'Until what, Essex?'

He looked up, white-faced. 'Until this last week. Before that, I was sure she was very pleased with me.' He felt foolish saying it, just as he had felt foolish for believing it but had his Sprite not shown every sign of passionate attachment to him?

'You know how emotional women in her condition can be, stupid boy! It is your duty to reassure her, to tell her she is beautiful, to cater to her whims it is the least you can do for the girl bearing my grandchild.'

'Mum what are you *on* about? She's not she can't be you see, it's just not possible ...'

Eileen's laugh was the most cheerful sound she had uttered in longer than Severus could remember. 'You're a lad and she's a lass, love. That's all it's taken since the first man wooed the first maid.'

Stubbornly, he shook his head. 'No no, she isn't able to conceive. She was very careful to tell me that before we married. She'd already been deserted by one suitor because of it.'

'She won't be the first woman to catch pregnant when she's been told it's not possible. She's been sick every morning for the last ten days, you know.'

His head came up at that. 'I didn't know are you sure?'

'Some mornings she didn't get the door closed behind her I know what I heard. How can you not have noticed how she glows?'

'I *did* notice that!' he said defensively, beginning to pace again, and thinking out loud. 'I just misinterpreted it. She stopped cooking breakfast and began serving fruit and shop-bought pastries she stopped eating breakfast with me, always insisting she had already eaten she stopped drinking alcohol ...'

Eileen watched him complacently as he began to work out the answer to one plus one equals three. 'But why did she go?'

'Girls get funny ideas in their heads when they're pregnant it's all those hormones, you know. Is there any reason why she wouldn't tell you? Any reason why she might think you don't want a child?'

The only answer she received was a quiet but vehement review of every swearword he knew. At last he whirled to her, his face more hopeful, now.

'Where has she gone, Mum?'

'A girl runs to her mother in these times,' Eileen informed him.

'But her mother is dead,' he said impatiently. 'Where else could she go?'

'If she can't go to her mother, then she goes to her best friend,' the portrait proclaimed with authority.

His answer to this was uttered like an expletive, though it was not one with which she was familiar.

'Potter.'

In an instant, he had turned on the spot and was gone.

Harry loved his friends fiercely, but there were times when he wished he cared a bit less about them, because it could certainly complicate his life. After travelling to America to stand up with Ron at his wedding and having the opportunity to spend hours of unfettered time in the presence of the love of his life, he had come to a decision. If she would have him, he would marry Ginny Weasley.

He had made plans for tonight, including a romantic candlelight dinner prepared by his own hands, to be followed by a marriage proposal. The ring was in his pocket, seeming to burn against his skin. He was ready.

The first sign of the plan going pear-shaped was having Hermione show up on his doorstep in tears that morning. They had spent all morning and most of the afternoon talking over her quandary, and she was now tucked up in her bedroom upstairs, to rest and spend some quiet time. She knew of his plans for the evening, and she had promised to remain as quiet as a mouse.

After getting Hermione settled, he had prepared the only meal he knew how to make spaghetti with meatballs and showered, shaved, and dressed in his best jeans and newest tee-shirt. At precisely six o'clock, Ginny had knocked on the door, and Harry had let her in and placed a surreptitious Imperturbable Charm on the front door.

Now, dinner was complete, and he and Ginny had moved into the sitting room with their pudding. Ginny was so beautiful, with her coppery hair shining in the candlelight, her beloved brown eyes full of an expression that made his heart race. She was laughing at his jokes and reaching out as they spoke to touch his hand, to place a hand upon his arm all was going beautifully

Until Severus Snape no, Prince - tore down the wards on Harry's front door with all the finesse of a Muggle with a fire-axe.

Ginny saw Harry wince and said, 'What is it, Harry?'

He gave her a lop-sided grin. 'You'll see, soon enough.'

The front door slammed, and a familiar voice carried up the stairs. 'I'd like a word, Potter.'

Harry stood and moved to the door, where he met Professor Snape no,*Prince* - and barred his way in. Ginny watched as her former teacher glared about the very dimly

candle-lit sitting room.

'Such romanticism, Potter,' the older wizard spat, giving Harry a shove which caused him to stumble back. 'For whose benefit, I wonder?' the silky voice continued menacingly.

Ginny was on her feet, wand in hand, with a speed which seemed to impress Harry. 'Touch him again, Professor, and I won't hesitate to hex you,' she said firmly.

'Miss Weasley?' the professor said, obviously confused.

'Yes, sir. And where I come from, it is considered extremely rude to enter someone's house without knocking.' Ginny held her wand on her former teacher without a blink.

The gaunt-faced man swallowed, obviously abashed, and gave a stiff bow, saying, 'You didn't hear my knock, for there was an Imperturbable Charm upon the door. Please accept my apologies, Miss Weasley Mr Potter.'

Ginny glanced at Harry why on earth would he place an Imperturbable Charm on the front door? She lowered her wand but stayed on her feet to await developments.

'She's in her room,' Harry said to his best friend's husband.

Prince looked at him sharply. 'Will she see me?'

Harry nodded. 'If you're not a fool and for all the things I've ever thought about you, I've never thought *that* she'll be very happy to share her news with you,' Harry said. 'You are one lucky bastard, you know?'

An expression that no student of his had ever witnessed touched the hawk-like face. 'Is it true, then?' he said.

Harry nodded. He began, 'She's upstairs on the second floor, third door on the left ' then he smirked, 'and don't forget to knock.'

Severus Prince hastily left the room and Ginny turned to Harry. 'What in the world was that all about? I thought they were happy and is Hermione here? Why didn't you tell me?'

Harry walked over to Ginny, his hands held out; she immediately placed her hands in his. He said, 'They are, and she is - and *we* were ...'

'But why is she here?' Ginny demanded, giving his hands a little jerk. 'What's going on?'

Harry sighed and sat, pulling Ginny down beside him. 'She's pregnant but she hasn't told him '

'Pregnant?' Ginny screeched. 'But why is she *here*?'

'She was upset, so she came home. I *am* her best friend, Gin.'

Ginny's eyes narrowed. 'Why didn't you tell me she's here?'

Harry released Ginny's hands and sighed, running a hand through his messy mop of hair. 'She knew this evening was special, and she didn't want to interrupt.'

Ginny's eyebrows went up. 'What's so special about tonight?' she demanded.

Harry uttered a hollow laugh. 'I am going to ask you to marry me,' he admitted.

Ginny blinked and felt her tummy swoop in the direction of her feet. '*You are*?' she whispered.

'I am,' Harry answered firmly, his emerald green eyes holding hers fearlessly.

Ginny swallowed and sat up straighter. 'Well?' she prompted.

And when he pulled a small square velvet box from his pocket and knelt at her feet, she could not help the tears which started to her eyes.

Hermione sat propped up in the bed in her old room, trying to concentrate on the paperback novel she had excavated from a box of things she had left in her closet when she had moved to Spinner's End. The room seemed strange to her now, though; the single bed was too small, she missed the colourful cushions she had sewn and she desperately missed her husband.

She sniffled and dabbed at her eyes with the rather damp handkerchief she held. Harry had told her to go home and tell Severus about the baby he would not even discuss any other option with her. She knew he was right she felt a bit silly now for becoming so upset about it but the pregnancy was completely unexpected, and she could not help but be fearful of both how Severus would react to the news and how it would change their relationship.

A knock sounded at the door; she wondered if it was Ginny coming in to show off her new engagement ring. Hermione tucked the handkerchief in her pocket and called out with forced cheerfulness, 'Come in!'

The door opened and Severus entered, closing it behind him and leaning his back against it.

'Severus!' she gasped.

'Why am I out chasing you all over London?' he inquired neutrally.

'I left a note didn't you see it?' she asked anxiously. 'I wouldn't go without letting you know.'

'For future reference, Hermione, "Don't worry, I'll be fine" and "We'll talk when I come home" *are not* messages guaranteed to put the mind of one's husband at ease quite the opposite, in fact.'

He sounded natural enough, but his expression was shuttered she couldn't tell how he was feeling. 'I didn't mean to worry you,' she said in a small voice.

One corner of his mouth quirked up. 'I see that you are unharmed, so my mind is now at rest. But what are you doing here? The study must be converted to a nursery, and you cannot expect me to do that alone.'

Her mouth dropped open. 'You knew!'

He moved away from the door, crossing the floor in three long strides and seating himself on the edge of her bed. 'I did *not* know, my Sprite forgive me.'

The instant he was close enough for her to touch him, Hermione held out her arms, and he pulled her into his crushing embrace. 'My mother's portrait informed me,' he murmured into her crazy hair. 'But why did *you* not tell me?'

Hermione clutched at his robes, the feeling of immense relief flooding her body. Emotional distance from him had become painful for her, and the last ten days had been rendered horrific by her attempts to hide the truth from him. Now, the dam of dissembling broke, and the strain of the last days came pouring from her.

'I had *promised* you there would be no children it was practically the first thing I told you! And you've told me over and over again that you *like* it that way and we've been so happy, I just can't bear for that to end!'

With one large, long-fingered hand, Severus held her head to his chest as she sobbed; with the other, he rubbed soothing circles on her back. With his torso, he gently rocked her, murmuring endearments. As the storm subsided, he pulled a fresh handkerchief from his robes, which she gratefully accepted, and he began to speak to her.

'My beautiful Naiad,' he crooned, now stroking her hair. 'Do you know that I gave up the notion of having a wife and family before I was twenty-five years old?'

Hermione pulled back from him, the newly drenched handkerchief grasped in her hand, and hiccupped, 'R-really?'

He nodded, gently urging her to lay her head against his chest again, which she happily did. 'Yes. I believed that turning spy for the Order was as good as signing my own death warrant but I was willing to do it, as expiation for my guilt. The first war ended, then, and I was a free agent for many years, yet I never had much of a social life. I was unsuccessful with women, you see.'

Hermione sighed. 'I don't understand how that can be, Severus.'

He pressed his lips to the top of her head and said, 'That is what makes you unique, Sprite. But when the Dark Lord returned, the stakes were much higher than they had been before, and I truly felt that I would not survive the outcome of the second war. I never, ever thought I would have a wife, much less a child.' He stopped stroking her hair, and the palm of his hand cupped her chin, tilting her face up to his. 'I was grateful for your offer to marry me and quickly became besotted with you I said those things about children because I wished to put your mind at rest because I wanted you to know that the gift of *you* was more than enough for me certainly more than I had ever expected to have.'

Hermione looked into the black eyes she had once thought were an endless abyss and now saw such a burning intensity there that she felt as if she was truly seeing him as a whole person for the first time. 'So ... you don't mind about the baby?' she asked.

He tightened his arms about her and said in a voice made husky by emotion, 'I am filled with such primordial joy moved so deeply that I will never be able to express my gratitude to you adequately, Hermione. I am very much afraid that I will have to spend my life thanking you every single day.'

They sat quietly together, each so calmed by the presence of the other that it seemed as if their hearts beat with one pulse. At last, Severus said, 'But what about you, my Sprite? I have made you pregnant when you did not expect it perhaps this is not the time in your life when you would have chosen to have a baby. Does it not upset your plans for the future?'

Hermione immediately shook her head. 'Oh, no. I only have one term more at uni I will be finished by Christmas, and the baby won't be due until spring so school won't be affected. I will most likely enter the workforce later than I might have done otherwise, but there is no reason why I can't pursue my career and be a wife and mother as well my own mum made a success of it, and I shall, too.' She smiled at him mistily. 'It's not as if I can say, oh, let's do this another time, instead this is a one-off, Severus I'm pretty sure of that.'

He stroked her face and said, 'You wanted a baby very badly, didn't you?'

She nodded. 'I tried not to mind, but knowing I *couldn't* have a baby made me want one all the more.'

He slipped his hand up beneath her blouse, over her still-flat tummy, to stroke her burgeoning breast through the silken fabric of her bra. 'Then that is why our marriage consummation satisfied my life debt to you the combined magicks somehow forced an egg through your tubes and into your womb, where it was penetrated by my sperm.'

As he spoke, he moved his hand down and pressed gently against her lower abdomen; Hermione felt her womb throb once in answer to his words and his touch, and her eyes fluttered closed. His hand moved lower still, so that he was stroking her mons through the heavy denim of her jeans. 'Is there anything else you haven't told me?' he asked, bending his head to capture the lobe of her ear between his teeth. 'Now is a good time to bare your soul before I bare your body and ravish you properly.'

Hermione squirmed into the pressure of his hand upon her and said, 'No you have all my secrets, now.' Opening her eyes, she reached with one hand to stroke his face, tracing her fingers lovingly over his cheek, down his nose, and over his lips. 'Is there anything you haven't told me?'

He shifted her weight so that she was more upright, her cheek nestled against his shoulder, and he bent his head so that his lips ghosted over hers as he said, 'Yes, there is I love you, Hermione.'

Harry had his hands buried in Ginny's fiery red hair, feasting on her mouth, when the silvery otter gambolled down the stairs and into the sitting room. Ginny was the one who noticed the difference in the quality of the light in the room, and broke the kiss to say, 'We have a visitor.'

Harry released her and half turned to look over his shoulder, expecting to find Hermione or Prince in the doorway but it was Hermione's Patronus which capered about him and Ginny on the couch before saying, 'Thank you, Harry. We've gone home I'll talk to you later.' The otter then looked at a slightly embarrassed Ginny, who felt compelled to tug her blouse down before the Patronus said, 'Congratulations, Ginny Severus and I both wish you happy!' That said, the Patronus frolicked to the door and dissipated in the air.

'About bloody time,' Harry muttered before standing and sweeping a giggling Ginny up into his arms. 'We can move this party to its proper conclusion,' and he carried his love up the stairs to his bedroom.

A/N: See! I can write a story where Hermione gets pregnant! *Preens self*. I only did it for Ginny_Weasley31, though. She got me to write my first Prison!Snape, my first Pregnant!Hermione, and my first HBP-compliant fic - just in time for DH! One more chapter to come!

Epilogue: In the Blink of an Eye

Chapter 11 of 11

Vignettes from the rest of our couple's lives together.

Epilogue

In the Blink of an Eye

Severus lay beside his Sprite, his cheek upon her lower abdomen, looking up the length of her torso into her loving if amused brown eyes.

'Are you attempting communication?' she asked, smiling. 'Because the baby is about the size of a shrimp, now.'

Quirking an insolent eyebrow, he placed his lips near her navel, and said, 'Do not listen to your mother, Felix. She will learn that size is not necessarily a reliable indicator of ability.' In response to her gurgle of laughter, the other eyebrow rose, as well. 'Do you doubt me and my son, Felix?'

Hermione reached down and twined the fingers of one hand in the long, lank black hair. 'I hope you won't be too disappointed, Severus ...'

Gently he disengaged her fingers and slid up the bed, pulling her against the full length of his body. 'I cannot imagine being disappointed in either of you,' he said, his voice suddenly husky.

She burrowed her face into his neck. 'Well, good because your child is a daughter, not a son so you must call her Felicity, not Felix.'

Almost idly, he caressed the softness of her back. 'I do not see why I cannot call my daughter Felix,' he objected. 'Felix Prince is a fine name for a girl.' Distracted by the silken texture of her skin, his hands began to roam, working their magic upon her, evoking the soft whimpers of pleasure which compelled him to strive for even more responsive murmurs from her.

Hermione retaliated, her small hands pleasuring him, demonstrating all the skill she had learnt in the short time of their marriage, removing all thought from his mind save the necessity of joining with her, finding again in the haven of her embrace the serenity his restless soul had ever sought, but never found, until now.

And for all her life, Felicity Eileen Prince was called 'Felix' by her perverse father, who referred to her by her proper name only when he was very cross with her.

In December, before Yule, Hermione completed her graduate course of study at the Birkbeck College in Bloomsbury. In celebration, Severus arranged a soirée in her honour at a small hotel, inviting all of her friends and many of his colleagues and business associates, as well. She had been ignominiously married in a prison and deprived of a proper wedding, but he could provide for her, at the very least, a reasonable facsimile of a reception.

In a quiet moment during the festivities, he sat sipping at a glass of Ogden's and watching his Sprite as she chatted animatedly with Potter and his fiancée, Miss Weasley. Pregnancy was making Hermione, impossibly, more delectable and enticing than she had ever been before. The heightened hormonal state of her body during this, her second trimester, had her in a perpetual state of readiness to receive often, to demand, like the vixen she was his immediate and thorough attentions. He was frequently tired, to the point of inarticulate enervation, but he was so deeply and utterly enthralled by the Nereid who had walked out of the depths of the sea and into his life and his bed that he cared for nothing else.

When all of their guests had been thanked and wished a happy Christmas, Severus took his happily tired wife home and led her upstairs.

'I am *so* sleepy,' she said, stifling a yawn behind her hand. She frowned at the sight of a packed trunk in the middle of the bedroom floor, which had not been there when they had left for the party. 'What is this?'

Severus watched her through half-lidded eyes. 'If you don't mind, my dear, we will delay going to sleep for just a bit longer.'

Hermione looked quickly into his face. 'What are you up to, Severus?'

With a lazy smile, he produced a sweets-tin from the pocket of his robes. 'This is a Portkey, little Naiad. I would like to take you for a proper honeymoon if you will come with me.'

She looked at him with eyes brimming with wonder. 'You are much too good to me,' she said.

'Nonsense. This is both your Christmas present and my holiday break. We'll be back in time for the new year.' He took the trunk in one hand and extended the Portkey. 'Come along the Caribbean is warm at this time of year I believe you will like it.'

And indeed, he was not disappointed. The private villa, with its own beach, was quite expensive, but the memories of that trip remained indelibly imprinted in his mind for the rest of his life. Hermione had required very little encouragement to frolic with him in the warm ocean; after the first few days, she had even been willing to dispense with her swimsuit. The vision of his naked pregnant wife rising from the sea, her long hair drenched and adhering to her face and shoulders, her belly swelling gently with the growth of their child, her pregnancy-enhanced breasts streaming with water which coursed down to bead in the brown curls at the apex of her thighs, was the answer to every fantasy in which he had ever indulged.

And the Sand-Repelling Charm, for which he had paid the wrinkled old crone at the island village market an indecent sum of gold, had even made it possible to ravish his avidly willing water Sprite on the beach without unpleasant consequences.

At Easter, Harry Potter and Ginevra Weasley were married. Apparently, every Weasley on three continents was in attendance; never had Severus seen such a mass of red hair. Due to her advanced pregnancy, Hermione had bowed out of standing as matron of honour, but she and Severus were in attendance, seated near the back of the wedding hall, in deference to the baby's frequent bouncing upon Hermione's bladder. He Disapparated with her to the Burrow as soon as the wedding was over, to await the beginning of what would undoubtedly turn out to be a long, drawn-out reception. As the other wedding guests began to assemble, Severus hovered about the edges, exchanging nods with fellow Order members, conversing with work colleagues, and keeping a sharp eye on Hermione.

Thus it was that he was privileged to witness his wife's reunion with her erstwhile lover, Ronald Weasley. The boisterous best man was charging about the Weasleys' back garden in a typically Gryffindor fashion when he was brought to a screeching halt by the sight of a nine-months-pregnant Hermione, standing beneath a spreading elm.

'Hermione!' Weasley said, his voice full of wonder. He looked at her, awe-struck, and unbidden, reached one hand to lie upon her greatly swollen belly. Severus felt himself go rigid with rage when the unworthy whelp touched his wife, but he contained the emotion and stood quite still on the other side of the tree, awaiting developments.

'Hello, Ron,' Hermione said with perfect composure.

'You're pregnant,' Weasley said stupidly.

'Yes,' Hermione agreed, her voice full of amusement.

'*Snape?*' Weasley said in a voice of deep loathing.

Severus was enormously pleased to see Hermione swat the hand away from her and answer shortly, 'My husband's name is Prince, Ronald.'

Weasley seemed somewhat abashed; he looked down at his feet and said, 'Right. I forgot.' He raised his freckled face again and his eyes lingered on Hermione's belly or was it her breasts? before he said, 'But I thought you couldn't *have* babies.'

Severus watched as Hermione's head turned to observe the progress through the crowd of Weasley's American wife, a vividly pretty and decidedly unpregnant young woman who was bearing down on them with increasing speed.

'I know you did,' she answered simply. She then looked into Weasley's eyes. 'Severus didn't care about that, you see. He only cared about *me*. The baby is just the very best possible surprise.'

Weasley gaped at her with an expression of mute hurt on his face. 'I see,' he said, quietly.

In another instant, the advancing Mrs Ronald Weasley latched onto her husband's arm and said in an American accent, *There* you are! I wondered where you'd gone.' She turned a hard smile which did not touch her eyes on Hermione and extended her free hand. Severus was very sure she knew she was addressing her husband's former paramour. 'I'm Lola Weasley and you are?'

Severus stepped from behind the tree at that moment and was gratified by the fleeting look of panic which passed over Weasley's vacuous countenance. 'She is my wife,' he said smoothly, stopping behind Hermione and placing his hands reassuringly on her shoulders. 'Mrs Hermione Prince and I am Severus Prince. How do you do?' He glanced contemptuously at the uncomfortable redhead then, and said with a nod of acknowledgement, 'Weasley.'

He felt Hermione's shoulders relax under his hands, and he squeezed gently once. Bending to her ear, he murmured, 'How are you holding up?'

She leant back against him and glanced over her shoulder into his face. 'My back is bothering me,' she admitted. 'I don't know what's wrong. I just feel odd.'

Severus opened his mouth to suggest that they return home so she could rest, but was forestalled by Hermione's gasped, 'Oh, no!'

Looking down at her, he watched as water poured down Hermione's legs and onto the shoes of Ronald and Lola Weasley.

'I'm so sorry!' Hermione moaned, appalled. 'My water broke!'

Severus turned her to face him, securing his arms about her. 'You'll make our excuses to your family?' he said to Weasley. When the other wizard nodded, Severus Disapparated to St. Mungo's Hospital.

Many witches had their babies at home, attended by medi-witch midwives. In deference to Severus' concern for her, Hermione had agreed to birth their child at the hospital. As he had pointed out to her, they could not be certain what complications might arise from the curse which had nearly claimed her life.

As it turned out, there were no difficulties. Tiny Felicity Eileen was born after fourteen hours of labour, a respectable six pounds and four ounces of lustily squalling infant. Severus watched anxiously as the small lacerations in Hermione's birth canal were expertly treated by the Healer, then at Hermione's urging, he stepped over to watch as attendants cleansed and swaddled his protesting daughter. It was his deputed task to carry the tiny form to Hermione and to place the pink-swaddled bundle in his wife's arms.

'Oh, Severus,' Hermione breathed, gazing with rapt adoration at baby Felicity, 'she's beautiful!'

Severus swallowed, staring at the red-faced, squished-looking creature, and pressed a kiss to his wife's sweat-soaked hair. Hermione seemed not to notice his lack of comment, but moved over so that he could join her on the mound of pillows propping her on the mattress. Obedient to her wishes, he lay down and cradled her shoulders against him as she opened her gown and, after a false start or two, set the baby to nursing. The three of them soon fell into a sleep of exhaustion, cuddled together in the hospital bed, prostrated but triumphant.

Back at home with his exhausted wife and ever-hungry child, Severus gladly welcomed the witches who descended upon them for the next week to see to the baby; all of his concern was focussed on Hermione, who did little but eat, sleep, and nurse. Minerva, Poppy Pomfrey, Molly and Fleur Weasley, and Nymphadora Lupin were in and out of the house on Spinner's End, attending to and exclaiming over little Felicity. Minerva had assigned the house-elf called Winky to cook and to look after the house for the first month after the baby's birth. Severus felt himself to be redundant, except for the night watches, when he was alone with his wife and child.

On the fourth night after their return home, Hermione was particularly distraught. Her nipples were raw to the touch, she was constantly thirsty, her nether regions were still sore, and she was weary to the point of derangement.

She had been sleeping for less than an hour when the whimpering began again from the bassinette by the bed. Stepping over to the troublesome infant, Severus took her gingerly into his unpractised arms and carried her into the nursery, pacing from one side to the other of the small room, talking to his daughter.

'You cannot possibly be hungry,' he reasoned, holding her against his shoulder as the medi-witches had demonstrated and patting her back, 'and you are perfectly dry. Your mother is very tired and cannot attend to you, now; you will have to make do with me.'

'Walk her, Essex,' his mother's portrait urged him. 'She sounds a bit colicky.'

After several laps, with continual back-patting, the tiny being emitted a burp of such resounding quality that Severus was impressed. 'Oh, well done,' he said, as he might congratulate a fellow Slytherin for a well-placed goal on the Quidditch pitch. Tentatively, he sat down in the rocking chair beside the cot, which seemed entirely too large for such a diminutive individual. Shifting her so that her head was now cradled in his elbow, he looked into the face of his baby daughter and was gratified to see that her eyes were open and that she was returning his regard.

'Your looks are much improved,' he informed her. 'You are far less red, and the skin-peeling is almost behind us. Keep up the good work, and you will soon be a pleasure to look at.' With his free hand, he stroked one fingertip down the cheek so soft that he knew of no comparison. The wee fists which moved with no apparent intent came up, and miraculously, one wrapped about his finger. The dark eyes of indeterminate colour looked out of his daughter's solemn little face into his own hawkish countenance, and he was inexplicably captivated. 'Hullo, Felix,' he murmured.

After a time, the nearly-transparent eyelids of his baby girl floated closed, and still he held her, an emotion of such powerful, helpless love thrumming in his body that he felt too weak to stand. He drifted to sleep, as well, his head drooping to one side and cricking his neck.

It was thus that Hermione found them at dawn, when she peeled her daughter's hand from her husband's finger and lifted her from his arms. His eyes opened to the shining adoration in his wife's face. 'Why didn't you put her down and come back to bed?' she asked.

He held up his hand. 'She was holding my finger,' he explained, realising as he said it how foolish it sounded. 'I didn't want to wake her up.'

Hermione gifted him with a knowing smile. 'Of course you didn't,' she murmured, turning to change the baby's nappy.

Hermione was perfectly content to stay at home and care for the baby all through the spring and the summer, but as September approached and for the first time in her life, she did not prepare to go to school she began to turn her mind to other pursuits. On one weekend afternoon in October, she broached the idea to Severus as they sat upon the sitting room floor with Felicity between them.

'You want to leave Felix with *strangers* so you can go to work?' Severus inquired incredulously, allowing the clever little one to hold one finger of each of his hands as she took a tentative step on her chubby little baby feet.

Hermione frowned. 'Of course not! But I've been thinking, Severus surely I'm not the only employee at Security Solutions in need of childcare. Why could we not provide an in-house childcare centre for our employees, for a nominal fee? The centre would pay for itself, it would be a terrific service to offer our employees, and there would be far fewer missed work-days due to unreliable childcare.'

Felicity sat down hard on her nappy, letting go of her father's fingers, and immediately crawled across the room in pursuit of Crookshanks, who sped up when he saw her coming. The cat and the baby co-existed under a strained armistice for Crookshanks knew very well who would win out in any dispute between familiar and child but Crookshanks preferred to remain beyond the over-enthusiastic reach of the infant girl-child.

Hermione bent to lift Felicity into her arms, allowing Crookshanks to escape through the cat-flap and into the garden just as Severus said, 'Since when are you an employee at Security Solutions? And what do you mean, *our* employees?'

Hermione replaced the baby on the floor, where she promptly crawled to her father and grasped his robes, attempting to pull herself again to a standing position. 'Don't get shirty with me, Severus Prince! Minerva offered me that job before I ever *thought* about marrying you. Or, would you prefer I go to Draco Malfoy for a job?'

Severus gently disentangled the baby's fists from his robes and gave her his fingers instead, pulling her to stand. This task accomplished, he glared at Hermione. Draco had recently opened a security company as well, although he seemed to specialise more in providing actual security manpower or in some cases, troll-power for industry. 'Yes, why don't you do that? I'm sure the Troll Meister has need of a top-rank Arithmancer on his staff.'

Hermione flushed pink at the characterisation of 'top-rank Arithmancer,' utterly diverted. 'Severus! That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me!'

'Put your rambunctious daughter down for her over-due nap and see what sorts of nice things I can think of to say to you, Sprite,' he suggested, his eyes suddenly half-lidded and glittering.

Hermione had no fault to find with this suggestion, and she soon joined her randy husband in their bed for a languorous afternoon of the type of activity which seemed to grow only more satisfactory as time passed.

And in due course, she inaugurated the first in-house childcare facility in wizarding Britain, beginning a trend which quickly spread to other companies.

Severus looked up from the stack of office paperwork on the desk in the improvised office, tucked into the sitting room alcove at Spinner's End. Hermione stood before him with Felicity perched on her hip, her handbag hanging from the opposite shoulder; she was dressed for an outing.

'Are you two going out?' he asked, pretending not to see his daughter's imperatively outstretched arms as she reached for her daddy.

'No, Severus,' Hermione said patiently, setting Felicity down. The two-year old scampered to her father and Severus obediently picked her up to receive her adoring hug. 'As I told you last night, I'm going shopping with Ginny in Diagon Alley, today. She and Harry are ready to begin decorating their nursery. *You* said you would watch Felicity whilst I'm away. Remember?'

'Of course I do,' Severus prevaricated, having no memory of such a conversation. However, things at work were becoming so busy that he was often absent-minded at home. He was seriously considering hiring an assistant to help with the day-to-day management of Security Solutions. Draco Malfoy, whose own business had gone belly-up after less than a year, had been by to talk with him about it the day before. But how would Hermione react to having Draco Malfoy in an executive position in their company? She still called him 'the ferret' in private conversations.

'Excellent!' Hermione said with a bright smile. She leant over and kissed first Severus, then Felicity on the cheek. 'Be a good girl whilst Mummy is gone, and do everything Daddy says, all right?'

Felicity nodded, clutching her father's robes in her hands, and Hermione chuckled, saying in an aside to Severus, 'She would much rather be with you, anyway.' Then, with a glance at her wristwatch, she waved at them before turning on the spot and Disapparating.

Heaving a sigh, Severus stood with his daughter in his arms and carried her into the middle of the sitting room, where he sat upon the floor beside the large brightly-decorated trunk which held Felicity's toys. He removed several of these from within the trunk, noting that her happiest greetings continued to be for her soft plush toys. When she was happily engaged with these, he Summoned his paperwork to him and continued to read the latest proposal.

After a time, he charmed the little toy unicorn to trot about on the floor, a bit of magic which never failed to elicit a squeal of joy from the baby. Maintaining the charm with a small corner of his attention, he concentrated again on the closely written parchment. Father and daughter continued in this way until the little girl stood up and clapped. 'Lookie, Daddy!' she crowed.

Severus glanced up, and his mouth fell open. Not only the unicorn, but all four of the Magical Menagerie creatures were moving; the centaur was shooting imaginary arrows into the air with his bow, the mermaid was side-stroking around the rug as if it were a pond of water, and the Hippogriff was flying in small circles about an inch off the ground.

'Did you do that, Felix?' he asked her, awed.

'Felix did it!' she agreed, throwing her chubby little arms about his neck.

Severus felt a huge smile break over his face as he lifted the delighted toddler high over his head. 'That's my girl!' he told her, proud to the point of inanity.

'Felix is Daddy's girl,' the tyke proclaimed, clinging to his neck when he lowered her again, and she sat contentedly as he held her to him, unmindful of the tears which fell from his eyes into her wild coal-black curls.

Severus stood in glaring silence on platform nine and three-quarters at King's Cross Station. The milling crowd of students, parents, siblings, and assorted other persons was oppressive to him. In spite of his shorter hair and his more colourful clothing, he had been recognised. He had heard more than one exclamation of, 'Snape! Look, it's Snape!' but when he had turned his sternest scowl on the speaker, no one had been looking at him. Hermione seemed unaware of the stir he was creating on the secure station platform amongst the throng of his former students and their off-spring; she was much too busy fussing over Felicity, giving her repeated admonishments and bits of stray advice.

'Relax, Mum,' the eleven-year-old finally blurted. 'I'll be fine really.'

Severus glanced down at his daughter and found her big brown eyes, so like her mother's, seeking his, as they so often did, to gauge his reaction for approval. He nodded once, a glimmer of a smile on his lips, and she smiled her toothy smile, a little girl's mouth full of adult teeth that seemed too big for her face. He had agonised over it more than once, only to have Hermione calm his fears in her prosaic way. 'She'll grow into them, Severus all children her age look awkward with their teeth showing. If she needs any corrective work, it will have to wait until she has all her permanent teeth.'

'All set, Felix?' he asked in his no-nonsense voice.

'All set, Daddy,' she agreed, her small hand stealing into his.

Suddenly indifferent to the crowd of dunderheads surrounding them, he knelt down until he and Felix were eye-to-eye. 'Remember that your mother and I are very proud of you,' he said quietly, willing her to absorb and believe his words. 'Do your very best, and we will never be disappointed in you, Felix.'

Before he could prevent her, the flesh of his flesh had thrown her arms about him, clutching his robes in her hands. 'Oh, Daddy,' she whispered, her voice thick with threatening tears, 'I'm going to miss you so much!'

Engulfing her in a very quick hug, he whispered back, 'I shall miss you as well, Felix. Be a good girl.' Then he put her from him and, pulling his handkerchief from his robes, he dried her cheeks.

'Princess!'

Severus stood, a glower on his face, and turned to see the Lupins picking their way through the crowd, their twelve-year-old son, Alfie, leading the way. The boy was the one who had called out. He and Felix had been playmates from the cradle and, early on, they had taken to calling one another by nicknames. She was 'Princess,' a play upon her last name, and he was 'Wolfie,' a play upon *both* of his names.

As Hermione greeted Lupin and Nymphadora, Severus heard a voice addressing him.

'Mr Prince? Sir?'

He looked down his long, hooked nose into the earnest, open face of Alfie Lupin. 'Yes?'

'Don't worry about Felicity, sir. I will see to her on the train.'

He issued the standard sneer for presumptuous second year boys and replied icily, 'I'm sure that will not be necessary.'

Felicity, however, had already negated his comment, kissing her mother on the cheek and saying her good-byes to the Lupins. 'I'm going to sit with Wolfie in his compartment,' she said, and ran after the older boy, boarding the train without a backward glance.

Nymphadora had her arm about Hermione's waist, the two heads bent towards one another; Hermione dried her eyes as the great scarlet train puffed out of the station. At the last instant, one of the windows on the next-to-last car was forced down by Alfie Lupin, who quickly gave way to Felicity's white-faced figure. Severus saw her, and his heart turned over in his chest. He could not hear her over the rising noise of the clacking train wheels, but her lips clearly formed one word:

'Daddy.'

Severus relaxed in the sitting room, a glass of Ogden's in his hand, a favourite book opened in his lap. One thing he adored about Greek mythology was the pervasive presence of the water nymphs and water sprites. He smirked. Leaving Draco in charge of the office, he and Hermione had taken an anniversary trip, wherein they had visited again the private Caribbean villa where he had taken her on their first Christmas. At thirty-eight, her lush body was enough to bring on a heart attack in a wizard of his age who was less fit and less used to keeping up with her ardent, demanding ways than he. They both sported all-over tans from their jaunt, which had actually taken place before the true date of their anniversary. Hermione had insisted that they be back at home in time to retrieve Felicity from King's Cross Station, following her successful completion of her O.W.L. year at Hogwarts. The child's O.W.L. results had actually come by owl post that day; he had thought Hermione would sulk all day over Felicity's twelve Outstandings.

'Don't fret, Mum,' the brass-faced little baggage had said to Hermione, 'if *your* father had been a former Defence teacher, you would have gotten an "O" in Defence, as well.'

'That's right, my love,' Severus had agreed, his evil genius prompting him to get in a dig, 'Felix has a point. You had only the likes of Lockhart, Lupin, and Potter to teach *you* Defence.'

Upon reflection, it was perhaps a lucky chance that his Sprite was even speaking to him today.

A moment later, his sixteen-year-old daughter danced down the staircase, dressed to go out. Her beauty hurt his heart. She had Hermione's eyes and hair, although the colour was his glossy black, and she did not have to fight bushiness in her curls as her mother had done. Felicity had, indeed, grown into her teeth, as Hermione had prophesied. She was taller than her mother, and thinner, taking more after his family in her build. She was brilliant, she was beautiful, she was a Prefect, she was at the top of her class and she was going to be the death of him.

'Where are you going, Felix?' he asked in his silkiest voice.

'I'm going to a party, Dad. I told you,' she reminded him.

'And where are your clothes?'

Hermione came down the staircase and entered the room as the girl's mouth dropped open. 'These are my clothes!'

Severus sneered. 'Those are not clothes. They are an advertisement.'

Felicity raised her chin to him, as he had seen her mother do one thousand times before, and said hotly, 'There's nothing wrong with what I'm wearing!'

He replied coldly, 'I beg to differ.'

Felicity opened her mouth to argue, but Hermione cut across her. 'I told you what you need to do if you want to wear that outfit,' she said firmly.

'But, Mother,' Felicity said in exasperation, 'it's not as if I have all that on top, like you do. It doesn't matter!'

'Wearing proper under garments is not a question of build, young lady, it is a question of propriety,' Hermione responded adamantly.

'Oh, Mother, you are *so* twentieth century,' Felicity sneered in a fine imitation of her father's nastiest manner.

'Felicity Eileen,' Severus thundered, incensed at this show of disrespect to Hermione, 'you may follow your mother's instructions, or you may stay home tonight. The decision is yours to make.'

Without another word, the teenage witch stormed out of the room. 'I'll speak to her,' Eileen Snape's portrait said, and she walked out of the frame, undoubtedly to visit the family portrait in her granddaughter's room.

Hermione sat down on the couch beside Severus and took the glass from his hand, swallowing a slug of firewhisky. 'I'm going to be grey before we manage to get her to adulthood,' she moaned.

Severus moved a swath of hair from Hermione's face and kissed her throat. 'I predict that you will go silver, rather than grey,' he murmured.

Hermione turned to face him, running her hand through his inky black hair, now threaded with silver. 'If I grey as gracefully as you have done, I will be a happy witch.'

He bent his head and kissed her lightly on the lips. 'Who is she going with, tonight?'

Hermione sighed. 'Castor Rosier.'

Severus sat back. 'Not Evan Rosier's son? Surely that dolt never reproduced!'

Hermione shook her head. 'No his grandson, Severus. Evan Rosier's son is about my age, but he was educated in France.'

Severus winced at this reminder of the disparity between his age and Hermione's. 'I don't want any relation of Rosier's to date my daughter,' he snapped.

'You didn't want Alfie Lupin to date her, either,' she reminded him.

He brightened. 'Why can't she go with young Lupin, then? They're great friends I know the boy has been well brought up. She can go with him.' He nodded.

Hermione chuckled. 'Severus, have you ever known a teenage girl who allowed her father to pick out her boyfriends? No, don't even answer that,' she added when he opened his mouth. 'You know good and well that if you push her in one direction that she will go in the other just to show you that she can. You were the one who objected when she wanted to go out with Alfie last year and now she's going through the Slytherin boys; she finished with Ravenclaw last term.'

'Bloody Gryffindors,' he swore. It had been galling to him when his daughter had Sorted into Gryffindor, but he should have known; the Sorting Hat had very nearly put him in Gryffindor, after all, so it wasn't completely beyond belief for Felicity to be in Hermione's House. The child had been excited when it had happened, because she was in Alfie Lupin's House. They had continued their close friendship for all their years in school, but Severus had exerted all his influence to prevent his daughter from imagining herself romantically attached to Lupin's son. Now, he thought rather nostalgically of sending her off with Alfie in the past, for he had known she would be completely safe with that young man, who tended to watch over her as if he was a dog and she was his only bone.

The child burst into the room again in the next moment, properly dressed and dutifully contrite. 'I'm sorry, Mum,' she said, bending to kiss Hermione on the cheek.

'Have fun, love,' Hermione said, 'but don't be late.'

'Yes, ma'am,' Felicity replied, turning to her father.

Severus quirked an eyebrow at her. 'Well, Felix?' he said.

Grabbing a fistful of his robes, his daughter kissed his cheek, whispering, 'I love you, Daddy.'

There was a knock on the door to the back garden, and Severus rose and strode into the kitchen with Felicity at his heels. He opened the door to the young wizard who stood on the step; the young man had very short blond hair and piercings in each ear and each eyebrow. In his hand, he held a broomstick.

'Yes?' Severus said coldly.

'Dad!' Felicity hissed, trying to get around him.

'Good evening, sir,' the boy said, obviously nervous. 'I'm here to pick up Felicity.'

Felicity squeezed past her father successfully and followed the boy into the garden, mounting his broom behind him. Severus' last sight of her, as she and the young Slytherin wizard flew into the night, was certainly the waving of her hand and may also have been the blowing of a kiss.

Hermione sat by the open window of the large kitchen of her country house, her eyes on Severus as he sat in the back garden, watching the children splash about in the charm-heated pool. Severus had contracted to have the house built to his design in every detail, right down to the pool, which did not resemble a swimming pool at all, but rather a natural pond, fed by a fresh water spring and complete with a waterfall. When they were not entertaining their family or friends, he and Hermione had very much enjoyed spending time in the surroundings he had created for her. 'A setting fit for my Naiad,' he was wont to say.

When the grandchildren had begun to come, he had finally persuaded Hermione to move from Spinner's End, pointing out that there would never be enough room in the old terraced house for them to entertain their daughter's numerous offspring in any comfort. Felicity had married her Wolfie, and after two childless years and against her mother's counsel she had taken a dose of Felix Felicis. The identical triplets, Felix, Severus, and Remus, had been the result of that experiment, but only the beginning of Felicity and Wolfie's family.

Hermione heard the sliding door from the lounge to the patio open, and the elder Lupins appeared outside the kitchen window. Remus was completely white-haired now, but moved with the grace of a much younger man, whilst Tonks continued to be a bit on the clumsy side. Although Severus was hard put to admit it, he and Remus Lupin had become close friends through the years, and they still played the occasional Quidditch match, although now they did so with their grandchildren flying about, rooting them on.

'It's Grandmother and Grandfather Lupin!' young Alfie called, and the other five piled out of the pool behind him, converging on the Lupins with their greetings.

A smile touched Hermione's eyes at this; it was lovely to see her healthy, beautiful, energetic grandchildren in motion. The triplets were now fifteen and entering on their sixth year at Hogwarts in the fall. The girls, Eileen and Jane, were thirteen and twelve, respectively, followed by eight year old Alfie. Of the grandparents, only Tonks, at her own insistence, had escaped having a grandchild named for her. 'My mother may have been fool enough to call me Nymphadora,' she had declared, 'but I will not perpetuate the horror the stupidity stops here.'

Hermione saw Severus rise from his chair, pause to exchange greetings with the Lupins, then she heard again the sliding glass door.

'He's coming in,' she said to Felicity, and the two women held hands and smiled at one another, both with tears upon their cheeks.

Severus found Hermione in the kitchen, sitting with their daughter. Each of the women was in tears, and he frowned from the doorway.

Hermione had, as he had predicted, silvered beautifully; menopause had brought about the end of bushiness in her hair, and the long silvery curls hung down her back, secured with a clip at the nape of her neck. Nearing sixty, she bore the appearance of a woman ten years younger; in his eyes, she was more beautiful than she had ever been. They were both retired from Security Solutions now and pursuing their hobbies in their large, comfortable home, which was always open for 'grandparent business,' as Hermione put it.

Their only child was maturing into a beautiful woman in her own right. In her mid-thirties, she wore her cap of jet-black curls cropped closely about her head. The birth of six children had thickened her body, but had not diminished her loveliness, nor the glow in Alfie Lupin's eyes when they rested upon his 'Princess.' Alfie now headed up the Incursion Division of Security Solutions, a post inherited from his father; Felicity, on the other hand, was a free-lance journalist. She had been working on a project for the last two years which she sometimes discussed with her mother, but which she had yet to confide to her father. Severus, always respectful of reticence in others, had not pried; he knew she would discuss it with him when she was ready.

Hermione looked at him in the doorway and said, 'Hello, Severus.'

Leaning against the doorframe, his hands tucked in his pockets, Severus inclined his head. 'Am I interrupting?'

His daughter stood and picked up a thick sheaf of papers from the table in front of her. 'I have something to you show you, Daddy,' she said, approaching him and handing him the heavy manuscript.

'What is this?' he asked, hefting it. 'About two years of work, perhaps?'

Felicity smiled. 'More like fifteen years of research and two years of writing,' she said. 'See? The title is on the front.'

Echoing back to a babyish voice saying, 'Lookie, Daddy!' he glanced down at the front page.

Dumbledore's Double Agent

How the War Was Won

By Felix Snape

He was not aware of the tears on his face until Hermione took the manuscript from his hands put it on the table; as she dried his face, she said, 'You don't want to smear the ink.'

Clearing his throat, he said, 'No one will want to read such a thing, surely?'

'It has been accepted for publication, Daddy,' Felicity said, standing before him proudly. 'It will come out next year on the fortieth anniversary of the Final Fall of Voldemort.'

Severus allowed Hermione to lead him to a chair, where he sat clasping the handkerchief she had given him, wishing his hands would not shake. 'I am surprised that anyone would publish the true story.'

Felicity moved behind him and rested her cheek on the top of his head, his black robes bunched in her fists. 'Times have changed, Daddy. The world is ready to know the whole story, now and the Minister has already read the manuscript. Next year, at the fortieth anniversary celebration, you will receive your Order of Merlin, First Class, for your service during the war.'

Severus sat in silence, staring at his hands. 'It's not as if the Minister didn't already know all the facts,' he said.

'If it had been up to him, Daddy, you would have received the award when he first took office, five years ago. But at that time, he didn't have the support of the Wizengamot. Since the last election, with the new party in power, Arthur Weasley is the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and he has forced the issue. Each member of the Wizengamot has read the manuscript, as well. The measure to present the award passed by a vote of acclamation.'

Severus looked up at Hermione, whose cheeks were again streaked with tears. 'How much did you have to do with this?' he asked.

She only shook her head. 'I helped with the research and you know I campaigned for both Arthur and Harry but your daughter was the force behind this, Severus. She made it happen.'

And so it was, that on the fortieth anniversary of the fall of the Dark Lord, Severus stood before the wizarding world, with his family surrounding him, and accepted the Order of Merlin, First Class, from the Minister of Magic, Harry James Potter. He was also accorded forty years of back-pay for the Order of Merlin annuity, which he promptly donated to the Ministry fund for the British Wizarding University.

Vindicated, he listened to the tumultuous applause of the assembled people, reflecting on the vagaries of fate, which had brought his very determined wife into his life. She, with stubborn single-mindedness and a dose of lucky potion, had taken their improbable union and formed of it a life of the greatest felicity for which a man could wish.