

Tying Knots

by LadyTuesday

Hermione Granger's world is upended when a letter from the Ministry of Magic forces her to be the one thing she couldn't have imagined in her most feverish nightmares: the wife of her dreaded Potion's master.

~~ My little attempt at the WIKTT Marriage Law Challenge ~~ Lascivious rating is for the hot monkey sex to come in later chapters.

Every Knot was Once Straight Rope

Chapter 1 of 23

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~~ A/N - This story is my take on the When I Kissed the Teacher Marriage Law Challenge. I know that Severus doesn't appear a whole lot in this chapter but trust me, he'll become very important in just a little bit.

Also, feel free to email me at i_heart_harry_hermione@yahoo.com for any comments, etc. Hope you enjoy this. And now, on with the show ~~

Chapter One Every Knot was Once Straight Rope

Friday, July 18, 7:36 pm

Miss Hermione Granger

168 Kempston Road

Bedfordshire, UK

Miss Granger:

This letter is to inform you of a new piece of legislation enacted within the Magical Community. Enclosed forthwith is an explanation of Ministry of Magic Decree Number 1,124, subsections A E, commonly known as the "Rejuvenatory Genetics Marriage Law." Please direct any comments, questions, or concerns to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Domestic Affairs Division.

Best wishes for your future and your impending nuptials,

Mdm. Belinda Crescenzi

Dept. of Magical Law Enforcement

Domestic Affairs Division

For your information:

Ministry of Magic Decree Number 1,124 subsections A E:

It is hereby acknowledged by this decree that increasing intermarrying of the 'pureblood' community has caused a serious downturn in magical genetic material. As such, strictly pureblood marriages have resulted in a declining birth rate of magical children, have produced more 'squibs,' and have now rendered strictly 'pureblood' procreation a danger to the wizarding community.

Subsection A:

As such, the Ministry of Magic hereby resolves:

* All pureblooded witches or wizards between the ages of 18 and 60 who are not already married will be required by law to enter into a state of marriage with a person of mixed parentage or non-magical parentage.

Subsection B:

In compliance with this policy, the Ministry further resolves:

* Any mixed parented or non-magical parented witch or wizard may be served with a petition of marriage from any interested Pureblood family. Any witch or wizard served with a petition of marriage must acquiesce to said petition within a period of 10 working days. Should the witch/ wizard receive more than one petition, the witch/wizard has ten (10) working days from the date of the last petition submitted with which to make a choice between the available petitions.

Subsection C:

In order to ensure the success of this law, the following shall be abided:

* No witch or wizard under the age of 18 may be petitioned for marriage.

* Pureblood families who petition for the marriage of a witch/wizard may not be refused unless another family has been accepted. The patriarch of a pureblood family may submit a petition on behalf of his child with or without the child's consent. The contract will be considered binding.

Subsection D:

In order to ensure the success of these marriages, the following shall be considered:

* Each marriage formed as a result of the Rejuvenatory Genetics Marriage Law will be performed by a Ministry of Magic appointed official.

* Each marriage formed will be required to submit documented proof of the couple's cohabitation.

* At the union ceremony, a charm will be placed on each member of the couple to monitor for any instances of infidelity. In the case of infidelity, the Ministry will be informed, and the participants will undergo a trial by the Wizengamot to determine repercussions.

Subsection E: The Procreation Clause

In order to ensure the success of the Rejuvenatory Genetic measures, the following shall be abided:

* Each marriage shall be monitored for a period of one month to ensure the consummation of the marriage. If the marriage has not been consummated within one month, the contract is dissolved, and the mixed/non-magical parented spouse is forthwith required to acquiesce to the marriage petition of any other interested parties.

* Each marriage formed under Ministry Decree Number 1,124 will be required to produce at least one offspring (of either sex) by the end of a period of two years. If the mixed/non-magical witch or wizard is still enrolled in school at the time of the marriage, an extra period of one year (making a total of three years) will be allotted for the procreation of the first offspring.

The above is in accordance with Ministry of Magic Decree Number 1,124, subsections A-E.

Mdm. Belinda Crescenzi

Dept. of Magical Law Enforcement

Domestic Affairs Division

Hermione ran her hands over her face, smoothing out the wrinkles of shock that had deepened as she had read the letter.

"Mum, Dad," Hermione called, her voice as even as she could manage, "I know I told you I wouldn't be leaving for London until tomorrow, but something's come up. I'm going to have to leave this afternoon."

Hermione's mother rushed to the base of the stairs where her daughter was perched at the top. "Is something wrong, dear? What happened?"

Hermione fought back a rage of harsh words that would express her anger and managed a weak smile. "No, of course not. I've just received a letter from Harry, and he says they need me this afternoon if I can make it."

Her mother nodded gently, her light brown curls waving slightly as she placed a thin arm around Hermione's father, who had just appeared around the wall to stand next to his wife. "Are you sure everything's all right, pumpkin?" he asked, concerned. "You look a little peaky. Are you feeling well?"

"I'm quite well, Dad, thanks. I'm just going to pack up, and then I'll come say goodbye, all right?"

Hermione's mother nodded, her father blowing a kiss to her. As soon as they had gone back into the sitting room, Hermione hauled herself up off the stairs, her wobbling knees nearly collapsing under her.

"You can make it," she said quietly to herself. "Once you get to Grimmauld Place, we'll get this all straightened out. It's got to be a mistake."

She flew about her room, packing as fast as she could without breaking something. Her organization left something to be desired, compared to her usual precision, but at the moment it didn't matter. All that mattered now was getting to Grimmauld Place, to Dumbledore, Harry and anyone else who could explain this mess.

She did grin to herself at the ease with which she could pack now that she was allowed to use magic outside of school. Between that and her Apparition license, she would be able to get to London to Grimmauld Place fairly easily.

She dragged out her desk chair and scribbled a hasty note that she shoved at the Ministry owl she had begged to stay.

Harry,

Will be Apparating to Grimmauld Place

within the hour. No questions now.

Will explain everything on arrival.

Find out how to get hold of Dumbledore.

See you soon

Hermione

"Please hurry," she bid the large tawny owl before it rushed away with a hush of wings out her bedroom window. "And ... er ... don't ... let on where you've been." She was quite certain that owls could neither talk nor betray the whereabouts of their addressees, but with the prescient looks that she often encountered from Hedwig, she was uneasy at sending a Ministry owl to the headquarters of the Order.

With a quick levitation charm, she brought all her school things downstairs hurriedly. She stopped at the base of the stairs for a moment to compose her face before walking into the sitting room to her parents.

Hermione's heart tugged painfully at the completely mundane picture ahead of her. Her mother was quietly sipping a cup of tea and skimming her eyes over the latest issue of Dentistry Today, her father spread out in an armchair, grimacing at a review of the latest advancements in the auto industry in the London Times. Since she had first started going to Hogwarts six years ago, her life at home became a stark picture of how unusual the vast majority of her life was.

"Well," she said as her parents looked up from their respective reading material. "I'm off to London. I'll owl you when I get notice about school and the Head Girl position."

Her father grinned and held up his crossed fingers; her mother smiled gently.

"Have a good summer, darling. We'll see you again at Christmas," her mother replied easily.

Hermione kissed each of her parents and then held tight to her belongings. Her parents jumped slightly at the pop that signaled Hermione's departure.

Hermione's stomach still gave a churn every time she Apparated. Be it broomstick, hippogriff or Apparition, Hermione did not have an aptitude for magical travel. She sighed heavily and muttered to herself as she stood in the filthy Muggle alley, clutching her trunk for dear life.

"The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix can be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London," she whispered to herself. Apparating always disoriented her, and she found that this occasionally resulted in inability to find Headquarters.

As she whispered, number twelve, Grimmauld Place began to take shape before her eyes, inflating like a child's pool toy. With a deep breath, she heaved her trunk up the stairs to the porch and made use of the intricate snake door knocker, unsure whether Mrs. Black's portrait had been removed thus rendering the doorbell unusable.

To her great surprise, it was Harry who answered the door, enveloping her instantly in his arms quickly for a hug before hefting her trunk into the entrance hall. She noticed, to her surprise, that Harry had filled out quite a bit this summer; he lifted her trunk with incredible ease.

Harry noticed her unchecked gaze at him and smiled. "Been working out for Quidditch this year. Got hammered at the Cup match last year."

Hermione blushed at her inattention to staring, but smiled all the same.

"Good to have you here," Harry said.

"Good to be back," she responded quickly. An unmistakable nervousness crept into her eyes that was not lost on Harry, but Hermione continued, so he decided not to comment immediately. "Where is everyone? Ron?"

Harry stretched a bit and then hefted the trunk to his shoulder, starting up the stairway to the room Hermione shared with Ron's sister, Ginny. "Down in the kitchen. Dinner's starting soon, but I expect Ginny's still upstairs primping."

Hermione threw him a questioning look, to which Harry responded, "Bill is bringing his new fiancée, and I think Neville will be joining us as well."

Hermione smiled again, pleased to see Neville's progress in the DA had not been wasted in the year that it had been inactive. "Lovely. I'd welcome Neville's company, and I'm sure that he must want to get away from his grandmother. Who's Bill engaged to?"

Harry grunted in exertion as the trunk slipped slightly on his shoulder around the landing outside the room he shared with Ron. "Fleur Delacour." Harry giggled as he caught the disapproving look that glazed Hermione's face. "Aww, she's not so bad. Once you get on her good side."

Hermione *hmmphed* in disapproval, but watched Harry more carefully. "Wouldn't it be easier just to use a *Locomotor* charm on that, rather than hefting it all the way to the third floor?"

"Eh, it's good for me," Harry replied.

Hermione eased open the door to the girls' room, allowing Harry to deposit the trunk at the foot of Hermione's bed. To her surprise, the bed was turned down, showing deep blue sheets folded beneath the white comforter. It was as if they had been expecting her.

"Harry...?" Hermione began.

"They know why you're here. In fact, they know more than you do."

Hermione blanched, wondering what information could possibly have slipped by her, but she fell silent as Ginny walked back into the room. Ginny squealed in delight and rushed across the room to hug Hermione.

"You're here!" she shrieked. "We weren't expecting you until tomorrow!"

"Hey, Gin," she managed beneath a bone-crushing hug. She peered at the redhead. "You've grown again?" Hermione asked, incredulous. "You're taller than I am now."

"Dunno," Ginny responded, smiling. "I'm taller than Fred and George now too. Ron's gonna have a run for his money." Ginny chuckled winningly, drawing a smile to Hermione's face. The youngest Weasley certainly kept Hermione on her toes.

"I'm so glad you're here," the redhead continued. "Tonks hasn't been around lately, so it's just me and Mum for the ladies' point of view. Too much testosterone in the house for my taste."

To this end, Harry made quite a show of flexing his muscles with Hermione and Ginny dissolving into peals of laughter. "Come on," he beckoned, his hand on the doorknob. "Let's head down to dinner."

Mrs. Weasley's delighted shriek at Hermione's presence was an interesting mirror of her daughter's. The assembled party in the warm kitchen in the basement of Grimmauld Place was full of bursting. Hermione was assaulted upon entry with a barrage of welcoming greetings and several hugs from various members of the Order. Neville came quickly and gave her a gentle hug, expressing his delight to be working for the Order.

"Harry let it slip accidentally last year," he responded to Hermione's unspoken question of how Neville knew of it. "But once I'd heard that there was such a thing, I figured I ... well, owed it to Mum and Dad, you know."

Hermione nodded and clasped his hand gently as he fought tears that were welling in his eyes. "You are truly amazing, Neville," she whispered, smiling into his round face. Neville beamed with pride and turned to Ron, who had just reentered.

Ron made a large fuss over Hermione, picking her off her feet and swinging her around so violently that she started hollering that she was becoming sick just so he would let her down. They hugged briefly before Ron started regaling her with an update of every minute detail of Ron and Harry's summer activities. Hermione would normally have been hungry for every detail, but her stomach was still churning unpleasantly, so she made to disentangle herself, insisting that she must bestow her good wishes to the happy couple.

She moved away eventually, congratulating Bill and Fleur, shaking hands with Moody and Mr. Weasley as she made her way across the room. She had just pulled apart from a hug with Professor Lupin when she noticed two figures deep in conversation, sequestered in the corner, away from the growing hubbub of the kitchen.

She squinted into the corner and then questioned her smiling former teacher. "Professor Lupin..."

"Remus," he spoke softly. "You're an adult now."

She smiled in response and continued. "Er ... Remus ..." She trailed off and giggled. "I suppose that will take some getting used to," she said, acknowledging his nod. "Is that Professor Dumbledore in the corner? Who is he talking to?"

Remus's face lost some of its happiness. "Yes, that's Dumbledore. He's talking to Professor Snape. Something's ... come up, as I'm sure you know."

Lupin's smoky gray eyes held hers for a moment of understanding before she nodded. "I suppose they're discussing solutions to this?"

"Well," he began gently, "you might say 'alternatives,' rather than 'solutions.'"

Hermione attempted to pry her mind away from the conversation and set to work downing a healthy portion of Mrs. Weasley's delicious cooking. Dumbledore and Snape conversed throughout dinner, never leaving the corner they had occupied for several hours, according to Fred and George.

Abruptly, towards the end of the meal, Dumbledore rose from the corner and made to leave the room. He stopped at the door and turned to Hermione.

"Miss Granger, if you would accompany me to the study, please," Dumbledore said, holding the swinging kitchen door open for her.

She rose from the table, all too aware of the gaze of the rest of the party. She followed Dumbledore to the study, where he settled behind the desk and urged Hermione to one of the worn leather wingbacks that stood in front of it. By the window, standing in the lessening light, Professor Snape was staring out as if he had been there for hours.

Funny, Hermione thought with a start, I didn't even see him leave the kitchen.

Dumbledore quietly began speaking. "Miss Granger, to try and postpone this subject matter with small talk would be insulting to your intelligence, so I will simply get straight to the point."

Hermione felt her stomach turn over, but did not speak.

"Shortly after Harry informed us that you would be joining us here, we received a letter for you from the Ministry of Magic, no doubt because you were already in transit to Grimmauld Place. As I am well informed of what is going on within the Ministry, I have no doubt that this letter is regarding the new Rejuvenatory Genetics Marriage Law."

Dumbledore handed a sealed letter across the desk to her, which she nearly fumbled to the floor in nervousness. She slipped a finger underneath the seal and began, unknowingly, to read the letter out loud.

"Miss Granger," she began quickly. "This letter is in reference to Ministry Decree number 1,124. We are aware that you have been informed as to the stipulations of the law, and as such, this letter is intended to inform you of your status of eligibility as of eight pm this evening ..."

"Eligible?" she said, directing the question to Dumbledore. "How could I be eligible? I'm not 18 yet!"

Dumbledore merely gestured back to the letter, so she kept reading.

"Due to your use of the Time Turner during your third year, your body and person has experienced approximately 18.25 years of age, despite the placement of your birthday in mid-September. As such, you will now be placed on a list of eligible witches for the purpose of obtaining marriage proposals. Yours obediently, Madam Belinda Crescenzi ..."

She trailed off into silence.

Dumbledore sighed heavily, and Snape moved from the window to the fireplace, but did not speak. "Miss Granger," Dumbledore said eventually. "This has obviously placed you in a delicate situation. As a student at Hogwarts as well as a member of the Order of the Phoenix, your impending proposals will be a matter of great importance and discretion."

She nodded blankly, still disbelieving the situation she was now in.

She saw Dumbledore make to hand her another piece of paper, which she received blankly, not even bothering to open it.

"Miss Granger, you have received the first of your proposals."

Hermione's head snapped to attention, fixing her gaze on Dumbledore's blue eyes, now glazed with a heavy compassion and sadness.

"Who ...?" she managed, but Dumbledore gestured to the letter. Hermione reluctantly tore open the green wax seal, a sense of foreboding icing her stomach. She read the contents of the paper out loud. "I, Lucius Adonai Malfoy, request the hand of Hermione Granger in marriage on behalf of my son, Draco Ewan Malfoy ..."

Hermione barely digested the words before blackness crowded the corners of her vision. She slipped from the chair, passing out blindly before she hit the dusty carpet.

The Rope Tightens

Chapter 2 of 23

Hermione Granger is enjoying the respite of summer before coming back to Hogwarts for her last year. But one night, a letter from the Ministry of Magic turns all that upside down, when she finds out that she has become legally bound to get married. Will Hermione be left to the marital clutches of Draco Malfoy? What nefarious reason could he have for proposing to her? Who will provide the protection she needs when things get a bit more dangerous?

~~ Just my little attempt at the WIKTT Marriage Law Challenge ~~

A/N - Nothing but the thin padding of plot is mine, don't sue me, I have no money and nothing you'd want. Thanks to all of you who reviewed my last chapter ^_^

In any case, the plot thickens....

Chapter Two The Rope Tightens

Hermione's vision was fuzzy as she struggled to sit up straight. She glanced around quickly, the faces looming over her still obscured. She had somehow made it to the faded red leather couch in front of the window. Dumbledore's face was above hers, the blue eyes sparkling with concern; also crowding her field of vision was the round, pink-cheeked face of Mrs. Weasley, the thinner, optically bedecked face that she recognized as Harry's, and the smiling face of Ginny Weasley, determinedly brushing her tomato-colored locks out of her eyes.

"Oh thank heavens!" Mrs. Weasley intoned, her face contorting in relief. "Arthur, she's awake. Hermione dear, how are you? Does your head hurt? What happened? Do you have any bumps or bruises? Let me see--"

"Oh, honestly, Molly, stop fussing," a deep voice hissed from across the room. "She fell two feet, from a chair onto a carpet. She's fine."

Every face in her field of vision moved away to crane around to see Professor Snape. He was still standing in front of the fireplace for all she knew, he'd never moved staring deep into the now crackling embers.

"You're awfully assured of her health, Severus, considering you were the first to rush and lift her to the couch," Tonks piped up while inflating the size of her ears for Ginny's amusement. Snape growled low in his throat, like an animal on the attack, but, as Tonks had merely smiled innocently, he said nothing and returned his gaze to the fire.

"Now, Miss Granger," Dumbledore started, gently offering a hand to help her back into the chair in front of the desk, "much as the subject displeases me, we need to discuss your options regarding the letters you have received this evening."

Hermione bit her lip to stifle a sob. "What can be done? I mean, surely, I can't be expected to marry ..."

"Well, much as we'd like to keep that from happening, I personally cannot ascertain that there is any way to avoid it. The law in its entirety is very thorough. As a person of non-magical parentage, the only way for you to avoid its effects would be either to leave Britain or to leave the magical community as a whole."

The words fell in the room like a stone. Ginny had stopped fidgeting with her hair, Mrs. Weasley gasped and fell into silence, and Harry merely looked helplessly at Hermione, who avoided his gaze all together.

A squeaking sob escaped her lips before she bit it back, but she rallied her spirits as much as possible. "Not terribly favorable options. I cannot leave Britain and I will not leave the magical world. So I suppose I have to ..." But she couldn't finish the statement.

"Now, Miss Granger, don't be hasty. You have ten days with which to respond to the proposal. In the meantime, we can hope for a better one, as well as do some serious thinking to come up with a better plan. As for now, I urge you strongly to get some rest. The journey must have been wearying for you, and the subject matter has not helped. Mr. Potter, if you and Miss Weasley would please escort Miss Granger to her room, I would like to ensure she is steady on her feet."

Hermione nodded, unable to come up with any other response to the situation. Harry and Ginny stationed themselves on either side of Hermione and walked with her, in silence, up the stairs to her room.

Once in the silence of her room, Hermione flopped onto the bed without so much as removing her shoes. Ginny bustled around in the room for a moment or two having had, in hushed tones, insisted that Harry leave them alone on the assumption that Hermione may wish to divulge some of the hurt she must be feeling. When Hermione said nothing, Ginny contented herself with forcefully removing Hermione's shoes and, when the older girl showed no other signs of movement, throwing a comforter over her to ward off the draft.

Hermione remained face down on the bed, her head turned away from the door, staring at the wall. A few minutes after Ginny finally gave up and left the room, Hermione let the well of frustrated tears come. She had tried her best not to be hysterical in the presence of Dumbledore and Snape, but she could do no such thing now. Dumbledore's words had not a hint of the reassurance and careful planning that she had hoped for, and now it seemed that the only choice in front of her was to marry Draco Malfoy.

Hermione's body hiccupped fitfully as she lay crying, and eventually she fell into a dreamless, yet restless sleep.

When Hermione awoke the next morning, sun was streaming through the window across the room, striping the floor in dark bands as a result of the deep blue curtains

shielding the major portion of the glass. From what she could tell, the hour must be somewhat late, considering the fact that it was full sunlight and Ginny was no longer in her bed. Hermione rose quickly and dressed, chiding herself for lingering, as she knew quite well that Ginny was a notoriously late sleeper.

It must be very late indeed, she chided herself again.

On her way down the stairs she bumped, quite literally, into Neville, who was emerging from Harry and Ron's room, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"Neville," she said, stifling a yawn, "I didn't know you stayed here for the night."

He grinned in response, yawning himself, and responded, "Well, Gran was here for quite a bit last night, and I fell asleep in the kitchen. I woke up at about four a.m., and they said she'd left around midnight. Apparently, she trusted that there'd be extra places for me to sleep."

Hermione chuckled, warming to the good nature of the last of the Longbottoms. Neville may be a bit inept and somewhat twitery at times, but Hermione was quite certain that there wasn't much that the young man couldn't smile at. He was determinedly good-natured.

"Feeling better today than you were yesterday, I trust?" Neville inquired as they made their way down to the kitchen.

"Well," she began tentatively, "for now. I have a better outlook, I suppose."

Neville nodded and held the doors open for her as they made their way into the kitchen. There were a few scattered members of the Order still crowded around the remnants of last night's meeting notes. Tonks whose hair was a deep brown and piled on top of her head today and Lupin were seated at the long wooden table, cups of coffee settled between them, chatting animatedly about a Ministry confrontation that Tonks had thwarted the previous night.

"Not my best performance, but I did accomplish what I set out to do, so I suppose that doesn't matter. Watcher, Hermione, Neville!" She reclined in the chair, looking fully satisfied with herself, just before losing her balance and tumbling backwards, headfirst. Neville rushed around the table to attempt to catch her chair before it hit the floor, but caught his toe on the edge of the table leg and ended up sprawled on the floor, Tonks still in her chair on top of him.

She scrambled to roll off of the chair and right it before helping Neville to his feet. "Sorry there, mate. But thanks anyhow."

Neville shrugged and flushed crimson. "I tried."

Hermione smiled at the interplay but said nothing. Between the two of them, she surmised they could accidentally tear the house down. Mrs. Weasley was bustling about the fireplace, tending to breakfast, and very quickly set a bowl of porridge in front of Hermione.

"Tea, dear?" In answer to the shaking of Hermione's head, she continued, "Juice? What about some hot cocoa?"

"I'm fine, thanks, Mrs. Weasley."

Hermione set about eating her breakfast determinedly, not managing to come up with any conversation. Her head was still buzzing with the possibilities discussed the previous evening.

Possibilities indeed, Hermione thought with a scowl. *Not very bright on the possibilities scale.*

Her face must have belied some of her inner turmoil because Remus leaned over and rested a hand gently on top of her right wrist. "Don't worry," he said lightly, "we'll come up with something. Dumbledore's made it top priority for the Order to deal with."

She looked up into his eyes in surprise. "The Order? What does my impending marriage have to do with the Order?"

"Oh, do think, Miss Granger," came a voice from behind her. She wheeled around to see Professor Snape sitting by himself in a corner, cradling a cup of coffee. She wasn't quite sure how someone could make drinking coffee look arrogant, but somehow, he accomplished it.

"You are a Gryffindor, to many people's dismay. You also happen to be one of the stooges closest to Mr. Potter. Can you not think of any reason why young *Master* Malfoy," he spat the words with obvious disgust, "would have an interest in you?"

Hermione looked from Snape's searing eyes to Remus's gentle gaze. "Prof..." she began, then corrected herself, "Remus, what could Malfoy want with me?"

"Well, Hermione, you happen to be close to Harry, as Severus has mentioned. So it's possible that they could be interested in you to get to him. It's also possible that the Death Eaters, Lucius Malfoy of course being one of their number, could be interested in rubbing out any Muggle-borns, especially those connected to Harry. But aside from all that, it's entirely possible that Lucius Malfoy happens to recognize you as the perfect invigoration for a weakening genetic line."

She scowled deeply and shot an angry stare at Snape as he snorted derisively at Lupin's final remark. "What do you mean?" she asked Remus.

He smirked as he looked back at her, but his face became serious again. "Well, you're intelligent, quick, powerful and virile. With the exception of powerful, that is everything that the Malfoys aren't. You'd be a perfect choice when producing an heir."

"An heir..." she began, but stopped. She had passed over the final clause of the law when she had originally read it. She had been so distraught at being forced to marry at the age of 18 that bearing children hadn't even entered her mind. But now, as she considered it, she shuddered from head to toe with the ideas of what such an intimate relationship with a Malfoy would entail.

"Oh god..." she moaned quietly.

Remus laid his hand on her wrist again. "Don't worry, we won't let it come to that. I'm sure Dumbledore will come up with something."

It wasn't until later that evening that Hermione found out just what it was that Dumbledore had come up with. He had breezed in just after dinner and, with a terribly grave face, called upon the entire assembled party to join him in the study. Hermione trooped in with the rest, feeling as if her stomach had settled somewhere around her kneecaps.

"By this point, I'm sure you all have been duly informed of Miss Granger's predicament. We can have no doubt that Lucius Malfoy's intentions on petitioning for Hermione are of the gravest and most ill intentions. So, measures must be taken to ensure that Miss Granger is safe."

Hermione looked around the room to find that all eyes were currently fixed on her, with the exception of Professor Snape, who was, again, staring deep into the fire. When Dumbledore began speaking again, Snape began to pace the room.

"Until something better can come along, my dear, we are going to do our best to stall the Ministry. You have eight days before your time runs out with Draco's proposal. On the evening of your seventh day, we are going to have one of the pureblood members of the Order petition for your hand."

Hermione felt herself blanch. She looked around the room. The male members of the Order were all old men!

Well, not really old, she argued with herself. *But all of them at least as old as my father! Surely I cannot be expected to marry them?!*

Dumbledore seemed to read her mind, and continued. "Now, we surely do not expect you to accept this proposition hastily. We merely intend to buy some time until a better plan can be established. On the last day of each ten-day period, we will have another wizard within the Order petition for your hand. If nothing else, it will give us some time to think."

For the first time, Snape spoke up. "It won't last long, Albus. After a month or so, they will see what is going on. Fudge cannot be put off for that long. We may even draw more suspicion by having such goings-on surrounding someone so closely connected to Potter."

Ron stood up suddenly, hurriedly crossing the room to kneel next to her and take Hermione's hand. "I'll petition for her."

Mrs. Weasley gasped, and the whole of the room suddenly seemed to radiate visible waves of tension.

"Ron, that may not be entirely wise," Mr. Weasley replied, the first daring enough to word the situation.

Ron rose behind Hermione's chair and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Why not? We're ... well, we're good friends and ... and I'd take care of her. Why shouldn't it be me?"

Ron's face was reddening with all the sudden attention, and Mrs. Weasley's sniffles could be heard in the background.

"If Lucius has his sights directed towards Miss Granger, you can be assured that it will be a ridiculously dangerous situation. For her, and for anyone who even petitions for her hand, let alone whomever she accepts," Snape replied. "You could not handle the wrath of the Death Eaters, Weasley. And neither could she."

Harry's quick reflexes and hand at the back of Ron's collar was all that kept the youngest male Weasley from leaping over the leather sofa and attacking Snape, so vicious was the Potions master's tone in his final statement. Ron shrugged off Harry's restraining hands, but calmed himself nonetheless. Ron opened his mouth to shoot a scathing comment at Snape, but Dumbledore headed him off smoothly.

"Severus, you will kindly remember that young Mr. Weasley, like everyone in this room, has only Miss Granger's best wishes at heart. It is a noble gesture, Mr. Weasley, but is far too risky. We cannot allow you to petition for Miss Granger, as it would most certainly lead to personal danger."

"What about Harry?" Hermione asked quietly.

All heads turned to where she sat, in the middle of the room, on a rickety desk chair. It was the first time she had spoken since they entered the room, but Hermione's expression and body language made it quite clear that she was not agreeable to be passed around and discussed as if she weren't there.

"Pardon me, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore inquired politely.

"I said, what about Harry. His mother and father were both wizards, could he not petition for me? He is a bit ... more experienced when it comes to handling these situations."

Ron shot her an angry look, and she noticed out of the corner of her eye that Snape was smirking condescendingly. Her face was pleading as she looked at Ron, but with a small inner giggle, noticed that Harry was blushing to the shade of Ron's hair.

"Unfortunately not," Mr. Weasley answered. "While Harry's parents were both magical, whether or not someone is considered pureblood is not simply measured by their parents. It's a whole line that's considered. Unfortunately, in another two weeks or so, we'll be going through this whole process again. Harry will find himself in quite the same situation."

This time, it was Harry's turn to blanch. He looked thoroughly shocked and embarrassed but said nothing. Hermione, however, would not be sidetracked. "So who will be petitioning for me?"

"Well, that is, by and large, what we are here to discuss. We need to have enough pureblood wizards to petition for her to stall the Ministry for a time."

"I'll petition," Neville spoke up suddenly. Snape looked even more disgusted, but before he could respond, Neville said, "I wouldn't be as close to risk as Ron. Gran is very well connected at the Ministry and there are several things she could very successfully destroy for Mr. Malfoy should he get in her way. Besides, she's almost as influential as the Malfoys are, so there'd be less chance that Malfoy could bribe someone into disallowing my proposal."

Most people in the room were duly shocked that Neville seemed to have given this situation so much thought. Dumbledore, however, seemed to be very closely considering this. After a moment he said, "Yes, I think that will do nicely. But seeing as how you will be putting yourself in danger, it may be best if you were to stay here at Headquarters until further notice and not venture out of doors without one of the members of the Order unless extremely necessary."

Neville nodded silently and was greeted by a grateful smile from Hermione. Even should it end up being required of her, marrying Neville wouldn't be so bad, Hermione told herself.

At this point, Remus spoke up, "Won't Neville's grandmother be in danger?"

"Oh, I think not," Tonks replied. "With the not-so-mysterious deaths of Frank and Alice last month, any direct attacks on Lavinia would be traced back to either a Ministry slip up or the Death Eaters. It would be far too obvious."

Neville was blushing pink, but his face carried such a look of determination that Hermione couldn't help being moved by it. With a last vote of thanks and an issue of goodnight, Dumbledore swept out of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, Professor Snape accompanying him.

Hermione reflected curiously that Snape and Dumbledore had been so deep in conversation throughout the night that she had expected Snape to have more concrete suggestions or solutions throughout that meeting.

"Something's not quite adding up with him," Hermione said to no one in particular. "But I'll be hanged if I can guess it."

No Knot Unties Itself

Chapter 3 of 23

"Oh, by the way," Hermione said as they worked their way to the kitchen, "Happy birthday, and you're officially seeking my hand in marriage."

Neville smiled and blushed nervously as she held up the ministry-sent proposal. "What a way to celebrate!

Congratulations, you're of-age, here's a fiancée."

Chapter Three No Knot Unties Itself

Hermione awoke rather abruptly just over a week and a half later. A rather disgruntled owl zoomed into her room and very unceremoniously dumped a scroll on her head. Without even waiting for her to respond, the huge tawny owl spread its wings and zoomed out of the room and down the stairs. Crookshanks, whom Hermione had Apparated home to retrieve the previous day, rose from his place at her knees and hissed at the retreating bird before settling back to sleep.

"How rude," she muttered sleepily, before hoisting herself into a sitting position to read the scroll. She noticed with a great sinking of her stomach that the large red wax seal bore the "M" insignia of the Ministry of Magic. In a moment of childish fear, she crossed her fingers and prayed that it was only the agreed-upon proposal from Neville.

She realized with a jolt that if it was in fact the agreed upon proposal, she would need to wish both Neville and Harry a happy 18th birthday. *Rather convenient*, Hermione thought as she let out a breath at the sight of Neville's slightly lopsided scrawling signature, *that his birthday should fall right on the day where I need to buy some time.*

She reminded herself, also, to thank Neville heartily for putting himself in harm's way simply to help her. It was truly chivalrous of him, and she firmly intended on expressing her gratitude. As she was pulling a T-shirt over her head, it also occurred to her that she needed to speak to him on another topic as well.

Her thoughts on this buzzing in her head, she sped out of her room only to collide with him on the landing below. "We need to stop doing that," she said ruefully, rubbing the elbow that had hit the wall in the collision.

"Oh?" he said, massaging his side (where her other elbow had hit). "You don't think we should make this a tradition?"

She smiled, but felt it dissolve from her face as her thoughts returned to their previous occupation. "Neville, I didn't know about your parents. I'm so sorry."

He was quiet for a second or two as they moved down the staircase. "That's all right. I suppose it's ... well I can't say it's better, but at least they're ..."

After a moment of silence, Hermione offered, "At peace?"

Neville teared up and turned his face away, but nodded in response.

"Oh, by the way," she said as they worked their way to the kitchen. "Happy birthday, and you're officially seeking my hand in marriage."

He smiled and blushed nervously as she held up the ministry-sent proposal. "What a way to celebrate! Congratulations, you're of-age, here's a fiancée."

Hermione laughed heartily as they sat down at the kitchen table, accompanied by several more members of the Order of the Phoenix than she had seen present during previous vacations. Tonks and Remus were once again talking over tea, joined by Kingsley Shacklebolt and Bill Weasley who were in the corner near the fireplace, engaged with Harry in a heated discussion of the merits of the most recent broom in the Nimbus series.

Hermione scanned the room. She was actually surprised...she couldn't imagine why, though...at the absence of Professor Snape. In previous years he had been constantly absent to the point where he was only ever present for meetings, but in the last six months, since the threat from Voldemort had heightened, it was not uncommon to see him breezing in and out of Grimmauld Place.

Mrs. Weasley was bustling about the kitchen, foisting breakfast on anyone who stopped talking long enough to look hungry. Hermione smiled and accepted bacon, eggs and tea and seated herself next to Tonks and Remus, who seemed to be having the most joinable conversation.

"I tell you, Remus, you should go back. What does it matter that you're a werewolf? They need someone who knows what they're doing, especially now!"

He sighed heavily and nodded a greeting to Hermione. "It will matter a great deal once word gets out to the greater public that I could eat their children once a month. Besides, I heard that he offered the position to you."

Hermione raised her eyebrows in surprise, and Tonks turned to include her, brushing her shoulder-length, neon green hair out of her eyes. "Defense Against the Dark Arts teaching position at Hogwarts. Dumbledore's offered it to me, but I still think that Remus should apply for it."

"Oh. Well, I would love to have Prof...Remus back, but I can see his point." Lupin leaned back in his chair, smiling triumphantly at Tonks. "If you've been offered the position, I'd say that'd be quite beneficial having an Auror at Hogwarts. Very safe."

"That's what I said," Remus finished smugly. "With all this new Ministry interference into the personal lives of students, it might not be a bad idea to have a member of the Order at Hogwarts, just in case."

Though Remus hadn't said anything to that effect, when his gaze lingered just a touch longer than usual on Hermione, she couldn't help but feel that he was referring to her. Hermione sighed heavily. "My engagement is already causing problems and I'm not even engaged yet. Not really," she responded glumly. "I can't even imagine what's going to happen when school starts." Turning directly to Remus, she continued, "Has Dumbledore thought of anything better for us to do about my proposals?"

He shifted in his seat, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "Erm ..."

Hermione watched him expectantly and somewhat curiously. Remus was not someone who was normally speechless. In fact, when she was his student, she had believed firmly that he had a thought-out answer for everything. This would explain her admiration for him.

"Yes?" she prompted.

But just as Lupin had opened his mouth to form a response, Harry bounded over and plunked down on the bench beside him. "So, how are we all on this fine morning?"

"Well," Tonks replied, "aren't we chipper for being of-age now?"

"Happy birthday, Harry," Hermione offered as Harry helped himself to breakfast. Harry nodded his thanks and set forward to consuming his meal.

"Cheers," he said, around a mouthful of toast. "Best birthday I've had so far."

Tonks chuckled heartily, and Hermione smiled and said, "Harry, it's only 9:30."

"Says something about all those birthdays I spent at the Dursleys, eh?"

It hadn't occurred to Hermione right away, but with Sirius gone, Grimmauld Place must rightly belong to Harry, being the closest thing to kin that Sirius had left. *Aside from Bellatrix Lestrange, of course*, Hermione reminded herself. *But one could hardly expect her to jump at the ownership of the house.* After a few moments of silence unbroken except for the clatter of cutlery, Hermione spoke.

"Aren't you worried about the petitions now that you're eighteen?" she asked, unable to control her concern any longer.

"Not really," Harry said after a long pause. "I've done so many stupid things, and so many people think that I'm crazy that I doubt that many people will even be interested. I

think all of that 'famous Harry Potter' nonsense has finally worn off."

"Thank goodness," Remus replied, and everyone at the table laughed heartily.

"Either that or they figure that marrying Harry is like signing a death warrant," Ron chimed in, having just caught the end of the conversation as he sat down to breakfast.

"Ron!" Hermione hissed, but Harry just shrugged.

"Either way works out for me," he added, helping himself to more eggs.

The bustle of number twelve, Grimmauld Place consumed all its occupants with preparations for the approaching term at Hogwarts. Not only were preparations being made for Tonks to take over as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, but Hermione had been notified that she would be assuming the position of Head Girl. Dumbledore had been in and out several times over the last week, and had explained that normally she wouldn't be notified this quickly, but given recent circumstances, he had several duties for her to take up before arrival.

The battle...as it were...against Voldemort was now in full swing. *Actually*, Hermione had thought angrily one day, *it's not so much of a battle as a slow execution of the opposing forces.*

Every day there were more instances of deaths surrounded by looming Dark Marks. She only barely contained her anger at the seeming lack of response from the Order of the Phoenix, but any time one of the students residing there had brought it up, they had been quickly hushed, saying that steps were being taken. So many families had been hit in the course of the attacks that Dumbledore had charged Hermione with the task of compiling a list of deceased students and brainstorming ideas as to how the matter should be addressed within Houses.

Hermione stared down in horror. Hardly a month from the beginning of term and she couldn't even begin to guess how they could possibly address losses of this magnitude. There were so many losses that Hufflepuff House (being the heaviest with Muggle-borns and those with mixed parentage) was nearly cut in half. They were not the only ones, however. Gryffindor had suffered some weighty blows as well. Hermione shook her head as her eyes scanned the Gryffindor House casualty list. She had grown up with many of the people who were now just names and dates on paper.

"So many," she said aloud. "So many young ones, too." The list she looked at now was too full...far too full...of her classmates, and this was only from the last month.

Gryffindor House Student Casualties

Abercrombie, Euan July 1

Brewster, Elijah July 2

Coote, Ritchie July 2

Creevey, Colin July 3

Dickinson, Evangeline July 4

D'ibruzzi, Roger July 5

Eggleston, Marissa July 6

Finnigan, Seamus July 7

Frobisher, Victoria July 7

Hollingsworth, Penny July 8

Hooper, Geoffrey July 9

Kirke, Andrew - July 10

MacDonald, Natalie July 11

Maddox, Lilah July 11

Maharini, Oscar July 12

McLaggen, Cormac July 13

Patil, Parvati - July 14

Sheffield, Grace Ann July 15

Sloper, Jack July 16

Thomas, Dean July 7

Vane, Romilda July 17

Vreeland, Annabelle July 17

Wellington-LaCroix, Etienne July 18

Westinghouse, Julianna July 19

Westinghouse, Nathaniel July 19

Zorich, Belinda July 20

She sighed heavily, staring down at the list with a tight throat. The names that corresponded with each date were so alphabetical with the exception of Dean Thomas, who had been murdered while visiting Seamus Finnigan that it was almost as if someone had gone down a class list and checked them off as they died. *So many people...* she

pondered. *How can we bear it?*

"What's the final count?" a soft voice said, behind her shoulder. Hermione turned to find Harry standing behind her in the study. She had not even noticed him come to the door, so engrossed had she been in the list on the desk. His face glazed with concern and sadness, and there was something almost guilty behind his eyes. The happy-go-lucky cheer of only hours ago had disappeared.

She shook her head again as she responded. "Fifty-seven from Gryffindor, all told, but Hufflepuff has lost one hundred and fifty three! Nearly half the whole house. The only surviving seventh-year Hufflepuffs are Hannah Abbott, Ernie Macmillan and Susan Bones. Ironically, the only house virtually untouched was Slytherin: they only lost one." Hermione shook her head as Harry moved to quietly stand behind her. "And what happens when we go back to school? All these people all in one place. Oh, poor Lavender! She'll have a time without Parvati. And Padma will too, I suppose. But Dennis Creevy! How will he ever get on without his brother? They were inseparable; he'll be lost."

After a moment of silently scanning the lists, Harry spoke quietly, "Ron, Neville and I are the only remaining Gryffindor seventh-year boys."

Hermione nodded silently, ashamed with herself for momentarily considering that this severely limited her eligible male pool. She couldn't contain the wretched thought now that it had escaped, and she was thoroughly disappointed with herself. She sighed heavily again, ready to try and divert him from the subject at hand, when he took it on himself.

"I would have petitioned if I could have," he said, his voice dropping to a barely-audible hush.

"What?" she asked, not certain she had heard him correctly. Hermione turned in her seat to see Harry standing, hands on the back of her chair, his face screwed up in fretfulness.

"I said..." He took a breath to steady himself. "If I could have petitioned for you myself, I would have."

"Oh, Harry, I...I don't know what to say. It just means so much to me that my friends would take the chance of giving up marriage for love just to protect me."

He took another breath, his chest shaking slightly. He looked down into her eyes and then away again. "I wouldn't be giving it up, Hermione."

She opened her mouth to question him but closed it quickly with an audible snap as it occurred to her what he had just said. "I...oh," she mumbled, not quite able to formulate a response. She could feel a deep flush creeping up her cheeks. Had Harry just told her he loved her?

"I'd, er, I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk about this after today," he muttered shakily.

In the absence of a response, Hermione just nodded her head. *Things are definitely getting complicated*, she thought.

Harry moved around the chair to look her in the face. Slowly he leaned down and placed his lips against her cheek. She sat stunned for a moment, not able to formulate any coherent thought, as he stood straight again and walked from the room.

"Oh, bloody hell," Hermione muttered as the door clicked shut. She laid her forehead against the cool mahogany of the desktop and exhaled loudly. "It's never easy."

A/N - Okay, ladies and jellyspoons, I have just realized that I have hit a small snag. I realized that if you want to be a stickler for canon, Harry and Neville are actually turning seventeen, not eighteen. However, for the purposes of my fic, both Harry and Neville need to be eighteen, so I hope you can just come along with me on that one. Thanks everybody! don't forget to review!!!

The Square Knot

Chapter 4 of 23

"I had to make a choice, and I made it." Hermione cleared her throat and continued. "I know it's dangerous. And I will never forgive myself for putting any of you in this kind of danger. But I had to make a choice and I made the choice that is most likely to bring me the most amount of happiness." Tears welled up in her eyes but she ignored them as she rose and walked to the door. Her head was held high as she turned to address them on her way towards her room. "I cannot and will not apologize for my decision."

A/N: Keep an eye out for these chapter titles; from now on, they will indicate something within the chapter...

And a big thank you to amsev, who made me aware of the fact that I'm an idiot (not amsev's words, obviously) and put an excerpt from chapter FIVE as the description of this chapter. ... whoops! So for those of you who read early and/or are rereading this... you got a tiny sneak peek. Sorry!

~~ ** LadyTuesday ** ~~

Chapter Four The Square Knot

"The Square Knot (Also known as the "Reef Knot")- The square knot is only useful in simple applications. It is easily tied and will not jam, so it is always easy to untie."

Hermione remained in the study with her head resting on the desk for nearly an hour before rousing herself and getting back to the task at hand. She felt guilty for it later, but after the events of the afternoon, she had no desire to be accessible and cast a quick locking charm on the door.

"I just can't handle anymore, Crookshanks," she moaned to the large ginger cat now stationed in front of the fire. He had sauntered in just after Harry had left and had leapt onto the desk. His piteous meowing and demands for attention left her little choice as to ignoring him, and she got a sneaking suspicion that he was aware of her emotional turmoil. As she set herself back to the arduous task of planning supportive House activities, he had curled around her feet, a constant reminder of comfort and love.

Now that she was merely walking circles of the study, he had chosen a more stable position. Hermione could not force herself to settle. To say her mind was racing would have been a vast understatement.

"What's going to happen to me, Crookshanks? Even Dumbledore doesn't know what to do ... I can see it in his eyes. And this stalling is only going to last so long. Eventually the Ministry will catch on, and I will have to marry someone. But who?"

As if the cat had responded, Hermione wheeled around to face him and kept talking. "And it's not as if wizarding marriages can be dissolved by divorce. I checked. In a wizarding marriage, you either die as husband and wife or you petition for an annulment ... and even those are practically impossible to get. And I'm quite certain that annulments wouldn't be allowed for this stupid law. So who can I possibly marry?"

"Harry's not available, Ron's too dangerous, Neville couldn't really protect me once school starts, and to get right down to it, I don't love him. I mean, he's lovely and all, but I'm not interested in him like that. But this buying time thing will only stall for a few months ... and then ... Then I'll have to get married. And even if they do repeal the bloody thing, I'm sure it won't be in time for the inevitable."

She stopped her tumultuous pacing of the room. "Married, Crookshanks! How can I be married at 18 years old! All my plans ... They'll be ruined!"

As the bright summer sunset started to reflect into the window, Hermione had stilled her pacing of the room, but as of yet was in no mood for visitors, so she had simply curled up on the leather couch with a volume of *Moste Potent Potions* that she had found residing on the study's bookshelves. She had lost herself within the book for an indiscriminate amount of time and was practically oblivious until a soft tap sounded on the door after a gentle rattling of the knob.

"Hermione?" Ginny's voice came uncertainly from the other side of the door. "Dinner is ready if you'd like to come eat ..."

Hermione had a fleeting instinct to holler at her to go away, but stifled it, reminding herself that her current situation had nothing to do with the plucky sixth-year. She sighed heavily as she heard Ginny's retreating footsteps. She felt awful turning a cold shoulder to the girl who was the only person Hermione dared to call a girlfriend, but she just didn't feel equipped to deal with any more human contact.

She began pacing the room once more as her stomach grumbled noisily. "You'll have to eat sometime," she told herself angrily, but at the moment, the only solution to that was an errant thought of stalking down to the kitchen once everyone had gone to bed. Hermione was thoroughly ashamed being a person who opposed any form of escapism. "Aren't I due this little bit of comfort though?" she asked Crookshanks, who merely arched up under her hand, begging for affection. Just as she was contemplating what time would be best to avoid people, another soft knock tapped on the door.

"I'm not hungry, Gin," she called back, feeling even guiltier for ignoring her earlier. "I promise I'll come out and eat later."

The voice she heard in response, however, was much different than the one she had expected. "Miss Granger, I'm certain you need your solitude more than anyone right now, but I'm afraid there is a matter of some importance that we must discuss as soon as possible. Please unward the door so that I may come in."

When Dumbledore's voice had died away again, Hermione hurried to fetch her wand and open the door. She had begun to mutter an apology as Dumbledore entered, shortly followed by several members of the Order, but Dumbledore was quick to respond.

"Ordinarily I wouldn't dream of trespassing on your privacy, Miss Granger, but something has come to my attention that needs to be addressed."

Hermione occupied Snape's usual position in front of the windows and stared around at the quickly filling room; she realized that it could be nothing good and was most certainly something to do with her marriage proposals.

Mrs. Weasley moved over to her tentatively and handed her a scroll that had already been opened. "Well dear, this came for you this evening during dinner, and since you had the door warded, the owl delivered it to the first open window he could find, which happened to be the lounge where Dumbledore and Professor Snape were talking."

Hermione took the scroll from Mrs. Weasley, but did not open it. From a quick glance around the room, she could ascertain that she was the only one who was not aware of its contents, and as such, expected them to elaborate. She sighed heavily and looked to Dumbledore.

"If you notice the Ministry crest, Miss Granger, I'm sure you can guess what it is about." He sighed heavily, adjusting his half-moon glasses before settling into a worn chintz armchair near the fire. "The Ministry is calling for a decision on your marriage proposals."

Hermione's head whipped around, her attention fixed. "But Neville just proposed today! I should have at least ten days before..." Dumbledore nodded and opened his mouth to speak, but Snape interrupted smoothly.

"There is no doubt that this rush tactic is coming straight from Lucius Malfoy. The Ministry is maintaining that Neville's contract should be considered invalid for the ten day period because it was submitted on the day that you theoretically should have accepted Malfoy. However, as it is a valid contract, they are now stating that you should have a decision logged within 24 hours. By which time I'm sure Lucius will have come up with a reason for Longbottom's claim to be disallowed. It's quite obviously a scare tactic to force you into accepting Draco."

After a weighty silence, broken only by muted grumbings from Ron and Harry, Snape turned to Dumbledore and continued. "I'm not the sort of man to say, 'I told you so,' Albus." Hermione snorted derisively without even noticing, but Snape continued as if she had never done so. "But I can't help but state that I did say this would not last long. I think it's time that you considered my suggestion that..."

For the first time in her memory, Dumbledore was more forceful in his interruption than politeness would have allowed. "No, Severus. Your solution would be a last resort, and an option I would turn to only in the direst situation."

"We are there!" Snape countered, his voice edgier than Hermione had ever heard.

"No," Dumbledore responded coolly. "Not yet."

Hermione watched the byplay between the two men in silent confusion. She looked around at the faces and realized, yet again, that she was most likely the only one aside from Ron and Harry that were not aware of what they were arguing about. A cold fury rose in Hermione as she glared around at the assembled party.

"Is someone going to inform me just what's going on? Or do you all plan on scheduling out my married life for me and informing me the day of the wedding?"

Ginny and Harry both recoiled visibly as Hermione released her emotional venom, but the rest of the party merely looked away. Remus rose from his chair gently and laid a soft hand on her shoulder.

"Hermione, I know this is difficult, but we're trying to determine what is the best and safest course of action for you ..."

She slapped his hand away and turned her back to him. "Did you ever think of including me in that decision? It is my future!"

Lupin sighed softly. "Of course. But there are certain options that we'd rather not trouble you with until we know whether or not they are necessary. The pertinent thing to discuss right now

is how to keep you from having to marry into the Malfoys."

At this point, Tonks joined the conversation. "Well, it seems like the only way for her to do that is to accept someone else."

Hermione looked to Dumbledore, hoping for some other alternative. When Dumbledore responded, his eyes were full of sadness. "So it would seem," he said softly.

Hermione sighed again and looked to Neville. "I'm so sorry for this ... I know that you never intended..."

Neville squirmed in his seat, obviously uncomfortable, but responded with a clear voice. "I wouldn't have offered if I wasn't willing to see it through."

Hermione smiled weakly but could offer nothing else.

"Well," Dumbledore responded, "seeing as how Neville is still in school as well, it may actually be more favorable to accept a proposal from a man who is out of school. That way cohabitation could be postponed, as you are still in attendance at Hogwarts. Hopefully, by the time you graduate, the law may be repealed."

Hermione nodded. "But ...er ... who?"

Mr. Weasley spoke up almost immediately. "Charlie has written to say that he would petition if necessary, and you could be granted a cohabitation waiver as he is still in Romania."

Hermione nodded again, but had a feeling there was more. "Or...?"

"Or I could petition, if necessary."

Hermione turned to gaze at Professor Lupin, who was blushing slightly in the firelight. "Prof- Remus ... you would ...?" Hermione blushed deeply as well, slightly horrified at the thought of a wedding night with her former Professor.

"If necessary. It may be a more favorable alternative if the law should continue, as you would not have to move to Romania upon graduation. I reside here, so you would have London at your disposal."

Hermione's head was spinning. Her choices for marriage were limited to someone she could barely stand, someone she barely knew, someone who could never protect her, or someone she looked up to as a sort of father. "I have how long to decide on something?" she asked to the room at large.

"Twenty-four hours," Snape remarked, his presence in the room suddenly thrown into relief again.

"I need to think ... maybe a night's sleep?" She looked to Dumbledore, who nodded silently. Upon his acknowledgement, she swiftly walked from the room and called upon all her self-restraint in aiding her in the battle against running up the stairs in a blaze of embarrassed sobbing.

The instant she regained her room, Hermione broke out into horrified sobs. She couldn't remember the last time she had carried on in this manner, and yet, within the last two weeks, she had cried more than a two year old in the midst of a temper tantrum. She beat her fists against the bed and her pillows, heaving out her anger and frustration upon the bed clothes.

She started violently and grabbed for her wand when a soft hand touched her shoulder. She looked up to see Ginny standing over her, Ron and Harry standing by the door, shuffling their feet nervously. The youngest Weasley's friendly, heart-shaped face was screwed up in concern as she laced her arms around Hermione.

"I know this doesn't help any for your situation, but I'm here for you if you want to beat on someone." Hermione chuckled slightly as she swiped at her tearstained face with her sleeve.

"I'm serious," Ginny continued, "it might make you feel better. But perhaps you should beat on Harry instead; he's a bit sturdier."

Harry nodded enthusiastically, obviously relieved to see Hermione tending towards a better mood than the shrieking sobs they'd heard a moment ago.

As he and Ron moved to take a seat on either side of her on the bed, Hermione raised her fists and pummeled them playfully into Harry's chest. He made a good show of fake pain and muttered, "Go on, I can take it..."

As the smile melted from Hermione's face, Ginny slid behind her one long leg on either side of Hermione and enveloped her in her slender, lanky arms. Hermione tried valiantly to stave her barrage of sniffles, but leaned back against Ginny and said nothing.

After a few moments of silence, Harry finally whispered, "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Hermione responded, her voice thick with emotion. "I can't marry Draco; that's just out of the question. But as for Neville ... it doesn't seem ..."

"Sound," Ginny finished. "Not the wisest idea."

Hermione nodded mutely, but stared over at Ron as he cleared his throat loudly several times in rapid succession. "What?" she groused, not able to control her irritability.

"Well," he began and cleared his throat again. He thrust his hand into the back pocket of his jeans and produced a crumpled scroll with a broken seal. "I intercepted this before it got to you. Wanted to say something myself, you know."

He thrust his hand out to Hermione, who took the proffered paper without comment. She opened it and read quickly, her mouth dropping as she took in the contents.

"You can't marry Draco, you shouldn't marry Neville or Lupin, and if you're going to marry a Weasley, I'll be damned if it's going to be anyone but me."

Ginny roughly looked over Hermione's shoulders at the parchment still clutched shakily in her hand. "Ron, they said it was too dangerous. She can't..."

"Oh, yes she can," Ron said. "I may not be as experienced as Harry, but I'll protect her all the same."

Hermione stared from Ron to Ginny to Harry, unsure of what her next move should be. She knew deep down what her decision as to that was, but if she didn't seek someone else's opinion, she was terrified that she would make the wrong one, simply out of too much emotion. Ginny's face was set and obviously disapproving; Ron's was a mirror of Ginny's, but determination replaced her disapproval. Hermione looked last to Harry, hoping he could shed some light on the best course of action. He was the person she trusted best. But Harry merely looked away, a strained sort of pain still lurking at the corner of his eyes.

"You just have to sign there at the bottom," Ron replied firmly, but there was a hint of a question in it.

With a deep breath, Hermione leaned over to her bedside table, retrieved a quill and scratched a hasty signature at the bottom of the parchment, which rolled itself up and disappeared with a loud pop! the instant she finished.

The entire downstairs vibrated with the force of a shout coming from the entry hall.

"Granger! WEASLEY! *WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?*"

Hermione stiffened in anticipation as she sat sipping tea at the breakfast table. The reaction was expected, but still intimidating. The five students currently eating breakfast

silently all looked up in alarm as a great thundering of footsteps clattered towards the kitchen.

Severus Snape thrust open the swinging door of the kitchen so hard that the top flew off its hinges and hung precariously as Dumbledore, Lupin, Tonks and Arthur Weasley followed him to the kitchen. Molly turned from the cauldron of porridge she was stirring, her face shining with perspiration and now glazed with concern.

Snape stalked over to the table and peered down at Ron and Hermione who happened to be sitting side by side. "What is the meaning of this?" he spat angrily, waving an opened letter from the ministry.

Without waiting for Hermione's or Ron's ready answers, he plowed on, furious. "We discussed this, Weasley. You have just signed your own death warrant! And as for you-!" he scowled, turning to Hermione.

Ron piped up, his face an angry purplish color. "Something had to be done! She had to marry someone, and I'll be damned if it's anyone but me!"

Snape looked furiously around at the rest of the table, anxious to unleash his spleen on someone and certain that they had encouraged him. "Do you have any idea what you've just gotten yourself into? You fools have no idea ... Yet again, you can't possibly fathom that someone else might know what's best for you."

Ron stood up in front of Hermione, shielding her from Snape's anger. "And you can't possibly understand that the people who love her have to stand up and do something!"

Ron was staring heatedly into Snape's eyes, refusing to back down. Severus's hands moved swiftly to grab Ron by the collar of his robes and lifted him to his toes. "Do you have any idea what you've just done, Weasley? Something I could have saved her from ... and you, I might add."

"Severus," Dumbledore spoke, his voice icy in warning. "Unhand Mr. Weasley this instant."

Snape reluctantly released Ron and shoved him back toward the table. Hermione grabbed at his chest, forcing him to leave off his retaliation against Snape. Harry cleared his throat nervously and looked to Ginny, who was fuming in anger and shooting daggers at both Ron and Snape.

"Ron, that was a foolish thing to do," Mr. Weasley spoke up. Ginny's face radiated a sick sort of triumph. Harry's glazed in concern. Ron was fuming. "And Hermione," he continued, "it was even more foolish of you to accept. You know the risks we're now taking, tying together the two closest people to Harry. It would make you both a very valuable target."

Hermione started to respond, but Tonks cut her off. "Well, she had to do something, and marrying Neville or Remus wasn't much safer. No offense meant," she added hastily to Remus.

"None taken, but it does put Hermione, Ron and Harry at tremendous risk ..."

Harry and Ginny had leaned toward each other and lapsed into silent conversation; Ron was throwing down his breakfast, no doubt in an effort to distract himself. Hermione listened quietly and carefully to the byplay between the adults, all of whom were now bantering heavily back and forth. Eventually, she could take no more and raised her voice.

"I made a choice."

All the people in the room stopped and turned quietly to where she sat at the table, hands folded, looking up at the assembled party.

"I had to make a choice, and I made it." Hermione cleared her throat and continued. "I know it's dangerous. And I will never forgive myself for putting Ron or any of you in this kind of danger. But I had to make a choice, and I made the choice that is most likely to bring me the most amount of happiness." Tears welled up in her eyes, but she ignored them as she rose and walked to the door. Her head was held high as she turned to address them on her way towards her room.

"I cannot and will not apologize for my decision."

Sometimes the Things You Most Wish For Are Knot to Be Touched

Chapter 5 of 23

Hermione turned swiftly to see Ron collapsing to the ground in a heap. Before she was able to process the image, she felt the sharp point of a knife at her throat. She looked down minutely and saw the curved blade of a dagger, etched with tiny scrolls, emanating from an ebony handle in the form of a snake striking at prey.

"Wonderful little Muggle instruments aren't they, Miss Granger?" a slick voice purred close to her ear.

A/N - So it occurred to me today that my most popular fic on this website is starting to wind down. So I asked myself, "Self, why haven't you updated your other fics?" I had no good answer for that, so I decided to update these fics, as Bundle of Joy won't last forever (sadly). As a result, here's the next chapter of Tying Knots, woefully overdue.

~~ ** Lady Tuesday ** ~~

Chapter Five Sometimes the Things You Most Wish For Are Knot to Be Touched

Hermione moved as slowly and easily as she could from the hallway up to the front sitting room. It would be too easy to break into a sprint ... to run up the stairs, down the hallway, and out through the heavily beveled front door into the Muggle world. Even now it tickled at her brain. It would be an escape. To leave the magical world would be to leave all this behind. No marriage. No trouble.

'No friends either,' she reminded herself, as she had done every time the thought occurred to her. The faces of all her loved ones swam in front of her vision as her knees buckled, and she collapsed onto the landing of the first floor stairs. She could not leave this behind. She could not leave them all behind.

And Ron would treat her well. Her would raise her up, support her dreams, love her

"Love," she spoke aloud. "Love."

"I don't love Ron," her head whimpered. But neither did she love any of the other marriage prospects but she had to choose one of them. The situation was certainly not ideal. However, Ron was by far the best choice when considering her happiness and the future. He would give her the best chance of being content and allow the freedom to pursue the future she wanted. But love?

She sank her head into her hands, her elbows perched atop her knees, and when the soft rustle of fabrics came closer down the hall, she did not even jump as Dumbledore's gnarled hands rested on the backs of hers.

"My dear Miss Granger," he intoned softly, "no one ever said this choice would be easy. And it certainly must be exceedingly uncomfortable for someone your age. I cannot express how sorry I am that you have to endure this horrid hardship. I would not wish it on anyone, especially someone so poised on the edge of burgeoning adulthood. But you must understand that I cannot deceive you as to the amount of danger with which you have now surrounded yourself. Mr. Weasley is in grave peril, and so are you."

She looked up at his weathered face slowly and only managed to say, "I know. I wish I could say I didn't know what I was doing when I signed that letter. But I just didn't know what else to do. What else was I to do?"

Dumbledore was silent, again devoid of the sagely comfort she used to think flowed in his veins. He had never before failed to guide her on all terms, never flagging in his courage, even throughout these dark battles with Voldemort. But now he was silent.

"What do we do now?" she asked, her voice a hoarse whisper.

Dumbledore's eyes locked with hers, and his face was set with grim determination. "We make sure that the two of you are as safe as it is in our power to help you be. That is all we really can do. And pray for the best."

Mr. Harry J. Potter

4 Privet Drive

Little Whinging, Surrey

Mr. Potter:

This letter is to inform you of a new piece of legislation enacted within the Magical Community. Enclosed forthwith is an explanation of Ministry of Magic Decree Number 1,124, subsections A E, commonly known as the "Rejuvenatory Genetics Marriage Law." Please direct any comments, questions, or concerns to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Domestic

Affairs Division.

Best wishes for your future and your impending nuptials,

Madam. Belinda Crescenzi

Dept. of Magical Law Enforcement

Domestic Affairs Division

Hermione was perched in a large arm chair, quietly reading what Harry recognized as this coming year's NEWT level Potions textbook when he strode into the sitting room where. He pulled a chair up next to her without her noticing and drew a deep breath as he dropped the letter he was clutching into her lap, atop the page her eyes were scanning.

"Well, it's official," he said, "you're not alone."

Hermione quickly picked up the letter and read. "Oh, dear ..." she began. She looked quickly up to Harry's face.

"When did you get this?" she asked quietly.

"On my birthday. Officially of age, just like when you were sent yours." Harry's face was surprisingly relaxed; there was no tension in his voice.

"Have ..." Hermione began nervously, but her throat quit. She tried again. "Have you received any offers?"

Harry forced a weak smile. "Not a one. I told you I was too mad for people to want to marry me."

Hermione laughed lightly, but it died on her lips.

"So," Harry continued awkwardly, "how is the newly-engaged Head Girl?"

Hermione set down the book in her lap, abandoning all hope of being able to concentrate on Potions now. She sighed heavily. "Scared and confused. I mean, I don't have any desire to get married at all, but I suppose if I have to..."

Harry nodded. "Then Ron's the best choice. I just hope..."

"I know," Hermione interrupted quickly, not sure she could stand to hear the lingering threat of violence worded. "Me too."

Harry sighed deeply, but then reached out for her hand. He gently pulled her up to her feet from her sitting position and wrapped his lightly muscled arms around her shoulders. She plunged her face into the hollow of his neck, shaking with repressed sobs. He spoke softly to her, his face buried in her hair.

"It'll come out all right," he murmured. "Somehow. I'm here."

She sobbed at his last sentence, and Ron, who had stood silently at the door, turned and walked away without ever being noticed.

Several days went by without a word spoken between Ron and Hermione. Since their engagement was formalized and recognized as something to be dealt with inside the Order, they could barely look each other in the face; when they did meet eyes, Hermione saw a disappointed confusion in Ron's and was forced to look away. The simple fact of the matter was that she was afraid her eyes would give away the regret she felt over the whole situation.

Nearly a week later, Hermione and Ginny had their heads together, giggling over the remnants of their dinner. The two girls had straggled at dinner, wishing to talk and laugh like normal, long after the other members of the Order had eaten and left. They were still snickering over a joke when Ron made his way into the kitchen. He perched next to Hermione on the long wooden bench at the table and slid a letter across to her.

"Have to go to the Ministry to sign some papers," he said gruffly. "Declaring our engagement, read some details of when the wedding has to be performed, that sort of thing."

Hermione nodded, the smile fading from her face. She took a deep breath and replied. "Just let me finish my dinner ..."

Ron began to rise from the table before she completed her sentence. "Well, the letter says only me. You don't have to go ... if you don't want to."

She looked up into his eyes and saw him desperately trying to mask the hope that she would accompany him. "I'll go," she returned quietly.

"And so will I."

Hermione turned to see Professor Snape standing in the doorway to the kitchen, followed by a very frazzled looking Tonks.

"Oh, no you won't," she retorted loudly.

"They have to be protected, you fool," he grouched as he stalked into the kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee. "Suppose they are ambushed by Death Eaters..."

"And it won't look suspicious to have someone they think is a spy for them fighting against his comrades?"

Snape growled something incoherent.

"Severus is right about one thing," Tonks continued, now addressing Hermione and Ron. "You're both going, and you'll be accompanied by a member of the Order."

Hermione nodded obediently, but Ron flushed and bit back. "I can take care of myself and Hermione!"

Tonks sighed. "Not against a contingency of Death Eaters, you can't. This may be nothing, there may not be any trouble. But the fact that the letter requested only you to come is highly suspicious. You're both going and I'm coming with you."

"Why you?" Hermione asked.

"Because it won't look out of the ordinary for me to go strolling into the Ministry of Magic." She shot daggers at Snape with her eyes as she spoke. "As long as I went to my office and looked busy for a bit, no one would be the wiser and you two would be protected. But Severus ..."

"All right, all right," Severus snapped. He opened his mouth to say something else but then blended it into his trademark sneer. After a moment or two where the party in the room stared at him silently, he grumbled, "Be careful."

Tonks smiled winningly. "I shall."

Tonks, Hermione and Ron walked as quickly as possible towards the visitor entrance of the Ministry of Magic. "Tell me again why we didn't just Apparate?" Ron asked. "I mean, we've all got our license."

"Well," Tonks started, "it is off hours." She glanced at her watch. "The fact that someone sent you a Ministry letter at 8pm on a Friday means that there may be an ambush waiting for us in the office you were supposed to Apparate to. If we enter through the Atrium and the elevator, we'll be able to hear an attack before it hits us."

Ron nodded, satisfied with this explanation, but Hermione wasn't convinced.

"Come on, Tonks, what's the real reason? You can only Apparate into the Atrium. We couldn't have Apparated straight to an office."

Tonks looked around suspiciously. "All right, all right," she said after a few seconds of silence. "We're trying to draw an attack."

"WHAT?" Ron hollered.

"Shhhhhh!" Hermione whispered furiously. "Why?" she directed to Tonks.

"Because if we draw out an attack here, we are not trapped. The Ministry has a limited number of places to run. Here, we can Disapparate freely, should we be attacked, with no delay. The Ministry is very heavily ensconced in magic, which could be manipulated by the Death Eaters, should we try to escape them within the building."

Tonks was easily glancing over her shoulder as they walked down the street. Suddenly, she halted and threw out her hands to stop the others from moving. Leaning forward to peer around the dumpster that was on her left side, Tonks resembled nothing so much as a cat with its hackles up. Just before she had moved free of the shadow of the bin, Ron who was at the back of the group grunted heavily. Hermione turned swiftly to see Ron collapsing to the ground in a heap. Before she was able to process the image, she felt the sharp point of a knife at her throat. She looked down minutely and saw the curved blade of a dagger, etched with tiny scrolls, emanating from an ebony handle in the form of a snake striking at prey.

"Wonderful little Muggle instruments aren't they, Miss Granger?" a slick voice purred close to her ear.

She wrenched around to try to see her captor, but was met only with a smooth, featureless white mask. She recognized the voice, however. And the lock of white-blond hair that was escaping the hood and rolling over her shoulder.

"I wouldn't know," Hermione spat viciously, "I've never had a Muggle pull one on me. So much for the rumored manners of purebloods."

Hermione winced as the knife bit into her throat; she felt the lithe arms encircling her waist, and her throat tensed. "Don't tempt me, Miss Granger. The only thing keeping you alive is the marketability of your womb. Don't entice me to jeopardize that."

Hermione dimly heard the whooshes of spells going by as Tonks fought the Death Eaters Apparating around her. She was aware of a muffled squawk that was Tonks, and then a heavy thud as the woman hit the ground.

Lucius Malfoy used the point of the knife to turn her cheek to him. He pressed his mask-covered face closer to Hermione's ear and inhaled deeply. "Ah, the reek of Mudblood. Never fear, you'll have purer influences, soon enough. Soon enough. And I'm sure Draco will be charitable. After all, we must share things among family."

Hermione's throat burned with embarrassment and anger as she imagined just how she would be "shared" among the Malfoys. She struggled again as Lucius's thin, elegant, merciless hand clamped on her breast and squeezed hard. A delicately boned female hand ran down her cheek, just close enough for Hermione to see short fingernails painted a deep red, almost black.

"Well, well, what have we here? Little baby Mudblood," the woman's voice hissed, "we intend to teach your lover a thing or two about getting in the way."

Hermione whimpered and struggled against the blade still held at her chin. It slashed at her throat, a thin trail of blood snaking down over her collarbone and staining the neckline of her tank top.

"Meddle no more," Lucius hissed before he threw her forward and Disapparated, leaving Hermione to sink to her hands and knees on the hot pavement. She looked up just

in time to see Bellatrix Lestrange smirking back at her, yanking Ron to his feet and Disapparating with a loud crack.

"No!" she heard her voice cry out thinly, reaching hand out towards the retreating pair. Following the crack, she buried her face in the grass near by, retching in horror, and passed out.

The Half Hitch

Chapter 6 of 23

Before Hermione and Ginny could begin to ask what was happening, Mrs. Weasley burst through the double doors. She was gibbering incoherently.

"I had gone home for the night ... and the clock ...," she mumbled. Much to Hermione's surprise, when Mrs. Weasley's voice left her, it was not racked or nervous: she was furious.

"Where is he?" she demanded again, her anger simmering to a cold fury. "What happened to Ron?"

A/N - I'm so sorry to everyone that it's been such a long time since I updated. I have a fabulously time consuming job. But ... I think once you read this chapter you'll understand why it took me such a long time. It's rough and it's long, my babies, so batten down the hatches: the calm is ending and a storm is brewing ...

Chapter Six – The Half Hitch

Half Hitch –

"The Half Hitch is a capsized overhand knot; it is very useful to carry light loads that have to be removed easily. As for all knots, working the knot well is extremely important. Work it wrong and you might end up with another (probably unwanted) knot. Capsizing the half hitch might end up in a granny knot, the worst of all knots."

Severus Snape's feet dragged as he trudged away from the now-quiet tree. His body ached dully with the exertion of the last few minutes, but it was his mind that truly screamed. He had been here before, but he had never had to carry this burden. He took a great, heaving sigh, unable to reconcile anything and figuring it was best not to prolong the inevitable. He thought briefly of the sound of the anguished cries that would echo in his head soon enough. Soon enough.

With a swirl of robes and a muffled crack, Severus Disapparated into the pinkening summer morning.

Hermione was shaken awake by insistent hands. The visions of the events of the evening had haunted her, and when she felt herself being tugged back into reality by Ginny, Hermione could have sworn that she had only just now fallen asleep.

"What is it?" Hermione groused irritably, trying to turn over despite Ginny's relentlessly shaking hands.

Ginny gulped and shook. Hermione sat up quickly. Her friend trembled head to foot in such a violent manner that Hermione was reminded forcefully of the night after her emergence from the Chamber of Secrets. When Ginny didn't speak, Hermione pressed on, her voice now clear, her mind painfully awake. "What is it? What's wrong? Any news?"

Ginny shook her head so hard Hermione thought it might fall off. "I don't know. But there's banging and noises downstairs. Something's wrong."

Hermione all but leapt out of bed, not even bothering to throw her dressing gown over the knee-grazing, periwinkle t-shirt she was using for a nightdress. Her hand encircled Ginny's wrist and she made quickly for the source of the now growing sounds: the kitchen.

When Hermione pushed through the double doors she was not quite prepared for the site that met her. The kitchen was full. Lupin was prowling the room, nervously glancing from person to person; Arthur Weasley was holding an ice pack to the side of Tonks's head and delicately muttering a charm over her bruised eye. Harry was sitting at the hearth, staring into the fire and muttering to himself. Fred, George, Bill and Charlie were all seated at the table, each one fidgeting nervously with a piece of cutlery that had been set for breakfast. Snape was standing in the far corner, his robes smudged with myriad blotches of dirt and grass, and four inch-long tears rent the front over his abdomen, allowing just a smattering of pale flesh to be seen. His eyes were hooded from above by his heavy brow and shrouded underneath with deep black circles.

Before Hermione and Ginny could begin to ask what was happening, Mrs. Weasley burst through the double doors. Her hair was disheveled to say the least, flying away from a mobcap still perched precariously at the back of her head; she had thrown an inside-out jacket over a flannel nightdress and still donned a pair of worn slippers. She was gibbering incoherently.

"I had gone home for the night ... the clock," she mumbled. "It said—and I was sleeping—but it rang and I—where?—it can't be that he—"

She continued much in this manner for several seconds until she scanned the room and found Snape. She practically ran to him. Much to Hermione's surprise, when her voice left her, Mrs. Weasley was not racked or nervous, she was furious.

"WHERE?" she demanded.

Snape looked back at her, but quickly averted his eyes. Hermione's stomach lurched. Severus Snape would not look away from someone ...

"Where is he?" she demanded again, grabbing a hold of the front of his robes and shaking him. Her anger simmered to a cold fury. "What happened to Ron?"

Every person in the room stopped any kind of motion, slowly circling with either eyes or whole bodies, to regard Snape. He squeezed his eyes shut tight and then, with a deep breath, leveled them at Mrs. Weasley. They held nothing when he opened them.

"He's dead."

Hermione felt as if she had been kicked in the chest. Throughout the night, pictures of Ron's violated body had assaulted her vision – causing her to shake and sweat in fear and guilt – but she was little prepared to hear her fears confirmed. Mrs. Weasley wavered on her feet and opened her mouth, her jaw wavering but no sound issuing from it.

"He is ... gone then?" Arthur's voice shook as he worded the question to Snape, determinedly straightening his back, a twitch at his forehead.

Severus nodded quickly but said nothing. Mrs. Weasley's eyes wildly searched the room, but found no place comfortable to stop, not even on Arthur who was still determinedly forcing deep breaths. Mrs. Weasley's eyes finally rested on Hermione. She started to open her mouth to speak to Hermione, but instead, pitched forward the few inches between them and sobbed hysterically on her shoulder as Hermione fought to keep her off the ground. Hermione could not unglue from her face the look of shock and, as her knees buckled under the extra weight and they collapsed to the floor, Hermione could only manage to pat Mrs. Weasley's back distractedly and stare straight ahead. She dully registered Bill swearing in a furious whisper, Fred and George's sniffles, and a hysterical shrieking sob issuing from Ginny.

Hermione stared around the room. The ice pack had slipped from Tonks's forehead and she leaned forward to rest her head in her hands, staring down at the cool wooden table. Lupin had moved to hoist Mrs. Weasley off the floor and was now stroking her back and whispering in her ear.

Hermione suddenly noticed Ginny's wrist still enclosed in her hand; she released the delicate arm and moved across the room to stand at the fireplace where Harry was now resting his head against the warm bricks. Huge glittering tears were sliding down his cheeks as Hermione stood over him, her hands clasping the mantle as if it were a lifeline.

"Ron," she whispered. "Oh, Ron, what have I done to you?"

Hermione felt her body shaking as she fought to keep her sobs inside. She could not ... would not break down. 'Not here ...' she told herself, 'not now.' She bit her lip to stifle a sob, but a squeaking cry came out despite her efforts. Seemingly as a result, Mr. Weasley snapped as if bent and broken and dissolved into silent tears. Despite this however, he moved to Remus and Mrs. Weasley, threading his long thin arms under Mrs. Weasley's solid shoulders and transferring her body from Remus's grip to his own.

She collapsed against him and cried, "Oh, Arthur!"

He merely shushed her, mumbled, "I know," and "my poor boy." Remus backed away across the kitchen to lay a hand across Harry's shoulders, but made no move to further comfort the boy.

Hermione stared around the kitchen. Ginny's upper body now rested in Tonks's lap, the purple-haired witch stroking the younger girl's tomato-colored head, whispering words of comfort. Every person in the kitchen had dissolved into clutching hugs, sharing their grief with each other; even the twins were huddled, Fred's arm around George's shoulders; Charlie had grasped Bill's hand in a tight hold though the young men said nothing. The kitchen was quiet except for muffled sobs and words of strength; all parties grieving together. Everyone except her. And Snape. She was suddenly aware of how alone she was in the room. Helpless. Hopeless. She had sent her best friend to his death.

After a few moments, Mrs. Weasley straightened up against Arthur and looked to Severus, still standing in the corner, quiet, alone, haunted. "How did it happen?" she asked quietly.

Snape took a deep, raspy breath. He licked at his lips, now dry and cracked. "A revel, organized after the kidnapping. To teach him a lesson." Severus spat the last phrase with obvious disgust. But it wasn't anger that Hermione saw, piercing and clear, in his eyes. But she felt it slowly build in hers.

She remembered, with a bitter taste in her mouth, the point of Lucius Malfoy's knife against her throat, and the feel of Bellatrix Lestrange's fingers at her cheek. "Who did it?"

Snape turned away, brushing absently at the mud on his robes.

"Who?" Hermione bellowed, her taste for vengeance, for blood, building in her throat. Her mind raced with a need for Lucius Malfoy's throat in her hands. Severus still did not speak. Hermione shouted until the whole house rang with her voice and every head turned in her direction. "Damn it you tell me this instant: WHO KILLED RON?"

In what Hermione would register – vaguely, through her anger – as the only gesture of defeat ever exhibited by Severus Snape, he lowered his head slightly, his long black strands curtaining the tortured eyes.

"I did."

"What?" she asked, her voice more hysterical than she would have believed likely.

"That's impossible," Harry muttered, his face still coated in shock and grief.

"I assure you, it's quite unfortunately possible," he said, his voice now flat. "It is both possible and true. I killed Ronald Weasley."

"Why?" Mrs. Weasley choked out, her voice strangled.

"To save his life."

"Bullshit," Hermione spat angrily. "Admit it! You were furious at us just because we didn't follow your sage advice. And then you saw your chance and you took it; you've always hated Ron. And me. And Harry. And the Death Eaters just happened to offer you the easy out you'd been looking for! Isn't that right, you reprehensible bastard?"

By the end of the rant, Hermione had moved to him and was pounding her fists viciously against his chest. She lashed out at him with everything she had, but Snape merely became rigid and accepted her assault. Until she called him a name. Then, as swiftly as she had moved to strike him, he swept up his right arm and captured both her wrists in his long thin fingers. His grip was crushing as she struggled to release herself, clawing at his skin, an inch away from becoming completely feral and setting her teeth on him.

Snape yanked on her wrists so that she stumbled into him bodily. As he stared down at her, the hungry, murderous stare returned to his eyes. "Make no mistake, Miss Granger, that I allow this only because of your grief. Do not dare to presume comprehension of situations you cannot possibly understand."

"Oh, you think I don't understand do you? I can understand just fine you—"

Hermione began her tirade again, but found that Lupin had moved across the room to stand behind her. Remus's hands now encircled her wrists in a delicate yet firm gesture of restraint.

"Don't be ridiculous, Hermione, Professor Snape wouldn't kill Ron on purpose," Remus intoned. Snape smirked down at Hermione in a somewhat smug way, but when she turned to regard Lupin, there was something in his face that said he was not 100% certain that he was correct.

"Wouldn't he?" Harry asked from the hearth. "How much choice did you have Professor? Did you even try to save him? Or did you just take the path of least resistance?"

Hermione could see just a tinge of a seething anger that was in him, but Harry remained seated on a stool near the hearth. He was wound tightly, like a bedspring waiting to uncoil, but he made no move to relieve himself of his anger. Hermione was anxious to unleash her spleen on Snape but the gentle yet firm pressure of Lupin's cool fingertips against her wrist stopped her from making her assault any more physical.

"Harry," Mrs. Weasley spoke up, steady despite her tear-stained face, "that won't help Ron. Of course Professor Snape didn't hurt Ron on purpose." Mrs. Weasley, also, didn't look quite certain, but her voice was strong and left no room for arguments. "But I would like to know how it happened..."

"No," Severus replied shortly. "I cannot ... I *will* not recite the entire evening in front of my students."

Fred cleared his throat loudly. "Former students." George nodded emphatically.

"Not all of you," Snape hissed, glaring pointedly at Hermione, Ginny and Harry.

"But don't we have just as much right to know what happened to Ron?" Ginny spoke up.

"I will not retell the entire night," Severus said, a note of distinct finality in his voice.

"You will not have to," came a voice from the doorway.

Hermione turned to see Dumbledore standing there, leaned against the doorframe as if he had been there for hours. He had what looked like a large bowling ball bag in his left hand. Amidst the hush that had fallen over the room, Dumbledore motioned for everyone to follow him and moved out of the kitchen. The entire party stood up and wordlessly trailed after him into the study.

Hermione seated herself in one of the wingback chairs aimed to stare directly out the now dark and curtained windows. The lump in her throat was practically choking her as she sat alone among the people cuddling and clutching. They all stared starkly at Dumbledore; Mrs. Weasley seemed to be hoping against hope that it was not true, that Dumbledore would tell her that Ron was alive somewhere. Arthur clutched her shoulders, standing behind her at the couch, ready for the worst; Fred and George perched next to their mother and Bill stood next to Arthur, but Charlie was pacing the room anxiously. Tonks, Ginny and Harry had clustered on the other couch, none of them touching, looking for all the world like they would shatter if they did.

Snape was standing only a few feet from Hermione. His hands were buried in the pockets of his robes, and he was staring out the window at the Muggle apartment complex across the street. She was quite certain he was trying determinedly to resist the urge to run from the room, though she was completely at a loss as to where this realization had come from. She regarded him closer and noticed for the second time the tears just above his waist. Her curiosity got the better of her and she reached her hand out the few inches distance.

Hermione's fingertips didn't even move the material; she threaded them into the open spaces and had just barely brushed against his skin. Snape jumped away as if he had just been burned. Hermione had fully expected a firm, scathing response, but instead Snape looked so startled at her touch that his face paled to a ghostly white. She was so intrigued by this that she had not even retracted her arm, but instead let it hang in mid-air, her fingers outstretched towards him. Snape was visibly struggling to wipe the shock her touch had caused from his face; he grumbled something as he moved out of the reach of her hands.

"My dear friends," Dumbledore's voice began quietly as he seated himself at the desk, "I cannot even begin to speak my grief at this horrific loss. Unfortunately, it has come about as I had feared, and Gryffindor and Hogwarts alike have lost another fine, brave and valuable student. Molly, Arthur," he spoke, turning his head to each one in turn, "Bill, Charlie, Fred, George, Ginny: words cannot express my sorrow and sympathy."

Arthur nodded graciously while tears leaked silently from Mrs. Weasley's eyes. Dumbledore continued.

"I understand that you all must be anxious for answers, explanations, anything connected to Ron's tragic and untimely end. However, I do not think it would be fair to force Severus into recanting his entire evening."

Hermione heard the barely-audible noise of a held breath being released just over her right shoulder. Mrs. Weasley began to sob and managed a tearful, "But we should ... we need to know how ..."

Dumbledore raised a shaking hand to silence her. "My dear Molly, I have no wish to deprive you of closure regarding your son. So, I have a proposed solution, if Severus will consent."

Snape turned to Dumbledore, his shrouded eyes wide in question. Dumbledore reached underneath the table and produced the bowling-bag-like container and placed it on the desk in front of him. From the gnarled leather bag he reached in deep and produced a carved stone basin, the contents of which threw wavering, bright cobalt bands of light on the walls and ceiling of the study. Snape turned away again.

"Severus, if it would be easier for you, you could release the memory to the Pensieve, and each of us here could view your memories without your direct relation to them. It would offer the parties here closure as well as you some much needed separation from the events of the evening."

Snape did not answer, merely moved in front of the desk and stared back at Dumbledore. For the first time in her memory, Hermione recalled that Snape's eyes were neither menacing nor angry; he merely stared back into the old man's eyes and then heaved a great sigh. From the inside of his robes, he drew his wand and placed it to his temple. After a few seconds, he drew forth a long silver strand and released it to the basin. Without a word, he then swept from the room.

The instant he left, most of the room was on its feet. Hermione remained in her chair, resuming her deep gaze out of the window. She dully registered Dumbledore's instructions.

"We shall all view at once, that way no one is left in suspense. One at a time please," she heard him say. She heard the shuffling that she realized must be each person entering the Pensieve, but she could not will her legs to remove her from the chair.

After several moments, she heard Dumbledore's soft, "Miss Granger?" She could not move.

A few seconds later came Harry's voice, even quieter, "Hermione?"

She turned. Dumbledore stood in front of the fireplace, his hands shaking, his eyes sad. Harry stood in front of the Pensieve, hands on the edge. He then reached out his hand to Hermione. She shakily stood and crossed the room to take his hand.

Harry's voice came quietly to Dumbledore. "Can we go together?" he asked.

Hermione heard Dumbledore mutter, "*Engorgio*," widening the basin to accommodate the two of them. Hermione had never used a Pensieve before and wavered nervously. She turned to face Harry, watching him as he gently guided her down towards the surface. Her eyes were still on him as she pressed her face to the swirling force of Snape's memories.

Much to Hermione's surprise, her feet, still bare from being roused out of bed, slapped against the warm pavement of downtown London. The muggy, mid-August heat was rising off the street in almost visible waves. She felt the warmth of the day around her, but surprisingly, her feet were not burned against the hot sidewalk. Her mind raced in questioning, unclear as to why Snape's memories of the events leading to Ron's death would start here. He was not assigned to guard them, so what was he doing here? But it was then that she looked directly ahead of her, down the streets of Muggle London. She started slightly – causing Harry's hand to tighten against hers – as she looked down the street and saw herself. And Tonks. And ...

There he was.

Her heart ached seeing the sun gleam gold sparks off his ruby hair, knowing it would never do so again. This was the last sunshine Ronald Weasley had seen; he had most likely taken for granted the big, energetic city, thrumming under the hot summer sun. She heard the scuffle and clatter of the Weasleys and the other viewers around her, but her head instead searched for someone else. She found her target standing just off her left shoulder. Snape had been following them through London, watching

their moves.

She was startled as she appraised his apparel. He had attired himself as a Muggle and – to her very great shock – had done so quite well. His appearance was much altered: he seemed so much less intimidating in the long, loose, light blue jeans that were faded white at the knees. His broad square shoulders and thin, lithe frame were much more apparent beneath the loose black T-shirt that was tucked in at the waist. His heavy combat boots made a soft *flump* as they hit the pavement, nearly two streets behind the three wizards he was tailing. A long black trench coat flapped about his calves. He sat himself carelessly on the end pillar of a brownstone's stoop and lit a cigarette. She started as she realized that had she not known him, she would have passed him on the Muggle-filled street without a second glance.

Since she had begun to guess his motivation for being there, she noted how easily he blended into the mid-afternoon rush. As he sat taking long, almost insolent drags on his cigarette, his eyes darted pointedly – but not suspiciously – to and from Hermione, Tonks, and Ron, who had just grouped together outside a dumpster.

Hermione's stomach plummeted. This was it.

She heard a slight popping noise, and the Snape that she had been watching rose quickly – but not jerkily – to his feet and started a quick pace. Hermione had to run to keep up. She jerked to a stop and watched in horror as Lucius Malfoy Apparated from behind the dustbin and used the hilt of his knife to knock Ron unconscious. His body crumpled to the ground.

Bile rose in her throat as she saw Bellatrix Lestrange now Apparate behind Tonks, striking her with a quick Stunner, the purple-haired witch twitching beside her as well as crumpling to the ground three-quarters of a street ahead. Hermione felt Tonks's grip grasp her unoccupied hand as the entire assembled party of viewers watched the scene unfold in front of them. Hermione could still feel the point of the knife as she watched Lucius bring it to her neck nearly half the street ahead of her.

She could not hear Lucius's words but whimpered in horror and anger as she looked ahead and saw his fingers angrily seize her breast. Beside her, Harry swore loudly and pushed up the sleeves of his pajama shirt. Hermione was nearly certain he had forgotten himself and that he intended to charge after Malfoy. She felt a meteor-sized lump clog her throat as the scene became even more surreal. She watched Bellatrix run her fingers across Hermione's cheek.

"Stop it!" she heard a voice scream out. It was only when Harry laced an arm around her waist that she realized that the voice had been her own. Of course, no one in that awful scene in front of her flinched. She couldn't stop her feet as they took her forward, running towards Ron, not reaching him in time to save him before Bellatrix Apparated away. She couldn't have saved him even if she had been on time, she reminded herself.

She stooped to a squat over her own body, her cheeks burning in embarrassment as she watched herself retch in the grass and then lie still, knowing that the rest of the party had witnessed this assault on her person and her ill-equipped response. She reached out a hand towards her own shoulder ...

But before she could have ever made contact, she heard the heavy tread of boots. She looked up into the face of Severus Snape. The Snape of the memory glared down as if at her crouched body, but then stooped and grasped the wrist of the unconscious Hermione at his feet. Hermione watched, transfixed, as he flipped her body gently and searched for a pulse at her throat. He pushed an arm under her shoulders and knees. Snape lifted her body as if she weighed no more than a dried leaf. He moved to Tonks, who was now just showing signs of movement.

"Nymphadora—" he called, his panic starting to show on his face. "Nymphadora, if you don't have the energy to stand, grab hold of my ankles."

Tonks hauled herself to a kneeling position and threaded her arms around one of his knees. With a loud *pop!*, he turned on the spot and Apparated away, leaving the crowd of people watching in silence before they, too, were whisked to the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix along with Snape and his memory.

Hermione found herself suddenly standing outside Grimmauld Place. She knew this part of the story. Despite her gut feelings, she followed them inside the house. The Tonks of the memory collapsed into the arms of Arthur Weasley the instant the door had been opened. Arthur and Tonks had proceeded into the sitting room, where Hermione knew Mr. Weasley had allowed Tonks to pass out on the threadbare couch. She would not rouse for hours. Despite some people's moves to find out what Mr. Weasley had done in the meantime, the party itself was forced to follow Snape and his memory up the stairs.

Hermione watched, silently wondering why he was still bodily carrying her. Snape could have easily placed a *Mobilicorpus* spell on her and avoided the fatigue on his arms. But he hadn't. Instead, he climbed the three flights of stairs to her room with Hermione's limp form cradled in his arms. Any suspicion of a kinder motive on this, however, was quashed by the dark muttering that he partook in the entire climb.

In an exhibition of his typical amount of tact, Severus kicked the door to her bedroom open. Ginny, who was writing a letter at a desk in the corner, began to retort in protest but watched in silent horror as she noticed Hermione's limp form.

"Which one?" Severus growled in reference to the beds. Ginny stood stock still for a moment, then indicated the far bed with the blue coverlet.

Contrary to what Hermione, and evidently all the people watching behind her, would have expected, Severus leaned down and gently laid Hermione on the bed. As he was laying her down, Ginny moved towards the bed, her mouth open and ready to question.

Before she could get a word out, Snape snapped a quick, "No. She's fine."

She began, again, to start to question. "What hap—?"

But Snape was shaking his head at her question, a vague hand gesture stating plainly that it would be explained shortly. He then pointed to the door and returned to his care of Hermione, even stooping to loosen the spread and bring it up over her body. Snape tucked the blanket gently around her waist and paused a moment until he realized that Ginny's gaze had still not left him. He turned dramatically and glared angrily at her, to which she mumbled something unintelligible and turned back to her work at the desk. The party behind her made a move to return to the downstairs of Grimmauld Place, but Hermione stopped jerkily at the door to her room as she watched Severus bend minutely and swipe a lock of hair out of her eyes with his long fingers before sweeping out the door.

Hermione couldn't stand to sit in for the next few hours and listen to Memory Snape recant the attack and danger to the rest of the people in Grimmauld Place. It had been bad enough the first time, never mind the horror of watching her own reactions to his damning explanation of the danger Ron was in. Instead, Hermione slipped the pack of cigarettes out of the pocket of the Memory Snape and went forth to crouch on the porch steps of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. She laughed quietly to herself when she realized that by sneaking the cigarettes out of the deep pocket of his trench coat in the memory, the real Snape would be out of luck when he went to smoke later.

Hermione sat on the stairs, tugging the nightshirt around her knees – she had forgotten to change before entering the Pensieve – and twiddling a cigarette between her fingers. She certainly hadn't actually intended to smoke any of the cigarettes she had stolen. In fact, she was only mildly aware of why she stole them. She needed to do something else, to be somewhere other than in that kitchen where Snape would be speaking for at least another few hours. She couldn't take it. And when she had seen the pack sticking out of Snape's pocket, it had just occurred to her to take it, and she didn't fight it. She hadn't intended to smoke, just allow herself a reason to escape the house. But seeing as how she had forgotten to steal his matches, it didn't matter whether she intended to smoke anyhow.

"*Incendio.*"

Hermione turned to find Severus Snape looming above her as the cigarette dancing between her fingers lit itself.

Under her breath, she swore. Now she'd have to pretend to smoke. Out loud, she retorted in a fashion she thought befitting of his startling her. "But ... but ...," she stammered gesturing into the house.

Snape sighed heavily. "Are you always this articulate?"

She ignored the insult and regrouped. "How am I talking to you? You didn't come along with us. This isn't part of the memory."

"Of course not," he growled, stemming the insistent flow of her questions and taking a seat next to her regardless of his annoyance. She jumped in earnest when he reached into her lap where her nightshirt pooled. He retrieved the pack of cigarettes from her lap, withdrew one, lit it with his wand and took a drag. "Dumbledore forced me to come back for" He stopped. "For the culmination of Mr. Weasley's fate. He felt that I need to see it. As if seeing it once wasn't enough."

Hermione had no real response, so instead raised the cigarette he had lit for her which was going to ash in her inattentiveness. Despite her previous thoughts, she didn't even bother with the pretense that she was actually going to smoke. Instead she merely sat, her cigarette burning itself out, and tried not to stare as continuous, serpentine curls issued from Snape's elongated nostrils.

After a few moments, he flicked the cigarette away from the porch and stood. As she stubbed the rest of hers out – disregarding his chuckles that she hadn't actually smoked it – he growled, "Those will kill you, you know."

Hermione merely plastered her most syrupy simper across her face and said, saccharine sweet, "Don't get your hopes up."

Snape smirked a trademark sneer that was all too genuine for her own comfort and swept back into the house, leaving her alone as the scenery swirled into blackness.

Hermione found herself standing apart from the rest of the group that was now surrounded on all sides by an ever-encroaching blackness. A few yards away, staring into the trees, was Snape. But then, with a loud snap! she also saw Snape standing before her, shrouded in a long, draping black robe and hood, a white porcelain mask dangling precariously from his fingers. As she watched in horror, he placed the mask over his face and tightened the hood around it, allowing the mask to stay in place without any visible clasps.

Snape the Death Eater moved into a growing circle that had formed around a bonfire. The forest around them seemed to be consciously leaning back out of their way as more and more Death Eaters Apparated into the clearing. Hermione squinted across the fifty or so yards between herself and a Death Eater that had just now apparated. He seemed to be dragging something ... or someone Hermione ran, and she was conscious of the rest of the party hot on her heels. She skidded to a halt as she heard the smooth voice rise above the crowd.

"Comrades," came the voice behind the hood and mask, "Countrymen, the first of a band of meddlers has been apprehended. And shall be dealt with forthwith. *Ennervate.*"

With the muttered charm, the heap at the Death Eater's feet began to struggle in earnest. After a great twist and a familiar grunt, a shock of red hair became visible in the slim hand that jutted out from the sleeve of the thick black cloak.

"Malfoy, you bastard," Ron's voice echoed through the clearing. "Let me go this instant! You gutless son of a bitch!"

Ron thrashed and fought, wincing in pain, hollering in anger. The Death Eaters assembled in the clearing hooted with laughter, catcalling at Ron and shouting in glee. A flash of orange light and a small pop issued in front of the bonfire at the group's center. As a figure rose out of the fire, the Death Eaters collapsed into prostrate bows.

The skeletal figure beneath the voluminous robes straightened as it walked towards the struggling pair not ten feet from where Hermione had stopped and stood, shaking. A bone-thin gray hand snaked out of the robes and touched lightly the top of Malfoy's hooded head, bent in abject worship.

"Rise, Lucius," Voldemort spoke quietly, "and do inform me what we have here."

Malfoy stood straight and yanked Ron to a kneeling crouch. "The miserable mudblood-lover that has been standing in my way, milord."

"Ah yes," Voldemort slyly replied, "the abominable marriage law. The Minister is again encroaching upon my plans. Why is this miserable excuse for a wizard important to me, Lucius?"

"Well, milord," Lucius began, his voice distinctly panicked, "in my family's attempt to appear law-abiding, I petitioned for the hand of a particularly bright – if annoying – mudblood. In order to ... breed a line of brilliant children to serve the Dark Lord, of course."

Voldemort sneered beneath the hood that shadowed his eyes. "And this has nothing to do with your vain attempt to reinvigorate a weakening gene pool, does it?" Voldemort smirked again, while Lucius lowered his head in humiliation.

"Succinct as always, milord," Malfoy responded, but Hermione could hear the humiliation and barely restrained anger in his voice.

"Why should this boy be a purpose for a revel, Lucius? I do not appreciate a waste of my valuable time."

At this point, something brushed past Hermione. She noticed a sweep of black robes and a familiar hook to the front of the white mask. "This is Ronald Weasley, milord. His fate could prove most profitable to us."

Voldemort whirled quickly to regard Snape. Despite the continued humility and fear of the rest of the collection of Death Eaters, Snape's body was unbowed. And though Voldemort was currently regarding him with a stare of utmost annoyance at his impertinence, the Dark Lord made no remark at his posture.

"I did not direct this question to you, Severus. Your loyal service at present has not yet overshadowed the betrayal and incompetence of the past. You are in no position to try my patience."

"Forgive me, my Lord," he replied strongly, "but I merely wish to illuminate more on the lucrative position which we currently find ourselves in."

Voldemort regarded him again for a moment, clearly warring with his instincts to hear Severus out or punish him for his intrusion. "Explain," he responded shortly.

Hermione's eyes were glued to Snape's face; her ears seemed to ring with the effort she was now using to concentrate on the deep reverberations of Professor Snape's voice.

"Well, my Lord, Weasley is a student of mine, and I can tell you for a fact that he is Potter's closest confidante. It could prove truly profitable to have Weasley in our possession to tap him for information. Who knows? The mudblood lover could even prove to have the key to Potter's downfall."

Snape looked down to where Ron had stopped struggling beneath Lucius's grip. Ron was staring back up into Snape's eyes, his hazel ones burning with a sort of vindicated hatred. Hermione understood in that moment that this was the backstabbing retaliation that Ron had been expecting out of Snape for seven years. There was a sick swooping sensation in her stomach as she longed to yell to Ron that he was wrong. She didn't know exactly how she knew she was wrong; in fact, it had been the exact conclusion that Hermione had come to earlier. However, something in her was screaming now that Snape was not at fault.

But Snape's face revealed nothing as he stared down. He then swept his eyes back to Voldemort, who had been watching the whole incident, his eyes still shadowed by his hood. "Severus would save him," Voldemort said, addressing the crowd of Death Eaters, who were now standing straight and laughing nervously. He lowered his voice again and whispered, "And what would you suggest we do with him Lucius?"

"Well, milord, the boy is standing in the way of my plan. Miss Granger, whom I petitioned for Draco, is engaged to this boy. I have it on good authority that Potter would

have petitioned for Granger himself, had he been allowed. Granger is supposedly Potter's girlfriend."

Hermione laughed a sick sort of giggle at the idea that Malfoy somehow knew Harry's feelings and supposed her to be his girlfriend. At that moment, she noticed Harry standing only a few yards away, his face twisting in hurt at her laugh. She moved to explain herself, to wipe away that look of disappointed betrayal, but was caught back by Malfoy's words.

"If I have my way, Granger would be forced to marry Draco. That way we would have all the assets of information against Potter without the hassles of Weasley."

"Hassles?" Voldemort questioned, his mouth – the only feature visible on his face in the waning light – twisting into a gut-wrenching smirk. He knew what was coming next.

"Well, the hassle of keeping Weasley alive of course. With the laws of obedience in wizarding marriages, Granger would be under our control of discretion. With Weasley, it would be necessary to keep someone guarding him at all times. Eliminating his intrusion would allow us to welcome Granger into the fold with little effort."

"So you're suggesting we kill the boy in lieu of your son marrying Potter's intended?"

"Yes, milord," Lucius replied, bowing. "It would be simpler."

Hermione sucked in breath as she prayed fervently for a quick, painless death for Ron. She knew now that it was out of the question to think that this was all going to end differently.

"Fine Lucius, his life is yours," Voldemort decreed. Voldemort then very slowly raised his arms and lowered the hood surrounding his head. With the thin, craggy features of his skull now visible, Ron drew a horrified gasp. Voldemort bent slowly and purposely to place his hands around Ron's face and force him to look into the serpentine eyes. Ron cried out as if the fingertips were burning his skin, but stared back into the reddening eyes.

"Make sure to show him how much Lord Voldemort dislikes meddling."

Hermione heard Harry swear loudly behind her, Mrs. Weasley and Ginny start sobbing somewhere in the distance, and felt her own heart throb within her chest. Ron had suffered. And greatly, if she was not mistaken.

Lucius Malfoy carefully took down his mask. For what seemed like hours, Hermione and Harry – who had come up beside her and slipped his hand into hers – watched in horror as Lucius used the Cruciatus on Ron. Hermione lost count at fifteen curses and could barely focus her eyes through the tears pouring in rivers across her face. She buried her head in Harry's shoulder, as he stared on stoically, as if he owed it to Ron. After a while, Ron's screams no longer drowned out the hysterical sobbing of the party she was with, which of course went unheard by the players in the horrible dance.

Intermittently, Hermione heard Lucius yell questions to Ron. She could only assume that he was checking to see if Ron had run mad with the torture. When his answers were no longer speech and had merged into incomprehensible sobbing, she looked up to see the Snape of the present standing behind the Death Eater-berobed version of himself, who was now entreating Malfoy to stop.

"Come now, Lucius," he was saying, "if you do not give him time to recover from the first curse, it will dull him to the new."

Hermione watched the face of Snape, not the one of the memory, but that of the watching man from her time. His features were slipping from the mask of indifference and starting to twist in self-deprecating horror. Hermione was suddenly caught by the noises coming from Ron's twisting form.

"Mum ..." he was mumbling, "Mum I'm sorry ...I didn't mean it ..."

Hermione was sobbing again, concluding that Ron had indeed run mad and was now recalling a childhood scolding. She was resigned to his insanity until she heard another sound.

"Hermione ..." he sobbed.

She felt her whole body tense.

"Oh, for pity's sake, Lucius, he's sobbing for his beloved. Must we endure this ridiculous display?" Snape had spat it with disgust. Hermione wrenched from Harry's grip to crouch over Ron's battered, sobbing form. She knew he couldn't feel it, but she wrapped her arms around his agonized face. Memory Snape glared disdainfully at Malfoy and then stood above Ron.

"Pitiful, Weasley. You know that? You're pitiful."

Suddenly, Ron stopped writhing and looked into Severus' face, still swathed in his mask. Hermione guessed that at her close proximity she was most likely the only one who could see the twitch that ran the length of Snape's body. Suddenly, he crouched down so he was only a foot or two away from Ron's face and removed his mask and hood.

"Lucius," he called, his voice shaky. Hermione had a feeling it was only shaky now, here, near to Ron. "This bores me. I tire of his suffering. This torture of Weasley is only your lip-service attempt at impressing of the Dark Lord. We end this now."

Severus made to stand up, but before he did, he whispered furiously. "I pity you, Weasley. Do you understand? I pity you."

For a moment – one shining moment that made Hermione's heart lift a scant inch – Ron's eyes emptied of their glaze and his face had an unblemished moment of clarity. Whatever it was that Snape meant by offering his pity (Hermione was not sure), Ron had understood. And as Snape stood to raise his wand for the green light that would encompass his student, Ronald Weasley's eighteen-year-old face melted into serenity.

As Snape straightened up, however, Ron jerked up and sank his grip into the front of Snape's robes.

"Hermione," he squeaked in panic.

Snape, fear sliding under the coating of indifference on his face, shook his robes to try to loosen Ron's grip. His fingers tore holes in the front of Snape's robes, but before he let go, he yanked until Snape was jerked down to Ron's face.

"Tell her I love her," Ron whispered.

Hermione broke into sobs as Ron eased his grip; Snape painted his face with an appropriate level of disgust for the Death Eater role, and leveled his wand. Only Hermione noticed that Snape closed his eyes as he spoke the words that caused her stomach to drop away.

"*Avada Kedavra.*"

Hermione tried desperately to hold onto Ron's body throughout the end of the revel. She kept her arms around him as the Weasleys filed up – Snape and the other Death Eaters had completely abandoned his body as they finished up the revel. The entire watching party filed up and bent around Ron's body. Hermione's eyes were the only ones that stayed dry. Bill, Charlie, Fred and George were huddled together. Ginny bent and laid a kiss on Ron's forehead. Mrs. Weasley dissolved into tears and collapsed at his feet. Even though she knew that Mrs. Weasley could no more feel his body than Hermione could, Mrs. Weasley pressed her hand to Ron's cheek and blessed her

"baby boy" as Arthur knelt beside her.

After they said their goodbyes, the party dissipated. She knew that they had gone with Dumbledore to the 'real world' outside the Pensieve. Hermione, however, stayed. She walked beside the real life Snape, silent as they watched the Death Eater Snape wait for all to leave, bend to pick up Ron Weasley's finally still body and Apparate away from the site of the revel.

As the memory swirled to reveal a different location, she looked around to realize that she was the only one who had stayed to watch the Death Eater Snape of the memory bury Ronald Weasley with a crude, handmade marker, beneath the Whomping Willow shrouded in the stretching shadow of the castle at Hogwarts.

A/N - *ducks and covers her head* Okay, okay, so I know that many, many, MANY of you will probably flame me so bad my children will have psoriasis for killing Ron. I'm sorry. I know. But it had to be done. I don't know if you do/will understand, but it had to be done. The story wants what the story wants. And even if you're pissed at me for killing Ron, please keep reading, it will get better.

Lots of love to everybody, THANKS FOR REVIEWING AND FOR FOLLOWING MY STORY!!!

A Frayed Knot

Chapter 7 of 23

After several minutes, Harry spoke up quietly. "You're not safe you know. You're free again."

Hermione's throat clenched so painfully she thought she might have to gasp for breath. "I can't think about that now. Not here. It's too soon ... too fresh ..."

DISCLAIMER: You should know by now that I do not own these puppets, I only rent with the promise that I will return them, if in slightly stranger shape then when I got them.

A/N - I've just been given Validated Author status (Thank you, admins!), so I'm feeling a bit mad with power. Here's the next chapter of Tying Knots, as a stop-gap until I can start writing a sequel to Bundle of Joy. *snerk* Anyway, I hope you like this chapter, and I'll have the next coming shortly, as I no longer have to worry about the queue!

mwuahahahahahahaha

~~ ** Lady Tuesday ** ~~

Chapter Seven A Frayed Knot

It all seemed so surreal, Hermione thought as she stood underneath the tree. The wind was the only thing rippling the branches of the Whomping Willow today as the small party surrounded a tiny headstone that had been fashioned for him.

'Ron is dead ... Ron is dead ... Ron is dead ... Ron is dead ...'

She couldn't make the phrase loosen its grip on her subconscious. *'Ron is dead ... and it's my fault.'*

Hermione sniffled loudly, but the people thronging around the tiny gravesite took no notice. The Weasley clan huddled together; Tonks and Lupin clasped hands, whispering prayers to Ginny and Neville, who stood nearby, both crying unrestrainedly. Dumbledore was reciting some passage of hope and courage and bravery, but Hermione could not get her mind around it. She stood at the far edge of the crowd, staring across to the other side where Harry, too, endured the service alone.

His eyes were fixed on the stone that just protruded over the lump of freshly packed earth. Rigidly upright, as if someone's touch would shatter him to pieces, Harry did not cry, he did not pray. He merely stood still, his eyes fixed on where Ron lay beneath the soil, and he stared.

Hermione barely held back her weeping. She had made it through a majority of the previous evening by being too tired to cry, but today, seeing his grave here in the real world, she could not hold back. Tears cascaded down her face but she made no effort to stop them. She deserved these tears. *Ron* deserved these tears.

She looked up, startled, when she realized that everyone was moving about except her. Mrs. Weasley was now laying flowers at the foot of the small, stone-walled-in plot that Snape had set aside the previous night. People were milling about, consoling, comforting, aiding each other in their grief.

Hermione looked around a bit and realized she could no longer locate Harry. Turning wildly in every direction to scan the horizon, she eventually spotted his retreating form heading towards the lake. She followed as fast as her feet would carry her. Harry was nearly a third of the way around the lake before Hermione caught up with him, but she merely fell into a pace next to him, matching her shorter, quicker strides to the slow steady plodding of his own longer gait.

They circled the lake in silence for quite some time. Her head was buzzing with a hundred different things she wished to say to him, but every time she tried, the glazed, vacant look in his eyes warned her off, and the words died on her lips. Eventually, on their second or third time around the lake, Harry stopped walking and turned to view the scene.

They had crossed to the opposite side where the long lawn leading to the forest could be seen. Hermione watched in silence as the bright afternoon sun glinted off the hair of the Weasleys, now huddled in a tight knot underneath the tree, a few hundred yards away. Hermione felt Harry's slim fingers slide into hers as they stood watching. Clasp his hand tightly, she said nothing.

After several minutes, Harry spoke up quietly. "You're not safe you know. You're free again."

Hermione's throat clenched so painfully she thought she might have to gasp for breath. "I can't think about that now. Not here. It's too soon ... too fresh ..."

She had to stop. It was impossible to think of protecting herself, of aligning herself with someone else when the grief of Ron was so rife. Hermione looked up to Harry's face. He was hiccupping quietly, holding in the sobs as he stared to where a spot had opened up in the crowd and Ron's grave was once again visible. Harry was battling to keep it in.

"Cry for Ron," Hermione whimpered, her voice an almost desperate plea. "Cry, Harry! Cry for your best friend!" Her voice broke as a single tear rolled down Harry's face, now splotted red with strain. "Cry for him! Cry for yourself!"

At her last words, Harry turned to look desperately into her face, now drenched with grief as well. It seemed too hard, too much to take, the pain there in his eyes, the guilt in hers. Harry pulled Hermione roughly to him, her head buried in the strong hollow of his neck. His arms came about her at crushing strength, his hands like vises crossed and grasping at her shoulder and waist. Her fingers dug deep into his soft cotton shirt at his shoulders, and she grasped onto him as if he were her last salvation.

Beneath the aching grief escaping her throat, Hermione's heart trembled. Harry was shuddering as he sobbed now, his body wracked with a hurt so deep that she feared he might collapse with it. They cried aloud, howling out the anguish that had built up since the previous night. Hermione clung to Harry's shoulders, not bothering to regard the time, merely taking the proffered solace. As their weeping subsided, Hermione pulled away once again to look up into Harry's eyes. He raised a hand delicately to trace a half circle underneath her right eye.

"Dark circles," he said gently. "You haven't slept."

"I couldn't, not after ..." She raised a hand as well, mirroring his action on the other side. She gently removed his glasses and then traced a finger underneath his eyes, now brighter green without the hindrance. "Dark, too," she murmured.

"I couldn't sleep either."

Hermione barely knew what was upon her as he moved towards her softly. It seemed to take hours, but when their lips met, it was as if she had been waiting for it to happen all her life. Something tumbled over itself in her stomach as his other hand came up to cup her face, his thumb gently caressing her cheek. She could feel his heart thrumming, her palms flat against his chest as he gathered her closer.

"Ahem."

Hermione started at the sound of the voice nearby, bumping her nose into Harry's cheek as she tried to pull away with some semblance of dignity. Severus Snape was standing a few feet away, leering at them with a condescending sneer plastered on his face. He watched, obviously amused, as Hermione scrambled away from Harry, who was glaring at him with utmost loathing.

"If you can pry your hormones apart long enough to grieve the dead," Snape said, bitingly, to which Hermione had to restrain Harry from lunging at him, "Dumbledore wishes that everyone pay their last respects. The rest of the party is returning to London as we speak."

Hermione and Harry followed Snape back around the lake in silence. His steps were swift, leaving them trailing far behind; he never so much as glanced over his shoulder to see that they were following. Hermione noticed, with a sigh, that she and Harry were walking several feet apart, heads down, as if they were chastised firsties. Harry was flushing lightly in anger, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides.

When they reached the willow where Ron's grave stood, Hermione was surprised to see that only a few stragglers had remained. They arrived just in time to hear ~~th~~*pop!* that was Lupin and Tonks Apparating away. Mrs. Weasley was squatting near the headstone, clearing away some weeds and laying a bouquet of sunny daffodils. Arthur stood with his hands around Ginny's shoulders, heedless of her occasional sniffing and the fact that Neville's hand clasped hers tightly enough to whiten his knuckles.

Hermione drew a deep breath. She was not certain that she could handle the grief that she felt emanating from them in almost visible waves. She started to turn, to move away, when Mrs. Weasley seemed to read her mind.

"Come on, Arthur, Ginny, Neville," she said too brightly, a determined smile on her face. "Give Harry and Hermione a moment alone with Ron."

It cost Hermione a great deal to hear the stout woman speak of her son as if he were there somewhere, merely asleep or in another location, but she worked up a gratefully smile and turned her eyes to Harry. Harry merely nodded in recognition but did not lift his eyes from the ground. Mr. Weasley clapped a hand to Neville's shoulder and steered him in the direction of the castle, leaving Mrs. Weasley to comfort Ginny as they walked back towards Hogwarts, where they could Floo back to the Burrow.

Hermione sank to her knees on the ground just ahead of the stone. She traced her fingers over the words, little hiccoughs in her breathing as she whispered them.

Ronald Weasley

Martyred at the hands of the Dark Lord:

Aged 18 years

Cherished son, dearest friend,

Devoted to his beloved Hermione

She fought to keep from sobbing hysterically again. Instead, she stretched herself out and laid on the mound of earth, beneath which lay Ron's body. Without even glancing up, Hermione extended her open palm up towards Harry, inviting him to lay down with her. She noticed him, out of the corner of her eye, straightening his shorts and shirt nervously before laying down upon the earth. They turned their faces inward his facing hers, hers facing his their eyes gazing back at each other as they laid hand over hand on the mound that they supposed covered Ron's heart.

"Goodbye, mate," Harry spoke quietly.

"Rest in peace," Hermione whispered.

After several long minutes, Hermione sat up slowly and brushed the stray dirt and twigs from the front of her tank top. Harry offered his hand to her to help her off the ground, which she took lightly and allowed him lift her. Once she was on her feet, Harry bent quickly and brushed his lips briefly against hers. She felt her cheeks warm and redden with a quick flush. And then she shrieked as she felt a hand at her shoulders.

"Miss Granger."

Dumbledore's voice was calm and steady as always but there was something sad and strange in the clear blue eyes. "Forgive me, I didn't mean to startle you, but there are pressing matters that need to be discussed. I did not wish to confer in front of anyone else close to Mr. Weasley or his family, as I feared it would upset them." Dumbledore looked pointedly to Harry, who moved closer to her, a hand at her elbow.

Hermione was perplexed. She had never seen Dumbledore be so exclusive before, but she had also never seen Harry suddenly become passive-aggressive. She looked from one to the other briefly, and then to Snape, who was now pacing back and forth, glancing uncomfortably at Ron's grave. Hermione was absolutely stymied.

"All right, Headmaster," she said slowly. "Perhaps we should adjourn to your office to discuss this?"

"Indeed," he said, and moved on towards the castle. Snape followed quickly, leaving Harry and Hermione to glance at each other curiously and jog to catch up.

Hermione settled quite uneasily into one of the chintz armchairs in Dumbledore's office. Snape prowled the perimeter of the room ceaselessly, glaring at her; Hermione couldn't decide if she thought he was nervous or simply circling his prey like a buzzard. Harry stood firmly behind her chair, his hands just behind her shoulders as if he were her own personal bodyguard.

"Miss Granger, as grieved as I am at Mr. Weasley's death, I'm afraid there are some harsh realities we must face."

Hermione nodded silently, Harry stiffened behind her, and Snape's pacing picked up speed. If Dumbledore was aware of the professor's interminable pacing, he made no move to indicate so.

"Due to the young Mr. Weasley's untimely death, you find yourself in a very precarious position. As dangerous as your situation was while engaged to Mr. Weasley, you are now even further endangered, and we find ourselves back at the start that we encountered little less than a month ago. You are now an eligible witch, and I'm certain that the Ministry will not hesitate to force you into a decision regarding your marriage proposals as soon as they catch wind of Ronald's passing."

Hermione felt a great plunging in her stomach. Here it was: the moment where Dumbledore was to tell her that she must marry Draco Malfoy ...

Dumbledore sighed heavily. "We have been saving one solution for only a last resort case..."

Snape snorted derisively, causing Hermione to jump several inches, suddenly acutely aware of his vulture-like presence in the room.

Dumbledore continued as if he had not been interrupted. "I feel that, unfortunately, we are now at that dire state. We have only one choice for your marriage that we feel will ensure your safety, and I hope that you have faith enough in me to trust in my judgment."

With a feeling of great unrest, Hermione watched as Dumbledore's gaze shifted up to meet the hulking glare of Professor Snape, who had stopped his pacing and was now plunging a hand deep within the pockets of his robes.

Above her head, she heard Harry mumble, "he can't be serious ..."

Evidently, Harry had picked up on something she had not, as there was a look of complete and horrified shock on Harry's face. Hermione looked quickly to Professor Snape and then back to Dumbledore, puzzled.

"Sir? Who have you," she stopped to gulp in fear, "chosen for me?"

Her heart was repeating a single refrain: *Please not Malfoy. Dear God, anything but Malfoy. Please, PLEASE not Malfoy ...*

Snape said nothing but moved to her and thrust a somewhat crumpled scroll into her hands. She looked down at the seal of a striking serpent that was emblazoned upon a crest whose letters she could not make out. They simply looked like a complex series of squiggles to her. She looked back up, again perplexed.

"It was..." Snape stopped, cleared his throat, resumed his scowl, and continued, "...submitted this morning."

When he said nothing more, simply glared down at her in frustrated anticipation, she shakily ran a finger under the seal and opened the scroll. Barely recognizing what she was seeing, she read aloud.

"I, Severus Reynard Philippe Snape d'Guise, hereby request the hand of Miss Hermione Claire Granger in marriage under Ministry of Magic ..."

She trailed off and stared in disbelief as it washed over her what was really happening. Hermione could tell that she was now gawking owlishly at Dumbledore, who merely sighed and lowered his eyes to the desk. When she found no relief there, she peeked over her shoulder to Harry, who was staring gape-mouthed at Snape. With a slam of his hands on the back of her chair that made her jump, Harry launched himself across the room at the man, shouting furiously.

"You hideous bastard! You've had this planned the whole time haven't you?" Harry was furiously bellowing. His wand was clutched haphazardly in his left hand, and Hermione was quite certain that, at the moment, it was his balled right fist he was intending to actually use. "Had to kill Ron to save his life, eh? More like get him out of the way!"

Harry was charging towards Snape now, his wand abandoned, his fists ready. Hermione leapt out of her chair to try and subdue Harry but Snape managed it first. He drew his wand quickly and muttered "*Petrificus Totalus*" easily, and before Harry was aware of what had happened, his body seized up and crashed to the ground, victim to Snape's full Body Bind. Severus merely stepped over Harry, who had landed face down at his feet, and addressed Dumbledore.

"This, Albus, is exactly why I said we should have proposed this as a contingency plan from the onset! At least the girl would have known what to expect, and we could have avoided this touching display of misguided chivalry." He said the last word as if it were a foul vulgarity. "The last thing I need right now is His Royal Majesty starting term in my class thinking I'm pathetic and lecherous predator yearning after his plaything."

"Severus!" Dumbledore snapped. "That is hardly an appropriate way for you to behave at all, let alone in front of a woman whom you've just proposed to. Get a hold of yourself, for goodness's sake."

Hermione had ignored the two older men completely, and was now drawing her wand as she knelt down in front of Harry. "*Finite Incantatem*," she spoke quietly, releasing Harry from the Body Bind. She helped him sit up slowly and glared daggers at Snape when Harry's nose started to bleed from contact with the floor.

She roughly removed his hand from his face, pointed her wand at him, and muttered, "*Episkey*." Though his nose had stopped flowing freely, Harry was still dabbing at the blood on his face.

Hermione rose to her feet and jammed her hands into the pockets of her robes, resisting the fury welling up in her throat. "If you two are quite finished speaking on my behalf," she hissed at Dumbledore and Snape, only one of which had the decency to look chastised.

"I'm terribly sorry, Miss Granger," began Dumbledore, looking truly weary. "If we are snappish it is only with grief over the situation."

Snape snorted derisively, but Dumbledore continued.

"If you remember correctly, I did say that there was a stage of desperation that we had not yet reached before you accepted Mr. Weasley's proposal, and that Severus had a last resort solution Most unfortunately, Professor Snape's proposal was a last resort that we had hoped not to reach."

Snape sneered, and replied, "I resent that remark."

Hermione found herself hard-pressed to stifle a giggle when Harry muttered, "You *resemble* that remark."

Snape glared at Harry but said nothing to dignify the insult. Instead he turned to Hermione and sneered at her. "Miss Granger you do surprise me. I would have been certain that you'd have had the vapors and passed out by now. What a disappointment."

"You loathsome bastard, I ought to just..." Harry began.

"If the both of you would please restrain yourselves and refrain from the senseless undercutting," Dumbledore interjected. "You both have every reason to be upset right

now, but it does not diminish the need for immediate action on your part, Miss Granger. I know that it isn't fair to ask you for an immediate decision, but I assure you that if you do not act soon, Lucius Malfoy most certainly will. And it is much easier to aid you in a marriage with Severus than protect you in one with the son of a Death Eater."

Hermione sighed. Harry was grumbling behind her.

"I suppose I don't have much of a choice, do I?"

Dumbledore looked to Severus, who was now staring into the fire and scowling.

"I cannot say that you do not have a choice. One always has choices. But, as I said before, a marriage to Severus would be the easiest and most thorough way to protect you. And despite his outer gruffness," Dumbledore critiqued gently, casting a fleetingly doubtful look over his shoulder, "Severus is a good man who has my complete trust. I do not hesitate to assure you that he will endeavor to make the situation as favorable as possible for the both of you."

Hermione sighed and gazed up to Harry who had moved to stand behind her chair again. His face was deeply lined with scowls but he said nothing.

"Harry?" she said, laying a hand lightly on his.

Snape grumbled, no doubt for the fact that she was appealing to Harry for marriage advice.

Hermione watched as Harry took a slow, deliberately calming breath, looked away, and then back to her eyes. His fingers clenched on hers momentarily before he drew his hand away. "What other choice do you have?"

Hermione nodded and turned back to the desk where both Snape and Dumbledore were now watching her. She pushed forward on the chair, and once again looked over the scroll.

"I, Severus Reynard Philippe Snape de Guise ... de Guise?"

"My mother is French, the custom is to name the child by the matronymic there," he responded quickly.

"Hmmm," she answered. "Severus Reynard Philippe; you have a rather copious amount of names, don't you?"

"That's not even all of them," Snape mumbled distractedly. After another moment or two went by with no movement on Hermione's part, Snape burst out, "Oh, for heaven's sake, Granger, just sign the damned thing!"

Hermione enjoyed toying with her last few moments of calm before the storm.

"... hereby request the hand of Miss Hermione Claire Granger in marriage." She sighed heavily. "Well, Hermione Claire," she said barely audibly, "here we go ..."

She picked up the quill from the stand on Dumbledore's desk and paused only minutely before scripting her name in careful, perfect characters next on the appropriate blank. She looked down at it for another moment.

I, Hermione Claire Granger, do accept your proposal, Severus R. Snape, for marriage on a date yet to be determined.

As soon as she lifted the quill tip from the paper, the parchment rolled itself up and disappeared with a pop. Severus rounded the desk and, on his way out the door, very unceremoniously dropped something in Hermione's lap. He shut the door behind him without a backward glance. Dumbledore sighed heavily.

Hermione looked down at the object, now gleaming in her lap.

"Oh, dear," she muttered as she picked it up.

An ornate, antique silver ring set with a large diamond encircled by two small emeralds lay glittering in the firelight. She could feel both Harry's and Dumbledore's eyes on her face as she slipped it on; the ring molded to fit her hand. Only then did she notice that the ornate scrollwork on the ring was actually the body markings of a serpent, whose eyes were tiny emeralds, and whose fangs and open jaws were the setting for the enormous diamond.

"Oh, dear," she said again, wondering idly what she'd gotten herself into this time.

A/N - *Finite Incantatem* - used in all books; to stop/finish a spell/incantation.

Episkey from HBP; a spell used to stop blood flow and mend damaged nose/facial features.

So yeah, chapters will be on the move, so stick with me!

The Timber Hitch

Chapter 8 of 23

Hermione Granger's world is upended when a letter from the Ministry of Magic forces her to be the one thing she couldn't have imagined in her most feverish nightmares: the wife of her dreaded Potion's master.

~~ My little attempt at the WIKTT Marriage Law Challenge ~~ Lascivious rating is for the hot monkey sex to come in later chapters.

A/N - Okay, so as you might have noticed, I'm speeding through posting these chapters now that I have Validated Author status and won't have to wait in the queue. Huzzah for quicker updates for my readers! Oh, and because people mentioned this in the reviews for chapter 7, I'll make this clear: I started writing this story LONG before Deathly Hallows; in fact, I started writing it during Order of the Phoenix. As such, at the time I was writing, nothing was known about Snape's heritage, bloodline, etc etc etc. So you can expect that canon will be gleefully heaved out the window for the sake of the story, because Snape would have been on the other end of the petitioning had canon been known. So that's that, and let the games resume!

~~ ** Lady Tuesday ** ~~

Chapter Eight The Timber Hitch

"**The Timber Hitch** Most commonly used to attach a rope to a log, or where security is an issue. This knot tightens under strain."

"Oh, come on now ... do you think I was born yesterday?"

Hermione sighed. *This is going to take forever.*

"I'm telling the truth."

Ginny Weasley's tomato-colored hair swung as she turned her head to gaze at Harry, who was now fiddling distractedly with the papers on Hermione's desk. "Harry, post traumatic stress lunacy? What do you think? I mean, really, a story like that ..."

"Ginny," Hermione said, frazzled, and squeezed the bridge of her nose with her right hand. "I'm not lying, I'm not trying to fool you, and I'm not crazy. I'm engaged to Snape."

Harry sighed as Ginny persisted with this general line of tactics for several more uncomfortable minutes before Hermione merely grunted and shoved her hand under Ginny's nose. Hermione smirked in morbid satisfaction as the grin of teasing froze on Ginny's face while her eyes glued to the glittering ring on her friend's hand. The smile melted away as Ginny grabbed Hermione's hand and yanked it closer to her view. Ginny stared at the ring, focusing and refocusing her eyes, before yanking it off Hermione's finger and staring at it further. It was obvious that she simply could not get her mind around the concept.

"Don't know anyone else that could give me a ring like that, do you?" Hermione remarked, triumphantly.

"Short of Malfoy," Ginny returned before looking up into Hermione's pained face and realizing at once what she'd said. "Oh, Hermione, I'm sorry. God, I know this must be hard for you, and here I am making light of it. I'm sorry it just ... seemed so ludicrous. I mean, it's *Snape*."

"Believe me, I know."

Hermione breathed in a long drawn out sigh. She chanced a look to the desk, where Harry now sat, turning a bracelet of Hermione's over and over in his hands. Something in the look on his face told her not to interrupt. She turned back to Ginny. And Hermione was suddenly struck with something. In the instant that Hermione had caught Ginny off guard there was a second that Hermione could tell Ginny hadn't expected her to turn back she noticed that something was warring in Ginny's face. She was holding something back.

"All right, out with it," Hermione said brusquely.

"What do you mean?" Ginny said, smoothing her face as she looked up.

"After this many years knowing you, I can see when you're chalking up a story."

Ginny looked put out, as being able to pull the wool over people's eyes was one of her special talents. But Hermione wasn't fooled.

"You're not telling me what you're thinking and I know it. Out with it. And now," she demanded.

Ginny sighed and cleared her throat a few times. Hermione drummed her fingers on Ginny's knee. She was quite aware that these sorts of diversionary tactics were Ginny's way of putting on her "show face."

"Ginny," Hermione began again.

"All right, fine," Ginny huffed, her pale and befreckled face starting to splotch red with anger. "You want to hear it? You want to know that I'm furious? That I think you have all the tact of that social-climbing cow, Pansy Parkinson, because you couldn't wait 24 hours after my brother's death to get engaged again? Damn it, Hermione! Ron's not even cold in his grave and you're shackled up with *Snape*! Did Ron really mean so little to you?"

Ginny was now pacing the room like a mad, caged wild cat, her small, delicate hands flying up now and again to point out her rage. And yet, Hermione could feel as if the waves of it were visible that this was Ginny reining herself in. Hermione knew inherently that the youngest of the Weasleys had her deceased brother's temper. She was stalking the room to rid herself of the excess energy that she could be releasing on Hermione.

After several moments of anxious, pained stalking, she stopped again and glared at the older girl. "Bloody hell, Hermione! I thought you...you were...God damn it! Ron trusted you! He was so damn worried about what was going to happen ... TO YOU! He cared about you. Hell, he lo..."

Ginny stopped in the middle of the word. Seeing a tear roll down Hermione's face only stirred her anger more, and that word refused to exit her mouth while she was in such a state. Her balled fingers dug into her hands forcing her to note the small something still curled inside her fist. Ginny raised the hand and opened it, seeing the glittering diamond and emerald ring lying there serenely. With a growl of rage, Ginny cocked back her arm and heaved the ring into the mirror on the wall across from Hermione.

"Ginny!" Harry shouted, ending his silent reverie as he leapt to his feet.

The redhead turned on her heel and marched out, not even looking at her best friend who had huddled against the throw and was now crying gently as she picked shards of glass from the fingers that she had thrown up over her head to shield her.

"Hermione..."

"Go," she said quietly but firmly.

"But, Hermione, your hand..."

"I said, 'go,' Harry. I'm perfectly capable of handling this myself."

Harry sighed. "But..."

"Harry, she's just angry," Hermione said with a wince, pulling another piece of glass out of her finger. "She's entitled to be angry. Her brother's dead, for God's sake, and I have betrayed his memory."

Harry moved to sit on the bed next to her. He gently took her injured hands into his lap to stop her picking at the glass. "Is that what you think you've done?"

"No," she responded, barely audible. "Is that what *you* think I've done?"

Harry was quiet for a fraction of a second longer than Hermione thought necessary, and as a result tears sprung to her eyes. Harry sighed and put a hand to her hair,

stroking it gently, but carefully thought out his response before speaking up.

"I think that getting engaged to Snape less than a day after Ron...after what happened was probably in bad taste," Harry began. Hermione sat bolt upright, ready to argue, but Harry patted her shoulder and continued. "But, seeing as how you didn't have much choice, I'd say you did right."

Hermione quieted a bit, so Harry decided that his next remark wasn't as dangerous as he first thought. "However," he began again, to which Hermione sat up nervously, "I do think it's going to be extremely easy to misinterpret for some people. And that doesn't even take into account what will happen at school..."

Hermione leapt from the bed and gathered the ring frantically from the pile of broken mirror near her bed. "Oh, dear God, Harry ... I never thought of Hogwarts! I can't imagine what they'll say. Oh, Lord, it'll be the end of me."

Hermione was fairly certain that she most certainly didn't need to imagine what people would say at school. She was quite certain she got the full gamut of reactions, just from the members of the Order of the Phoenix:

Lupin *Remus*, she reminded herself, **Remus** had sighed heavily and said, "Oh dear, you poor thing ... If you need to talk about it, let me know."

Harry stood stoically in the corner at dinner that night, talking to nobody, not even Hermione.

Molly Weasley had wept for a moment, then bucked herself up and said, "Well, I'm as good as a mother to you while you're in the wizarding world, so if you need help with wedding plans, you call me dear. Ron would have wanted that."

Hermione's heart had nearly exploded after hearing that.

Ginny had remained angry and silent while Fred and George made loud, mocking comments about Snape's ability (or lack thereof) to perform his "husbandly duties." Bill blushed when he said hello to Hermione, and then spent the rest of the evening huddled in conversation with Fleur about their own wedding plans. Arthur Weasley couldn't even look her in the eye; Tonks was trying so desperately to say the right thing that she couldn't form a complete sentence. Eventually, Hermione resorted to sitting in the corner, between Harry and Mad Eye Moody, unable to think of a single non-Marriage Law conversation topic, so she remained silent.

Just when Hermione thought that the night couldn't get any worse, Severus Snape walked through the kitchen door and, without throwing her a single glance, busied himself making a plate of food for himself. The entirety of the Order watched from their positions around the room as he planted himself at the table and silently ate his dinner. He never raised his eyes for nearly a half hour. Hermione was becoming steadily more uncomfortable because, as the minutes passed and he did not look at her, the party's attention drifted from him to her.

Eventually, knowing there was no escaping it, Hermione raised herself from her spot in the corner and strode over to the table. Before seating herself across from Severus, she swept an accusatory glance around the room, following which there was a greatly increased amount of side conversation as people blushing returned to their activities. Snape showed not the slightest notice of her presence. Hermione cleared her throat loudly, at which point he glanced up at her, raised an eyebrow, then resumed eating without taking his eyes off her face.

Unsettled to say the least, Hermione had to clear her throat again before speaking. "Would you care to discuss details of our," she had to stop to clear her throat again, "wedding this evening or later?"

Once again, she noted the serious decrease in conversation around the room. She noticed, with some satisfaction, a slight twitch in Severus's eye that told her he must have noticed as well. But, as usual, he said nothing. Instead, he got up, cleared his plate into the sink, said "Porch" to her as he passed, and headed straight out the kitchen door. The party watched again in tense silence as she hesitated for a moment then followed him.

Hermione settled herself quite uneasily on the stoop of Grimmauld Place, which could not rightly be called a porch. Snape settled himself on a railing opposite her and drew a pack of cigarettes from his pocket; he deposited one between his lips, lit it with his wand, and glared at her as he sat smoking silently. Under his painful glare, she was suddenly reminded of view of him in the memory: sitting insolently on cement pillar, smoking and staring into the London traffic. A light blush painted her cheek as she fidgeted nervously with the hem of her sundress, which now seemed unspeakably rumpled and ill-fitting. He continued to stare at her wordlessly as his cigarette slowly went to ash as it moved in and out of his lips.

When she could take no more of the dangling cigarette and fixed stare, she dropped her eyes to her lap and muttered, "Well, are you going to say something or not?"

Snape dropped the butt to the stone steps and ground it out under the toe of his boots without even shifting his weight. "I was under the impression that it was you had something to say. As always."

"Are you determined to be argumentative for the rest of our lives?" she spat in embarrassed annoyance.

"Are you determined to be contrary?" he returned.

Hermione sighed. "Well, I just wanted to start talking about the wedding," she started.

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment, picturing what her wedding should have been. She could see herself: a crown of flowers on her head, an elegant, flowing white dress, standing hand in hand with a dark haired groom in front of a glittering lake with a small, happy party surrounding her ...

And then she opened her eyes to her groom sitting on the stop in front of her, scowling and lighting another cigarette. He was old enough to be her father.

"I hope you are quite aware that I did not ever intend to get married."

"I'd say that is perfectly believable."

He raised an eyebrow and glared at her, but continued. "So I hope you realize that I do not intend to participate in any form of ceremony. We shall engage in the prescribed charms and legal nonsense at the Ministry of Magic, and that will be the end of it."

He was standing to stub out yet another cigarette when she rocketed to her feet and grabbed his arm. "And I don't get any say in this?"

He opened his mouth to speak but she responded before he could form a word.

"I understand that you would probably rather marry a cantaloupe than me, and believe me, the feeling is mutual. However, this may not be fixable. Should the powers that be decide that this law is for keeps, we will be stuck together for all and good. I know that wizarding marriages are forever; I've done my research."

Snape snorted derisively, but she continued.

"But I ..." She stopped and took a breath, summoning her courage. "This may just be my only shot at a wedding. If it's not going to be the wedding of my dreams, I at least want a chance to make it something I will look back at in sixty years or so and ... well, at least not regret what I didn't have."

Severus couldn't help the mildly annoyed grumble in his throat, but then he looked down at his fiancée. Seeing her standing there in a pastel striped sundress, bare foot

and nearly in tears, reminded him: she was just a girl. And her future was being ripped from her handily; the only one she was being offered was something second-hand with a surly old man. He smirked deeply.

Hermione watched, puzzled, as Snape smirked and then shook himself out of whatever thought process he was in.

"We have some terms to agree to," Severus started carefully.

"All right," Hermione replied.

"I will agree to give you a free hand with the ceremony on the following conditions: I will not spout any words of love or fantasy. I will not state, to *anyone*, that this marriage is anything other than what it is: a marriage of convenience and protection..."

"Convenience?" Hermione scoffed. "Convenient for whom?"

Severus looked genuinely puzzled. "Both of us, naturally." He scowled as Hermione scoffed again.

"How is this convenient for *either* of us?" she asked, incredulously.

"Well," he replied, glaring at her, "I'm *conveniently* agreeing to keep you from being killed, for one. But for the other, we are both dissipating the constraints of the Marriage Law for the other."

Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"Are you forgetting, Miss Granger, that the law not only requires Muggle-borns to get married, but that it also requires purebloods between 17 and 60 to make a petition for marriage?"

"Yes, but..."

"Surely you do realize that I am within this age group?"

"Well, erm ..."

When Hermione merely shuffled her bare feet against the stone instead of giving a direct answer, he nearly shouted, distinctly insulted, "Good Lord, Granger, how old do you think I am?"

"Actually," she replied, reddening, "I have no idea how old you are."

He cleared his throat. *Dear Lord, this won't make things any easier.* "I'm forty-one."

Hermione blushed. "Well, you're two years younger than my Dad."

"Thank heaven for small mercies," he said woodenly. "In any event, as I was saying, I will not pretend that this is not a marriage of convenience. I will not participate in anything overly saccharine or sentimental. I will not play the part of anything but a surly forty-one year old, and I will certainly not be overly social at any type of reception. Aside from that, I will allow you to plan the ceremony as you will."

Hermione nodded and immediately sat down with a notebook she had left outside the previous evening. Severus pocketed the cigarettes she had left on the rail and made to move inside when Hermione reached a hand out and lightly clasped his sleeve.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "It may not be a fantasy wedding, but I'll try to make it so even you enjoy yourself."

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"Well, I'll try to make it so you don't hate it."

Severus nodded shortly and returned to the house as quickly as possible.

A/N - All right, so I know that this was kind of a vehicle chapter (one that exists merely to move you to the next chapter) but I hope you enjoyed it anyway and will review. *wink wink nudge nudge*

The Triple Crown Knot

Chapter 9 of 23

Hermione Granger's world is upended when a letter from the Ministry of Magic forces her to be the one thing she couldn't have imagined in her most feverish nightmares: the wife of her dreaded Potion's master.

~~ My little attempt at the WIKTT Marriage Law Challenge ~~ Lascivious rating is for the hot monkey sex to come in later chapters.

Chapter Nine – The Triple Crown Knot

"Triple Crown Knot - The Triple Crown Knot is my favorite double splayed loop knot because ... the loops definitely don't communicate."

(Taken from Knot Knowledge)

The last few weeks of the summer were passing more slowly than Hermione would have thought possible. There were only a few days left until she would board the Hogwarts Express with her classmates, and yet, it felt like a millennium had passed since Ron had ... passed. Had this been any other summer, Hermione would have been thoroughly thrilled to have the time with her friends so wonderfully lengthened. As it was, however, Hermione was down to her last friend: Harry. And even their relationship was strained to say the least. Neither of them could quite banish the grief they were feeling, and Hermione could only just barely keep her head above the

current of resentment that was threatening to drag her under.

The only escape she could manage was of little joy. Hermione had taken to burying her nose into books regarding Wizarding marriage traditions. She was still determined to make the best wedding she could possibly scrape out despite the rolling wave of nausea crashing over her every time she thought of marrying Snape, so she tried to immerse herself in the duties and responsibilities of crafting a wedding, however undesirable the groom might be.

But that was mostly during the day.

The nights were when Hermione really suffered. Sharing a room with Ginny while the fiery redhead maintained her bitter silence was a challenge. In the end, Hermione resorted to either staying in the study reading long into the night – when she was certain Ginny would be sleeping and she could creep upstairs unnoticed – or going to bed at such an early hour that by the time her roommate reappeared for the night, Hermione could at least conjure up a good imitation of slumber. Even then, however, Hermione was haunted.

She saw Ron every night: his face, his eyes, the claw marks in Snape's robes, his voice echoing in her head ...

"Tell Hermione I love her ..."

He haunted her in dreams and in waking hours every night as she lie in bed, staring at the wall. Sometimes she would awaken to find herself moaning or crying in her sleep and would spend the rest of the night with her back resting against her headboard, knees huddled to her chest, trying to forcibly remove the horrific images from the back of her mind. But every morning, she still woke haunted.

And she could tell that Harry did too. The ghost of it crept around his eyes, painting heavy gray-blue smudges under his lower lids; but more than that, his sparkling green eyes never quite lost the look of a guilty, hunted man. And Hermione could think of nothing to say.

Day by day, the two of them talked less. Her only escape was in the books she was using to plan the wedding, but every time Harry saw them, noticed what she was reading, he seemed to twitch or flinch just a tad more every day. She had trouble deciding whether this was because she was getting married, because she was getting married to someone other than Ron, because she was getting married to someone other than Ron and it was Snape, or because she was getting married and ... and it wasn't to him.

Even in her head she felt the arrogance of the statement. She tried to tell herself that his anger and sadness couldn't possibly be just for her. It was too narcissistic to think that he would be this broken up over the loss of her. It was just not likely, being who she was and who he was. Being who she was to him.

But she couldn't remove the thought from her head, no matter how hard she tried, every time Harry's eyes met hers. They always seemed to journey from her own sad eyes ... to her ring.

Hermione took a deep breath. The knowledge that it had to be done had settled like a lead weight in her stomach, and every time she thought about doing it, she felt a fresh burst of panicky sickness course through her. But now that she had done it, she really did feel at least marginally better knowing that the first real step had been taken towards getting this wretched event behind her. She had set a date for the wedding.

After two solid weeks of debating and three days of checking her calendar, she had finally decided on the last weekend in September. The weather would still be good and crisp, but not cold; and she had the added benefit that it was a Hogsmeade weekend. They couldn't possibly afford the time or effort to do it anywhere other than Hogwarts, and Hermione had no desire to have the possibility of random students wandering into the wedding or reception. The possible results of that were too horrific to even imagine. So she had decided on September 25th at sundown, out near the lake. Now all she had to do was inform her fiancé.

And her parents.

As much as she was truly dreading the reactions of her fellow students, she couldn't even begin to imagine what her parents would say. But first ... first she had to inform her fiancé.

And, much to her dismay, as he burst into the kitchen and busily began pouring himself a cup of coffee, she had the opportunity to do just that. She dawdled at finishing her breakfast, chiding herself all along but still not in a rush to correct the situation. She chewed every bite rather more times than was strictly necessary, gathering the energy and courage to broach the subject.

Hermione looked around quickly. Only a few Order members remained in the kitchen, and they were all sufficiently busy doing other things. She supposed this was the best chance she would get at privacy. She walked slowly over to him on the pretense of placing her dishes in the sink to be washed. She threw a sideways glance at him as she stood in front of the sink and muttered, *"Scourgify."*

He didn't even cast a glance at her as she strolled over to him.

"I'd ... er ... I'd like to discuss," she began, stuttering. She couldn't seem to get her tongue under her any time she talked to him.

He slowly cast her an indifferently disdainful look. In fact, how he managed to look both indifferent and disdainful at the same time mystified her. *But*, she thought with a sigh, *if anyone could do that, it's Severus Snape.*

This was the man she was marrying in little under a month.

"I'd like to discuss the wedding," she said firmly.

"What about it?" he asked, sitting down at the table, drawing out a copy of the Daily Prophet and not even glancing in her direction.

"The date ... er ...," she stuttered again. He still hadn't looked at her. Frustration and annoyance welling up in her throat, she plunked down across from him at the table and snatched the newspaper out of his hands. He looked decidedly angry at her presumption and rudeness, but for a moment, she thought she saw just a flicker of amusement cross his face. And then it was gone as quickly as it had come.

"Spit it out, Granger," Snape growled, "before I get unpleasant."

Hermione snorted derisively. "I've set a date for the wedding."

Snape raised an eyebrow, snorted back, and returned her glare step for step. "Is that so?" he said, sneering.

"September 25th," she said firmly. "A Saturday."

"Hmmp," he replied, seemingly without a nasty comment. He snatched his paper back from her and resumed his scan of the articles. Much to his surprise, Hermione snatched it back.

"Oh, for the love of Merlin, the least you could do *spretend* to care that I've got something to say," she spat angrily.

Snape folded his hands in front of him and stared at her intently. Hermione wasn't at all certain she preferred this to complete indifference. She sensed that he knew this,

however, because he had now smeared a curious and interested look on his face, mocking her with every inch of his being. She decided the best thing to do was to beat him at own game.

"Much better," she cooed sweetly, and launched into a fifteen-minute elaboration of the plans she had established so far. She watched in amusement as his eyes glazed over and the disdainful sneer returned. She smirked. At least she had gained a step or two on him. Just when she knew he was starting to tune her out entirely, she casually dropped the bomb in his lap to see how he would react.

"--so that's why I was thinking that perhaps you would like to accompany me to my parents' house tomorrow evening," she said quickly, and then hastily added, "so they can meet their future son-in-law."

Unfortunately, Hermione hadn't counted on the fact that he'd been listening to every word, and grimaced as he slickly responded, "I'll do no such thing."

Hermione, however, was ready for this type of answer. "Would you prefer to meet them now? Or wait until a year or two down the road when we have to explain to them why I'm pregnant with my former teacher's child?"

As much as the statement left a bitter taste in her mouth and a sick, swooping feeling in her stomach, it achieved the desired result: Snape sighed and grumbled as he got up and left the room.

"All right, fine," he called grudgingly on his way out, "Tomorrow evening I shall accompany you to your parents' home."

Hermione smiled in triumph, but she felt the familiar plummeting stomach as she thought about the repercussions of this: for the first time ever, she was bringing someone home to meet her parents. And it was Snape.

She was bringing Snape home to her parents.

"Oh, Holy Jesus," Hermione breathed, allowing her head to dropped onto her folded arms. "This is going to be disastrous."

Mum,

I hope this isn't too terribly sudden, but I'm going

to be coming home for dinner tomorrow

evening. Also, if it's not too big an imposition,

I'll be bringing a friend

someone special someone from

school with me as well. I have some exciting

interesting big news for you and Dad.

Please return owl and let me know

if this is all right.

Love from

Hermione

Hermione dear,

That's no problem, Love. Your father and I will

be working late so dinner will be at 8:00. Hope

your little friend likes pork chops! Is this the

handsome young man whom we've heard so

much about? Harry? I'll make your father promise

not to embarrass you ...

What's this about big news? Does this mean

you've gotten the Head Girl position?

I suppose I'll have to wait until tomorrow

to find out.

See you then, Pumpkin.

Love from

Your Mother

Hermione couldn't stop her fingers from fidgeting with her skirt as she stood in the entranceway of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. From every angle she possibly looked at the situation, she couldn't imagine a worse pickle she'd ever been in. And the worst part was, it wasn't entirely of her own making, so she hadn't a clue whom to blame. Not that blaming someone would help the situation. But it would certainly would be easier when explaining to her parents if she had somewhere to place the blame.

Hermione sighed and fussed at her hair and outfit while peering grumpily into the hall mirror. He was ten minutes late and she was a nervous wreck. She had changed her outfit four times before settling on a mint green skirt and jumper set with a dark green tank top underneath. She was certain that she looked well enough to befit the

situation of introducing her fiancé to her parents. The problem was, she didn't want to look too nice. She had originally picked out a rather nice looking suit that she kept for important occasions (because she was certain that Snape would criticize her if she went comfortable with her usual jean shorts and a T-shirt), but she knew that if she had worn the outfit that her parents had last seen on her at her cousin Marissa's wedding, they would know something was up.

As Hermione leaned closer to examine the light makeup she had applied, she reaffirmed to herself her choice that things would go the best this evening if they were to ease into the subject. If her parents suspected that anything was amiss, Severus would get his hackles up, and then someone would end up bruised or bloodied ... and it was likely to be her. No, she told herself again, things would indeed go smoothest if she could introduce the topic easily and gently.

The one x-factor was Severus.

The man could be predicted about as easily as he could be restrained. And Hermione could only keep things light and casual to a certain point, as she'd be accompanied to dinner by a man who had all the warmth of a glacier, all the endearing charm of a cactus, and all the social skills of a man-eating shark. She sighed heavily. She was dealing with a man who would more than likely insult her parents out of their skins. If he didn't injure them. And if her sister Genny had not yet left for her own school, Severus may well terrorize the younger girl within an inch of her sanity just for good measure. Her mother thought she was bringing Harry home with her.

And Hermione heartily wished this were the truth. Even if she were forced to endure this wretched situation that she had to explain to her parents, it would be so much kinder and easier if she were able to bring Harry home with her. Harry. A kind, sensible, courteous sort of boy, who, while somewhat flighty at times, would be respectable and nice, well mannered and courteous to her parents. He may even have shown her little scraps of affection ... a hand held, a patted knee ... perhaps, if he were feeling particularly generous, he may have even kissed her cheek ... something to show her parents that their daughter would not be left emotionally adrift for the remainder of her days in a world they didn't understand. Harry would have handled the situation marvelously.

Almost as if her thoughts had been broadcast aloud, Hermione noticed Harry's bright emerald eyes gazing at her in the mirror. He stood at the end of the hall, watching her silently, sadly. He spoke no words because he needed none. As Hermione turned to gaze at him, he walked slowly to her, his eyes never leaving her face. When he was only an arm's reach away, Harry gazed down at her outfit.

She watched as his eyes raked her – across the green heeled Mary Janes that were her favorite, the modest, knee-length mint skirt and it's matching cardigan with the emerald green piping, the emerald tank top that was the same shade as his eyes – and finally returned to her face. Without a word, he reached to her side where her arms hung limply, grasped her hand and brought it up in front of her. With a light movement of his hands, he turned her engagement ring under to the palm of her hand and gently laid his lips across the top, just under her wrist.

He did not look at her again before climbing the stairs. Hermione jumped slightly when she heard the door at the top of the landing slam shut.

The Prusik Friction Hitch

Chapter 10 of 23

"Who's the one you're marrying?" her father asked, his voice calm, but barbed.
"Well, I did bring him with me . . ."

Chapter Ten – The Prusik Friction Hitch

"The Prusik Friction Hitch - The Prusik is widely used as an ascending knot. The friction can be increased by adding ... turn[s]. The prusik can cinch up tightly and the friction can be somewhat difficult to break after a load has been applied." from Knot Knowledge

Hermione was practically growling as she glanced – for the fourth time – at her watch. He was now thirty minutes late. At that point, she was congratulating herself on telling him to be at Grimmauld Place forty-five minutes before they were expected at her parents' house. With any luck, they'd be to Bedfordshire right on time. Then again, she realized with a jolt, he simply may not show up.

"It would be just like him to leave me to go by myself," she muttered as she sank down to the landing, abandoning the idea of waiting near the door.

"Indeed it would," Snape announced as he breezed into the foyer. The corner of the heavy oak door jabbed into her bum as he swung it open, but he gave this no notice. "However, I would rather get this monstrosity of an evening over sooner rather than later."

Hermione rose from her seat on the stairs. "That makes two of us," she said.

Snape smirked back at her but it faded from his face as she scanned him slowly.

"You're not *really* wearing that, are you?" she asked incredulously.

He glanced quickly down at his robes – the unrelieved black robes that ended in a high neck, the stiff white shirt collar visible beneath, and the traveling cloak that were his typical fair – and scowled back at her. "I see nothing wrong with my attire."

Hermione sighed heavily. "Prof— Sn-- ... Severus." She cleared her throat as he lifted an eyebrow at her. "My parents are Muggles."

"And?"

"They live in a Muggle neighborhood."

"And?"

"You can't go into Muggle Britain looking like that," she said. "You'll terrify people."

Snape's smirk deepened.

"Not to mention stick out like a sore thumb."

This time, it was Snape's turn to sigh. He gave her a withering look before drawing his wand. "Will you be this insistent and obnoxiously relentless for the rest of our lives?"

"Most likely."

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth briefly. "Mule," he muttered.

"Horse's arse."

"Most likely," Snape returned. Hermione smiled thinly. He sighed again and gestured towards his clothing with his wand. "I suppose you feel I should wear something akin to the dreadful outfit I wore on the day that Mr. Weas—"

"Yes," Hermione interrupted before she could stop herself and immediately regretted it. She had several reasons for the response, each more grating than the rest. And from the sanctimonious expression on Snape's face, she had a feeling he could guess what most of those reasons were.

It was really just to stop him from talking about Ron, Hermione told herself, but even as the words occurred to her, she knew it wasn't entirely true. Something fluttered and kicked strangely in her chest as she remembered the way he had looked in the Pensieve. So insolent ... so arrogant, sitting there in the well-worn jeans and mysterious black trench coat. He looked so haughty and enigmatic ... so ... **bad**. And she flushed as she recognized what a quiet thrill it was.

"Yes," she repeated, clearing her throat and forcing confidence into her voice. "Yes, I think something similar to that outfit will do just nicely. But perhaps a bit more formal," she added hastily. "I want to make a good impression."

Snape's features darkened and he lifted an eyebrow. She resisted the urge to squirm under his gaze as he laid the tip of his wand to his robes and muttered a charm. Eyebrow still in the air, Snape gave no indication that his gradual change of attire even registered for him. Hermione, however, saw fit to appraise him.

More to avoid his gaze than anything else, Hermione walked in a small circle around him, taking in his appearance. He had, apparently, the good sense to take her advice and dress slightly more formally. *But only slightly*, she thought with a wry smile. When Severus noticed her appraisal pattern, he made a good show of removing the black trench coat and following her with his head as she circled him. He was clad in a trim pair of black trousers and a button-down, collared shirt in a deep, stormy gray. Much to her surprise, he had left the shirt open at the neck. Hermione actually caught herself staring momentarily at his throat, fully certain that this was the most "undressed" she'd ever seen him.

Hermione laughed aloud when she glanced down at his feet and noticed he was wearing a thick-soled pair of combat boots.

"What in the world is so amusing about my choice of footwear?" he asked lazily.

For some reason, she had a sudden fit of the giggles. "I have no idea," she managed. "I think it's something to do with the idea of a friend from home."

Snape quirked an eyebrow.

"A girl that lives round the corner from my parents is into the whole ... erm ... what do you call it? 'Goth' I think is the word. I just remember that she used to wear a trench coat and combat boots even in the dead of summer. It doesn't surprise me in the slightest that you would torture yourself similarly." Hermione started chuckling again, but it died on her lips as Snape merely stared down his nose at her.

"Yes," Hermione said, clearing her throat, "well ... perhaps we better ... get going."

"Perhaps," Snape said and pulled his trench over his shoulders. The pair strode silently into the square outside Grimmauld Place. Hermione was fishing in her handbag for money for the Underground (assuming, naturally, that if they were to dress as Muggles, they would be traveling as Muggles as well) when she felt Snape's fingers close over her own. She squeaked in shock – unsure that he had ever even touched her before – but had no time to contemplate the matter, as she suddenly felt a tugging sensation and was whisked away into the evening.

Hermione's knees buckled and she tumbled head first over the low wall outlining the front garden of her parents' house. She rolled into a sitting position as quickly as possible and hurried to rearrange her clothing. Hermione swore as she brushed at the chafe marks on her knees and the palms of her hands. She turned around with a growl as she heard soft laughter behind her.

Snape walked easily through the gate onto the front path and offered her his hand to help her to her feet. Hermione scowled deeply. "You could have warned me that we were going to Apparate together. At least then I would have been a bit more prepared." Hermione ignored the proffered hand and brushed at her clothing. She had taken such care to look nice and now she was all rumpled.

He stared at her, but a thick smile was plastered across his features. "And miss this lovely opportunity to witness your natural grace? Surely not."

A growl rumbled low in her throat. "You are despicable."

"Usually," he returned.

Hermione quirked an eyebrow at him as they stepped up onto the front porch. "Please, whatever you do, don't allow my parents to know what a bastard you have the capability to be."

Before Snape could bite off a retort, Hermione lifted her hand and rapped on the door. She couldn't help thinking, as she waited for her mother to answer, how absolutely bizarre it was to knock on her own door. *But, then again*, she rationalized, *it would hardly do to just tromp into the house with him behind me. God knows what he'd do.*

But before Hermione had the chance to contemplate the horrors of an impromptu meeting with Severus and her parents, the door swung open and, behind it, Hermione's mother waited with a wide, warm grin. Her mother's long, curly hair – a mirror of her own, though more controlled and just starting to streak with gray – was pulled away from her face in a low ponytail, a contrast to the usual tumble of spirals. Hermione's mother brushed at the light blue polo shirt she was wearing and then at the apron tied loosely around her waist before pulling Hermione into a gentle hug, pressing her cheek against her daughter's in lieu of a kiss.

"Welcome home, darling," Hermione's mother said, and beckoned them into the house with a wave of her cleanly manicured hand. "It's so lovely to see you. And I'm so glad you've brought—" At this moment, Hermione's mother noticed Severus. It was obvious from the slight double take that the woman experienced that she certainly hadn't expected a teacher, but she covered it with graceful aplomb. With barely a break in her voice, she continued, "one of your teachers. We've never had a chance to meet any of them at your school."

After a moment of uneasy silence, Severus cleared his throat loudly.

"Oh!" Hermione squeaked and then took a deep breath. "Mother, this is Severus Snape; he's the Potions Master at Hogwarts. He's ... one of my teachers," she finished uncertainly.

Hermione's mother extended her hand towards Severus and favored him with a warm smile. "Welcome, Professor Snape. I'm Constance Granger, as I'm sure you've guessed. My husband, Elliot, is in the sitting room. You're welcome to join him. I'm going to ask Hermione to help me a bit with dinner; make yourself comfortable, please, and let me take your coat."

Through the entire introduction, Hermione's heart was pounding wildly. Severus's expression had not changed whatsoever to indicate that he'd even heard what her mother had said; but he did shake her hand lightly and nod as she reached for his coat. It wasn't the bright meeting that Harry would have garnered, but she supposed it could have gone worse.

Snape glared at Hermione pointedly. When Hermione merely stared back, her throat tightening in anxiety, he rolled his eyes and placed a hand at her elbow.

"Perhaps, Miss Granger, you might show me to the sitting room and introduce me to your father."

She recovered herself as quickly as possible. "Yes, of course," she said quickly, and moved towards the sitting room.

"Be sure to get the Professor a drink, won't you, darling?" Constance called over her shoulder as she moved back towards the kitchen.

Once the woman was out of earshot, Severus allowed Hermione to direct him down the small corridor towards the sitting room. "Your mother seems ... polite. Although, I'd have to say it seems that the trait is not genetic. You are an appalling hostess."

With already jangling nerves, Hermione felt stung by the insult. She whirled back to look at Snape.

"Don't you dare start in on me again. If this whole evening is just going to be one little jaunt where you try to make me look a fool in front of my parents, I'll save you the wasted hours, dump your drink on you now, and then thank you to leave the house and let me tell them on my own. I cannot put up with your particular brand of bullshit this evening!"

As Hermione's speech had progressed, her words had not only gotten more vehement, but much faster as well. She rankled at the fact that he continued to look more and more amused as her comments went on. With her last furious whisper, she stood glaring at him and breathing heavily.

Snape reached down gracefully, picked up her hand and placed a kiss on the back of it. "Charmed, Miss Granger. How could I resist an evening of such warm and witty conversation?"

Hermione glowered dubiously at his expression. "Have you been drinking?"

When Severus laughed aloud, Hermione turned without another word and strode into the sitting room. If Severus Snape was standing there in her house, kissing her hand and laughing, this evening was going to be even worse than she thought.

Hermione's father was reading the *London Times* when she led Severus into the room. At her approach, he practically leapt up from the chair and swept Hermione into a hug, turning in a dizzying circle until she squealed with delight.

"Hello, Dad," she chortled as he set her on her feet.

"Hello, Dad," he sing-songed back at her. "That's hardly a way to greet the love of your life!"

She could feel Snape's eyes on the back of her neck, surveying her as she laughed at the old joke between her and her father. "Well, you know, those boys at school may give you a run for your money yet, Darling Father," she returned, as usual.

He smiled and gave her a smacking kiss on the cheek as she ruffled his salt-and-pepper waves of hair. Hermione's father pushed his glasses further up on his nose and surveyed Snape, who was still standing silent and stoic behind Hermione.

"Well, now," Hermione's father began, obviously pleased, "so nice to have you here, Sir. I assume you're one of Hermione's professors?" He extended his hand and, as Hermione stepped out of the way to allow Severus to take it, Severus cleared his throat and brushed his fingers over the front of his shirt before taking the proffered hand.

Hermione was suddenly struck with an absolutely strange realization: Snape was nervous! She tried to hold back a grin as she introduced the men.

"Father, this is my Potions Professor, Severus Snape. Professor Snape, my father, Elliot Granger."

"A pleasure, Sir," Snape said, though his expression said otherwise. Hermione groaned, sure of impending disaster, but her father seemed to be completely unaware of the cold greeting.

"Excellent," Elliot replied and turned to Hermione. "Get us a drink, will you, Pumpkin?"

"Certainly," Hermione replied, but in her head, she couldn't help but think, *Oh dear*.

"A bloody Mary for me, dear, and for Severus ...?"

Hermione held her breath. She could see Snape flinch at being immediately addressed by his first name, but she could also tell he was struggling to stay civil. "Just water," he replied shortly.

Hermione made to leave, but her father said, "Oh come now, you must have something a little more powerful than that; a whiskey perhaps?"

Severus glared at Hermione witheringly, but when his voice came, it was even. "Thank you, a whiskey would be lovely."

He was almost being pleasant. Almost.

Hermione didn't actually taste a single morsel of the meal she imbibed; in fact, had she been quizzed afterwards, she was quite certain she wouldn't have even been able to tell anyone what they had eaten. The actual act of eating had become automatic as she focused all of her attention on the dreadful pressure that was slamming down on her shoulders. *Keep it light*, she kept reminding herself. *The conversation needs to be light, so that when they find out ...*

So far, the meal had not been a total disaster. True, Hermione's parents did at least ninety percent of the talking – and she could see that they were straining to keep cheerful in the face of near complete silence from the opposite side of the table – but at least Severus hadn't out-and-out insulted them. Yet.

She nearly sobbed into her peach cobbler when she heard her mother ask Severus, "So, Professor, are you married?"

A malicious smirk tugged at the corners of Severus's mouth. He glanced pointedly at Hermione before answering. "I am not," he started, "but I am engaged to be married late next month."

Hermione's parents both brightened visibly and gabbled congratulations.

"Oh, how lovely!" Constance chimed.

"When did you ask the lady, if it's not prying to ask?" Elliot asked jovially.

"Actually," Severus said smoothly, laying his fork against the dessert plate, "the marriage process works somewhat differently in the wizarding world these days. I petitioned for her hand."

"Petitioned?" Constance asked, some of the happy chirp gone from her voice but a determinedly bright smile on her face.

Severus nodded, and as the smirk on his face grew, Hermione felt her limbs gel with fear. She closed her eyes and hoped for the best.

"You see," he began with an air of one explaining something to a child, "I was required by law to marry within the next six months because of a declining rate of viable pregnancies in the pureblood wizarding community. In an effort to reinvigorate the wizarding world's genetic lines, I am required to petition for the marriage of someone who has non-magic parents. Like Hermione."

He said the last statement with great relish. Hermione's stomach dropped away as a look of horror penetrated the perfectly polite visages of both of the Grangers. For one horrifying moment, Hermione prepared herself for the outrage that would accompany their realization.

"That's ... that's," her mother stammered. "That can't be easy on you, Professor."

"Indeed," her father said. "Sort of barbaric isn't it? Do they allow you any choice in the matter?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," Severus said, with an affected downtrodden expression. "I did happen to get somewhat ... bullied into a certain choice."

"Oh dear," Constance intoned, and patted Severus's hand comfortingly.

Oh God, Hermione thought, her stomach lurching as if she might be sick all over the table. She clutched at it. *I have to stop this before he says something hideous ...*

"Mother, Father," Hermione said nervously, standing up from the table, "perhaps we could go into the sitting room?"

"Of course, Pumpkin," Elliot replied. "Is there something wrong?"

"Well," Hermione began, and then cleared her throat. "There is a specific reason why I am here this evening. I would just ... we would ... be more comfortable in the sitting room, I think."

The men swiftly cleared the dishes from the table – Hermione's father making a boisterous comment that 'we should help the ladies every now and then, eh? They did such a lovely job.' – and the four of them proceeded into the other room, where Hermione's parents occupied two matching rocking chairs, leaving Hermione and Severus the sole choice of sitting side-by-side on the love seat across from them. Hermione couldn't stop her knees from bouncing with nervousness. She'd rather have sat in a chair. Alone.

"Well," she began, "erm ... ah ... Well, I suppose it's just best to get right down to business –"

"We know you're Head Girl, darling," her father said, beaming.

"We got the letter yesterday," her mother finished.

Hermione smiled weakly. "Oh yes ... that. Well, yes, I am, but that's not what I was ..." She glanced nervously towards Severus, hoping for help, but received a stiff smile. He gestured towards her parents with a brief flick of his hand. From the look on his face, she needed no translation: *Go ahead, have at it.*

"Well, I ..." she stammered. Probably best, she decided, to simply spit it out, get it over with, and then explain. "I'm ... I'm getting married next month."

Hermione's parents sat frozen, the serenely happy expressions on their faces glazed and hardened as if they were, indeed, not her parents, but a photograph cleverly arranged. She charged on, figuring that as long as they were silent, she'd have the courage to talk about it.

And talk she did, only not about the Marriage Law. Hermione found that the words tumbling from her mouth were instead the history of her seven years at Hogwarts. Every summer, she'd come home and tried to word what happened to her at school, but that first summer when she was eleven, her mother practically had a stroke when Hermione mentioned breaking the rules to research Nicholas Flamel. So after that, Hermione had simply stopped telling. She had given her parents carefully padded stories of Harry and Ron that were so sanitized from all her danger and rule-breaking that they were only shadows of the truth. She had raged with guilt every summer that she couldn't be truthful, but in the end she knew her parents wouldn't understand the world she lived in during the year. And here she was, on a sunny August afternoon, spilling every incident she'd aided and abetted throughout her term at Hogwarts.

The faces of her parents became slowly more shocked and horrified as her stories continued, her father nearly spewing over with fury. Fury, however, was soon replaced with terror as Hermione began to recount the dark days since Voldemort's rebirth. Her house in Bedfordshire had never been as silent as the few moments when Hermione, dry-faced, described the days surrounding Ron's death.

And it was then that she surged into her description of the Marriage Law. She extracted the parchment containing the outlines of the law from her handbag and handed it over, talking slowly about her necessary movements because of the threat from Draco Malfoy as they scanned the contents of the paper with horror-struck faces.

"So that's why I need to get married," she finished, feeling the twinge of muscle cramps in her shoulders and lower back. The sun had long since set and she had been holding herself rigid with anxiety for the last two hours, at least. "For protection, you see. That's why I'm marrying—"

"Who is it?" her father asked, his voice calm, but barbed.

"Well, I did bring him with me..."

Hermione's mother seemed to understand. Her eyes drifted slowly to Severus, who had not spoken since they had risen from the table. Constance's mouth opened and shut several times, no sound leaving her lips. Her father, however, rose from the chair and started to move towards the door.

"Well, ask him in for goodness sake, Hermione. Where are your manners, leaving someone outside for hours?"

Hermione made a move to stop him, but it was her mother that lifted a hand from the arm of her chair and grasped Elliot's wrist before he could leave the room.

Hermione gathered a deep breath. "Father, Mother, I'd like to introduce to you my fiancé, Severus Snape."

Severus's head was suddenly pounding as his vision slid up from blurriness. He raised his hand, dabbed at his nose, and stared in confusion at the trickle of blood running down his fingers. Hermione was standing over him, her face worried. Severus blinked a few times. He couldn't focus.

"Honestly, Elliot," he could hear the woman chiding shrilly in the background, "is that any way to treat someone who is a guest in our house? Good grief!"

Severus clutched at his head. "Well, now I know where your daughter's tendencies to be both a nagging harpy and a hotheaded prat come from," he grouched, still dabbing absently at his nose.

"Severus!" Hermione burst out, suddenly acutely aware that this was the first time she'd ever called him by his first name.

Snape rose to his feet as Elliot Granger struggled out from his wife's grip and charged towards him again, fists raised. Severus produced his wand so quickly that Hermione hadn't even gathered where he'd had it stowed and muttered a charm at her father. Elliot's hands snapped together in front of him and Snape conjured a deep gray length of rope that encircled his wrist. Hermione cried out in anger, but Snape merely approached him calmly.

"If you touch me again, *Muggle*," he spat, "I will have no qualms about separating your limbs from your body. Slowly."

"Severus!" Hermione called again, outraged.

"You lecherous monster, you," her father bit back, fuming and glaring back at him.

"Dad!"

Constance was wringing her hands as she moved across the room. "Gentleman, please, this can't be helping." She placed a light hand on Elliot's chest and motioned for him to take his chair, which he did, reluctantly. When she delicately touched Severus's arm, he jerked as if she'd soiled him somehow, but he resumed his seat.

"Behave," Hermione hissed at him.

"You can't get married," her father raged the instant she sat down, "that's all there is to it."

Hermione put her head in her hands and pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to massage away the tension there. "I *have* to, Father, I've told you that. I either marry or leave the wizarding world all together."

"Then come home, darling," her mother said.

Hermione's head snapped up. "I can't do that. You know I can't. I don't belong here."

"Nonsense," Elliot said. "You belong here much more than with some ... some horrid old man," Snape scoffed at this, fully aware that he was actually younger than Elliot, "who hasn't the heart to treat you right. You can't marry him. You won't; I won't allow it."

Severus smirked and opened his mouth to reply, but Hermione was already on her feet.

"You won't *allow* it?" she trilled. "The last I checked, I was a legal adult! That's what got me into this mess. I'm not just an adult in that world, Dad, I'm an adult in yours. So you have no business telling me what you will or will not *allow*. I'll get married if it will keep me in the wizarding world and there's not a damn thing you can do about it!"

"How dare you!" her father thundered, standing again. "You are just a little girl! Don't you take that tone with me!"

"Elliot," Constance started.

"Oh, be quiet and let me handle this," he snapped. "If you do this, my girl, you join one world, but you most assuredly leave this one. Mark my words: if you marry this man, you never come back here again. Do you hear me?"

Severus stood up behind her suddenly and Hermione jumped when his hands came to her shoulders. His fingers were surprisingly gentle but firm as he clutched her. She looked back, curious, to see his eyes were ablaze with disgusted anger, but nevertheless, his hands on her were gentle. Hermione trembled.

"You disgust me," Severus bit out through clenched teeth. "You Muggles never fail to disgust me. This is your daughter. She is a bright, intelligent, capable witch who is most likely the strongest of any to pass through Hogwarts in decades. And you would alienate her completely for something you don't understand?"

Elliot started to retort, but Severus cut him off.

"And no doubt, you would cut off the offspring that will inevitably come from this union? Combined with her intelligence and power and my line of some of the strongest and most noble wizard blood in Europe, the children that come from us will no doubt be more powerful than any of their generation. And you would cut off your grandchildren without a second thought. You sicken me."

"No child of yours is a grandchild of mine!" Elliot roared. "The idea of the two of you together is like some grotesque joke! Even imagining the two of you ... together is ridiculous."

"Indeed?" Severus asked lightly. She watched him smirk at her parents in defiance as he slid a hand down from her shoulder. Hermione yelped in surprise when Severus's long, thin fingers slid over her breast. Elliot charged towards him again but jerked back when Severus yanked Hermione around and planted his lips on hers.

Too stunned to react, Hermione simply stood and allowed herself to be kissed as she heard her father yelling in the background. But it was as if someone had turned down the volume in the room. The only thing that registered to her was that Severus had slightly chapped lips.

And then it was over. He had pushed her away and she was stumbling to regain balance as Severus asked her father, "Ridiculous?" and then grasped her wrist.

Just before Severus made to Apparate away, Elliot called to Hermione. "Don't do this, Pumpkin," he pleaded. "Just stay here and we'll pretend that none of this ever happened."

Hermione drew herself up to her full height, pushed her chin higher in the air, and said, "I'll send you an invitation to the ceremony."

And then they were gone.

The Kleimheist Friction Hitch

Chapter 11 of 23

"Well, fine!" Hermione hollered back. "If you've all the answers, what would *you* do?"

"Well, I certainly wouldn't murder one man, manhandle his best friend and then marry someone else! You can't even stand your fiancé and my brother is in a grave! How long before Harry is covered in dirt and daisies too Hermione?"

Chapter Eleven The Kleimheist Friction Hitch

"*The Kleimheist* is easier to tie and untie than the prusik. It does not tend to cinch up as tightly as a prusik, so it is easier to break friction after releasing the load. You can add more turns to increase friction, as well." from *Knot Knowledge*

Hermione sank with an audible *thunk* to the warm stone steps of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. She distantly wondered why she hadn't had trouble with disorientation after Apparition when she heard a nasally sigh.

"Planning on staying out here all night or will you be joining the land of the living?" Snape said with a snarky smile.

"I fought with my parents," Hermione muttered, absently running her hands over her face. After a moment, she rested her elbows on her knees and dropped her head into her upturned hands. "I fought with my parents."

"Very good, Miss Granger," he returned. "I knew you were appointed Head Girl for a reason."

She whipped her head around to glare at him. "You don't understand how bad this is; I *never* fight with my parents."

Snape sighed heavily. "Oh goodie; I've agreed to marry Sally Sunshine with a perfect childhood," he said acidly and closed the front door behind him. He leaned against the banister near her, pulled out and lit a cigarette, and took a long drag. He smirked a moment before offering the pack to her, and it was only after a great sigh that she shook her head 'no.'

"I'm serious. When I say we never fight, I mean we've never fought. Ever. We just ... didn't fight."

"Well, naturally, you were the perfect student, the perfect child, the perf..."

"Oh, shut up!" she interrupted bitterly. "It wasn't like that! It just ..."

Hermione trailed off when she saw just a tiny twinge of shock on his face at her outburst. She heaved another sigh. "I didn't have any friends when I was in grade school. Not that this surprises you, I'm sure," she added without even looking up at his face. "It was okay to be smart, but not *really* smart. Especially if they found out you liked school. I just ... never had any friends. So I guess when I met Harry and Ron, I was just so..."

"Relieved," Snape finished, and nodded. "I know."

She dared not break the tender connection by acknowledging it, so she charged on with her story. "So I just went ahead with their shenanigans. Mostly to keep them from breaking their fool necks, I sometimes think. But then I came home that first year and ... well, Mum practically had a stroke when I first told her about some of the 'research' we did about Nicholas Flam..." Hermione stopped rapidly, realizing she was confessing rule-breaking to a teacher.

"Don't worry, Miss Granger, I'm well aware of your indiscretions. And I couldn't punish you retroactively anyway. However much I am tempted," he added.

"Well, she sent me to my room everyday after supper for nearly a month after that, so I just sort of ... doctored the truth in the coming years. And I didn't hit my teenage rebellion phase until I was in my third year at Hogwarts, and by then they only saw me at the summer holidays because I stayed with Harry and Ron at Hogwarts for Christmas. What good would it have done to rebel against people you only saw two months out of every year? It would have just confused them."

Snape said nothing but continued to take long pulls from his cigarette and nod minutely. Hermione stood, brushing the dirt from the rear of her skirt and jumper.

"They barely know me anymore. I mean, the real me. I just didn't see the good of fighting with them about things they wouldn't understand." She sighed again. "And now they may never speak to me again."

Hermione looked to Snape with tears welling in her eyes. For a moment, there was a twitch in his face, a hitch in his arms as he flung away the cigarette butt and pushed off the porch rail. For a moment, she was certain he would throw open his arms and comfort her.

"Look at it this way," he said jerkily as he stood, "at least you'll never have to fight with them again." Without another word, Snape turned and moved into the house.

Disheartened but not surprised at Snape's swift and slightly rude departure, Hermione remained on the steps of Grimmauld Place for a few moments before heading indoors. She passed by Tonks and Neville, dismissing their questioning looks and light greetings with a wave of her hand. She wandered into the study and, glad to find it empty, plunked down in the big leather chair behind the desk. With a loud *wham!*, she let her head drop to the cool mahogany surface.

"I keep managing to steer myself into the most abominable situations, Crookshanks," she said to the large ginger cat when a soft paw batted at one of her curls. She raised her head to see him poised with one bandy leg lifted in the air. "How do I keep doing this? First Ron, then Ginny, then Snape, and now my parents. What's next? My life is so ridiculous that I suppose the only thing left would be for Harry to tell me that he's running away to Belgium to live with Lupin and Dumbledore in some hideously sordid, conventions-be-damned gay love triangle!"

A light peal of laughter came from the corner of the room. Hermione's head rocketed off the desk and whipped around, trying to find the source of the sound. The curtains to her left shifted, and Harry emerged from the window seat that she had forgotten existed, a book dropping from his hand onto the worn red velvet cushion.

Before she could speak, he smiled and answered her. "You couldn't help what happened with Ron, Ginny will come around, God only knows about Snape, and I'm most certainly not homosexual *or* moving to Belgium for a sordid gay love triangle. In fact, added to that, if I were gay, I highly doubt that Dumbledore would be my type."

Hermione smiled weakly.

"Come to think of it, I think I'd more fancy Lupin. Good show, Hermione, you're giving me ideas," he said with a grin. "Perhaps *he* can help me with this marriage law."

Hermione couldn't help the giggle that escaped her lips. "Now there's a pretty mental picture: you and Remus snuggled up in connubial bliss."

"Because it's not as if he's old enough to be my father," Harry said.

Hermione laughed again. "Yes, but you two are awfully handsome; what beautiful babies you'd make."

"And who'd carry them, then? I suppose you think I'd be the mother, eh?"

Hermione laughed loudly, and Harry grinned as he mock-pondered the idea. The smile faded from her face quickly, however, as she slumped back over the desk again.

"Do you really believe that I couldn't help what happened to Ron?" she muttered. Unconsciously, she toyed with the ornate silver ring with its heavy diamond as she looked down at the desk and then up into Harry's face.

Harry sighed and stayed silent for a few moments. He held out a hand to her and led her gently to the settee on the opposite wall. With the desk blocking the fireplace and the curtains drawn against the night, most of the light in the room did not reach them, throwing Harry's face into a strange bath of shadows as he sat and drew her down

with him.

"It's not your fault, Hermione," he said quietly. "I wish it could have gone differently. Of course I do; we all do. But I don't really see how it could have. Yes," he added quickly when she opened her mouth to rebut, "yes, what happened to Ron was because of your accepting his proposal, but I think that whether they admit it or not, it really was inevitable. Ron wouldn't have allowed you to accept anyone else but him; come hell or high water, he would have fought it. So I guess it was just his ..."

Harry's voice cut out. He was silently for a long moment. Hermione leaned forward towards Harry, anxious to hear that last word. She was certain that her absolution from guilt lay in his last word. But Harry did not speak. Instead, he moved toward her, closing the gap between them on the couch, lifting a hand to her face.

Hermione felt as if the breath had been sucked out of her body when Harry's fingertips touched her face. There, in the cool span of his touch, was the healing she was longing for. She leaned into the touch of his hand, closing her eyes as his palm spread across her cheek. Hermione felt Harry lean closer to her; a trickle of tears leaked out from under her eyelids when he slowly wrapped his arms around her body. Hermione opened her eyes just slightly and rested her head in the gentle curve between his chest and neck.

Without thought or plan, Hermione laid her lips against the pale curve of his throat. When Harry's chest jumped with an intake of breath, Hermione lifted her head and looked deep into the green eyes buried behind the firelight glinting off his glasses. She raised her hand slowly and moved the spectacles away. She only barely heard them clatter to the wooden floor beneath the settee as Harry pulled her tight to his chest.

"Destiny," Harry said quietly.

"What?" she muttered, trying to clear her head. He was so close. She couldn't focus on anything coherent.

"Ron," he said. "It was his destiny. We all have ...don't you believe that we ... we all have ...?"

"Destiny," Hermione said, and nodded. Then she pressed her lips to Harry's.

Hermione could feel Harry's heart racing beneath her fingers as he pressed her closer to his body. Her own pulse thudded so swiftly within her chest that she was certain her heart was trying to leap out into her throat. Harry's arms were warm, his kiss tender but strong; he clung to her as if his very life depended on it. Hermione gripped tight and held on. He drew away from her mouth to lay a trail of warm, gently sucking kisses along her jaw line to her ear, making her writhe with pleasure and anticipation. Hermione felt her arms wrap around his shoulders, clutching at his neck so fervently it was almost as if she wasn't steering them herself. She kissed his cheek rapidly before letting his skin drop away from her mouth to gasp in pleasure as Harry skimmed just the tip of his tongue along the curve of her ear.

"Oh, God, Harry," she murmured.

One of his hands delicately fingered the hem of her tank top and with barely a thought she guided his hand underneath where his fingers moved up tentatively. He shook just a bit as he skimmed his fingertips over her cotton-covered breast. She could feel his pulse skip and kick within his chest as she leaned back and rested against the arm of the settee. His mouth was traveling over her skin and she felt as if her whole body was humming from the contact. He kissed her throat and neck, the pale skin over her collarbone as he leaned over her. She threaded her arms around his back and smiled when she felt him murmur into the curls at her neck.

"Oh, Hermione," he whispered, "Hermione, God, how much I love you ..."

It took a moment or two for the words to sink in before she pulled back his head to look into his eyes. His feelings were naked in them, but she found herself gulping before she asked again.

"Do you?" she said. "Do you love me?"

He smiled gently but there was fear in his eyes. "You know I do."

Hermione smiled in spite of herself. She was a smart girl; she should know better than to sit here kissing a boy she would have to wake up and face every morning after he realized what a mistake this was. She was smart enough to know better than to kiss a boy who wasn't her fiancé. But right now she felt struck newly dumb with his easy, warm affection. She pressed him closer to her.

"Let's have another kiss then," she whispered through a small grin.

He faltered for a moment. She knew he had expected a different response; he had expected her to say she loved him. Unsure that she actually did love him, Hermione couldn't force herself to say it; no matter what her feelings for Harry, she wasn't free to act on them any more permanently than this stolen moment, and she cared too much to lead Harry to believe otherwise. But after the moment's tiny hitch, Harry smiled again and leaned down to her lips. Though she knew she would regret the abandon in the morning, Hermione let herself fall again into the affection that Harry offered so readily with his soft lips, his gentle hands. She could live on the love waiting in his hands. After a moment though, she pressed the heels of her palms lightly on his shoulders, pushing him up and away. To her great surprise, he did not fight her. He merely sat up and grinned easily back at her. With a smirk, she lifted a hand and wiped a smear of her lip gloss from his chin.

"That was lovely," Harry said, flushing.

"Absolutely," Hermione said.

Harry reached out a hand and took hers, pulling her to her feet and towards the door of the study. Hermione bumped full force into Harry's back without realizing that he had jerked to a stop.

"What's the matter?" she said, readjusting her clothes.

"How long have you been here?" Harry said, his voice queerly strained.

"What do you m..." she started before looking up and realizing that Harry was not speaking to her. Hermione moved around Harry to see Ginny standing in the doorway, her cheeks flushed with anger, her arms folded across her chest. Only then did Hermione realize she was still holding Harry's hand, which she dropped quickly. Unfortunately, she did not drop it quickly enough to escape Ginny's notice.

"One more life you intend to ruin, Hermione?" Ginny said caustically, her voice low and penetrating.

"Now, Ginny, that's not fair," Harry started.

"You're bloody right, it isn't," she bit back. "She's the reason Ron is dead. Snape isn't exactly thrilled to pieces to be saving her arse, and now she's throwing herself at you. Just running right down the line of everyone working hard for our cause, aren't you, Hermione?"

"Ginny, watch your tone," Harry said, his voice hard and stern.

"Oh, give over, Harry; you don't think she's in love with you, do you? You're just safe. You're an easy sap who'll give her what Snape can't. She can't marry someone she loves, so she'll marry someone who'll protect her and sap the love out of someone who'll give it. You're so blind!"

Ginny stalked across the room and gazed into Hermione's eyes. The round, brown eyes of her friend looked at her with cold fury, and Hermione found herself squirming

inwardly.

"Two months ago I never would have believed you could stoop to this. How quickly one can change to save their own neck. How expendable people have become to you."

"Do you think this is easy for me?" Hermione choked out. "Do you have no idea how miserable I am every minute? Don't I deserve *something*? Some little bit of happiness?"

"Even if it costs other people their happiness?" Ginny hollered. "Do you even care about them?"

"Of course I do!" Hermione hollered back, but Ginny only growled low in her throat. "Well fine! If you've all the answers, what would *you* do?"

Ginny's eyes blazed. This was obviously a chance she'd been waiting for. "Well, I certainly wouldn't murder one man, manhandle his best friend, and then marry someone else! You can't even stand your fiancé, and my brother is in a grave! How long before Harry is covered in dirt and daisies, too, Hermione? Are you going to leave any men for the rest of us?"

Ginny swirled on her heel and marched out of the study without a backward glance.

"Leave any men?" Harry asked after a moment of ringing silence. "What in the bloody hell is *that* supposed to mean?"

Hermione sighed heavily, closing her eyes. "It means that apparently without knowing it, I've just trampled her chance at marrying the man *she* loves."

Harry looked from Hermione to the door where Ginny had left and then back to Hermione. And then he followed Hermione's eyes to the settee where they had been kissing. And it dawned on him.

"Come on, you don't mean ...?"

Hermione didn't answer, but it didn't seem that she needed to say anything.

"Oh, fuck all," Harry spat.

"Precisely," Hermione answered with a sigh, and then plunked down on the settee.

The Rolling Hitch

Chapter 12 of 23

Every gown she came across seemed garish and unfitting. They were all too ...she didn't know what, but whatever it was they seemed to her, every gown had too much of it. A peal of laughter hit her ears and she turned to regard whoever had issued it. ... Hermione's stomach plummeted when she realized that she recognized the girl. Hermione fought down nausea at the look of complete bliss on the girl's face. ... It was then that she realized what the gowns had that turned her stomach: they were all too *happy*.

Chapter Twelve The Rolling Hitch

Rolling Hitch The Rolling Hitch is one of the most underrated knots in . . . Guiding; the Rolling Hitch is used to attach one rope to a second, in such a manner that the first rope can be easily slid along the second . . . When tension is applied and the ropes form a straight line, the rolling hitch will lock onto the first rope. When the tension is released, the hitch can be loosened and slid along the first rope to a new location. The tension must be applied on the side of the knot with the extra turn." from **Get Knotted!**

If Severus had thought about it, he may have been indignant or even outraged at the pity that surged up in his throat as he looked down his nose at his soon-to-be bride while she sat alone at the large kitchen table of Grimmauld Place, surrounded by stacks of wizarding tradition books and bridal magazines from the Muggle world. If he had even considered his reaction, he most certainly wouldn't have sighed as he passed her; she commenced dabbing at the orange juice that had dribbled across the page she had dog-eared in a Muggle magazine as she poured over a description of a wizarding fidelity charm. He may have even spoken to her about this reaction had the kitchen not been filled with the other members of the Order, milling about and eating their breakfast. If he were a different man, he may have sat down next to her to keep the process from being so lonely; if he'd had it in him, he may have even offered help. But it wasn't in him. So he simply picked up his mug of coffee, looked down his nose at her as she muttered to herself - scratching notes in the margins of the book - and strode out of the kitchen to have a cigarette on the porch.

Hermione sifted through the books she had set out in a wide arc around her at the table, looking for a passage she had read somewhere about the magical connection between the wands of spouses. It was an option - and repercussion - of this marriage that she certainly didn't want to ignore. From what she had read, the theories posited the idea that certain marital links between magical people could strengthen each spouse's magical powers and that at times they could even share powers. Hermione wasn't certain that she wished to share powers with Snape; God only knew what the man was capable of, and Hermione wasn't sure she wanted to be privy to that.

She sighed as she glanced around the kitchen. There was a circle of silence around her. Though no one was being unfriendly, there was definitely an air of discomfort that permeated the atmosphere. No one knew how to talk to her anymore except Harry, who had kept a careful distance since the incident with Ginny. Hermione found herself more alone than ever. Ginny was maintaining a stony silence even more tenacious than before. In the days and weeks following Ron's death, the girl she'd once considered her closest (if not only) female friend had not only not spoken to her, but had been aggressively angry in gesture and aura. Now, it was if any room that Hermione occupied was empty. Hermione sighed again. This whole process wasn't even her idea, and it certainly wasn't something she'd choose to pursue if she had the option. Which she didn't.

So she just sighed again and went back to her work, muttering about the rebounds of a fidelity charm and dabbing at the orange juice she had spilled on a page containing the dress style she thought most suited her body type. She made a concerted effort not to look up when she felt Snape's eyes on her for a long time, certain that she'd find him scowling down at the silliness of bridal magazines. And, for that matter, of brides. But then she heard a sigh. She knew it was him and was almost certain that it sounded sad. From the corner of her eye, she saw his hand reach out towards her just the tiniest bit and she froze, closing her eyes. Her heart raced as she considered the idea that maybe Maybe he would sit. She couldn't decide if she wanted him to sit or not. Would it be less awful, or more so? Maybe it wouldn't be awful anymore. She felt his eyes on her still. With a small, hopeful smile on her face, she raised her head and opened her eyes.

He was gone.

"Hermione dear," Mrs. Weasley called up the stairs, "hurry up, will you? If you want to go to Diagon Alley to get your school supplies with the whole group, we're leaving in five minutes!"

Hermione gulped hard and willed herself to stop stalling. She didn't want to go to Diagon Alley because of what it meant. It meant that she'd be heading back to school tomorrow where she'd have to face all the empty chairs and empty desks and empty beds. It meant that she'd see people from Hogwarts. It meant they'd be asking questions and offering sympathy she wasn't prepared to accept. It meant she'd be going back to where she couldn't hide from memories of the past and horrors of the future. Where she'd have to face today. Where she'd have to face Snape. It meant she was really getting married.

She looked in the mirror with a sigh, telling herself to finish grooming quickly but not really moving any faster. There were still dark circles lingering under her eyes, more prominent now as she pulled her hair back away from her face. Ron's voice still echoed through her head every time she closed her eyes, chased by Ginny's cat-like growl of anger and the haunted pucker to Harry's face. The irate fuming of her roommate had slid into a bitter and stoic silence and Hermione nearly crumbled at the thought of facing all the questions and glances and whispered rumors without Ginny. Harry was no help these days either. Hermione closed her eyes for a moment and bit down on her lip as her chest hiccupped with the effort needed to restrain the sobs.

"Hermione?" Mrs. Weasley called again.

In rising from her chair and heading towards the door with her cloak and moneybag in hand, Hermione's stomach swooped in sickly anticipation. More heavy coins populated her purse than usual. This might be the last chance she had to shop before the end of the month, and there were many supplies she needed to get to prepare for *the thing*. She couldn't even think the word just yet.

The hall a few floors below her filled with the sound of shuffling feet. "Coming," she responded, and Hermione started at the sound of her own voice. There seemed to be nothing of her left in it.

As the lot of them began to meander their separate ways through the bustling throng of the winding street, Hermione sifted her fingers again through the sack of money resting in her cloak pocket. She was alone for the first time all day. In a moment of energy and humor all too rare these days, Harry had stayed back at the Leaky Cauldron after lunch (offering to mind her bags) to have a chat and a few butterbeers with Neville, whom he and Hermione had bumped into during their excursion in Flourish and Blotts. Despite a bit of wariness in his eyes, Neville had seemed to fair well the remainder of the summer since they'd seen each other last; he even had appeared to have lost some weight round the middle and gained a little bit of spring in his step. Hermione smiled absently as she thought of how well he looked. Perhaps he'd end up better in this whole marriage law business than she'd thought.

This brought her crashing back to the reason she was standing in front of this shop window, staring into the display as if it held the secrets to life itself. With effort, Hermione straightened her back and pushed into the shop, hearing the echoes of tinkling bells somewhere beyond her. She had fibbed to Mrs. Weasley, saying that her old dressing gown was beyond repair and a new one was in order; the real reason for the trip was the last bit of purchases she needed for the event she was trying to deny the existence of entirely. Without the dress, she could pretend she wasn't really getting married. It wasn't official until she had a dress.

Fighting the urge to look around to see who might be watching her, Hermione made her way over to the section of formal wear. A sad commentary on the times, Hermione thought, was the staggering growth to the bridal section; last year there had not been a quarter of the gowns in stock that there now were, and some in such small sizes that she had to remind herself that the law really did state that no one under 18 could be married. She shook her head as she pawed through the racks.

Her heart sunk lower and lower as she fingered the endless choices. Every gown she came across seemed garish and unfitting. They were all too ...she didn't know what, but whatever it was they seemed to her, every gown had too much of it. A peal of laughter hit her ears and she turned to regard whoever had issued it. In the corner of the bridal section kitty-corner from her was a woman not too much older than she, standing with what must have been her best friend or possibly a sister. Hermione's stomach plummeted when she realized that she recognized the girl. She didn't know the girl well her name was something flighty and silly that Hermione never remembered; she was a Hufflepuff and had only ever been in only one of Hermione's classes but the sparkle in her smile and laughter told Hermione that she did not suffer an unpleasant choice of fiancé. Hermione surmised that from what she knew of the girl, she was most likely marrying the boy she'd been seeing for the last year or so: a Chaser on the Ravenclaw team and a Muggle-born wizard. Hermione fought down nausea at the look of complete bliss on the girl's face. The blonde girl looped the bend of a hanger around the back of her neck, allowing an off-the-shoulder set of snow-white bridal robes to drape across her front. Admiring the effect in a nearby mirror and spurred on by the giggles of her friend, the girl spun in odd pirouettes, gauging the twinkle of the sequins across the neckline. It was then that Hermione realized what the gowns had that turned her stomach: they were all too *happy*. She wished suddenly, stupidly, that she could marry Snape in black robes, to match her mood.

As it was, she picked out the plainest robes on the rack, a trim and simple cream-colored affair with a square, but not unflattering neckline, and held it up against her. The robes did not exactly thrill her, but they were classy and understated, fitting in her mind the nature of her wedding. No frills, just simple. Convenient. Just bearable. She closed her eyes, and for a moment, allowed herself that hazy mental picture of her perfect wedding and her perfect gown long and flowing, lace soft as a whisper and her perfect dark-haired groom.

"Having a fall wedding, are we?"

Hermione shrieked slightly at the voice that had suddenly appeared at her ear. She hadn't even heard the proprietor of the store, Madam Malkin, walk over to her and was more than a little startled at her jerking Hermione from her reverie.

"Uh, yes," Hermione said quietly. "The twenty-fifth of this month, actually."

"Lovely," the woman said, smiling warmly. "You have a perfect complexion for a fall wedding. Your hair and eyes would match so wonderfully with the reds and oranges and greens of the season."

"Thank you," Hermione managed with a weak smile and turned back to regard the look of the plain robes against her.

"Still in school, are you?" Madam Malkin inquired.

Hermione had the instinct to tell her to mind her own sodding business. Every store she had been to today to purchase supplies for her wedding had produced the same reaction. Every shop owner or clerk she had spoken to had either laughed or gasped when she began to explain that she needed this or that thing for her wedding, telling her she was far too young, and what was a girl like her getting married for when she was still in school and had so much ahead of her? She had barely kept her tongue in check at the last store, and had only done so because Harry had not had as much restraint. She bit her lip. Every witch or wizard must know of the Marriage Law by now, why must they torment every poor girl involved?

But none of this was Madam Malkin's fault; the woman merely waited for an answer with a polite smile. "Yes," Hermione replied. "Yes, I'm in my seventh year. Head Girl, actually."

"Oh, congratulations, darling. But aren't you a bit...?" she started.

"Yes, very young for it," Hermione interrupted before she could hear the end of the sentence. "But it's not as if I have a choice..."

Madam Malkin just interrupted smoothly and pointed to the robes.

"...Conservative in your choice of attire here? Every woman wants to be a princess on her wedding day. Not that there's anything wrong with these robes, dear, but it does nothing for your face or figure. Here," she said and grabbed Hermione by the wrist, dragging her to a different corner of the formal section, "I have something that I just know you'll love."

Hermione's protests went either unheard or ignored because Madam Malkin simply steered Hermione to a corner and heaved a set of dress robes from the top rack. When the round woman held them up for Hermione to inspect, a lump stuck hard and painful at the back of her throat.

She couldn't help but reach out a hand to the fabric and smile. She was sure that the fabric wasn't silk it was much sturdier than silk but the yards of ivory were so soft to the touch that she couldn't name what it might be. The robes had a tank-top with a delicately scooping neckline, but at what would be the mid-bicep had it not been on a hanger, sleeves made of a thick, antique lace draped down into a delicate bell. At an empire waist, the thick lace began again, splitting in the front to reveal a wide panel of the ivory fabric and draping down to form just a bit of a train in the back. Hermione felt tears prick her eyes. If it were any closer to her dream gown, she'd be convinced she was asleep.

"Perfect," Hermione whispered.

Madam Malkin nodded. "I knew it. Go try it on, love, and we'll see how she goes."

Barely restraining a sob, Hermione shook her head. "I can't."

"Why ever not? It would compliment you perfectly in face and figure, and if it's the price you're worried about, why we could work something out, I'm sure..."

"No, no," Hermione responded and forced a smile. "You're more than generous, Madam Malkin, but it's not that. It's just that this wedding ... well, it's not really that *type* of wedding, you see. Something this fancy would be out of place, you understand, and I just want it to be..."

"Nonsense," Madam Malkin said. "Every woman wants to be a princess on her wedding day, and you said yourself that it's perfect; now go try it on. No," she held up a hand to stop a protest from Hermione, "now you heard me. There's no sense in refusing to even put it on. If you try it out and still think it won't work, then I'll be happy to sell you the sensible robes."

As she could both see the logic of the response and the fact that she would never win an argument with the seasoned saleswoman, Hermione allowed the older woman to herd her into one of the changing rooms with the gown. Even though she knew it was silly to do so, Hermione closed her eyes as she slipped the robes over her head. She was almost afraid to see it on; afraid not that they wouldn't fit and wouldn't be the robes of her dreams, but more so, that they *would* fit and she'd want to buy them. Hermione just wasn't certain she could wear these robes to that wedding when there would be so little joy in the wedding itself. It seemed an unfair standard to set.

She knew it was a bit foolish to do so, but she stubbornly kept her eyes shut as she pushed the gown in place. She would take one look, and one look only, once everything was in place and then she would take the gown off as quickly as possible. Of course, that was *if* she could get the bloody thing done up. Hermione wriggled around helplessly, trying to reach the low set clasps in the back, but no matter whether her eyes were open or shut, she still couldn't force her arms to reach the clasps. She let her head droop forward onto the cold mirror on the wall away from the door of the changing room and called out wearily.

"Madam Malkin? I could use a bit of help, please."

She heard the woman call out from across the store, but couldn't quite make out the words. Even as she heard the curtain pull back just the slightest bit, Hermione didn't raise her head or her eyes. "Thank you," she muttered as she felt nimble hands hook the last few clasps together at the back. "It's gorgeous and it feels perfect, but I just don't know if I have the heart to look."

The older woman said nothing, but Hermione heard her drop to a squat behind her to adjust the train. Her eyes still closed, Hermione let her hands drift over the soft drape of material just under her bared shoulders.

"You see," Hermione started quietly, "I was supposed to marry someone else." Her throat tightened and though she had no idea why, she felt as if she had to tell the older woman or she'd burst. "I was supposed to marry my best friend and he was attacked," Hermione let her head droop towards her chest, tears spilling from her eyes, "and now he's gone and I just can't wear robes like this to my wedding because it's just so perfect and this wedding is so not perfect. And Ron would have loved these robes so much."

Hermione finished sobbing, her voice reduced to choked hiccups that weren't even words. She felt the woman stiffen behind her, hands frozen at Hermione's shoulders. The fingers pressed down more forcefully than Hermione thought proper and she could hear the woman floundering for words.

"I'm sorry," Hermione managed after a second, "I'm so sorry." She swiped at her tears with the back of her hand. "I shouldn't have gone to pieces so, I just ... this is just so..."

"Perfect," a voice behind her whispered. Hermione knew at once that it wasn't Madam Malkin's voice.

Madam Malkin's voice now came from outside the booth. "Good heavens, dear, whatever is the matter? What with those robes looking so well on you, I'd have thought you'd be pleased! Is this your Maid of Honor?"

Hermione raised her head so quickly she could have gotten whiplash. She looked into the mirror, barely believing the site of a pair of brown eyes staring back at her from behind the shock of red hair. Tears glistened on her cheeks as Ginny's hands softened at Hermione's shoulders.

"My what?" Hermione managed as she left her eyes drift to Madam Malkin's reflection.

"Your Maid of Honor, dear? I figured she must be, what with helping you into the robes."

Hermione turned and looked to Ginny, searching her eyes for some kind of answer. There was still a steely glint of pain in them, but the anger was gone. She opened her mouth for a moment and Hermione leaned in, anxious for an answer.

"Yes," Ginny said. "Yes, I'm the Maid of Honor."

Though her voice was strong, there was just a hint of a question in it.

"Yes," Hermione said quickly, and put a soft arm around Ginny's waist. "Yes, this is my Maid of Honor. What do you think I should do about the robes?"

"They're perfect," Ginny said softly. After a moment, she bit her lip and then smiled. "Ron would want you to wear this."

Ginny quickly pulled Hermione into a hug and then, sensing the curious eyes of the shopkeeper, pulled back and with a laugh asked her, "Is there anything matching for me in maybe a nice green color?"

Madam Malkin bustled away, bubbling with energy and determined to find the perfect compliment for the delicate gown. Hermione turned and wordlessly allowed Ginny to help her out of the gown.

"Gin, I..."

"I was a full-out arse," Ginny said quickly and gruffly. Hermione grinned, hearing Ron's influence in her husky apology. "And I shouldn't have said what I said. Or hurt you with the ring."

Hermione nodded as she slipped her jumper back over her head and wriggled into her jeans. "It's all right, really, I understood why you did. But I want you to know that the night with Harry..."

"Was none of my business," Ginny said quickly, "and I don't think you're a whore. Or a slut. Or whatever it was that I called you." Ginny grinned and playfully cuffed Hermione on the arm.

"Well, I'm glad to hear it, but honestly," Hermione drew a deep breath, "you were right. I shouldn't have let things get so carried away. And I don't know how I feel about Harry. I just ... don't know. He offered me something that I haven't ever had before and I just took it because it was there. I shouldn't have. But I can't change it now."

"It's all right," Ginny said, but there was still something pained in her voice. "It hurts, but it's all right. I probably would have done the same thing."

Hermione shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not, but Ginny, I promise you, I won't jerk him around. I don't have the luxury."

Ginny nodded shortly and looked up to the older girl. "So what are you going to do about Snape then?"

Hermione sighed. "Marry him, I suppose. What else is there to do?"

"And after the wedding?"

Hermione closed her eyes and scrubbed both hands over her face. "I don't know, Ginny. I'll just have to hope there's more to him than meets the eye, I suppose."

Ginny quirked a mischievous grin for a moment and regarded her oddly. "Let's hope so, or that wedding night won't be much of an adventure! Stare at the ceiling and think of England and all that."

"Oh God, Gin, I think I'm going to vomit if you mention that again."

Ginny cackled for a moment and said, "Better you than me," before moving out to try on the coordinating dress robes that Madam Malkin had unearthed from the back of the shop.

Hermione tried to laugh along with Ginny, but as soon as the redhead left the stall, her stomach nearly overtook her with nausea, and Hermione had to drop to her knees before her head stopped spinning.

"Better you than me," she said to her reflection.

The Heaving Line Knot

Chapter 13 of 23

In the darkness of the hall, each candle sparkled not only with a pure flame, but glittering gold words written on the air, announcing the name of each of the remembered dead. Hermione would not have needed Colin Creevey's camera to capture the sight. She stared so long at the gently shimmering words that she believed that "Ronald Weasley" would be forever branded across the back of her eyes.

Chapter Thirteen The Heaving Line Knot

"Heaving Line Knot: The Heaving line knot can be used to add weight to the end of the rope to give mass to it when you want to throw it." from **Knot Knowledge**

Hermione bounced her wand off her knee, unaware that it was emitting a fall of silver sparks as she did so. She stared out the window, miles of English country-side whipping by her; she didn't really see any of it. Harry and Neville sat across from her, discussing their summer and occasionally, and under the protection of several Muffliato spells plans with the Order of the Phoenix. Ginny sat next to her, pouring over a Quibbler article with Luna, who kept furtively glancing at the two boys. Harry's Head Boy badge, pinned crookedly on the lapel of his robes, winked the bleary sunlight from the window onto her shoulder. She didn't really see those things either. What she did see was the gaping hole on the boys' seat where Ron should have been, which they had all intentionally and yet, silently left open. She also saw the two bright green dress bags from Madam Malkin's sitting atop her trunk on the luggage rack. She couldn't take her eyes off the tag that bore her own careful handwriting.

H. C. Granger

In less than a month, that tag wouldn't be correct any more. The tag would have to read a different last name; even now, in her own head, she still couldn't think of those two names joined. She kept staring at the dress bag because she couldn't take her mind of it and it wasn't until Ginny nudged her to remind her that she, Hermione and Harry had to make patrol in the corridors that Hermione let her mind return to the present on the Hogwarts Express. Hermione remained silent as the train chugged along through a haze of clouds and the now drizzly rain. The weather mirrored her mood. For the first time in recorded memory, Hermione dread her return to school and that, in and of itself, upset her greatly. School especially Hogwarts had always been a haven of peace, excitement and growth for her; now it merely drew her closer to the ruination of all her aspirations and dreams. Married at 18 and to a beast of a man that she barely considered capable of proper human emotion.

"Come on, love," Ginny said, reaching a hand out to touch her shoulder as they walked. "Buck up, it won't be that bad."

Hermione's mouth dropped open in horror and her lips worked soundlessly. Not that bad?!

To her surprise, Ginny's eyes pricked with tears. "I know. I miss him, too. It'll be so strange without Ron here. Must be awful for you and Harry ... you lot have been together from the start."

Hermione nodded quickly and hung her head, ashamed. She hadn't even been considering what it would be like without Ron, but now that she had, her shoulders sunk even lower and tears streamed from underneath her clenched eyelids. Ginny threw her arms around the older girl's shoulders, stroking her head as she cried. Without Ron, she and Harry would barely be whole. And back in their compartment, folded up in her trunk was a list of far too many others who wouldn't be returning. She would have to spend the year coaching other students through coping with their losses. Hermione began to sob. What about her loss? Did anyone really care that her life was crashing down around her ears?

After a moment, Hermione forcibly pulled herself together when people in neighboring compartments began to stare at the weepy Head Girl just outside. She struggled to throw out normal conversation as they walked. The train was so quiet; she couldn't help noticing how many seats stood empty. From the look on Harry's face, he noticed it,

too. The friendly green eyes darkened and his face clouded with sadness and anger. She knew without looking that his fist clenched around his wand. Seeing no solution for it but to press on and act normal, Hermione made her voice as business-like as possible and tried to discuss start-of-term practices and duties with her best friend and Head Boy and her girlfriend-cum-prefect.

As the hours passed, Hermione felt her mettle waning. She began taking constitutionals throughout the corridors just to avoid staring at the empty seat across from her. Late in the day, Hermione commenced with the usual knocking on doors to remind first years to put on their robes and breaking apart the odd squabble here and there. Just in the middle of dressing down a particularly sullen pair of third years for trying to duel in the space between cars, Hermione let out a surprised squawk as a burst of flame dropped a golden feather and scroll onto the floor at her feet. With a hurried scold to the third years about getting detention before classes even began, she shoed them on their way, then snatched up the feather and scroll. With as much decorum as she could muster, Hermione rushed to the one place on the train that she knew would guarantee privacy.

"I feel a perfect fool," she muttered to herself as she closed the lid of the toilet and sat down, smiling ruefully at the walls of the Express's tiny loo. Her fingers shaking, she examined the feather that had dropped with the tightly-furled scroll. She could only think of one thing that could have caused the occurrence a phoenix delivering a message so she knew it could only have come from one person. Hermione suddenly felt glad for her chosen hideout; she thought she might sick up from nervousness. Trembles racked her as she unwound the parchment and read.

Miss Granger,

I hope that your summer has continued well, despite the marked unpleasantness you have suffered. My thoughts have been with you and shall continue to be so. Please report to my office following the feast to discuss some of your new Head Girl duties and to establish details regarding your impending nuptials, and the ensuing future.

Regards,

A. P. W. B. Dumbledore

PS Lemon drops spark my fancy this evening. No need to inform Mr. Potter.

Hermione couldn't decide if she wanted to laugh or cry; perhaps both. The Head Girl's business would be depressing enough, but the wedding? She couldn't think of anything she cared to talk about less, unless maybe the extended history of Quidditch or Ron's death. Thankfully, though, Dumbledore seemed to have indicated that Harry didn't need to be included on the discussion of Head duties. He instinctively understood, she believed, the havoc that would arise from shooping Harry out of the office to discuss the wedding with Snape. When she laid her head in her upturned hands, Hermione felt something bubble up in her throat. Far from the sobs she expected, laughter mirthless and mad erupted out and refused to be contained.

Ginny held Hermione's hand as Dumbledore spoke after the feast. Each Head of House had chosen one student from their ranks to come to the head table, read the names and light a candle for each place setting left empty to remember the dead. Much to her surprise, Hermione had been McGonagall's choice, not Harry. She hadn't expected to be asked something this large so soon. Out of respect, Dumbledore had said when he swooped down upon her during the feast, and for the support needed from peers at a time like this.

"I can do it, Professor," Harry had said when Hermione's face froze in shock.

"That's very noble of you, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said, acknowledging his offer with a slight inclination of his head, "but no. To have you light the candles would be to assign their deaths to you. You are not at fault."

"You know me too well," Harry muttered, half scowling, half smiling.

Dumbledore merely smiled, then turned to Hermione. "Will you recognize your fellow students, Miss Granger?"

What a dirty trick! her heart was screaming. She knew what he was up to and thought it far too harsh of him. Announcing Ron's death to the entire school? Harry wouldn't be thought to be at fault, *she* would! It was unfair and low of him to do that to her. But if she didn't do it, it would look cowardly. She nodded stiffly.

Dumbledore spoke for a few minutes about courage, unity, and hope, but Hermione wasn't really taking it in. She kept looking between Dumbledore's podium and the empty plate on her left, between Harry and Neville, across from her and Ginny. Signaled by Professor Sprout rising from her seat, Hannah Abbott marched to the podium as if being led to a hangman's noose once Dumbledore had vacated it. Halfway into Hufflepuff's list at least twice over again as long as any other house's she began to sob and had to be supported by Professor Sprout while Ernie MacMillan finished the list for her. When he was done, Hannah drew her sleeve across her leaky eyes, pointed an unsteady wandhand towards the Hufflepuff table and cried, "*Lumos Veneratio!*" In front of each empty place setting, a candle rose over the table, its flame burning as purely white as its wax was ebony black. Something shimmered oddly over each candle, but Hermione could not quite make it out.

Next, Professor Snape rose from his seat. Hermione's stomach dropped away for a moment, but calmed when he merely nodded toward the Slytherin table. She knew she wasn't the only one who stared when a tiny little bit of a girl with a close cap of golden curls around her head stood and walked to the front of the hall. She could barely see over the podium, but her high voice was surprisingly strong when she said, "Daphne Greengrass." The girl pointed her wand up over her head to clear the podium, and pointed it towards the table she'd come from a few moments before. Her "*Lumos Veneratio!*" was almost defiant. When a single candle burned down at the end of the Slytherin table, she turned to Snape and, for the first time, looked helpless. She stared at her professor, who loomed stern and forbidding behind the staff table. Hermione watched in fascination as he straightened his shoulders pointedly, thrust his chin upwards just a bit and then nodded down at the girl. In an almost identical parody that Hermione might have found funny had the situation been different, the girl squared her tiny frame underneath the much larger black robes and strode back to the Slytherin table, head held ruthlessly high. Many eyes including Hermione's locked onto her as she moved, her pace never flagging, to the very end of the table where she surrounded herself with empty seats, save one, above which gracefully floated the black candle.

When the little girl was seated, Professor Flitwick stood on his chair and motioned to Terry Boot, who followed the procedure for Ravenclaw house. Hermione was staggered at the number of names that had been recited tonight, and only three out of the four houses had been covered. Which meant that it was her turn now. Hermione's legs wobbled as she rose and walked to the front of the Great Hall. Her heart stuck in her throat as she gained the podium and looked out at the sea of faces. Too many flickering flames lit the Hall. Behind her, she caught Professor McGonagall flicking her wand towards her, and a fresh sheaf of parchment, covered with names, settled on the board in front of her. With great effort, she raised her voice.

"Euan Abercrombie. Evangeline Dickinson. Marissa Eggleston. Julianna Westinghouse. Nathaniel Westinghouse," Hermione spoke, as clearly and calmly as she could. Too late did she realize that these names had been ordered by year; instinctively she knew why. One particular name would be last. She felt her voice hitch when she realized it, but plowed through.

"Colin Creevey. Seamus Finnigan," someone at the Gryffindor table swore, "Parvati Patil," Lavender Brown began to sob, "Dean Thomas." Hermione had to stop a minute, swallow hard for the reaction she knew was coming, before she read the last name. "Ronald Weasley." Gasps of surprise and small cries echoed throughout the hall at this last. Hermione clenched her eyes shut against the sight and against the stream of tears now flowing freely from her eyes. She raised a trembling hand. "*Lumos Veneratio!*"

A wave of candles sprung up from the Gryffindor table. Hermione made her way back to her seat in silence, barely seeing anything around her, especially not the gaping stares or offers of pity and condolences. Ginny's arm wrapped around her shoulders and the two girls stood, crying silently. Harry's face was dry, but devoid of color. Dumbledore rose to his feet when Hermione reached her place and somehow, everyone else knew to rise as well. With a gentle wave of his hand, all sources of light in the room winked out save for the wavering beams coming from the honorarium for the dead. And with a shuddering cry, Hermione realized, along with the rest of the hall, the odd shimmering that had appeared with the enchanted candle flames. In the darkness of the hall, each candle sparkled not only with a pure flame, but glittering gold words

written on the air, announcing the name of each of the remembered dead. Hermione would not have needed Colin Creevey's camera to capture the sight. She stared so long at the gently shimmering words that she believed that "Ronald Weasley" would be forever branded across the back of her eyes.

She could barely stand the silence. All around her, the school rumbled with the noises of shuffling feet and the buzz of chattering voices of students heading back to their dormitories after the feast. But the silence between her and the man walking next to her was enough to make her think she'd temporarily gone deaf. She picked at the stitches inside one of her cuffs and tried not to think about how loud the clack of her shoes was against the stone. He hadn't said a word since they'd inadvertently met at the bottom of the stone staircase, just outside the Great Hall. She'd been so distracted that she'd nearly missed the trick stair on the fourth floor case and she had started quite alarmingly when he'd merely grabbed her upper arm, heaved her up a step and continued without even breaking his pace. Just the feeling of his long-fingered hand on her (even through the inches-thick barrier of school robes) made her want to run mad. He hadn't even cleared his throat or breathed loudly or made any of the myriad little noises that normal people made in the general course of human life. She had to do or say something before she went bonkers.

"So," she said, overloud, casting around for a topic. He glared down at her and slowly raised an eyebrow. She started to quail into silence before remembering something that had tickled her brain at the feast. "Who was the Slytherin in the memorial ceremony?"

His eyes narrowed, but he betrayed nothing else on his face. "That was Miss Greengrass," Snape answered, his dark eyes sweeping the hall. She had a feeling they missed extraordinarily little.

"No," she said, "not the name. The little girl who lit the candle. Who was she?"

This time, he directed the probing glare at her. But he never slowed his paced. "I dislike repeating myself. You will remember that for future reference," he replied, his voice smooth. It was the sort of smooth that epitomized a snake ready to strike. "The Slytherin was Miss Greengrass. She is a first year."

Hermione digested this information for a moment before surprise took her. "Daphne had a sister?"

He nodded.

More to herself than Snape, she replied, "I didn't know Daphne had any siblings."

"And when was the last time you engaged a Slytherin in conversation, other than to bandy petty insults with that sniveling worm, Malfoy, and his band of gormless cohorts?"

Hermione opened her mouth to retort hotly, accustomed to his ruthless biased towards his own House, but then shut her jaw with an audible snap. She honestly couldn't remember the last time she'd just talked to a Slytherin. Even in class. Hermione couldn't hide her vexation at this; she'd always considered herself to be quite fair and unbiased. Certainly the most so of any of her friends.

"But she was all alone!" Hermione said, thinking of the little girl surrounded by empty seats.

Snape had been smirking smugly but his face quickly became serious again. "Miss Greengrass has a right to form quite a grudge against her House: her sister was murdered for refusing when the Death Eaters came to ... recruit. Those were her sister's robes she was wearing. The elder Miss Greengrass was killed by a member of her own House."

It took a moment for this to sink in with Hermione. "You mean ... Death Eaters are in Slytherin?! Right now? Here in Hogwarts? Why don't you do something?"

Snape looked genuinely puzzled. "What would you have me do?"

"Bring them to Dumbledore! You must know who they are! Expel them; punish them; give them detention! *Something!*"

A scowl reappeared on the tall wizard's face. "Typical Gryffindor: all bravado and no thought. Tell me, oh Mistress of Intrigue, how would one of the Dark Lord's most loyal servants expel a member of his own House for following in his wizened footsteps ... without blowing his cover?"

Hermione was quiet and Snape nodded firmly, snorting a bit and looking quite satisfied with himself. "Lemon drops," he said, causing her to jump.

Hermione hadn't even realized that they'd reached the gargoyles guarding the stairs to the Headmaster's office. Suddenly being forced to be so close to Snape was unsettling, to say the least. Without a word, he seemed to sense this, standing aside to allow her to pass onto the case ahead of him. This resulted in the rather less pleasant effect of Snape's upper torso looming dark and imposing behind her, throwing a shadow across her shoulders. When the case lurched into motion, she felt herself rock backward and she felt a sick swoop in her stomach when the surly professor reached out a hand to her back to steady her, lest she fall backwards against his chest. She stiffened and had to fight the urge to move a stair up away from him. Try as she might, Hermione couldn't stop herself from fidgeting the entirety of the short ride to Dumbledore's office. Snape had returned to his former silent looming presence and Hermione just couldn't help being uneasy around him. As soon as the set of stairs had stopped, she took a quick, noticeable step away from him before raising her hand to knock. Before she had laid her knuckles to the carved wooden surface, she heard Dumbledore call from within, "Enter, Miss Granger, please enter."

A bemused smile on her face, Hermione pushed the door open. Even more puzzled when she noted that the wizened professor was standing quite a distance away, petting Fawkes, she couldn't help but ask, "Now, how did you know it was me when you're all the way over there?"

Dumbledore straightened and smiled at her, his eyes lighting with mischief and amusement. "I heard the stairs, and you were the only person I was expecting this evening. Quite a simple deduction."

"What if it had been someone you weren't expecting?"

"I gather they'd be in much more of a hurry to knock than you were." Dumbledore smiled again and crossed the office, seating himself in the throne-like chair behind his desk. "But that is neither here nor there." As if standing behind the much shorter student had camouflaged his presence, the dark-haired Potions professor stepping out from behind his future wife caused Dumbledore to raise his eyebrows in apparent delighted surprise. "Severus! I hadn't expected you until a bit later ... did Miss Granger bring you with her?"

Hermione flushed crimson and began to answer, but Severus beat her to an explanation.

"Certainly not," he said in a tight, clipped voice. "Being Head Girl, I'm sure she's quite capable of finding her way here on her own. I merely saw no reason in dallying to meet with you for another half hour and came here directly. I'm sure Miss Granger will not mind the extra presence for the beginning of her appointment."

At this statement, he cast a dark look in Hermione's direction that clearly stated that he was staying whether she minded or not. Hermione shook her head and managed a quick, "Of course not, Professor."

"Excellent," Dumbledore said. "And furthermore, after we discuss my first order of business, we can continue straight on to the next topic without having to wait for you to arrive later, Severus. And that conversation most definitely concerns both of you."

Hermione blanched. Thinking of the wedding in any form or function made her feel slightly ill even now. She felt she had, at least, gotten used to the idea, but she still couldn't make herself calm about it. Shaking her head, Hermione began to drop into a chair but then realized she hadn't yet been asked to sit, so she started to rise again. But then she unconsciously looked to Snape, who leered at her as if she were a simpleton, so she sat down and glared back defiantly. Dumbledore, who appeared to have taken no notice of this interaction, nodded gently and smiled. His face sobered, though, when he handed her a sheaf of parchment. The first page appeared to her at first to

be a listing of all her classes, but there were blanks next to each one and spaces with dates immediately following. The next few pages seemed to be calendars, with empty time slots for each day of the week until the end of term. Each weekly calendar had her name at the top. She looked up, confused.

"Miss Granger, I think you'll agree with me when I state that the issues of both the war with Lord Voldemort and the Marriage Law have presented some very complicated realities that must be dealt with here at Hogwarts. First of all, the ceremony in the Great Hall has made it obvious to everyone exactly how devastating the war has been on Hogwarts' student population. We have lost far too many fine pupils tragically; I fear we are certain to lose more before this business ends."

Hermione nodded, but with Ron's face so fresh in her mind she could do nothing else.

"Naturally, this has already begun to take an emotional toll on our remaining students. I believe that all of your peers here need guidance and support; they are, and will continue to be, in need of words of love and advice, or in some cases, simply an ear to receive their grief, confusion and fear. In order to better provide for our students, I have requested that a counselor be sent from St. Mungo's to help our student population cope with grief and impending difficulties, but she suggested and I quite agree that it would benefit all of our students to also have the option of someone their own age to speak to in times of sorrow and crisis. They need someone confident, open, intelligent and trustworthy. I could think of no one better for this task than you."

A few moments passed before it occurred to Hermione what Dumbledore was saying. "You want me to act as a grief counselor for other students?"

"In a manner of speaking. I believe that our students know that they can trust you and that you will listen. Your absolutely voracious mind, I have no doubt, will devour the chance to observe and puzzle out the human psyche in crisis, and I have every confidence that your boundless compassion will glory in being able to help every soul you can."

She knew she was blushing under the weight of such heavy compliments, but when she collected herself, she opened her mouth to respond. Tears were welling in her eyes and her throat squeezed. "Sir, thank you so much for such overwhelming compliments, but ... given the current circumstances..."

Dumbledore spoke over her gently. "And I believe that helping others will aid you in coming to terms with and assuaging your guilt from Mr. Weasley's untimely end."

Hermione hiccupped as she tried to stifle a sob. "That was low, sir."

Dumbledore sighed. "I know, and I'm sorry for it. But it is, in my humble opinion, still the truth." After another sigh and a few moments of silence, he continued. "If you are amenable to this position of Peer Counselor, then you can set up 'office hours' of sorts at your convenience."

Hermione patted her pockets as she sniffled, then reached out for the proffered handkerchief that Dumbledore had placed on the desk in front of her. "But sir," she said, with only a small hitch in her voice, "when could I possibly have time to do all this?"

Dumbledore nodded even before she had finished speaking. "Ah, this brings me to the next issue you will have to face, and in many ways, I'm sure, you have not anticipated. Though we have seen several of the obvious methods in which the Marriage Law has shaken your life and many others, there are some very tricky factors that must be taken into account as well. You are marrying a professor at this school."

"Yes, sir," she said, but wanted to growl, 'no bloody kidding!'

Across the room, Snape stiffened at the fire place. She had nearly forgotten that he was standing there, but his sudden movement reacquainted her with his presence.

"Not only that, but a professor in whose class you are currently enrolled."

Hermione's face darkened and she nodded.

"I believe you're beginning to see the problem I speak of, Miss Granger. There are many in this school who would challenge the idea of a student taking a grade-bearing course especially one in a testing year from their own spouse. Preferential treatment would, in many eyes, be almost unavoidable."

Hermione scoffed loudly; she couldn't help it. If anyone was less likely to give her preference over other students than Snape, it could only possibly be Lord Voldemort. Dumbledore seemed to take her indignance as something on Snape's behalf.

"Yes, I believe that Severus is an ethical enough professor not to fall prey to such petty tactics as favoritism..." Hermione laughed outright at this, but Dumbledore ignored both this and the murderous glare Snape had given her in response, "...but many would not agree. And I certainly wouldn't want you or Severus to open yourself up to such criticism. Students and parents alike can be cruel."

Hermione stayed quiet on this point; she knew only too well how cruel students could be and could only in her most horrific nightmares imagine what would befall her should she remain in Snape's class once they were married. The fact that she had been a good student all along would be ignored handily and for every raised hand, every minute compliment, every hard-earned grade, she would earn sneers, jeers and most likely much more. As if Potions hadn't been difficult to begin with, it would now be practically impossible for her to achieve to her own ruthless standards.

"So I'll have to drop Potions then?" She didn't want to look over at Snape; she already knew he'd be grinning. Hideous as he'd made the class for her, she didn't want to back out of it.

"Not necessarily," Dumbledore responded to her frown. "I have been in contact with Griselda Marchbanks, the witch in charge of Wizarding Examinations Authority at the Ministry. She remembers you quite well from your high achievement on your O.W.L.s and feels, much as I do, that you have excelled far beyond your peers and necessitate special arrangements for your N.E.W.T.s. Madam Marchbanks and I have come to the agreement that you should be allowed to use your discretion to determine which subjects you feel strongest in and you could participate in a sort of accelerated program. You see on the parchment I have given a listing of all your classes; with my approval, you may mark the subjects that you feel you could complete early testing in and the remaining subjects you may pursue either in class or, as with what I feel best for your Potions tutelage, you may seek independent study with the individual professor. Provided that the professor approves, of course."

At this, Dumbledore looked pointedly at Snape, who was staring intently into the fire. Eventually, Hermione dragged her gaze away from her class list and looked to her moody fiancé as well. She was certain he had heard every word but he gave not a twitch to indicate that he had absorbed any, even after a loud clearing of her throat.

"Prof...Sev...Professor?" She still couldn't decide what to call him, even though they were due to be married within a month, so she resorted to what she thought would be the most likely to garner his favor.

Severus turned his gaze away from the hearth and glared down at the girl who would, shortly, be his wife. His rankled just thinking the word. He smirked as she quailed in her chair, but after a moment, she collected herself.

"Would it be agreeable to you that I study Potions with you independently?"

"Of course, grades would still have to be submitted," Dumbledore said, before Snape could answer, "but if you were discreet about when and where you held your sessions, no one but the three of us even need know you were taking the lessons at all."

The moody professor made an indistinguishable grumbling noise in his throat but did not give a firm answer. After a few moments, Hermione stood and walked over to him. Her legs were shaking, her hands trembling, but she refused to lose this chance to show him that she could match him if she liked. Resisting the urge to clear her throat, Hermione steeled herself and, in a clear voice, said, "Severus?"

That got his attention. Severus raised an eyebrow as he looked down at the girl. The handful of times she had used his given name she had either been incensed at him or had said it so meekly that it was painfully clear she had used it only because she had thought she should. *Finally*, he thought, *some courage!*

"I suppose," he said lazily, "that I would agree to private study. Should you keep up with my challenging standards, of course."

"And then some," Hermione answered, just a touch of indignance in her voice. His blank expression melted into a bit of a sneer, but she didn't let it faze her. Instead, she turned her back to him and returned to the desk to plan for each of her lessons. She smiled to herself, pleased that she seemed to have gained a step on Snape at last.

After fifteen minutes of mumbling, scribbled notes on the parchment containing her classes, and conferring with Dumbledore, Hermione felt that she'd worked out a reasonable course of action. She was fairly certain she could test out of Charms, Care of Magical Creatures, and Ancient Runes immediately, as she'd read the entirety of the all her textbooks twice over this summer. For Transfiguration and Arithmancy, she'd approach Professors McGonagall and Vector to request independent study; she was certain that with an accelerated curriculum and the lack of other peers to hold her back, she could sit the exams in December before the holidays and do quite well. Defense Against the Dark Arts she'd continue in class with her peers, for several reasons: first of all, she reasoned, it was a practical subject and would be best studied when in a position to gain a hands-on approach; secondly, she didn't want to miss the chance of having Tonks for a professor; thirdly, she wanted a chance to actually see her peers, especially Harry. Though she hadn't mentioned this to Dumbledore, she knew she would be lonely if she removed herself from all her classes. She was certain that once she was married, her fellow Gryffindors would feel uncomfortable around her. If she didn't have a chance to prove that she was still a student just like them, she'd never fit in at all. Plus, she wanted a chance to work with Harry, just as if nothing had ever gone wrong.

"Well," Hermione said when the plans were final, "this will definitely give me a lot more time to be open to meeting with students as a counselor. Only one set class time will free up my day considerably, so I'll be able to speak with people whenever they're free."

"And it will give the other students the chance to see that you did, indeed, earn your status as Head Girl. Without such, it would be easy for jealous parties to say that you had gained it simply through an advantageous marriage, but this will allow people to see that you are working for your title."

With a last nod and promise to speak to McGonagall and Vector regarding private study, Dumbledore turned his attention back to the dark-haired man who'd stayed silent for the majority of the last hour.

"Severus, please join us," he said, pointing to the chair in front of his desk to Hermione's left. "Now that Miss Granger's Head Girl and student responsibilities are taken care of, we have matters to attend to that concern you both."

Severus moved swiftly to the vacant chair and sat, smoothly laying one long leg across the other. He didn't spare Hermione a glance, merely stared straight ahead at the older wizard behind the desk. Hermione couldn't help but stare at him for a moment, wondering if anyone ever managed to crack that stern, imposing façade long enough to see anything more than anger, disdain, dislike or disinterest. He began to tap his fingertips on his knee when Dumbledore did not break the silence. Hermione dragged her gaze back to the Headmaster.

"We must discuss the details of your wedding..."

"Oh, honestly, Albus," Snape bit off almost immediately, "I don't see why that's something that has to be discussed here. It's a private ceremony, not a school function."

"That's not entirely true," Hermione said and fought not to wince at Severus's glare. She continued, more strongly, "Well, it's not. I mean, neither of us have the time, inclination or resources to have the wedding anywhere other than here at Hogwarts. And even if we did, it makes the most sense. It would be the most efficient, the quickest, require the least amount of extra work, and would allow us to do planning and preparation in the course of our daily lives."

Severus raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"Miss Granger is quite right. Hogwarts would certainly be the most logical place to have the ceremony. Which bears the questions of where, when, and what considerations need to be taken?" Dumbledore responded.

With an uncertain glance at her fiancé, Hermione fished her hands into her robe pockets and retrieved and enlarged the notebook she'd taken to carrying with her at all times. She tended to be the sort of person to have ideas at odd times and found that shrinking her binder of notes and taking it with her always to be a prudent measure.

"Well ... erm ... assuming that Prof...Severus," she only stumbled a bit this time, "has no objections, I do have some plans. First of all," she flipped a few pages in the notebook to where she had penciled out a diagram, "I'd like to have the ceremony itself out by the Black Lake, at sunset."

"How lovely!" Dumbledore said, obviously delighted.

Hermione paused for a moment, waiting to see if Severus would respond. When he didn't even so much as look at the diagram she had gestured to, Dumbledore cleared his throat gently. With a slight roll of his eyes, Snape leaned forward minutely, gazed at the diagram and settled back into his chair.

"Is that acceptable to you?" Hermione asked.

He sighed and muttered, "I suppose so."

Hermione tried not to be frustrated at his purposeful indifference and charged on. "I'm not certain, though, about the location for the reception."

At the mention of this, Snape started to growl low in his throat. Hermione threw him a steely glare and continued.

"The house elves' cooking is, of course, impeccable and would do nicely. I don't have so large a family that it would put them out too much to make dinner, especially as there won't be a lot of guests. The problem is that I'd like to use the Great Hall, but that leaves nowhere for the students to have dinner. It is a Hogsmeade day, but that's only older students and most are back by the last half of dinner."

"Perhaps the Room of Requirement, then?" Dumbledore suggested when Severus stayed resolutely silent. "It would conform to fit your needs, the house elves know where to bring things to serve, and it would be removed from the general student traffic, so as to avoid the potential for unpleasant party-crashing."

Hermione's stomach took a sick, dizzy swoop. She couldn't decide what was worse: marrying Snape or having her peers walk in while it was going on. Trying to collect herself, she nodded her head. "Yes, I think that will do nicely, as long as someone is there far enough ahead of time to allow the room to prepare." She turned to her future husband, whose blank look was beginning to grate on her nerves. "Severus? Do you have an opinion?"

The lanky Potions Master smirked. "Many. Simply none that are appropriate for this particular conversation."

Dumbledore shook his head and Hermione scowled and sighed.

"Well fine then," she grouched. "Don't complain to me that you don't like the arrangements if you're not going to participate in the decisions."

Severus's lips curled again as she turned back to the headmaster, and this time, it was a genuine smile. At least the girl was beginning to show spirit.

What seemed like eons of discussion later, Severus unfolded himself from the chair in front of Dumbledore's desk, convinced that they had ironed out as many details of the ceremony as could be planned, for now. *And not a moment too soon*, Severus thought angrily. If he'd had to hear one more word about invitations or sleeping arrangements for her family or guests, he would have had to satisfy a base need and slapped one of the two of them soundly. Perhaps both of them. The girl stashed her binder back in a pocket of her robe, so Severus felt it safe to move towards the door.

"If that's it then," he said and turned to leave.

"Just a moment, Severus," Dumbledore said, raising a hand. "There is one more thing to discuss. Something crucial, I fear."

"What now?" he said gruffly. "The color of the napkin rings?" Severus felt a hot and steely glare land on him from the direction of his future wife, but he ignored it pointedly.

"No," Dumbledore said, his voice heavy with a sigh. "This is something much more important; something that could jeopardize the possibility of your getting married at all."

Hermione gasped. "Why didn't you bring this up sooner?"

Without answering, Dumbledore opened a drawer in his desk and removed a tightly curled scroll with a thick seal of dark green wax. As he handed it over to the taller, younger wizard, Hermione caught a glance of a seal containing a series of incomprehensible squiggles. Something about it looked strangely familiar. She felt the pit of her stomach begin to drop away.

"Oh, bollocks," Severus said harshly, snatching it out of the older wizard's hand and striding to the fireplace.

"I believe you have an inkling of what this could mean, then?"

Severus growled low in his throat and split the seal with his wand, his face darkening as he read.

"Then would somebody clue me in, please?" Hermione squealed, her voice just this side of hysterical. She hadn't gone through this much trouble and heartache and danger to become marginally okay with the idea of marrying her professor just to have it all erased now.

"It's from my father," Snape replied. His face twisted into a mask of annoyance and blatant hatred. "Apparently he thinks that he may treat me as if I'm still under the age of consent. He states that because he has not met you and been given the chance to sanction the marriage, he threatens to pull his support and disallow our union."

Hermione felt she might be sick. Not now. "Can he do that?" Her voice was hysterical now. "He can't do that Can he do that?"

Severus growled again and crumpled the scroll in his fist. "He certainly seems to think so."

A/N *Lumos Veneratio* (very) rough translation from Latin: "A light for remembrance"

The Weaver's Eight

Chapter 14 of 23

"I don't think it's going to work. Going to visit your father for a weekend - showing up out of nowhere I might add - and then saying, 'Hello, Dad! This is my student — whoops, I mean *fiancée*, Hermione. You know, the one you threatened to disallow me to marry? Well, she's joining the family whether you like it or not, so stop being a prat and hop on board! See you at Christmas!' It's ludicrous and liable to annoy him even further than we have already."

A/N Just a reminder before this chapter begins: Sevvie's background is mine, not J. K.'s. The 'heritage' that you'll read about is for spice, so don't get too embroiled in historical accuracy. Oh, and also much of the content of the "lessons" that Severus is giving in the first third of this chapter is entirely from my own imagination. I have no idea if that actually conforms to any actual written or unwritten rules.

Enjoy,

~~ ** Lady Tuesday ** ~~

Chapter Fourteen The Weaver's Eight

"**The Weaver's Eight.** This is the best weaver knot I know. Although it looks difficult to tie, it is actually very easy. Fast to tie with small material, and reliable for wool, linen and most other weaver materials. Because both loose ends fall back over the standing part, it has an almost perfect lead. ... A weaver on a traditional weaving loom never knows in advance in what direction the next line has to be tied." from **Real Knots**

Hermione had to jog to keep up with the long-legged gate of her fiancé as he strode down the corridor, away from the headmaster's office. "I think," she started, but had to stop to catch her breath for a moment before continuing after him.

"You do?" Snape said, glancing over his shoulder at her without breaking his stride. "Well, call the Daily Prophet."

A grimace heavy on her face, she sprinted down the hall to catch up with him and grabbed a fistful of the back of his billowing robes, heaving hard on them to stop his progress and force him to wait for her. No surprise showed on his face but he glowered down at her as she stood clutching a stitch in her side.

"That little comment just added extra items to the list of things I think and will proceed to tell you about," she rebutted.

He grimaced. "Goodie."

"First of all," she said, as her panting slowed and she stood straight. "I think that you could have slowed your pace if you expected me to follow..."

"Possibly."

"...secondly, I think you could be nicer..."

He smirked. "Unlikely."

"...thirdly which, incidentally, would have been my first and *only* point had you not been such a git just now I don't think this is going to work."

Severus leaned back to look at her and sneered. "Oh? Do regale me with the multitudes of flaws in my logic."

She couldn't help the flare of temper. Hermione glared back at him. "You know, you don't have to be so snarky all the t..." As his smirk increased, much to her annoyance, she bit down on the rest of her tirade. Bickering would get them nowhere. "I don't think it's going to work. Going to visit your father for a weekend, showing up out of nowhere I might add, and then saying, 'Hello, Dad! This is my student whoops, I mean *fiancée*, Hermione. You know, the one you threatened to disallow me to marry? Well, she's joining the family whether you like it or not, so stop being a prat and hop on board! See you at Christmas!' It's ludicrous and liable to annoy him even further than we have already."

"Thank you for that well-informed opinion," Snape said. Hermione just narrowed her eyes. "But sadly, it means practically nothing in the grand scheme of things. Do *you* think we should just leave him to his own devices and ignore the letter he sent me?"

Hermione grated her teeth. "No."

"And do you see any other way of potentially rectifying the situation?"

She thought her jaw might crack from the force of her clenched muscles. "No."

"Then what other choice do we have?"

Hermione made a noise that was half-growl, half-sigh. "None."

"Excellent," he said, his sneer turning to a mocking smile. "Glad you see reason."

Her fingers itched to smack that sanctimonious grin right off of his face.

"Now," he said, straightening and glaring down at her as if she were an unpleasant chore he was loathe to accomplish, "if you're going to be acceptable to present to my father..."

"Acceptable?" she exclaimed indignantly.

"...you need to learn to recommend yourself in a manner befitting a pureblood."

"You arrogant son of a b..." Hermione growled, unable to stop herself.

"Lesson number one," he interrupted smoothly. "Your language and tone. My father and mother both stemmed from some of the most noble and ancient bloodlines in Scotland and Europe. The community to which you are aspiring," he pointedly ignored her dark glare, "is one of ... tradition, you might say. Classic gender roles. As such, you will watch your tone and temper when speaking to anyone older or of a higher station than you. And before you get onto one of your tirades, which I can see blossoming so prettily in your face, this does not mean you are expected to be withdrawn and archaic in a 'speak when spoken to' fashion. It simply demands high manners at all times. Think of your mother, for pity's sake; that woman at least had some semblance of politeness."

All of Hermione's patience and concentration went towards wiping the annoyed glower from her face. "All right," she managed through clenched teeth. "I believe I can manage that." Snape looked doubtful. She sighed for a moment, knowing that if this was going to work, she'd have to play along. "What else?"

"Lesson number two: carriage and posture."

Hermione looked down at herself unconsciously. Perhaps she wasn't straight as a turret, like he was, but she saw nothing wrong in the way she stood. She brushed her hand across her clothes and looked at him expectantly. He sighed. Moving around behind Hermione, Severus grabbed a firm hold of her shoulders, causing her to stiffen in surprise and nervousness.

"That's better," he said, "but still not quite right. Shoulders back," he pulled on them as he said it. "You must align your shoulders so that they are centered over your hips, your hips centered over your ankles. My father comes from the line of King James V of Scotland and my mother is from the French line of the ducs de Guise. The fam"

"Didn't James V marry Marie of Guise?"

"I'll let that interruption slide on the merit of knowing your history. Yes, he did."

Hermione couldn't help a smirk. "So your mother's family married your father's family and they married each other, knowing they were related?" She scoffed, shaking her head. "Purebloods."

"They were eighth cousins by that time. Hardly incestuous." Severus grimaced and tightened his fingers at her shoulders. She winced. "As I was saying, the familial lines that raised me are a refined people. They demand adherence to things such as good posture and high manners. You must give the illusion at all times that you are haughty and arrogant, as that is how they raise their children and would demand such a quality in a spouse."

"Star pupil, were you?"

He sneered. "You have no idea. Now if we are to get anywhere, stop yammering and start listening!"

Hermione grimaced and did her best to tamp down on her indignance. They needed to at least mollify Snape's father and she had to admit, he knew best how to do it. He gave another pull on her shoulders to straighten them and then circled back in front of her.

"You're still slouching somewhat. If this helps, think of the posture necessary being rigid: you are a straight line from the base of your skull to the tip of your tailbone, being unable to bend except at the waist."

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to follow his instructions. Grating as the man was, he was still her teacher (for now) and she still a good pupil, determined to succeed at his instructions.

"Good," she heard him say. "Good, now the head. Open your eyes."

She startled at finding him surprisingly near. Hermione jumped when he laid one hand at her chin, the other behind her ear, his fingers wrapping underneath her hair to the nape of her neck.

"In the particular case of purebloods, much of the arrogant posture necessary can be accomplished in the proper way to hold your head." Hermione tried to make the carriage of her head match her body but she felt his fingertips, surprisingly cool against her skin, guiding her movement. "The chin a little higher. Style largely depends on the way the chin is worn..."

"They are worn very high, just at present," Hermione finished in a character voice, a smile on her face.

Snape looked surprisingly unsettled, his train of thought clearly derailed at the warm, laughing tone in her voice and the pleased smile on her face.

"I know that play, too. You were quoting Oscar Wilde," Hermione said in answer to his questioning expression. "The Importance of Being Earnest. Lady Bracknell's lines in the third act, to be specific, instructing Cecily on how to appear higher class. I didn't know you knew Oscar Wilde."

Severus's face twisted even further in shock and Hermione saw his sallow skin flush with color at the cheeks. She found herself unaccountably delighted by this and had to work not to laugh.

"Yes, well," he cleared his throat before his face melted back into the arrogant disdain she knew so well. "That's neither here nor there. The chin, as I said, must be worn..." Hermione smiled, "...at an upwards angle. This will help you achieve the heavy eye and slack, disapproving expression seemingly preferred by pureblood women the world over." This last was said not with an instructive tone but a combination of aggravation and fondness.

"Ah," Hermione said, "literally looking down your nose at people. How ... cliché."

"Stereotypes exist for a reason," he said and pushed at her chin and neck with his fingers again until she achieved what he considered a desirable result. "If you do something to restrain that shrubbery attached to your head," Hermione scowled at him, "the weight of your hair will help you keep your head back. Now, the most important times where this posture is necessary is walking. It sounds silly," he said, in answer to her raised eyebrow, "but walking is crucially important to the first impression. Positive first impressions are imperative, especially with my father. Everything he feels he needs to know about you, he will decide within the first fifteen minutes."

Hermione quailed a bit and shook at the harsh, biting tone that had leapt into his voice so suddenly. "Walking, then?"

"Indeed. That is lesson three. In our situation, walking must always been done as a pair. We move as a unit. Despite the fact that this is technically improper, I will measure my steps to you, seeing as how you are decidedly shorter than I am. But we step together, we must compliment each other visually, and you must carry yourself as a proper compliment to me."

"This all seems so..." Hermione groped for a word.

"Pretentious?"

Hermione nodded. "And far fetched. Will he really be so strict that he will disallow our marriage based on my posture or how I walk?"

"Most likely not," he said, thoughtfully, "but with my father it is not so much one thing, as a collection of many. You will need to present yourself as close to a pureblood as possible, so that they only thing he could possibly point at would be your parentage, which he can't change, as it's the basis for the law itself and thus our predicament. He will most likely sneer at it, but not fault you directly. Regardless, we must adhere as much as possible to his standards, if only for the weekend."

She couldn't stop herself from sighing heavily. "What a tremendous waste of our collective energies." When he opened his mouth to rebut, she held up a hand. "Nothing for it, though. I know, I know. Lesson three; instruct away."

Severus pursed his lips and glowered at her unpleasantly, but straightened his back. "Indeed. Walking. There are two ways to conduct yourself when moving as a couple: informal and formal. Hopefully we won't have an occasion in which to use the formal manner. If we do, we have larger problems than walking. But I shall teach you both. Firstly, the informal. We always walk side by side, the husband as an escort. Think of the commonly perceived nineteenth century manners. I offer you my arm," he positioned himself at her left side and crooked his arm at an angle across his mid-chest, extending his elbow towards her, "and you take it from underneath with your left hand. Hold just at the elbow, curling your fingers over my arm to the outside, with enough tension in your hand to hold your arm straight within mine, but not so much that you're pulling at my robes."

Hermione's stomach seemed to have a flock of owls in it, but she didn't want him to chide her for hesitating, so she raised her left arm and took the proffered elbow. His robes felt unspeakably scratchy and she couldn't help smirking just a tiny bit at the idea that this might be an insight into his surly demeanor. She stifled a chuckle.

"A little looser grasp," he said, seemingly noticing nothing. "Good. Don't turn into me; face straight forward. If we speak while we walk, turn only your head and only if necessary. There is a certain coldness to the proper bearing of a pureblood. Now, we shall practice moving together as a couple. I will walk you back to your dormitory."

Hermione abandoned her posture to glance around the hall. There hadn't been any students passing by this way, but she couldn't guarantee that there wouldn't be elsewhere, and the last thing she needed was someone spotting her arm-in-arm with Snape. Her reputation was odd enough already; this would doom her. Severus rolled his eyes.

"It is past curfew. No one will see you until you enter the Tower."

Hermione scowled at having been read so easily. "I dunno. I just ... you never know..."

"Oh, fine," Snape said, biting off her excuse. "I was trying to be gentlemanly," Hermione snorted derisively, "and save you the trouble of walking back on your own, but if you're so concerned with your popularity, I won't sully your reputation. We'll walk to my office and you can bloody well escort yourself home."

"Fine," Hermione snapped. She wanted to unleash some fiery invective upon him, but, annoyingly, she also knew that he had a point. "Walk me to your office and I'll patrol the castle before going to my room."

Severus exhaled breath heavily and scowled at her thinly veiled excuse but stiffened both his arm and his back. When he started to turn her towards the dungeons and stride away, Hermione had to admit that walking as a couple with him proved harder than she thought, as he easily had over a foot in height on her. His strides were long and quick and she rapidly felt outstripped.

"Would you slow down, please?" she asked, panting slightly again. "I thought you were going to match your steps to mine?"

"Well, perhaps you could give it a bit more effort instead of lolling behind," he said, not even looking down at her. "Posture, Miss Granger."

She straightened her back and scowled at him. "I am not lolling. Your legs come up to my ribcage, how am I supposed to keep up with you?"

He leered down at her, but she noticed that he slowed his pace and clipped the size of his strides. Hermione tried to keep from smiling triumphantly. He murmured little comments to her every now and then, reminding her of her posture and directing her about little things such as the placement of her free arm or how to go down stairs without "jouncing around like an amateur equestrienne riding a bucking stallion." When they reached the lowest level of the castle, turning onto the floor where his office lay, he stopped just before they entered the doorway.

"One last lesson on walking. God help us if we ever have to use it, but I should teach you the formal presentation, just in case." He straightened himself even further which she didn't think possible, given that his spine nearly always resembled a girder and bent his left arm behind him. This time, instead of offering her his right elbow, he extended the arm straight out in front of him, elbow bent at a right angle from his shoulder, his fist closed firmly and angled slightly towards her.

"This time, do not hold onto me, but rest your arm upon mine. Take your left forearm and lay it on mine, aligning your hand so that it drapes over the end of my fingers."

The owls began flapping around her belly again. Hermione didn't particularly want to touch him, but after the insult regarding being seen with him, she didn't want to be so uncouth as to give him another reason to snipe at her. She raised her arm and placed it flat against his, matching her wrist with his and allowing it to lie all the way to her elbow. Her fingers curled over the top of his fist and she couldn't help but notice how cold his skin was. She looked up into Severus's face for direction. His expression was surprisingly devoid of his usual sneer or mocking. Severus raised his free hand and corrected her positioning, pushing her elbow off and angling her hand towards him.

"The tension should be in the hand and arm," he said, positioning her over his closed fist, "not the wrist or fingers. The wrist should drape loosely, but not wobble like cold spaghetti."

Something strange gripped her. "Don't they usually hold hands?"

"I beg your pardon?" he said. He once again looked as if she had interrupted an internal thought process and startled him.

"I said, 'don't they usually hold hands?' Whenever I've seen films or read books where men and women did this sort of thing, the man usually held her hand in this position." Without thinking, Hermione turned his fist sideways, loosened his fingers, and placed her own inside of his. "Like this. Isn't it supposed to go like this?"

Strangely, Severus blushed. "Well, perhaps in Muggle culture they do. But purebloods generally seem to want to touch as little as possible. Most don't even sleep in the same bedrooms, which would make the intended result of this new Marriage Law much more difficult, I'm sure."

Hermione laughed at this, imagining people like Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy trying to touch each other through holes in the walls, with determinedly disgusted scowls on their faces. Much to her surprise, Severus began to chuckle along with her for a moment, but when her eyes met his, he stopped quickly. And then pointedly withdrew his hand from hers. A strange, shaky nervous feeling creeping into her stomach, Hermione allowed him to turn his hand back to the original fist position.

"As I was saying," Snape resumed, most of the typical cold smoothness back in his voice, "tension in the hand and arm, but not the wrist or fingers. Our joined arms remain presented high, typically at the mid-chest for the man. However, since you are so much shorter than I, we shall modify it to here, level with your sternum."

She couldn't help blushing just a tiny bit when his arm brushed her breast. She wanted to squirm away, but fought the impulse. Severus continued as if he either had not noticed her reaction or did not seek to identify it with a response. He began to walk.

"The general posture is the same, but the tone must be one of regality. Slow and elegant. Do you understand?"

Hermione nodded. His hands were so cold. She thought idly that she should knit him gloves now that she had abandoned her efforts for the house elves.

"When would something so formal and grandiose be used?"

"Oh, balls, formal dinners, affairs of state, that sort of thing. That is exactly why I said that if we find occasion to actually use this, we have much larger problems."

His voice sounded oddly conversational, Hermione thought, discussing such functions that, nowadays, would only be required of someone of very high rank. As they rounded the corner and walked the last corridor towards Snape's office, Hermione could feel her posture change. Something about walking like that almost a promenade with a man next to her so straight and tall and strangely dignified, she could nearly feel a crown on her head. Which tickled something in her mind.

"Did you say your mother came from the line of Marie of Guise?"

"Yes," he said, still walking slowly, not even turning to look at her when she spoke.

"The House of Guise and the male line had a number of dukes in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, didn't it?"

"Yes." She thought he stiffened just a tiny bit. His muscles felt just the tiny bit tense.

"The ducal line de Guise died out in the sixteenth century."

His voice was definitely tenser. "No, they were forced into hiding."

"Hiding? Why?"

"Magical blood was discovered in the line."

"So? At that time, it would have been revered, wouldn't it?"

"Miss Granger," his voice was *decidedly* clipped now, "do think about what was happening on the continent in that era."

A moment or two passed where they simply walked past several dungeon classrooms. And then it hit her: dungeons. "You mean the witch trials?"

"Indeed. And given the involvement that the dukes de Guise had in the religious turmoil and massacres in France at the time, it was doubly dangerous and discouraged."

"So if the line didn't die out, that means that the line of dukes still exists?"

"Yes."

A one word answer. Hermione was on to something. "How far does it extend? Is there still a duke of the House of Guise alive?"

"Yes."

Snape turned with a small flourish and dropped her hand. At that moment, she realized that they had reached his office. He took a moment to open his door behind him before turning back to Hermione. Muddling her thoughts completely, he bent down and took up her hand in his.

"Who is the living duke?" Hermione asked, sensing him stemming the flow of information.

"Both a complete disappointment to and the star pupil of his family."

Hermione's heart nearly seized when he bent over her hand in a bow reminiscent of something she'd read in a historical novel and for a wild moment, she thought he might kiss her hand. She nearly wept with relief when he didn't. He began to close the door, but realization hit her.

Star pupil!? "Are you the duc de Guise?"

"Goodnight, my Lady," Severus said, his face a blank, inscrutable mask as the thick mahogany door of his office closed in her face.

"Oh, come on!" Hermione shouted to the door.

Severus's deep voice practically rattled the frame when he called back to her. "Practice your walking, Duchesse."

"Merlin's teeth," Hermione said, her head to dropping to the cool wood in front of her. "Just when I thought the plot couldn't thicken any further. He's a duke. Not only have I gotten engaged to an unpleasant, unresponsive, sarcastic and sadistic man who happens to be my teacher, he's also a duke from a bloodline that was entwined in some of the bloodiest, most corrupt scandals and religious wars in French history." She banged her head against the door a few times, punctuating her words. Just for good measure. "Perfect. Just perfect."

Hermione felt somewhat foolish as she walked back to Gryffindor Tower, her back straight and chin high, but she practiced anyway. Following Snape's "advice" (which more resembled royal directives), Hermione kept her arm raised as if he was with her, practicing the proper placement of her arm and getting used to the feel of the posture. She didn't look down at the steps when she climbed each staircase as he had directed, and the lack of it caused her to trip numerous times, resulting in several near-falls. Each time she tried to recover as quickly as possible, muttering darkly to herself as she did. When she arrived at the seventh floor portrait hole, she practiced small curtsy which caused the Fat Lady to beam and bow to her and mumbled the password. Entering the Tower, Hermione started a bit to see so few people in the

Common Room. Harry sat in one of the armchairs at the fireplace, his legs curled under him, staring into the flames. Only a handful of people occupied the room's chairs, sofas and tables, and none of the typical boisterous chatter flowed through the room. Only a smattering of low conversations hit her ears. She moved over to where Harry sat, pulling up another armchair and smiling when he looked up at her.

"You were gone a long time."

Hermione merely nodded, not wanting to divulge where she'd been for the evening.

"Nobody wanted to sit around and talk about the memorial," he said, seemingly reading her previous thoughts. "And I think that everyone wanted to ignore how many are missing. Don't know how they're doing it though, staring at all the empty beds." He didn't look at her, but sighed heavily. "Lavender's engaged to a Ravenclaw."

"Really?" Hermione said, shocked. The girl was silly enough for anything; Hermione didn't know how the scholarly, serious Ravenclaws would take to that. "Which one?"

"Anthony Goldstein, apparently." Harry's voice was heavy. "She's heartbroken, so I hear. According to Demelza, she had her heart set on Seamus."

Hermione didn't speak. *What was there to say?*

"And I've gotten my first marriage petition."

"What?!" Hermione leapt out of the chair towards Harry. He raised a hand that had previously been buried in his robes and Hermione grabbed the letter he held in outstretched fingers, tilting it to get the light from the fire. Her heart dropped away and her stomach churned. "No."

"Yep."

"No!" she said loudly, garnering the stares of several other students. "No, it's impossible!"

"What's so impossible about it?" Harry said, his voice still lifeless. "If Snape can petition for you, what's to stop Pansy Parkinson from petitioning for me?"

Hermione thought she might vomit. She actually had to clutch at her stomach and curl her legs up under her to keep from shaking. "She can't ... you can't ... you can't marry Pansy! It's obviously a trap!"

Harry's hand darted out and snatched back the letter. "Of course it's a trap, Hermione!" Harry spat out. Now his eyes burned with fury. "I'm not daft, you know! Don't you think I see that they're trying to bait me and serve me to Voldemort?"

"Well," she said, her voice quivering, "we'll just have to find a way out of it. Someone else to petition." Harry made a noise in his throat but didn't speak. "We'll find someone else, Harry."

Harry, having resumed his study of the fireplace, remained silent for so long that Hermione eventually just mumbled that she needed sleep and when she got only the barest of nods from Harry wandered off towards the girls' dormitory.

Breakfast was just as somber an affair the next morning as going to bed had been the night before. Hermione had felt a wave of sorrow wash over her as she noticed Parvati's empty bed in the darkened dormitory. She sat on the foot of her own four-poster and just stared at the crimson curtains that stood open across from her. She hadn't even particularly cared for the girl, but Hermione's vision blurred behind tears when she stared at the empty bed, devoid of sheets. The bare mattress looked like a corpse, and Hermione couldn't help but wonder what its former occupant had looked like when she died. Had Death Eaters tortured her as they had Ron? Did she die as he had, wracked with pain, her satiny spread of dark hair gnarled and knotted, drenched with blood and tears? Was she peaceful, knowing the end was coming? Perhaps she had just dropped into the afterlife, a look of slight surprise on her face as death had come, like the spider she'd seen Moody kill in Defense Against the Dark Arts so many years ago or like Harry's parents must have done. Her throat ached, and she tried not to sob aloud, especially when she heard sniffing from behind Lavender's drawn curtain. Parvati Patil had been far too young to die. Just like Ron Weasley and Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan and Colin Creevey and any one of the countless others. Without removing anything but her shoes, Hermione curled into a ball in the middle of her bed and cried until she passed out from exhaustion.

As a result, she wasn't exactly in top form when she woke the next morning, sunlight streaming in from the window across from her bed. Sunrise prodded her from sleep, being unencumbered by her bed curtains as it usually was. She hadn't realized that she'd forgotten to close them last night. Her throat was raw as she made her way to and from the prefect's bathroom. She wasn't crying anymore, but she barely saw what was in front of her. More than once, she realized that she was trying to put pieces of her clothing on incorrectly before she forced herself to pay closer attention. She wandered down to the Great Hall, not caring that her hair was slightly askew or that her Head Girl badge was crooked. Trying not to look around the Great Hall, she sat morosely chewing a piece of toast. There were too many missing. Nearly a third of the entire school. But she didn't want to think about that, so she scowled down at her schedule instead. One class and it wouldn't even meet until tomorrow. Her Monday-Wednesday-Friday schedule was completely empty. And who even knew if anyone would actually come to her for help and advice? People already thought her a swotty know-it-all; would they really want to share their troubles with her? She grimaced at the parchment, wondering what she would do with her free time until people saw fit to meet with her.

"Plan the wedding, I suppose," Hermione mumbled to her pumpkin juice, which reminded her of a few ideas that she scratched down in the notebook she extracted from her schoolbag.

"So you *are* getting married?" she heard a voice say near her.

She looked up to see Lavender Brown standing over her, bag in hand and looking nervously between Hermione and the empty space on the bench next to her.

"Who are you marrying? I always thought you'd marry Ron," Lavender said uncertainly, "but now..."

Her eyes teared up a bit. Carefully avoiding the question, Hermione regarded the girl in front of her, sighing at the realization that the girl must have been totally blind-sided, having so many of her friends killed *and* being forced into marriage with a Ravenclaw she barely knew. A small but hopefully reassuring smile on her lips, Hermione pulled her bag from the bench and patted the empty space, silently inviting Lavender to join her. The girl looked overwhelmed with relief.

"Yes," Hermione said, trying to keep her face as light and steady and she could. "Yes, I was supposed to marry Ron, but ..."

"Do you," the girl started, but had to slash at a few tears before continuing, "know what happened? To Ron, I mean?"

Hermione nodded, her stomach roiling. "Actually, he was killed because ..." *Well, they're all going to find out somehow,* she thought. *Better to hear the truth from me.* "He was killed to get to me."

Lavender gasped loudly, covering her mouth with her hand. Hermione just nodded.

"I had a petition from ... someone else who we thought might be trying to either hurt me or hurt me to get to Harry. Unfortunately, I ... well, we didn't take the better advice of someone trying to protect us and we got engaged anyway." Feeling him as a magnet dragging her attention over to his pull, Hermione turned just her eyes to Snape and nearly upset her glass when she noted that his gaze had already been on her. His scowl deepened but he nodded at her just a tiny bit. "The Death Eaters tortured him to death." Hermione's voice steeled when she told Lavender the truth, but her eyes watered as the girl sobbed. Completely taken off guard when Lavender threw her arms around her in a bone-crushing hug, Hermione took a few seconds to recover before hugging the girl back.

"I'm so sorry," Lavender sniffled at Hermione's shoulder. "I know we haven't always got on so well, but ... but I really am sorry."

"It's all right," Hermione said stiffly. The girl *had* always treated her rather poorly, but if any time was ripe for banding together, this was it. "I've ... well, it still hurts, but I'm getting along."

Lavender backed away, wiped at her red-ringed eyes and shook a few of her chocolate curls away from her face. "If you ever want to talk or something," she said, "I would be happy to help."

"Thank you," Hermione said, genuinely surprised and pleased. "That's very generous of you." Her face sobered. "I'm sorry about Parvati. I know you two were close."

Lavender nodded and started to tear up again. She tried swiping her sleeve at her eyes, but when they kept flooding, she mumbled, "Excuse me," and got up to head out of the Great Hall.

"Of course," Hermione said, and stared after her, nonplussed. When she turned back to the table, she noted that Harry and Ginny both looked just as surprised, but oddly, Neville didn't.

"I think it's hit her really hard," Neville said quietly. He was pushing a piece of bacon around his plate. "I went to Seamus's and Dean's funerals. She looked like she'd lived about 15 years in the couple of weeks since I'd seen her. I think she feels guilty about Parvati; she was supposed to visit Lavender that weekend and was killed just after getting off the Knight Bus about three blocks from Lavender's house."

Hermione's eyes widened in shock and she turned to where the other girl had gone. No wonder she shared some kinship with her about Ron's death. Hermione shook her head, sighing.

"She shouldn't feel guilty, but it's normal, you know. Survivor's guilt. Happens all the time when somebody dies ... in your ... care...." His voice broke. For a mad moment, Hermione thought Neville might cry as well. She was equally stunned when he, too, got up from the table, muttering excuses and dashing out of the Hall.

"What is going on there?" Hermione asked Harry and Ginny, receiving only shrugs in return.

Not long after, Professor McGonagall bustled down the table, distributing schedules to the younger students who had needed additional advisement. Looking harassed, she stopped at Hermione's place on the bench.

"Miss Granger, you'll be interested to know that the Headmaster has decided that your 'counseling sessions,' such as they are, should be scheduled through me, so as to ensure you do not get overloaded in your eagerness to help others."

The older witch's lips drew into a thin line and she could see the wrinkles on her forehead become more pronounced. Clearly, she was annoyed at this, but whether it was the supposed slight to her Head Girl's sensibilities or the idea of Hermione being forced to counsel her peers, Hermione wasn't quite sure. Either way, she looked thoroughly displeased as she held out a piece of parchment for Hermione to take, which she didn't dare to glance at until the Professor had finished.

"You will note that three students have already requested a session with you. An hour each, Miss Granger, *at most*. I do not wish to have you overtaxing yourself, especially if your studies are to be more irregular than usual." At this, her face softened into a more pleasant expression. "On that note, please visit me after dinner to discuss the terms of your independent study in Transfiguration."

Hermione nodded and as soon as the statuesque professor left their company, her eyes devoured the paper. There they were, three names penciled into the open slots on Wednesday afternoon, Thursday morning, and Friday just before lunch: Neville Longbottom, Lavender Brown, and Charlotte Greengrass. She could only assume though she felt it a highly logical assumption that this was Daphne's younger sister that she'd seen in the memorial ceremony the previous evening. With a determined expression, Hermione stowed the paper in her bag. She would certainly find out what was going on with Neville and would have the chance to help poor Lavender out with the whole confusion and grief of the situation. And the little Greengrass girl ... well, that was an interesting thing, wasn't it? She wouldn't have expected a Slytherin to come to her for help. She had believed Hufflepuffs would seek her out, perhaps Ravenclaws, but she had never dreamed a Slytherin would. Though, considering the circumstances surrounding her sister's death, it seemed logical. It showed good judgment in the girl to seek out help and counsel, but also incredible courage, to surge away from the prejudices of her House and brave the taunting and trouble sure to come to her. And then, with a start, Hermione realized that it may not have all been good sense on the part of the tiny towheaded girl. She looked up to the staff table and again found Severus's dark gaze on her. Had he been the one to suggest the girl seek out Hermione's advice? As his gaze searched her face, she fought the slight panic that always flowed through her when under his scrutiny and managed a smile. Much to Hermione's astonishment, Snape looked genuinely startled at her response. Unable to contain her amusement at this heretofore unseen discomposure, Hermione nearly laughed when the usually-scowling professor made great work of rearranging his place setting before getting up and stalking away from the staff table. The panic resurfaced in her when he stalked directly to her.

A few well-placed scowls at Gryffindors who dared to look at him inquiringly quelled any eavesdroppers, with the exception of Harry and Ginny, both glaring defiantly. His face petrified into smooth marble as he returned his attention to Hermione. "Miss Granger, you will meet me in my office after first lesson. I have several things to discuss with you. Alone."

He said the last sharply, matching Harry's angry stare without so much as a flicker of emotion crossing his face. Hermione nodded and tried not to feel queasy. Being around the man still made her nervous, not the least because she'd had to be so very close to him last night. She could nearly still feel his cold fingers beneath hers. And the second-to-last time she'd seen him, her father had hit him and he'd scandalized both of her parents by kissing her. Yes, the man was certainly dangerous and most definitely made her uneasy.

"Yes, Professor," she mumbled. "I'll be there directly after the bell."

"See that you are." He turned with a flourish of his robes and moved away, seeming not really to walk, but to glide like a giant bird of prey on the wind. She shivered.

"What's that all about?" Harry asked. His face was set into a scowl.

"What?"

"Snape wanting to meet with you after first lesson," Ginny finished for him.

Harry's scowl deepened and he leaned across the table. "What does he want from you that you have to meet him alone?"

Harry looked so suspicious and accusatory that, despite the lingering trembles, Hermione felt her temper rise up in her. "I don't know, do I?" she snapped. "Otherwise I wouldn't have to meet with him. Besides," her voice dropped to a hiss, but there was venom in it, "you should get used to the fact that I won't always tell you exactly what goes on between me and my future husband."

Her stomach had dropped away when she'd said it, but the effect had been exactly as she intended: Ginny paled and Harry's eyes flashed with anger. Recognizing that she should quit while she had the upper hand (and the shocked silence), Hermione hefted her bag up from the floor and stalked out of the Great Hall. She was simply heading back to Gryffindor Tower to unpack her things, but Harry didn't need to know that.

Back in her bedroom, Hermione stared uncertainly at a few boxes that she had shrunk magically over the summer so that they'd fit in her trunk to return to school. Upon starting her quest to unpack, she'd returned them to normal size but now scowled at them, unsure of what else to do. The nine boxes that she'd brought were filled with many books, pictures, mementos and other personal items that had come with her to Hogwarts this year that had been left in Bedfordshire previously. When she had gotten

word of the Marriage Law, even though it had made her uncomfortably sad to think of not returning to her parents' house, she had packed them on the possibility that whomever she married might require her to move a difficult distance from her parents' home. Charlie lived in Romania, Remus in London she hadn't known whether she would have to relocate in hurry, especially if trouble arose. Then, the visit with her parents had gone so poorly she wasn't sure if she'd ever go home again. As such, she was happy that she'd had the foresight to pack her most treasured items, but they did bring up the sticky point of feeling like an orphan. So here sat the boxes. Her first instinct had been to unpack all the things, knowing that the items themselves would comfort her. But if she was simply going to relocate to another place though admittedly not as far as she had first considered was it really prudent to relieve them of their contents? Hermione hated wasted effort and it seemed silly to display items that would just remind her that she couldn't go home anymore. Seeing the boxes sitting around the dormitory, however, would just remind her on a constant basis of the impending marriage and surly fiancé that she currently wanted to think as little of as possible. She hadn't even seen his chambers and soon they would be her home. Hermione sat down on her bed and allowed out some tears. After a few rasping breaths and much sniffing, she stood up again and turned her attention back to the boxes. With a sigh, she stacked them neatly in the corner. However unpleasant it was to think about marrying and cohabitating with Snape, Hermione was a pragmatist. She was getting married to Snape and it couldn't be avoided, changed or wished away. The boxes remained unopened. But the wedding dress remained neatly folded within its bag at the bottom of her trunk.

Severus Snape scratched away at the parchment in front of him, a small tick in his eyebrow as he scowled at the letter he'd received the previous evening. It wasn't enough that the Ministry was now reaching so far into people's lives that they were reaching into their reproductive organs, now he would be forced to deal with his father as well. Nearly twenty years in blissful silence and now, when he had quite enough to juggle without further aggravation, he'd be forced to return to that dreadful place with an annoying little chit and play nice with the last vestige of family that held him enchained. The old man surely clung to life just to spite him. Severus still grumbled fiercely until a flicker of light caught the corner of his eye. Fingering the handle of his wand through the sleeve of his robes, Severus checked the Foe Glass he had stationed just behind the cauldron station on his front work table and then cast a quick eye at the mirror positioned behind his quill cup that reflected several other mirrors placed at key points throughout the room. His lips drew together in a thin line and he fought not to sigh when a reflection of Granger met his eyes, poking her head around the door frame, looking as if she were going to burst into tears at any moment.

"Come in, Granger," he snarled. "For heaven's sake, come in."

She startled for a moment, which made him smile, but quickly gathered herself and walked straight to his desk. He could see her setting her chin readying herself for battle, it seemed as she stood in front of him. And her little front of bravery would have worked had she not fidgeted a few times, unsure of where to place her hands. She settled for a wide-legged stance something akin to a military rest, hands behind her back. He smirked and glanced back to the letter he'd been reading. When he noticed that she focused her attention there and recognized it from the previous evening, he took the time to crumple it thoroughly and deposit it in the wastebasket beneath his desk.

After a long moment of silence, Hermione rolled her eyes. "Yes?" When he slowly leveled a potent glare at her, she added, "Professor. What did you want to see me about?"

"The charm of your company, to be sure," he said dryly. She narrowed her eyes and began to speak but he continued over top of her. "We must discuss the details of this coming weekend's visit to my family estate."

Hermione looked distinctly unsettled for a moment before she smoothed her features. *Well done, Severus thought, if a bit slow on the uptake.* He was impressed that her voice was steady when she spoke, though his face betrayed nothing of the approval.

"What would you like to discuss, sir?" she asked in a ruthlessly polite voice. *Anything you can do*, Hermione thought.

"The more obvious though slightly problematic details of presenting an acceptable impression to my father: your clothes."

Hermione raised an eyebrow to match his. "What about them? Sir," she added.

"You have dress robes?" he asked, though it didn't seem like a question. He smirked slightly at the idea that this little Gryffindor thought she could best him in a staring contest. His gaze was merciless and unwavering after years of practice. He laid down his quill and gave her undivided attention, watching to see if she would fidget.

"I do."

"And the only other clothing you own is school robes, correct?"

"No," she said, looking distinctly puzzled. "I have plenty of skirts, a few dresses, several nice pairs of jeans, and lots of..."

"I said clothing," he interrupted smoothly, "not that rubbish Muggles wear. Do you have any robes other than school robes and dress robes?"

Hermione scowled fiercely at him. "No, sir."

A slow smirk crossed his face. "We must remedy this situation. I will take you to an appropriate shop this week and select enough robes for you so as to correctly navigate the weekend."

He made it sound like a battlefield. Without her being able to restrain it, Hermione's throat tightened. "Sir, I don't" She knew she sounded strangled and embarrassed. "Since my parents have ... cut me off, I don't ... I don't have the money to buy that many pieces of clothing, sir. Certainly not up to your father's or your standards, I'm sure." She felt her face flush nearly purple as his gaze remained on her face for several long moments.

"I will provide you with the funds for new clothing," he said at length.

Hermione looked up into his blank face, startled, and rambled, "Sir, that's very kind of you, but I'm sure your teacher's salary can't be so large that you can flounce around buying me all sorts of robes, and given the circumstances, you shouldn't have to..."

"First of all, Miss Granger, I rarely flounce. Secondly, you are going to be my wife, shortly."

"I know that, sir."

"Hence the origin of this entire ordeal, Granger."

"I know that, sir."

"Would you consider it odd if I gave you money for clothing once married?" he asked.

Her brows knit together as she considered this. "I suppose not, sir. Not while I was in school and unemployed, certainly, as I have no means of income."

"Would you consider it odd if I gave you clothing as a gift once we are married?"

Before she could stop herself, she laughed. "Aside from the fact that I can't imagine you giving gifts to *anyone*, I suppose not." Her laughter stifled itself in her throat at his blank stare.

"Then why should now be any different? You are my fiancée, I am taking you to meet my father, and you do not have the finances to support the burden of the necessary clothing. I do not see the problem."

"I suppose I can see your point, sir, but it still seems like..."

Severus sighed in frustration. "Granger, you are making this far more difficult than it needs to be. Stop wittering, say thank you, and suggest a time when it would be convenient for you to leave school to go shopping with me."

For a moment, Hermione had the inclination to continue the argument, but then she realized that Snape had been offering her an olive branch (of sorts) and thought about how ridiculously impolite she was being to a man who rarely, if ever, made gestures of this sort. "I'm sorry, Professor," she responded slowly. "You're right. Thank you very much for your kindness; that's very generous of you."

He nodded shortly and Hermione could see just a flash of surprise exit his face. Most likely, he had not expected to acquiesce so quickly nor go so far as to apologize. She found herself quite amused and pleased at catching him off guard.

"Now, a time?" he asked.

"I have no commitments after double-Defense Against the Dark Arts tomorrow morning. I have a counseling session Wednesday afternoon, but am free for a few hours in the morning or afterwards in the evening, if that suits you better, Professor."

Snape had regained himself fast enough to reposition his trademark disdainful sneer. "Tomorrow will suffice. You will meet me in the Great Hall at 11:30 am."

"But sir..."

"We will eat a late lunch, once we have visited the clothier."

Both her temper and her pride chafed not only at being told where to obtain clothing but also when and where to eat lunch and the fact that he intended to pick out the clothing for her, but she swallowed her annoyance as quickly as she could manage. His talents were in angering and upsetting her; if she refused to allow him to goad her into a rage, perhaps she could gain a step or two on his arrogance. "Yes, sir," she said.

Severus raised his eyebrow further and smirked amusedly at the hard quality to her voice. After decades of watching students squirm in his classroom under his scrutiny, he could tell she just barely had a rein on her temper. Perhaps little exercises in patience would school her in stilling her tongue and listening to her elders. A nasty little voice in the back of his head reminded him that he was considering himself the elder of the young woman who would, not so long from now, be sharing his home. And his bed. He felt very nearly ill at that idea and waved a hand dismissively at her.

"You're free to go," he said, bringing the hand up to massage his temples.

He could almost hear her roll her eyes, so obvious was her annoyance, but after a moment, she turned with a flounce and strode out the door.

The French Knot

Chapter 15 of 23

"Well ... erm ... tell me something about you as a person," she said. Then she thought of the completely out-of-character behavior in *The Needle Fairy* and added, "Something true."
"Something true," he said, a sneer growing on his face. "Very well, I'll tell you something true." He paused for a moment, apparently in thought. "I hate tea."

A/N Oh, how angry you all must be with me! My life has been completely nuts, and I totally forgot to update! *headdesk* Anyway, here's chapter fifteen and I PROMISE that chapter sixteen will be hot on its heels. A thousand thank-you's to my darling friend and beta, Maggiferous, whose fantastic education and semester abroad was graciously put to the test when I wanted Severus not to sound like an idiot. Vive la Sorbonne and vive la Maggiferous. *snerk* Yeah, I know, I'm the idiot.

^ _ ^

Enjoy,

~~ ** Lady Tuesday ** ~~

Chapter Fifteen The French Knot

The French Knot "This knot is used often in hand-embroidery, but a lot of people avoid it, because it intimidates them. Once you work one correctly, you'll find that it's really easy!!! There are different methods to making French knots. Some people twist their thread three times, some only two. ...You can also achieve larger knots by changing the weight of the thread you are using. ...The trick to French knots is to keep tension on your working thread while you're pulling your needle through so that your coils stay in their proper place on your needle." from Needle-N-Thread.com

Hermione's stomach was aflutter, and she couldn't seem to keep herself from reaching up to smooth the long, tidy plait of her hair periodically. She'd chosen to put it up in a braid, reasoning that she'd look a fright if she left it out and had to keep pulling things off and on over her head, and had selected a blue striped blouse over her best pair of grey trousers. She kept walking back and forth across the entrance hall stones a few steps, smoothing her hair and trousers as she moved and waited. Ginny had Hermione's black traveling cloak over her arm.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?" the redhead asked, glancing around the hall.

"Yes, I'm sure," Hermione said, finishing her pacing towards the House points glasses and turning to walk back towards the stairs. "Anyhow, I don't think he'd let you come. He'd probably get all shirty and then deduct House points."

"Would you stop pacing?" Ginny said, her voice a tad hysterical. She grabbed the older girl's shoulders and held her firm. "You're making *me* nervous."

Hermione took a few deep breaths and she slumped within Ginny's grasp. "I'm sorry, I just," she stammered. "It's just so ... awkward. I'm not exactly leaping at the idea of spending a day with him, especially where he's picking out my clothing, and then it reminds me that the reason he's picking out my clothing is that we have to spend an entire weekend together. Obviously Snape's father must be a total bastard." Ginny raised her eyebrows at Hermione's use of such a relatively harsh word, "because if *Snape* thinks he's bad ... Oh, Gin, how in Merlin's name am I going to manage this?"

Ginny guided the other girl over to the stairs to sit and then gently pushed Hermione's head against her shoulder, stroking the curls that had been beaten into submission. "Breathe. Just breathe," Ginny said soothingly. "You'll manage it. You're the strongest girl I've ever known."

Hermione's head shot up, and she cast Ginny a dubious look. Her friend merely pushed her head back down and resumed stroking. Hermione eventually relaxed.

"I mean it," she continued, "you are. You're a match for Snape any day of the week and twice on Sunday. And if Snape's father's a bastard, then you just draw yourself up, tell him a precise orifice into which he can stick his wand, and march right out of there."

Ginny looked up when they heard footsteps echoing across the hall. Snape approached them, his appearance typically severe but a small sneer on his face.

"That might not make the acceptable impression," Snape said. "Not to mention that such a statement would garner my *extreme* displeasure. Weasley, you're supposed to be at lunch. Ten points from Gryffindor."

Ginny scowled at Snape, but deliberately turned away from him to regard Hermione again. "You're sure that you're going to be all right?" she asked.

Hermione laughed, especially at the fierce look on Snape's face that she just noticed out of the corner of her eye. Pulling the other girl into a hug, Hermione whispered, "Thanks for that," and then louder, "I'll be fine, Ginny. Have a good afternoon. And start putting your heads together about a solution for," Hermione glanced guardedly at Severus, "Harry's problem with the letter."

Ginny blanched a bit, but nodded and rose from the step. Taking an inordinate amount of time to brush off her robes, she offered Hermione a hand up from the stairs, handed her the traveling cloak, and then turned a beaming smile to the still-scowling Potions Master, who had now folded his arms across his chest and begun to glare.

"Professor," she said and made a show of curtsying deeply in front of him.

"Another ten points from Gryffindor for mocking a teacher, Weasley," he snapped. "Potter's attitude will not be allowed to become infectious."

When Severus turned swiftly and began to stride towards the door, Ginny pulled a horrendous face at his back, tongue out and all, causing Hermione to stifle a few giggles and wave her away into the Great Hall for lunch. Hermione scurried after the retreating form of the black-clad professor, who had already thrown open the enormous front doors and started moving down the steps. By the time she was within hearing distance of him, she was panting slightly from having to jog.

"I thought we discussed you not galloping if you expect me to keep up," she said when he slowed enough for her to keep level with him. "You have a stride like a giraffe. It's impossible."

Snape smirked. "I also believe we discussed you not lolloping around. I am accustomed neither to waiting nor to marking my steps."

Hermione grabbed the sleeve of his robe at the elbow. She tugged to get him to slow to a more reasonable pace and hung on. "You'd better *get* accustomed to both. I'm not getting any taller; you're not getting any shorter. I don't intend on dying any time soon, and that's your only way out of this marriage."

The thing that melted across Snape's hawk-like features probably would have been called a smile, had it not been Snape's face that bore it. He even chuckled just a tiny bit before his features straightened and he looked down at her hand, still clutched around his robes. With a jolt of surprise, Hermione unclasped her fingers from the black wool, and then cast a hasty glance at the windows of the castle, wondering if anyone could see them walking together. For good measure, she swung her cloak around her shoulders, hoping it might help mask her identity somewhat. Snape sighed but did not comment.

"Where are we going?" Hermione asked after a few minutes of walking in silence. She thought that she recognized the path towards which he seemed to be tending but he veered in a slightly different direction. "Hogsmeade?"

"Near enough," he responded. "There's a seamstress outside of the town with whom I am acquainted. She has the appropriate materials and an eye for the style I am looking for."

"You know a dress maker?" Hermione asked, surprised.

Severus did not comment, so she fell silent again. Her stomach in knots, she had no choice but to follow, as his very presence made her too nervous for conversation. *That he probably wouldn't return if I did speak*, she thought to herself, and hadn't realized that she was grumbling in her throat slightly until she felt that dark-eyed stare on her face. She fumbled for a few moments within the pockets of her robes, fingering her wand and a small satchel of money, before realizing the silence would drive her mad.

"Don't you ever just talk?"

Snape turned to regard her, raising an eyebrow. He did it so often she was surprised his face wasn't lopsided. That muscle in the top of his forehead must be strong until to lift a small dragon. "Idle chatter does not interest me," he said shortly. "It is wasteful and pointless."

"Well, how about actual conversation then?" she retorted. "If I'm going to meet your father, perhaps I should know *something* about you or your family?"

He pursed his lips thinly, his hands digging even further into the inner folds of his robes. "I was born on January 9, 1956, to Tobias Snape and Solange Etienne de Lorraine, a daughter of the House of Guise of France. Her father had been the last duc de Guise until he passed away shortly after my first birthday, passing the title," he scowled heavily, "to me, unfortunately. My younger brother, Septimius, was born in May of the year I turned four. My mother passed away when I was nine, seemingly having hung herself by the neck from the crossbeams of the chapel on our family's property. After that, I was raised by my father who, regrettably, is still alive, though my younger brother is not."

Hermione blanched. The way he spoke of his family, especially of his mother's and brother's deaths, had been so cold, so cavalier, that she couldn't help but believe that he didn't really care at all. His posture was as rigidly straight as always, but something seemed to tick in a muscle here and there as he continued his bland narrative. She was absolutely positive he had no desire to go home again, but whether it was out of fear of reliving the events he recounted or total detachment from them, she couldn't quite discern. And it made her want cry, wondering what kind of man she had agreed to marry.

"Septimius, being the younger child as well as the less able wizard and lacking a title, always felt he had to prove his superiority to the family which, I suppose, is why my father always favored him. He never ceased with showy theatrics of his accomplishments or his attempts, I should say, at accomplishments and my more intellectual pursuits and achievements either went largely ignored or completely misunderstood. Septimius thought himself quite the military leader in the making in his early years ... went on to see himself as something of a General within the Death Eaters. He was killed in Paris during a raid when he was twenty."

So much unhappiness in his life, and yet, he seemed unaffected, almost indifferent to it. Furrowing her brow, Hermione searched for something appropriate to say. "Septimius ... Severus," Hermione actually chuckled as she mullied the names over aloud. "Either your mother or your father had a fondness for the Romans, eh? I suppose it was fate that you became acquainted with Lucius Malfoy. It completed the trifecta."

A little smirk tugged at the corners of his lips as he walked, but Snape didn't look down at her. "You do know your history." He sounded obviously impressed now. "Yes, I suppose the names are a tad dramatic and pretentious. *Hermione*."

She laughed as he said her name, knowing he was mocking her but she didn't care; somehow, she sensed there was a helping of conspiratorial sympathy and humor in it. "Yes, my parents had a flair for the dramatic. Literally."

"To say the least. *One good deed dying tongueless/Slaughters a thousand waiting upon that. /Our praises are our wages.*' Sounds like a typically Gryffindor statement, don't you think?" he said, the edges of his mouth curling up further. "It seems the name was a suitable choice."

A look of distinct shock etched itself across Hermione's face and, despite her best efforts, would not go away. *The other night it was Oscar Wilde, and today, Shakespeare.* "I just can't figure you out," she said after a long moment debating whether she should speak at all.

"Nor should you," he said, the smile disappearing from his face. "It would be an arduous, futile task unworthy of your time and effort. Keep up; we've still got quite a walk."

Hermione increased her pace along side him and fell into silence. The man next to her was going to spend the rest of his life in her company, and yet, felt it was a waste of time for her to try to understand him. Which just made her want to understand him more. Her brows knit as she pondered all the information both spoken and silent that she'd gained as she followed him down a path that wound far around the outskirts of Hogsmeade village.

By the time they reached the quaint but sizeable cottage at the farthest edge of Hogsmeade, Hermione hunched a bit under her cloak and ran her hands across her arms. Despite only being September 7th, the air had a distinct chill to it that she hadn't accounted for when choosing her attire for the day. Her blouse seemed thinner than she remembered and she noted with a slight scowl that it wasn't only her arms that were reacting to the cold. Hermione crossed her arms over her chest. Perhaps she should leave her cloak on when they entered the shop. She looked up at the small sign hanging just over the lintel, showing a picture of a bending, winged woman, tapping a wand on a needle stuck in a spool of thread. Beneath the spool read the words, "*La Fée d'Aiguille.*" Though she certainly wasn't fluent in the language, Hermione could glean the meaning, from both word and picture: *The Needle Fairy.*

Striking his wand on a plate next to the door, Severus nodded as the door clicked and opened in front of him. He stepped over the threshold and into the cottage without checking to see if Hermione was following. Scowling just a tad, she did. The interior of the building wasn't at all what she expected, given the outside. It was more spacious than she'd imagined no doubt with the use of several well-placed expansion charms and every available inch of the walls was covered floor to ceiling with row upon row of bolts of fabric. Deep grays and moody blacks stretched out next to her right arm, near the door, and the colors bled as the shelves wrapped all the way around the one room main floor, winding behind a spiral staircase leading to the upper floor, and coming to rest a few feet away to her left with bright, cherry reds. It appeared as if every kind of fabric was available as well. Wandering away from her fiancé, she skirted the large wooden slab table that monopolized the center of the room, covered in various stacks of bolts, tools, and pattern pieces, and ran her hands across the shelves at her shoulder's height, her fingers passing across silks and satins, brocades, cottons, and even some scratchy wool that her skin remembered from walking practice a few evenings ago. *No doubt who did his tailoring then* she thought with a smirk. Several feet above her head at the very top next to the ceiling were bolts of lace so finely woven they looked made of spun sugar. Hermione stood on her toes and reached out a hand towards a bit that was dangling just out of her reach.

"Ne les touchez pas!" a haughty, raven-haired woman said, appearing at Hermione's side as if out of thin air. "Zey are antiques and could be damaged by ze rough fingers!"

Hermione retracted her hand quickly, coloring in embarrassment. "Excusez-moi," she said. "I meant no harm. They are lovely."

The woman only sniffed in response before turning to regard Severus. Her face became slightly less upturned and conceited as she greeted him, permitting him to bend and place a kiss on each pale cheek. *Too bad she is so snooty*, Hermione thought ruefully, returning to stand in the doorway. *A smile and she'd be quite lovely.* With a quick eye to her features, Hermione judged the woman to be approximately Severus's age, though she looked a few years older. She was no less striking for it, though. A wealth of black hair had been swept away from her face in a swooping and intricate series of knots at the back of her head, with several long, loose ringlets dangling to the middle of her back. Her cheekbones were high and prominent underneath dark eyes and brows that stood out against her alabaster skin. Quite tall for a lady, she did not need Severus to bend very far to take both hands in his and reach her cheeks.

"Etoile," Severus said, his voice now languid and deep. "Je suis toujours heureux d'être chez toi. A pleasure to see you and your fine work again."

"Merci," the woman responded, touching a hand to his cheek and smiling thinly. "And you, as always. What brings you 'ere today?"

Following Severus's studied gaze to the doorway, Etoile cast Hermione an appraising and somewhat disapproving look. She fought not to squirm under the twin scrutiny of both pairs of dark eyes and managed a small smile. The smile disappeared from her face, though, and was replaced by an open stare as Severus began conversing with the woman in the most rapid-fire French she'd ever heard.

"Un petit projet, Etoile," he said. "T'as entendu parole de cet loi de mariage?"

She made a disapproving noise at the back of her throat. "Une vraie insulte, ça, aux gens de sang pur autour de monde. En particulier quelqu'un avec une histoire comme toi, Votre Excellence." She made a very small curtsy. "Mais, qu'est-ce que c'est avec la fille?"

Severus's face dropped into a heavily put-upon scowl. "Elle est ma fiancée."

"Nom de dieu, quelle désastre!"

"C'est pourquoi nous sommes ici, Etoile," he said, turning back to Hermione. "Ses vêtements sont limités aux robes d'école et les bêtes choses Muggle. Nous rencontrerons mon père ce week-end, et il faut la préparer proprement. Je ne mis ma fois en personne que toi, parce qu'il faut le faire si vite. Je suis certain que tu comprends l'importance de sa comparution et le style que je cherche. Je comprends que tu es artiste, et je te compenserai de bonne manière."

From the way the seamstress's eyes suddenly began to glitter, Hermione surmised that Snape must have offered her a great sum of money. The distaste that had been in her eyes while the two spoke had melted into surprise and then that hungry, ambitious look. Hermione felt distinctly unsettled in being studied as if the woman Etoile, she thought she'd heard Severus call her was a large cat and Hermione a particularly fat wounded robin. Doing the opposite of her original instinct, Hermione took a few steps towards the pair and swung her cloak from her shoulders. Obviously, they were getting somewhere and she'd have to be fitted soon.

"Le sang boueux?" Etoile asked Snape without taking her eyes from Hermione.

"Bien sur," Snape answered. Hermione didn't like the tone in his voice; it was nearly a laugh, but just far enough away from one to be suspicious.

The seamstress crossed the distance between them and made a slow circle around her, running an appraising glance over her whole body. Hermione cleared her throat. Loudly. Etoile glanced back at Snape over Hermione's shoulders. "Donc, comme une pucelle ou une putain?"

This time when the woman spoke, Severus did laugh. "As my wife," he said, surprising Hermione by reverting to speaking English. "For now. But I may take you up on the latter one at a later date."

The woman laughed, and Hermione found it unpleasant. She had a very deep suspicion that they were mocking her, which made perfect sense, seeing as it was plainly clear that the woman spoke perfectly acceptable English. She crossed her arms around her chest and scowled at her fiancé.

"Finished talking over my head, are we?" Hermione snapped.

"Your manners, Miss Granger," he said smoothly, sneering down at her. "Madame Etoile Moreaux, may I present Miss Hermione Granger, the future Duchesse de Guise. Miss Granger, Madame Etoile Moreaux, proprietress of *The Needle Fairy.*"

Hermione turned to Madame Moreaux, hoping simply to keep from scowling at the woman, but found it difficult when the seamstress held and shook her hand as if Hermione had offered her a used tissue. Hermione fought not to roll her eyes.

"A pleasure, Madame Moreaux," Hermione said in a clipped, tight voice. "I appreciate you seeing us on such short notice and for agreeing to aid us in what I'm sure is a much tighter time frame than you are accustomed to."

Madame Moreaux nodded, her face resuming the look of cool arrogance that had marked in when she had first entered. She completed her circuit around Hermione, poking in a few places, smoothing her hands here and there over Hermione's shoulders and hips, drawing her arms out away from her body and then returning them.

"Ow many robes would you like for ze girl?"

Severus studied Hermione thoughtfully. "At least four, six if you can manage."

"Six is ze bare minimum, in zis case," Etoile intoned, returning to speaking about Hermione as if she weren't there. "I would say more, but zere is no time."

Severus nodded and waved his hand dismissively. "Six will do fine."

"Six?" Hermione asked incredulously, determined to reinsert herself in the conversation. "Why in the world would I need six sets of robes for two and a half days?"

Etoile looked thoroughly scandalized and muttered something under her breath in French. Hermione thought she caught the word "trash." She scowled when she noticed that Severus had adopted the patient countenance of someone explaining a difficult concept to a very small child.

"Three for day wear, including Friday afternoon's arrival," he said, "two that are more formal for each evening's dinner, and dress robes, just in case my father decides to pull any tricks. If luck is on our side, that one can stay packed, but it is better to be prepared. Is that possible, Etoile?"

The seamstress nodded shortly and thrust her hands into the pockets of her cornflower blue robes, withdrawing her wand, a measuring tape and a small notebook. She took a few quick steps back towards the spiral staircase and clapped her hands sharply, speaking a few quick words up towards the second floor. Hurried steps pounded the ceiling over her head.

"Etoile," Severus said, walking over to meet her, "I don't suppose you have any ready-made pieces that you might be able to fit to her immediately, do you?"

Again the woman nodded, and their voices dropped too low for Hermione to hear. Instead of allowing her temper to gain her, she took the opportunity to wander the perimeter of the shop, running her hands along the selection and making a mental note of the colors she liked best. With a bit of a start, Hermione turned when two girls in blue robes just like Madame Moreaux's scurried down the stairs just behind her. Hermione craned her head around to regard the flurry of motion that had overtaken this end of the cottage. Two girls that were likely not even as old as Hermione had lined up next to Etoile, their heads inclined towards the floor but both were eyeing Snape with interest and ... something else. The older of the two was blushing furiously.

"Good day, Your Grace," both girls said in unison. French accents tumbled thickly out of their mouths as well, and given the chocolate eyes, high cheekbones and tumble of inky curls framing both faces, Hermione figured that these must be Madame Moreaux's daughters.

"Good afternoon, ladies," Severus replied. "Fabienne, Amelie."

Hermione whirled around in surprise at the fluid tone, nearly bobbling the bolt of fabric she had pulled out, but pushed it back in delicately and found herself staring at the sudden, silky smile on his face. Flabbergasted, Hermione fought to keep her jaw from dropping at the mischief alight in his eyes as he took up and kissed each of the hands of the two girls, both of whom dissolved into giggles. Amelie, the older of the two, blushed herself practically crimson and stared down at her shuffling feet. Hermione nearly broke a rib trying not to laugh. *What is wrong with those two girls?* Etoile cleared her throat pointedly and glared at the girls, who instantly ceased shuffling and snapped to attention.

"Girls," she said, "you will take Miss Granger to ze changing room upstairs and asseest 'er in disrobing. You will please also place on 'er one of ze sizing pieces and bring 'er back down 'ere to me."

The girls nodded but looked uncertainly between Hermione, Snape, and their mother.

"Now!" Etoile said sharply.

The girls nodded again, but this time moved over to Hermione, Amelie taking her elbow and gesturing for her to trail the younger, Fabienne, up the stairs. Hermione followed, casting a glance at Snape as she made her way up the case. Between the rungs of the wrought-iron balustrade, she saw him smirk just a tad as his gaze tracked her. She narrowed her eyes at him, and then focused forward so she would not fall.

Once on the second floor, Hermione smiled genuinely for the first time. Again, the entirety of the cottage had been consolidated into a single, large area dressed out as a changing room. In one corner, a rose-pink fainting couch stretched out from behind a lace curtain. Not far away, a tea service sat on a silver cart, steam rising in delicate curls from a tall silver pot. Next to the wall on her left was a full-length stand mirror made out of a deep, curving mahogany. A few other pieces of boudoir-like furniture including a matching mahogany wardrobe and a beautiful privacy screen with herons painted on it scattered themselves about the room. Hermione wandered into the center of the space and smiled. The carpet was plush beneath her feet, the room was warm and inviting, and she felt like she had just stepped into a romance novel. It was something akin to the feeling she'd gotten when she first came through the platform at King's Cross, only that being a fantasy epic. She turned and, with a smile, hung her cloak on a nearby peg before moving back to the two girls standing at the top of the stairs, clearly waiting for her to beckon them over.

"I'm Hermione," she said, offering each her hand to shake. "It's nice to meet you."

The younger shook her hand politely, curtsied and mumbled, "Enchanté, Mademoiselle."

Amelie, who looked to be about fourteen or fifteen, took her hand, but it was her face that the girl studied with rapt interest. "Are you truly marrying ze Duke?" she asked excitedly.

"Erm, yes," Hermione answered, surprised, as the girl continued to pump her hand and blush at the same time. "Yes, I am. In a few weeks. How did you know that?"

Fabienne giggled. "You don't speak French?"

"Not much," Hermione admitted guiltily. Etoile Moreaux's daughters proved far more charming the she. "A little, but not enough to follow along with your mother and Sn...the Duke. How did you know?"

"Maman said zat ze Duke 'ad arrived with a fiancée," Amelie answered. She seemed almost in a breathless hurry.

"Do you know ... er," Hermione stammered, "the Duke?"

"Oh, yes," Fabienne answered and reached for the buttons on Hermione's blouse.

"That's all right," she said quickly, putting a gentle hand to the girl's to stop her progress. "I can do it myself. Have a seat and tell me what you know of him."

Drawing up two chairs nearby, the girls began to bubble over with stories of how they'd been helping their mother outfit 'the Duke' since they were little girls. Somehow, the picture that the two painted of him as a moody but quietly roguish mystery man just didn't fit, and Hermione bandied between laughter and complete bafflement as they spoke.

"'e is 'andsome, no?" Amelie asked, Fabienne giggling in return as she clipped Hermione's trousers to a hanger so that they would not crease. The older girl bustled around as Hermione stripped to her knickers and bra, gathering a lightweight beige chemise from a rack next to the stairs. "Just like tragic 'eroes in zose gothic novels,

yes?"

Hermione tried her best to stifle a look of bewildered distaste. He was *nothing* like that. He was more like Snidely Whiplash ... only not so humorous. "I suppose," Hermione said noncommittally, "though I hadn't really thought about it. We're getting married for ... other reasons."

Amelie nodded and looked suddenly pensive, but Fabienne seemed not to have noticed anything. "He is very secretive, ze Duke," Amelie whispered, holding out the chemise to her. "I think zat 'ee is eenvolved with You-Know-'Ooo."

Hermione was taken aback. Obviously the girl had seen a different side of Snape than she over the course of the years, but she hadn't expected such perception. "Well, I," Hermione stammered, but stopped when Amelie raised a hand.

"Fabienne is scared of zuch theengs," was all she said in response.

Nodding, Hermione hid her puzzlement at Amelie's appraisal of Snape behind fabric as she dropped the garment she'd been handed over her head and shrugged her arms into it. The confusion didn't abate, however, as she stared at the voluminous garment as it bagged around her arms and torso, nearly falling off her at the shoulders.

"Erm," Hermione said, not wanting to be impolite. "It's a bit big. And a bit see-through."

"Oh, zat ees all right," Fabienne said, moving in front of Hermione to pull the neck a little tighter with a cord at the front. "Maman weel adjust eet for Mademoiselle and use zis as a pattern for your uzzer robes."

Hermione nodded, seeing the sense in it, but still felt very self-conscious. The garment rather resembled the sort of chemise that would have been worn under a corset in Renaissance times, except that it was practically translucent, slightly stiff and rather larger than her frame. Fabienne had only taken the neck in far enough with the cord to keep it from falling off her shoulders.

"Please remove your brassiere," Amelie said in matter-of-fact voice.

"What?" Hermione squealed. "No! I mean ... it won't really be in the way, will it?"

The girls responded with a twin expression of furrowed brows.

"Maman must be able to see your body smoothly so zat she knows where to make certain markings and sew in supportive panels. Ze brassiere compromises ze measurements." Amelie stared at her as if this information was common sense; Fabienne nodded beside her and held out her hand for the garment, expecting immediate compliance.

"Well, you can almost see right through this thing," Hermione protested weakly, clutching the gown closer to her skin. "If I take off my bra.... Well, everyone will be able to see everything!"

"Eet eez only Maman and I," Amelie responded, "and Fabienne."

"And Snape!" She tried not to sound too hysterical.

"'Oo eez your fiancé, yes?" Fabienne asked. "'e 'as seen you before, surely."

"No!" Hermione said before she could stop herself. Both girls looked decidedly shocked. "I mean, we've decided not to ... not right away," she finished lamely, feeling slightly nauseous again.

They gave each other confused looks before regarding Hermione. Then Amelie's face took on a shy smile. "You are more patient zen I would be." This time, it was Hermione's turn to blush.

"Bécasses!" Etoile's voice shot up from the base of the stairs. "Ne soyez pas si paresseuse! Stop detaining ze Duke and Miss Granger; come down 'ere zis instant!"

Fabienne held her hand out again for Hermione's bra and, seeing nothing for it but to acquiesce, she removed the white cotton structure, crossing her arms protectively in front of her breasts. Shaking her head, Hermione felt as if she were already wearing a wedding gown as she descended the stairs, Amelie and Fabienne holding up either side of the hem so she would not trip.

She was going to die. Hermione was certain of it. If she didn't keel over of sheer embarrassment, the floor would certainly open up and swallow her, just to complete the oddity of the day. For the past forty-five minutes she had been poked and prodded, measured, assessed, turned, bent and, at times, even insulted in the process of fitting her for new robes. Amelie and Fabienne had scurried around the shop at their mother's command, grabbing bolts of fabric to hold against Hermione's skin, bringing down lengths of lace and trim, and holding pieces of the sizing garment closer to and farther from Hermione's skin as Madame Moreaux fit the stiff beige gown to her figure. She would tap places with her wand, cinching things in here and there, sometimes just to let them back out again. Now and then she would step back and regard Hermione from several angles, rapping her on the wrists with the butt of her wand every time Hermione raised her hands to cover her possibly visible breasts. Her cheeks remained rosy in embarrassment throughout the entirety of the fitting, but she thanked God that at least she'd been allowed to remain in her plain white knickers. She also prayed fervently that the gown wasn't as transparent to the four people watching her as it was from her perspective.

She had no means of telling, though, because Severus's expression had not changed the entire time the ladies worked around her. As soon as she had descended the stairs in the translucent sizing gown, struggling to cover herself, she had thrown him a covert glance to gauge his reaction. Thoroughly relieved to see that his expression was blank and polite, Hermione noted that none of the mocking or sadistic enjoyment at her embarrassment that she had expected actually showed on his face. He had merely leaned his shoulder against one of the shelving units full of fabric, watching the process and politely answering questions when Madame Moreaux inquired about time, pricing, and whether he would want more articles for her in the future. He looked as if there was nothing odd at all about watching a semi-undressed student get manhandled by an implacable seamstress.

At last, Madame Moreaux seemed satisfied that the sizing gown would make a suitable pattern for her robes and freed Hermione to go upstairs and change back into her street clothing. Hermione abandoned dignity, hitched the skirt up to her knees and took the stairs at a run. Muffled voices drifted up to her through the open staircase as she carefully removed the sizing gown and folded it neatly over the balcony. She squealed a bit in surprise when she heard a voice behind her as she put her bra back on, but just regarded Amelie confusedly as the girl held out a length of deep burgundy fabric.

"Your first piece zat Maman 'as created for you," she explained. Hermione took it and stared at it for a moment. "Ze Duke 'as requested zat you put it on right now. A set of walking robes."

"Walking robes, eh?" Hermione asked, torn between grimacing and smiling. "Did he seem amused when he suggested a set of *walking* robes?"

Amelie's mouth puckered a moment as she thought, then nodded. "Oui. 'e seemed pleased with 'eemself."

"I'll just bet he was," Hermione said, taking the robes and slipping them over her head.

Amelie took the folded sizing gown and started to make her way down the stairs, calling to Hermione that there were canvas bags in the corner for her to take home the clothes she'd worn into the shop. She folded them carefully before removing her cloak from the peg that held it. On impulse, she glanced in the mirror before leaving, but stopped when she caught her reflection. Compelled to look closer, Hermione set down her bag and draped the cloak over the railing to better examine her reflection.

However she might rub Hermione the wrong way, Madame Moreaux knew her trade. The port wine shade of the robes warmed Hermione's pale skin and complimented the honey of her hair very flatteringly. The cut of the robes was simple but elegant, a square neckline trimmed in a thick pink ribbon with a faint gold geometric pattern on it, the body of the robes falling smoothly from an empire waist that had been trimmed with just a bit of gold braiding. The elbow-length sleeves fit closely, but not tightly. Hermione reached up and loosened the plait of her hair; since she had put it up while wet, the curls tumbled out soft and tame (well, tamer than usual), as they had not had the chance to frizz about her face. She retied the top half of her hair away from her face but allowed the bottom to tumble over her shoulders.

Strange, Hermione mused, that looking at herself like this made her feel so much more ... grown up. She straightened her spine and adopted the posture that Snape had taught her the previous night, certain that she would not let him down looking like this.

The wind remained as chilly through the late afternoon as it had when they walked over, so Hermione kept her cloak clutched around her shoulders. After another few minutes of lightning-speed language she couldn't follow between Etoile and Snape, they had left the shop with a promise that one of the girls would be sent to Hogwarts by Thursday afternoon with the remainder of their purchases. Severus had kissed Madame Moreaux on the cheeks again before leaving and nodded to each other the girls, who restrained their giggles better than previously. Just as Hermione was about to cross the doorway, Amelie trotted up to her and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Mademoiselle Granger?" she asked, a little timid.

"Yes?"

"May I," the girl looked at her shoes for a moment, casting Severus a sidewise glance, "write to you at 'Ogwarts? For a friend?'"

Hermione couldn't stop herself from looking taken aback. "Of course," she said, pleasantly. "If you just address the letter to 'Hermione Granger' and 'Head Girl', I'm sure it'll get to me. No one has a name quite like that."

Amelie smiled shyly. "Merci beaucoup, Mademoiselle..."

"Hermione," she said, patting the younger girl on the hand. "Please call me Hermione."

"'Ermione,' Amelie repeated, smiling. "Merci."

Severus's face bore a thoughtful look as Hermione inclined her head first to Madame Moreaux and Fabienne before smiling at Amelie and exiting. He remained silent as they walked through Hogsmeade.

"Thank you," Hermione said eventually. When she received a glance punctuated with raised eyebrows, she took up a corner of the burgundy fabric. "For the robes. They are lovely and I'm sure that the rest will be just as lovely. So ... erm ... thank you."

He nodded but did not speak, still wearing a thoughtful, but not unpleasant, expression.

"Erm, Prof...Severus?" Hermione ventured after a moment.

The stumbling over his name got his attention, and he cast his dark-eyed gaze at her as they made their way into town. "Yes?"

"Was ... um ... was the gown ...?" Hermione knew she was making no sense, but couldn't stop the embarrassed stammering or flush in her cheeks. "Was the sizing gown I was wearing ... um ... as transparent as it seemed?"

A flash of a smirk crossed his face and then dropped away to the blank canvas of studied politeness. "No," he replied. "Fear not, Miss Granger, your purity, such as it is, remains intact."

She *hmmphed* a bit at the dig, but nodded. "Good. From my vantage point, everyone in Hogsmeade would be able to see my...", she stopped herself, "...charms."

This time, Snape did smirk. "Yes, rather an uncomfortable predicament, isn't it? Once you've tried Etoile's work, the debasement becomes worth it, but it is humbling at first. Consider yourself lucky, however, that you were as clothed as you were allowed to be."

Hermione scoffed. "How's that, then?"

"Imagine, Miss Granger," he said, steering them towards The Three Broomsticks, "having a two foot square of that material, from waist to knees, being the only thing covering your body and you will understand what it is like for a wizard to be fitted by a true French seamstress. Who has a house full of young ladies, I might add."

Laughter bubbled out of Hermione's throat. "Oh, dear. Speaking of the house full of ladies, I find it bizarre to even think as much let alone say so, but I believe Amelie as a crush on you." She wanted to laugh even harder as Severus looked distinctly uncomfortable for a moment or two before waving his hand dismissively.

After scowling heavily at Hermione, Snape responded, "It is natural. She was only nine when she began helping her mother with her duties. For the last four years, she's grown up seeing me in various states of undress, and I'd be willing to wager I'm most likely either the first or the only man she has seen in such. Perhaps both."

"Well, that would do something to you during the ravages of puberty, I'd say," Hermione finished, laughing nervously. Snape raised an eyebrow and she stopped laughing.

Without speaking to each other again, they moved into The Three Broomsticks, where Severus maneuvered her to a table in the corner, next to a window looking out over Hogsmeade. He stared out the window, not paying her the slightest mind as they sat waiting for Madam Rosmerta to come and attend them. When the clack of heels crossed to their table and the curvy proprietor appeared, a pad of parchment in hand, Hermione fought not to fidget. She could feel the woman's gaze moving over her curiously, taking in the picture of the Head Girl out of both school and school robes on what was obviously a school day, sequestered in a corner booth with the moody and generally disliked Potions professor. Hermione flushed under the scrutiny and only barely managed to order lunch without her voice breaking. Severus muttered something to Madam Rosmerta without even looking at her, causing the woman to scowl at him and walk away in a huff. He continued to stare out the window.

"Must you be so rude to people all the time?" she asked eventually.

"Yes," he replied shortly, earning him a scoff from Hermione.

"Aren't you concerned about being here?"

Finally, Snape turned his attention from the window and looked at her. His dark glare was not an improvement on the situation. "How do you mean?"

"Well," Hermione said, damning herself for faltering whenever he looked at her with that glare. "Well, people know me here."

"And?"

"They know *you* here."

"And?"

"Obviously we both should be at Hogwarts."

"I believe I've told you before, Miss Granger, that I dislike repeating myself," Snape said sleekly. "If you have a point, you'd best make it immediately."

"Well, you aren't concerned about being seen with me? I mean, you don't care what people will think?"

He sighed heavily and gave her a deadpan stare. "I think my reputation can survive being seen publicly with you."

She scoffed loudly. "That's not exactly what I meant. Aren't you concerned at all that people will be suspicious that you and I are together? I mean, it's pretty well known that we're not exactly best mates. Don't you care if people talk?"

"Talk?" Snape said incredulously. "I can deal with a great amount more onerous things than idle gossip. Besides, do you really think that people will not talk once we're married? You can hardly expect that the news of Potter's closest stooge," she scowled at him, "and Hogwarts's resident villain marrying will escape notice by the greater public. I wouldn't be surprised if there's an article in the Prophet theorizing all sorts of lovely reasons behind the union. As such, I'm hardly concerned about people 'talking.'"

Her brows furrowed as she digested this, and then her stomach swooped dizzily at the idea of the wizarding world-at-large knowing that she'd married Snape. She didn't even want to tell her Housemates, let alone everyone in Britain. She cleared her throat. "You don't think I should keep it quiet then?"

At that comment, Snape actually seemed to consider his response genuinely, without disregard. "It would be prudent, I believe," he said slowly, "to keep the issue quiet within Hogwarts for the time being. A student marrying a teacher especially this student marrying this teacher will be highly frowned upon and will open us both up to some very unfavorable talk and possibly violent consequences. As a result," Snape said, seemingly just thinking of the fact, "you may want to be prepared for the possibility of unfavorable retribution from your fellow students."

Hermione scoffed again. "Are you serious? Do you honestly think that I hadn't considered that already?"

"I mean," he said, a sharp look on his face, "that you might not want to assume your personal safety is entirely secure. I'm sure you can glean that you may be in danger, given the residence of a certain population within the school that you inquired after the other evening."

A moment passed before Hermione realized that he was speaking of the newly initiated Death Eaters in Slytherin House. Her eyes went wide with fright; she'd certainly considered that she was not safe in the outside world hence the entire reason she was marrying Snape but she had always unconsciously considered Hogwarts a neutral and safe territory. How sick, to know that Hogwarts was no longer the bastion of shelter she had always believed it to be. She shook her head and sighed.

"I suppose given the state of things, I should be most careful in how I," she chewed her lip a moment, trying to think of the best way to word it, "handle the albino ferret?"

Something like a smile tugged at the corners of Snape's mouth for a moment before his heavy brow furrowed. "Yes, I'd say so. Especially as the sire's bite draws blood."

Hermione nodded and as soon as Madam Rosmerta delivered their lunches, the pair fell into silence. Picking at her food and her thoughts from the day's travels, Hermione found herself both amused and more uneasy with all of this new information about Snape. She was thoroughly bewildered to find that not only were there people in the world that found him anything other than completely unpleasant and offensive, there were young girls that found him charming and attractive. Even a sex object, if she was interpreting Amelie's blushes and stares correctly. Stomach roiling, she pushed away her half-finished chicken salad sandwich. She didn't think she could stomach food *and* an idea of Snape having sex in the same thought. But she clearly didn't know very much about the man sitting across from her who had resumed his stare out the window as he finished his beef stew, so she ventured an effort at ridding her mind of the thought of him *in flagrante delicto* through harmless conversation.

"So," she said a little louder than necessary before tempering her voice to a more appropriate level. Snape raised an eyebrow at her and, with a blank stare, kept eating. "So if I'm going to be meeting your father this weekend, I should probably know at least a little something about you."

"I have already told you all the details you need know, outside your experience with me at school," he said blandly.

"All you told me was bare facts about when your family was born and died."

"Yes," he said, "that's all you need know."

Hermione raised an eyebrow in return. "You don't think that if we're going to convince your father that I should be marrying you shouldn't give me something a tad more detailed? Something more personal?"

"Such as?"

"Well ... erm ... tell me something about you as a person," she said. Then she thought of the completely out-of-character behavior in The Needle Fairy and added, "Something true."

"Something true," he said, a sneer growing on his face. "Very well, I'll tell you something true." He paused for a moment, apparently in thought. "I hate tea."

"You ... hate ... tea?" she asked, nonplussed. "*That's* a personal truth? That you hate tea?"

His face was completely serious now. "Absolutely. I loathe it. Never touch the stuff. Tastes like dirty rain water. Always drink coffee instead."

"Hmmm," Hermione said, mulling this over, unaware she was speaking aloud. "Well, I expect that explains the teeth..."

"I beg your pardon?" Snape said, his voice dangerously low. "My teeth?"

"Well, I ..." she stammered, quailing a bit. "Well, between constant coffee and knowing you smoke, I suppose that explains the state of your teeth."

Snape's eyes narrowed to near slits as he glared at her. She wished she could say that the effect was useless on her. It wasn't.

"I can't help it, you know," she said quickly. "Raised by dentists. I notice people's teeth. Especially because of the former state of my own. There, I said it before you could," she added sulkily when he looked ready to respond. Instead, he just gave her a knowing sneer. "So, you hate tea."

"Yes, I do."

"Well, I suppose that's a start. So we're leaving for your father's estate ...?"

"Friday afternoon," he said, resuming his lunch. "Just after classes end. And I still have a few more lessons for you, so you should carve out some time from your bustling schedule," he said this with a sneer, knowing full well how empty it was, "to devote a bit more application to some extra curricular studies in the form of table manners."

Hermione scowled. Being taught manners by Professor Snape occurred to her as being about as reasonable as being taught humility by Gilderoy Lockhart. She was still grimacing when Madam Rosmerta walked over and dropped the check on their table, not even waiting to see if they were ready to pay. The two stared at each other across the table before Hermione dropped her gaze and fished in her pockets for the small bag of coins she had brought. When she laid it on the table and began counting out Sickles for the check, Snape cleared his throat.

"What are you doing?"

"Paying for lunch," Hermione responded, trying not to blush under the steady, piercing gaze. "You paid a lot of money for those robes, I'm sure. The least I can do is buy your lunch."

Snape stared at her for another moment before picking up the Sickles she had dropped on top of the hand-written bill. "That is kind of you," he said, holding the money out towards her, "but unnecessary. Your funds are much more limited than mine." Without a word, he deposited them back in her open money pouch.

For a moment, she had been about to simply nod and take the silver coins back, but then she took a breath and shook her head. "Please," she said, her voice not quite as steady as she would have liked. "Please, I would like to pay for lunch. To thank you."

His sharp, angular face faltered for a moment before he smoothed it again. Snape nodded shortly and remained silent as she counted out the coins a second time. Portioning out a few extra Sickles as a tip for Rosmerta Hermione felt it necessary, to apologize for Snape's rude behavior she left the money stacked neatly on top of the bill at the corner of the table. She stood and brushed off her robes before looking to Snape, who had already risen from the booth and begun to head out of The Three Broomsticks. Sighing, she picked up her bag and hurried after him.

The walk back to Hogwarts proved to be just as silent as the walk away from it had been. Only this time, Hermione felt a tad bewildered rather than nervous. But she noticed, with a strange start, that she did not need to ask him to slow down. He walked just at her side, his long strides more abbreviated than they had been earlier that morning. With her stomach twitching, she decided to try her Gryffindor courage. Hermione couldn't decide whether she wanted to laugh in amusement or cry out in fear when Snape started violently as she threaded her left arm through his right. She'd rarely, if ever, seen the man startled.

"What are you doing?" he said loudly.

He hadn't bothered to cover the reaction in his face, and Hermione nearly trembled at the mix of surprise and anger in the sharp features. To prove herself worthy of Ginny's insistence that she could match the man toe-to-toe, Hermione stifled her nervousness and drew herself up, tall and rigid.

"Practicing," she said confidently, and closed her grip around his upper arm. "If you want me to get used to this whole walking nonsense you were insisting on, I think we should practice. Besides, you're obviously not used to having a woman on your arm; you could most likely use the practice yourself."

He glowered down at her, but eventually raised his forearm so that her hand fell in the crook of his elbow. "Woman," he scoffed under his breath, blowing a derisive snort through his long nostrils.

Hermione clenched her grip on his robes and bit her lip to keep from spitting a retort at him. They walked in relative silence for much of the remainder of the path back to Hogwarts. Every now and then, Hermione stumbled over little divots in the ground, but Snape just tensed his arm beneath her hand and kept walking. She nearly laughed a few times as she felt the hem of his billowing robes snap against the back of her cloak. She must look like a robin on the wing of a vulture. A giggle or two slipped out of her. This time, Snape didn't even favor her with a scowl. Instead, she noticed, his gaze was focused ahead, on the large, shaggy figure tromping out of the Forbidden Forest a few yards ahead of them. Snape grumbled in the back of his throat.

"G'morning, Professor Snape," Hagrid said, a friendly smile on his face. "Bit chilly today, eh? Not the best for a stroll." The warm, dark-eyed gaze passed to Hermione and Hagrid smiled a little wider, inclining his head to her. "Ma'am."

Hermione's smile faltered a moment before she realized that Hagrid didn't recognize her. Did she really look *that* different? "Hi, Hagrid," she said, forcing cheeriness into her voice and using her free hand to wave to him. "I'll stop down a little later to visit and talk about my early N.E.W.T. exam."

Hagrid started quite violently and dropped the sack of lumpy objects that he'd had thrown over his shoulder. Snape grumbled louder as Hagrid bounded over and Hermione stopped walking but didn't remove her arm from Snape's. In fact, when Snape made to pull away, Hermione clutched his arm harder. *You're not getting away that easily*, Hermione tried to make her body language say to him. *You'll get used to this and you'll like it!* She smiled in triumph when the muscles in Snape's forearm tightened rigidly, and she saw his jaw muscle clench.

"Hermione!" Hagrid exclaimed and clapped a hand to her shoulder. "Didn't recognize yeh, did I? Look at yeh, all kitted out and lookin' like a handsome lady! Why, yeh look fine enough ter be a queen, yeh do!"

Tears pricked Hermione's eyes and she blushed as the large, thick fingers patted gently at the curls tumbling over her shoulder. The smile on her face was genuine now. "Thank you," she said.

"Wouldn'a known yeh," he said, grinning. "But glad I do. I'll see yeh fer tea, eh? Ask Harry to come round with yeh."

Hermione nodded and began to stride off towards the castle, pulling on Snape's arm to follow her. She chuckled but said nothing and refused to look at him, even though she could feel that glare heat her as she walked. Hermione's smile grew as he dropped her arm the instant they hit the castle steps, and she glanced after him with a laugh as he stalked away down into the dungeons without a backward look. Many people stared at her as she strode through the foyer of the castle and up the stairs towards Gryffindor Tower, but she didn't let it faze her. He would make her pay for that, she supposed, but she certainly felt as if the day had been a success now, on however small a level.

End chapter A/N First and foremost, the big details: Okay, most of you probably don't speak French (much like me *hangs head in shame*), so you most likely want to kill me for that *gigantic* passage in French that has no translation. There was a point to that, believe it or not. Hermione's family has gone to France, so she speaks a little French, but she does not speak enough to keep up with the conversation of two native speakers like Etoile and Severus. Further than that, they purposely spoke at a speed and in a manner that would not allow Hermione to know what they were saying (*Ppphhht* Jerks. ^_^). I actually wanted you, the reader, to feel Hermione's confusion and annoyance at being deliberately excluded. However, as there were several nice little zingers and a few jokes in that French interplay between Severus and Etoile (so wonderfully translated by my darling friend Maggie), I will *not* be so mean or secretive to keep it from you. So here it is... the passage in French, translated so you can get in on the jokes. The statements in bold are those that were in French and have been translated for you. (BTW, I have cut out a few of the paragraphs of exposition so you can speed right to the dialogue). Enjoy :

"**Do not touch those!**" a haughty looking black-haired woman said, appearing at Hermione's side as if out of thin air. "Zey are antiques and could be damaged by the rough fingers!"

Hermione retracted her hand, coloring in embarrassment. "Excusez-moi," she said, "I meant no harm. They're lovely."

...

"Etoile," Severus said, his voice now languid and deep. "**I am always happy to be in your company** A pleasure to see you and your fine work again."

"**Thank you,**" the woman responded, touching a hand to his cheek and smiling thinly. "And you, as always. What brings you 'ere today?"

...

"**A bit of a project,** Etoile," he said. "**You've heard of this Marriage Law?**"

She made a disapproving noise at the back of her throat. "**An insult, it is, to purebloods everywhere. Especially someone with such noble lineage as you, Your Grace.**" She made a small curtsy. "**What does the law have to do with the girl?**"

Severus's face dropped into a heavily put-upon scowl. "**She is my fiancée.**"

"God help you. She is a mess."

"That's what I'm here to correct, Etoile," he said, turning back to Hermione. "Her clothing is limited to school robes and Muggle nonsense. We're meeting my father this weekend and she needs to be outfitted properly. I put all my faith in no one but you. I'm sure you understand the importance of her appearance and the style I am looking for. I understand that you are an artist and I will compensate you in a befitting manner."

...

"A Mudblood?" Etoile asked Snape without taking her eyes from Hermione. The seamstress crossed the distance between them and made a slow circle around her, running an appraising glance over her whole body. Hermione cleared her throat.

"Of course," Snape answered. Hermione didn't like the tone in his voice; it was nearly a laugh, but just far enough away from one to be suspicious.

Etoile glanced back at Snape over Hermione's shoulders. "Then would you like to dress her as a virgin or a whore?"

This time when the woman spoke, Severus did laugh. "As my wife," he said, surprising Hermione by reverting to speaking English. "For now. But I may take you up on the latter offer at a later date."

Hope you liked it. Oh, btw, later in that sequence, when Etoile called up to her daughters, she called them silly geese and told them to stop being so lazy. And before I end this gargantuan A/N, some fun minutia: the references to Roman names refers to Lucius Septimius Severus, an emperor in the Roman Empire who died in AD 211. As with the de Guise stuff, it's not crucial to the story line, just fun. Text from Severus's quote is from Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*, where the name Hermione comes from. Also, though I find it highly unlikely that anyone will protest (or even know the difference), I find it necessary to state that sadly I did not make up the name "The Needle Fairy." I pirated it from a clothier that makes Renaissance garb that I drool over every year at the Sterling Festival. They also have a website (www.needlefairy.com) if you happen to be a Ren Faire nut like me. Lastly, expect the next several chapters (if not all of the rest) to be much longer.

The Butterfly Loop

Chapter 16 of 23

"Never," Tonks said firmly, using her offhand to emphasize her words. "Never underestimate your enemy. If Mr. Malfoy had been watching carefully, he would have noticed my eyes darting to and from his wand hand, waiting for an opportunity for him to get bored and sloppy. All I had to do was distract him long enough to sideline his attention for an instant, and there you have it." She gestured to where her student now had started to mutter vulgarity. "*Liberacorpus*," she said easily, then, "*Wingardium Leviosa*." Using the levitation charm, she guided him to a gentle, upright landing and smiled just a tiny bit as he replaced his robes, swearing under his breath.

Chapter Sixteen The Butterfly Loop

"**The Butterfly (Lineman's) Loop** - An excellent easy to tie loop for applications needing a loop in another place than the rope-end, but somewhere in the middle. It has an excellent lead, and is secure even if the forces on both ends are stronger than the load in the loop." from Real Knots

"Come in," Hermione said in response to the tentative knock on her door as she flipped through a few sheaves of parchment and straightened the books on her desk.

She had finally gotten the room settled the way she liked it. It had taken a few days, but it felt like the right space for what she wanted to achieve. When McGonagall had told her during their first meeting for her independent Transfiguration studies that she was to be given her own office and sitting room, Hermione had thought the stern professor playing some sort of bizarre joke on her. After all, being Head Girl was privilege enough, wasn't it, not to require further compensation? But McGonagall had insisted that Hermione was to have her own sitting room and office as per instructions from Dumbledore that connected, by means of a discreet door at the back, to her Head of House's office and study. 'For your counseling sessions,' the stern witch had said. Her disdain for the idea was clear, but she seemed determined to keep her best student's new task legitimate. 'If the sessions are to be effective, you can hardly expect grieving, confused students to sit at the foot of your bed in Gryffindor Tower.' So she had made the little office as cozy as possible, nicely situating two squashy armchairs in front of the fireplace, flanked by a tea table and a small settee. She had scattered the room with soothing paintings of calm ocean scenes and dappled autumn forest depictions. With a nod, she crossed the room from her desk which was a lovely red-stained walnut secretary tastefully tucked into the far corner and met the student lurking in her doorway. She smiled.

"Come in," she said again as Neville peeked around the door jamb. "Make yourself comfortable."

Neville nodded wordlessly and moved to one of the armchairs, depositing his knapsack on the floor beside the settee. Hermione noticed that his hands scabbled in his lap and his cheeks were quite pink.

"Relax, Neville," she said as she crossed the room, putting her brightest smile on her face. "It's just me. We've known each other since we met on the train coming here." Neville just nodded. She could see he was going to need a bit of prompting. "Don't think of this as a counselor-patient sort of thing; let's just talk."

"Okay," he said quietly, but still remained fidgety and taciturn.

Hermione cleared her throat. If this was the way her sessions started, things might not go as well as Dumbledore had hoped. "How was the end of your summer?" Hermione asked. She knew it was a weak start, but she had to begin somewhere and he certainly wasn't volunteering anything.

"Good," he said, easing a bit but still somewhat tense around the eyes. "Gran and I went on holiday to Greece."

"Oh, that must have been lovely!" Hermione answered, with genuine enthusiasm. "The climate must have agreed with you, you look smashing."

Hermione warmed as Neville pinkened in pleasure at her praise. He even patted his stomach beneath the plain robes. "Yeah, climbing around all the historical sites lost me a few pounds," he said, a chuckle in his voice. "And I figured I'd better shape up, you know. If I'm going to have to keep a lady's interest soon" His eyes tightened with the stress he was trying to hide and Hermione tried to ease the transition of subjects.

"You'll have no trouble then," she said warmly. Neville blushed. "So no one else has been foisted on you since you lost me to Snape, eh?" She tried to sound flippant, knowing that this was a stressor for both of them. She was not sure she succeeded, really, but Neville smiled anyway.

"No," he said, only a tiny hitch in his voice. "But I was thinking of dueling Snape over you."

She laughed at the unusually roguish humor from Neville, and felt him relax as he laughed with her. "Don't waste your effort," she said, "you'd only embarrass him."

For a moment, there was a bit of silence where Neville fingered the wand she could see stashed in his sleeve. "Hermione, do you..." he started, and then trailed off. "Do you really think that I could, you know, attract someone?"

Hermione felt his insecurity and sadness squeeze her heart. He was trying so desperately not to betray his feelings on his face, but she could see them there as plain as if he had scrawled them there in glowing red ink: Neville was in love with someone and wanted to ask her to marry him, but he didn't think himself good enough.

"Neville," she started carefully, "what do you think of me?"

He bit his lip. "What do you mean?"

"What sort of girl do you think I am?"

He smiled shyly. "Brave. Kind. Loyal. Clever as the day is long. A touch bossy," he said with a smirk, giggling a bit when she pursed her lips, "but patient and helpful, even to poor saps like me. And one of the best people I've ever met."

Hermione allowed herself a moment to blush and smile under Neville's glowing praise. Her bashful housemate surprised her often with how clearly he could cut through a situation when he wanted to do so. "And I accepted you, didn't I?"

"Well, yes," he admitted, "but you sort of had to, didn't you?"

"No," she said flatly, but not unkindly. "I could have accepted Charlie or Lupin or any number of the others they suggested. I accepted you. Why do you think so?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea," Neville said, not even bothering to force a smile.

"Because you're sweet," he blushed immediately, "and kind and decent and noble," he nearly put his hand in front of his face here, "and I think you're just an absolutely lovely person. And I would never accept someone for a lifetime commitment that I didn't think would make a kind, loving, and strong..." here, Neville looked astonished, "...life partner."

"You accepted Snape, though," he said, clearly confused.

"Yes," she said, slowly. "Yes, I accepted Professor Snape. And while he isn't the kindest or most approachable man," at this, she received a 'ha!' of indignance, "he is intelligent and powerful. And however poorly he shows it on a daily basis, he is noble." Neville sat silently, gaping at her. Truth be told, Hermione surprised herself. To cover it, she said even more strongly, "I wouldn't accept someone I didn't have faith in."

Neville nodded, still silent.

"Now you tell me, Neville," Hermione said, hoping her prompt would not scare him away, "do you believe that those qualities I listed about you would attract someone?"

"I dunno," he floundered. "I ... well, she ..."

"You obviously have someone in mind. Tell me what about her makes you afraid you can't attract her," she probed gently.

Neville resumed running his hand along his wand, looking dreadfully relieved that Hermione had not asked him to reveal her identity. "Well, you see, she's quite smart and she's very good at what she does. She's powerful and witty and strong and she's so funny and ... and I'm none of those things. I'm just afraid that there's nothing she'd see in me."

Hermione started to respond, but Neville charged on.

"And she's hurting," he bit his lip a moment and Hermione had the feeling he chose his words quite carefully, "because of the deaths this summer. She's cried with me so many times and said that she feels like one of them particularly is her fault. It's not," Neville said fiercely, "but she feels responsible. And I've told her time and time over, it's not her fault and that it's just survivors' guilt..."

"But she can't help it," Hermione nodded. "It's a very common symptom of survivors' guilt. I've read lots about it in the last few days." Hermione reached out and laid her palm across the back of Neville's fidgeting hands. "Depression and anxiety and feelings of helplessness are very common. But it sounds like you're doing the best thing for her, Neville. Sympathy and commiseration won't work; she has to come to it herself. And it sounds like you've been supportive but strong, and that's what will help her. She's quite lucky she has you to listen."

"I'm afraid." Neville's voice was small; terribly, terribly small.

"Of what?"

"That if I don't tell her how I feel, someone else will snatch her up and I'll miss my chance. But if I *do* tell her how I feel," Neville's eyes started to tear up, "and she can't handle it, how could I ever live with making her sadder?"

Hermione was quiet a long moment. She knew that she should be gentle and detached, just like all of the books said. Caring and open but uninvolved. But this was one of her best friends sitting in the chair across from her, trying not to weep over the possibility of either losing or hurting his first love. Hermione reached out a hand and drew Neville to his feet. When he stood, she laced her arms around his waist and drew him into a loose hug. A tad awkward, as he'd never really touched Hermione before other than the perfunctory classmate sort of stuff, it took a moment before Neville wound his arms around her and allowed himself to drop his head and cry into her shoulder.

"Love from you would never make any woman sad, Neville," Hermione said as she ran her hand gently across his back. She knew that it was a tad unfair, that if the girl he spoke of *did* react badly to the news of his feelings that it might shatter his confidence, but Hermione couldn't stand to see him weep. He had always been such a kind, loving, willing friend, so grateful for affection that she couldn't stand to see him deny that affection to himself or someone else. She stroked his dark hair for a moment before she drew him back and looked into his eyes.

"You should tell her," she said firmly. "Understand if she doesn't leap in joy, as she's clearly going through a lot right now, but you should definitely tell her. Your love," he blushed, "will likely be a great strength to her."

"Thank you," he said brokenly. "I think I will tell her after all."

After another quick clasp around her shoulders, Neville swiped at his eyes and settled back into the chair in front of the fire. Hermione joined him. "She's lovely, Hermione," Neville said. His smile lit up his entire face, making the tear trails glitter in a strangely pleasant way. "She's really quite something. As soon as I talk to her, you'll be the first to know how it goes."

"I'm glad," Hermione said. "Was there anything else you wanted to talk about today?"

Neville smiled. "I think that can wait until our session next week."

Hermione smiled back. *A repeat customer.* The session had gone better than anticipated.

Her second counseling session, however, did not. Lavender Brown had come into her little study looking as if Hermione might supply her with all the answers to her emotional questions, and the weight of what her classmate placed on her shoulders settled heavily. Hermione tried to coax Lavender, offering her little pulls here and there to get her to speak about what was bothering her, but all that the girl wanted to know was how to "get better." Hermione had tried to explain that it wasn't as simple as all that, that she should try talking about what was bothering her first, about how the situations were affecting her, but Lavender snapped shut like a bear trap each time. It seemed that the girl wanted to bury all her troubles under a thick layer of dirt and simply pave a road over top. Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose as she sat at her desk, scowling down at the progress report she was writing for Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore. Lavender had said she would come back, but Hermione wasn't sure how much she could do for the girl until she consented to talk about the past, the deaths, and how they were affecting her. Hermione made herself a little note on her homework planner to research Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in more depth and search for ways to probe the girl more productively without sending her even further inside her defenses. She couldn't decide whether the girl was suffering from a bout of PTSD, plain old depression or just some heavy survivors' guilt, but whichever was the case...

Hermione's head rocketed up from her folded hands. "Survivors' guilt?" she nearly shrieked. Her mind raced through the information that she had gleaned from Lavender and then thought hard about her session the previous day with Neville. Survivors' guilt, crying and blame, being snatched away by someone else? It all fit! It was Lavender that Neville was sweet on! "No accounting for taste," Hermione said, then scolded herself for the nastiness. Apparently, Neville saw something in the girl that she had not. "Well, I just hope he can help her out of this rut she's in..."

Completely out of the blue, though, Hermione thought as she sat with her hands resting on her report. Neville had never seemed to favor any girl at school except perhaps for herself when she helped him in all those classes. Scouring her mind to try and come up with any memories of Neville spending time with Lavender or, for that matter, any other girl, she could only recall him spending time with Ginny, Luna and Hermione as far as girls went, and a few instances of seeing him chatting with Tonks after Order meetings. She remained completely puzzled, but figured that once Neville talked to Lavender about his feelings, she'd hear the details of how the unlikely match had happened.

A heavy sigh escaped Hermione for what seemed like the thousandth time that day. Massaging the back of her shoulders, she glanced at the carriage clock on the mantel and smiled. It was nearly time for Defense Against the Dark Arts, and the thought livened her. Tonks could make any day better. She hefted her knapsack and muttered a few locking and warding spells as she exited her office. Hermione smiled as she navigated the crowded, bustling hallways between her office on the seventh floor and the fourth floor classroom. The first day of Defense against the Dark Arts with Tonks had been quite interesting, to say the least. She and Harry had both slipped and forgotten to call her Professor, though she hadn't seemed to mind it at all. In fact, she had seemed to be more amiable to that than being given the appropriate title. The entire class of NEWT level students had been completely thrilled at the idea of having an Auror for a professor, especially when she had stated baldly at the beginning of the class that she intended for the curriculum this year to focus on combat skills and strong defensive magic.

"A war is on us," she had said dramatically from the front podium, "and I won't sugar-coat it for you just because you are students. There is danger out there," she thrust her arm towards the window and the dramatic sweeping effect was only slightly marred by the two piles of books sent soaring to the ground from her arm, "and you need to know how to be prepared for it! I'm going to teach you to think quick, look sharp, and when it's necessary, hide right out in plain sight."

The entire class had been breathless on her words, Hermione included. Though she knew Tonks to be an Auror and that Aurory required a high level of skill, she couldn't help but think of the fuchsia-haired witch as the well-meaning but slightly bumbling jokester that had made animal noises for her and Ginny over dinner so many evenings at Grimmauld Place. Seeing her in the deep purple robes, standing at the front of the classroom demonstrating her Metamorphosing, had put the witch in a totally different light for Hermione. It was with great pleasure that Hermione dropped into her seat, pulling out her textbook and smiling at Harry as Tonks bustled in the back door of the classroom.

"Quiet now, quiet everyone. Watcher Harry, Hermione, Neville," she said with a smile on her face as she swept to the front of the room. "Don't worry about the textbooks for now. The next few weeks, we're going to be concentration on some basics of combat." The entire class leaned forward in their seats as a single entity, hungry for every morsel of information. "I understand that there was once a dueling club here, correct?" Everyone nodded.

"Well, as I have heard who the instructor was," Tonks smirked, "I'd imagine that it was simply basics. But as basics are the best way to start, that's not necessarily bad. The thing you want to keep in mind, though, is that what you've been taught is a formal duel. Rarely, if *ever*, will an enemy especially if it's a Death Eater preserve the niceties. Your enemy won't wait for a nice bow and salute before serving you a Cruciatius Curse. So you need to learn to watch your opponent and think quickly."

Tonks blushed just a tiny bit as she noticed how the entire class hung on her every word. Hermione smiled encouragingly and winked when the older witch caught her eye. "Right," Tonks said. "So in a real fight, you have to be on guard at all times. Who wants to help me with a demonstration?"

Before she had even finished her sentence, nearly every hand in the classroom had shot into the air. To her slight annoyance, Hermione realized that some people had even beaten her well-trained response. Tonks laughed heartily and scanned the room. Her gaze rested for a moment on Harry and she pursed her lips thoughtfully before continuing her search. The friendly, heart-shaped face hardened when she realized that only four hands in the entire classroom were not raised, and they all belonged to Slytherins.

"Mr. Malfoy," Tonks said, her voice just a bit barbed. "Perhaps you'd be so good as to help me?"

He smirked deeply and made a great show of smoothing his robes and plucking his wand from his desk before standing and moving to the front of the classroom. "Of course, Professor," he said. There was just enough disdain and insolence in his voice to make her lips set into a thin, hard line.

"Thank you," she said tightly. Clearing her throat and smoothing her features, she turned towards him. "Mr. Malfoy and I will be demonstrating the necessity of quick reflexes. Wand at the ready, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco raised his wand slowly, a thick smirk on his face. When he had taken a ready stance, Tonks turned back to the classroom.

"I cannot stress to you enough how important it is to be alert at all times. Never underestimate your opponent; any moment of inattention could turn into a split-second advantage, making you an open target for injury or Merlin forbid death. An enemy will rarely give you the opportunity to assess and consider his weaknesses or plan your best method of attack. So even if you believe you know your enemy, never assume you can anticipate their intentions or moves...*Levicorpus!*"

She had whirled around and trained her wand on the insolent blonde so quickly that nearly everyone in the classroom jumped when he was upended and hoisted into the air. Draco clearly had thought himself safe as she spoke because his wand had gone slack at his side and clattered to the floor as he struggled in mid-air. A roar of laughter rumbled through the classroom as he wriggled against the invisible cuff holding him aloft by the ankle. Tonks, though, turned back to the class as Draco dangled.

"Never," she said firmly, using her offhand to emphasize her words. "Never underestimate your enemy. If Mr. Malfoy had been watching carefully, he would have noticed my eyes darting to and from his wand hand, waiting for an opportunity for him to get bored and sloppy. All I had to do was distract him long enough to sideline his attention for an instant, and there you have it." She gestured to where her student now had started to mutter vulgarity. "*Liberacorpus*," she said easily, then, "*Wingardium Leviosa*." Using the levitation charm, she guided him to a gentle, upright landing and smiled just a tiny bit as he replaced his robes, swearing under his breath.

"Excellent job of demonstrating my point, Mr. Malfoy," she said and smiled winningly as he glared at her. "Ten points to Slytherin."

Most of the other students in the room scowled at her giving points to Slytherin merely for being inattentive and humiliated Draco included but Hermione was among the few who smiled.

"Clever, that," Harry whispered to Hermione, "giving him points. Made it look like she hadn't enjoyed hoisting that little prat up by his ankles."

Hermione giggled behind her hand and nodded.

"You had the privilege of working with my mentor, Mad-Eye Moody," Tonks said, before mumbling under her breath, "more or less." Hermione and Harry smiled at her. "Professor Moody always taught 'constant vigilance.' Not a bad idea." Many of the students looked at her skeptically. "While I'm not saying that you have to drink out of a hip flask and look around every corner with a Foe Glass, being aware of your surroundings is an essential part of combat. For example, I'm going to give you an exercise: I want you all to clear everything off your desks." Everyone rushed to obey. Tonks waved her wand and out from behind her desk soared no less than twenty random objects, from a pair of boots and a sugar quill to a small pumpkin, a ball of old twine and a crystal goblet. With a flick of her hand, the objects deposited themselves, one per student, on each bench. "You will study your object for approximately three seconds. Go!"

Everyone seemed at a loss as to what to do, so there ended up being quite a bit of looking around in confusion. After three seconds, Tonks flicked her wand again and the items flew into mid-air, jumbled themselves up and then landed on another person's desk with no discernable order or reason. "Again, study your object. Go!" Tonks caused the objects to rearrange themselves numerous times until everyone had seen each item once for no more than three seconds. After the last pass, she cried, "*Evanesco!*" and the items instantly vanished.

"Take out a piece of parchment," Tonks said, grinning widely at the students now. Hermione had her quill poised over a length of parchment before any one else had even reached their bags. "Now, write down, in order, each object you saw and three identifying characteristics of that object. You have five minutes. Go!"

The entire class gaped at her as she leaned back against her desk, arms folded across her chest, a smug look on her face. "Time is wasting!" she said, tapping her wristwatch.

Hermione smiled, then chewed the corner of her lip in concentration and set to work. The task proved much more difficult than she had imagined. She had managed to write down the first five or six items with a list of a few characteristics each, but after that her mind got fuzzy. Each item seemed to blend together and she couldn't make sense of what order they had gone in. Giving up on the characteristics temporarily, she tried to settle for simply getting down a list of all items, only to realize that she could only remember the first eight or nine and the last two or three. She scowled at her paper, as if it had Confunded the information out of her head.

"Time's up!" Tonks said brightly, answered by a great chorus of groans. "Who got all seventeen with three characteristics?" Silence. Everyone stared at Hermione, who proceeded to blush and stare at her parchment. After her previously blemish-free academic record, this failure seemed gargantuan. "Okay, did anyone get all seventeen, even without identifiers?"

Not a single student raised their hand. Strangely, Tonks smiled. "Who got fourteen or more?" Only Harry raised his hand. Hermione scowled even deeper. "Okay, eleven or more?" Hermione's hand shot into the air, accompanied by Hannah Abbott and Draco Malfoy. "More than seven?" Most of the rest of the class raised their hands. "Less than seven?" Crabbe and Goyle laughed thickly and raised their hands.

"Okay," Tonks said, nodding. "Only one person got 75% of the objects. One." Most of the class fidgeted and looked uncomfortable. "And quite frankly," Tonks said, casting Harry an appraising look, "I'd have expected that from him. But he's not the only one from whom I would have expected that performance. So what does that tell us?"

After a few moments of silence, Hermione raised her hand uncertainly. "That we need to be more observant?"

Tonks nodded and made a so-so gesture with her hand. "Yes, but not only," she said. "It's not just about seeing what's around you. It's about taking everything in as quickly as you can and branding it into your memory. Processing the information. Using your advantages. Knowing your surroundings. More than one fight has been won just by paying attention and using what's available." The students nodded and looked around the classroom, as if committing it to memory in case a battle was to happen upon them at any moment. "Okay, parchment out; I'm going to give you some notes before we finish up until next week."

A rustle of paper and quills filled the classroom as Tonks lectured about different methods of combat. As the bell rang, she assigned a ten-inch essay on combat styles and then smiled. "And anyone who can come up with a list of exercises to help focus your awareness will get bonus points on the next exam!"

Hermione scrawled the extra credit in her homework planner and hurriedly moved to pack up. She wanted to get to dinner as soon as possible so she could begin researching mental exercises in the library. She had nearly packed everything away when a conversation at the front of the room caught her attention. Lavender Brown and Hannah Abbott chatted happily with Tonks when Neville shuffled out of his seat and up to them, his cheeks a little bit pink and clearing his throat. It took all of her self-discipline not to rocket up from her bag and squeal in joy when she heard Neville's voice say, "Could I speak to you after class?"

She giggled to herself, knowing what a treat the girl would be in for when Neville got to say his piece. Trying not to cause him anxiety by gawking, Hermione studiously turned her head away from the knot of people at the front of the room and headed to dinner with Harry. Hoping fervently that Lavender would respond well to Neville's attentions, Hermione practically skipped from her desk.

"What are you so happy about?" Harry asked quizzically as they left the classroom and made their way down to the Great Hall.

"Oh, I just have a feeling it's going to be a good evening, that's all," she said and looped her arm through Harry's.

"Hermione, you are truly the cleverest person Gryffindor has ever housed! The cleverest person ever!" Neville's voice was nearly shouting as he pelted through the portrait hole and into the Common Room. A squeal tore from her throat as Neville yanked her to her feet, threw his arms round her middle and swung her in a wide, dizzying circle, causing her to kick a few first years and knock several books off the table before he consented to put her down. She couldn't help but laugh at the elated face of her housemate as he tried (and failed) not to bounce up and down in his happiness. "Well, then?" Hermione said, trying not to give away her knowledge. "What's this all about?"

"I've told her!" Neville said in a rush. "I've told her everything we talked about! That I've been really glad to spend time with her and that I think she's lovely and smart and funny and strong, and that I want her to be happy. And I told her how much I lo..." At this, Neville's words screeched to a halt. He blushed furiously and looked around the room at everyone who was trying not to stare at them.

Hermione took both of his hands in hers. "Go on," she said and grinned.

"I told her that I really care for her," he said, lowering his voice distinctly. "And that I think that ... well, that I ... that I love her."

Hermione's face lit up. "And?"

Neville threw his arms around Hermione and hugged her until she started to wheeze. "And she said she loves me, too! Can you imagine?! We're going to get married!"

"Oh, Neville, that's fantastic!" Hermione felt tears prick her eyes at the complete and utter joy on his face. A tiny prick of sadness poked at her heart in envy, but she slapped it away. "I'm so happy for you. I'm sure you two will be absolutely blissful together."

Neville smiled his shy little grin and nodded. "Well, we're sort of an unlikely pair," Hermione chuckled, "and it will be a bit difficult, we both agreed, having another teacher-student marriage..."

"Teacher?" Hermione asked, a little more loudly than she'd intended to do. "What do you mean, teacher?"

Neville grinned. "Yeah, it's her. I talked to her after Defense Against the Dark Arts. She told me to call her Dora." He blushed furiously.

"After Defense Against the ... Dor...do you mean Tonks?! Tonks is the one you're marrying? I thought it was...but it's *Tonks?*"

Neville looked a little surprised at Hermione's sudden astonishment and volume, but he nodded and regained his smile. "Yeah, it's Tonks. Dora," his grin tripled and Hermione couldn't help grinning along with him. He was clearly smitten within an inch of his life. "So you won't be the only one dealing with being married to a teacher, eh?"

Hermione nodded absently, and then something clicked into place. Her face sobered. "Tell her it's not her fault about Ron," she said seriously. "There's nothing she could have done, that day in London. They got the drop on us and she couldn't have saved him. It's not her fault, Neville."

Neville's friendly, open face pinched a bit. "I know, but she blames herself. For not being quicker, for not Apparating or Flooing in.... Maybe if you said something to her?"

"I'll do that," Hermione said, smiling. "When I offer her my congratulations, I'll do that."

Hermione scowled at the binder open on the table in front of her. She'd planned the whole thing from start to finish now, so there was no avoiding it. No sense in trying and, if she were honest with herself, the impulse to do so had faded considerably. Marrying Snape was inevitable, and getting out of it at this point was impossible, so she had resigned herself to it. She wasn't happy, but she was resigned. She took a deep breath and scrubbed her hands over her face. A second opinion was needed on the ceremony, on what she'd written, but who would she ask? Certainly not *him*. No doubt he'd just say something snarky or something hurtful, they'd quarrel, she'd cry, and then they'd be no better off than before and she'd want to slap him even more than she did right now. Yes, she was resigned, but it wasn't a pleasant place to be. So whom to ask? Harry? No, that was no good. Not only would he slam shut and grouse about the marriage itself, he would likely cast away any attempt she had at making it a pretty or enjoyable wedding. And she couldn't afford to paint his perception of it any blacker, what with the favor she needed to ask of him. That had her nearly sobbing. One of the invitations she'd sent out what a laugh that was! Only three that weren't here at the school: one to her parents, one to Remus Lupin, one to the Burrow for the Weasley family had come back unopened. Not just unopened, but covered with her father's easily recognizable scrawl, stating that the post should return to sender. A half hour later, a single sheet of paper folded in on itself had been delivered by a barn owl at the common room window. The handwriting on it was clearly her mother's and she'd opened the note with shaking fingers and no little amount of anxiety clenching her chest.

Darling, (Hermione had stopped to scoff at that)

I don't have much time to write, as your father will be quite upset if he catches me, but I just couldn't let his scribble on the invitation be the only response you got. He's still furious, of course. You have to understand, Hermione, that this is hard for us. You flit off to what seems like a different universe every school year, learning things we don't understand and can't be a part of. And then you come back one night and tell us that everything we've been told is a lie and now, to save yourself, you have to marry a man Daddy's age. And not only that, it's a man whom, based on what you've told us in the past, if you had to start a fire by rubbing together the good words you've said about him you'd freeze to death. It's all a bit much. And as for your wedding ... I'm afraid we just can't, dear. I can't go against your father. We are a team and if he says that he cannot condone it, I have to stand by him.

Take care of yourself,

Mother

She'd wanted to laugh at first, at how ridiculous her mother's logic toward the end of the note, but the tears had come later. And resurged now as she thought about it. Her parents weren't coming. They'd cut her off because they couldn't find the energy to try to understand necessity and sacrifice. And protection. They'd refused to understand *her* and the choices she'd made. 'A team,' her mother had said. Wasn't their family a team? Not anymore, it appeared. She'd committed a foul and been thrown off the field. They weren't coming. And if her parents weren't coming, she'd have to ask the favor of Harry. She just had no idea how he'd take it.

"What's the matter?" she heard a familiar voice say.

"Oh, the same old thing," Hermione said, trying to muster up a smile for Harry when he sat down at the table next to her. She knew her voice gave her away, but what else was there to do?

"Come on, Hermione," Harry said, his face serious, "do you think that after everything, I don't know when you're chalking up a story? What's wrong?"

Hermione made a motion to Harry to keep his voice down. Even two hours later, Neville was still beaming and jabbering happily to Ginny about his plans with 'Dora'; she didn't want to spoil his lovely triumph with her sad news. So instead of responding to Harry, she just passed over the envelope she'd received just after she spoke to Neville. She nodded grimly as Harry's face hardened when he read the neat words her father had printed.

"So not only are they not coming," she said as lightly as she could, "he's pretending I don't even exist. Isn't that lovely?"

Harry didn't speak, but it didn't really matter. What could he say to her that would possibly make it better?

"So I need to ask you a very large favor," Hermione said quietly. She had to draw every ounce of courage she had to ask this one thing of Harry because she was sure it would not go well. Laying a gentle hand on top of his, Hermione looked Harry straight in his sad, lovely green eyes. "I need to ask you if you'll give me away."

Harry started and gaped at her. "What? You want me to ...? You can't be serious."

With all the times she'd sighed in the last few weeks, she was beginning to doubt her ability to finish a conversation without one. "I'm completely serious. If my father's not coming to my wedding, who else is there to do it?"

Harry started shaking his head before she could even finish. "I can't, Hermione. I can't do that. It shouldn't be me. Don't ask me, please."

He tried to push away from her, away from the table, but she tightened her hand on his. "I want someone to give me away, Harry. I know it's not an ideal wedding," Harry scoffed loudly and started to retort, but she clamped down on his hand, "but I want at least the ceremony to be of my choosing. And I want to be given away. You have to, Harry, please. You're the person I'd most want to give me away. *Please?*"

The smooth features of his face twisting in suppressed rage and agony, Harry finally pushed away from the table. Away from her. He looked as if he might vomit. "I can't, Hermione. The only person I could possibly have handed you away to isn't here to take you. I can just barely stand letting you go to him," she noticed they'd both stopped referring to her fiancé by name, "so please don't ask me to *give* you to him. I can't do it. I won't. Ask someone else."

Harry made to stride away but Hermione wrenched herself up from her chair and clutched at his upper arm. "Harry, please..."

"No!" he snapped, yanking his arm from her grip.

When tears began to flood his eyes, he turned from her and fled the room, taking the dormitory steps three at a time in his haste to get away from her. Hermione sat for another five or ten minutes in silence collecting her thoughts once he'd gone. She'd known he'd have trouble with the idea but she had never imagined that he would flat out refuse. He was Harry, and Harry was always there for her. Always. Only here she was, alone. It took her another few minutes to think of who else could do it. Who in their right mind would willingly hand Hermione over to Snape? Who would knowingly consent to putting Gryffindor's pride and Hogwarts Head Girl on the arm of Slytherin's Head of House and treacherous spy? Only someone who was exceptionally, if not foolishly, trusting.

And then it came to her. It was a good idea. The picture they would make walking down the aisle would be comical to the point of absurdity, but he would do it and she knew he'd be thrilled just to be asked. It was a good idea. Never one to waste time, Hermione strode up to her dormitory, grabbed her cloak and purposefully marched out of the portrait hole and away from Gryffindor Tower.

"Hermione! Been wonderin' when yeh'd come visit! How's yer first week been?"

The smile that broke over Hermione's face was completely stress-free and easy as she stood on Hagrid's doorstep. She breathed a little easier, feeling as if a weight had been lifted off her chest just in the presence of his effortless good nature. "It's been just awful, Hagrid," she answered, but she was still smiling. "May I come in?"

"'Course you can," Hagrid said and stepped aside to allow her in. As soon as the door shut behind him, his face sobered. "I dinnt know if I should contact yeh, after what happened to Ron ..."

Hagrid's words trailed into nothing as he broke into tears. He dropped into one of the chairs at his kitchen table and began to sob. Hermione moved to pat his wild tangle of hair and when he pulled her into a bone-crushing hug, she felt her eyes water too, but not entirely in sadness.

"It's all right, Hagrid," she said quietly. Gently, she extricated herself from his squeezing grip. "I mean, it's not all right, it's bloody awful. But I'm going to be okay."

"I wish I coulda made the funeral," he said, sniffing and releasing her. "Dumbledore asked me to take care of some Order business and I was outteh the country until just a week ago. Meant to offer yeh my condolences, but I just dinnt know how."

"It's all right," she said again, patting his cheek. "Really it is. Just promise me you'll take good care of his grave for me."

"O'course I will!" Hagrid cried, looking grateful to be given something to be responsible for in recompense for his absence. When he stopped sniffing, Hermione finally sat next to him and grasped one of his trash-lid sized hands in both of her own. He gently patted her fingers and gave her a watery smile.

"Actually, Hagrid," she said slowly, looking into his warm black eyes. "There's something else I'd like to ask you to do for me."

"Anythin'," he said quickly, "you know that."

She nodded. She'd have to back up and explain a bit first. "Well, you must have known why Ron was killed..." Hagrid nodded gravely, "which means you must know that I had to accept someone else's petition."

Hagrid growled and, not for the first time, Hermione trembled a bit at the tiny show of force from the usually kitten-gentle half-giant. "Ruddy law!" he spat. "Whatter they thinkin', bloody Ministry...sorry fer the language, but it's just daft of them, passin' that sort of thing!"

"I know," she said, and her face hardened. "But what choice do I have? I have to get married, and I had to choose someone who could help keep me safe. And by extension, keep Harry safe."

Hagrid nodded and again, patted her hand, waiting patiently for her to finish. Something about the kind look in his eyes, the childlike trust in his face as he awaited her explanation, shook her and she couldn't bear to see his expression. So she got up and started pacing his hut.

"Well, you see ... the choice I made didn't make many people very happy. In fact," she said ruefully, "it didn't even make the man I chose happy. Or me. But it's the best choice." Her voice trailed away. She had to keep believing that was the truth.

After a long beat of silence, Hagrid asked, "What lucky wizard did yeh choose?"

Instead of answering, Hermione scoffed. "Lucky? Ha! It's nothing but a bundle of trouble and snooty know-it-all book learning he's getting." She hadn't meant to sound so bitter; Hagrid immediately bristled in defense.

"What he's gettin' is a beautiful girl who's the smartest witch of her age, who wants to make everybody better an' has the finest heart I've seen since Lily Potter was alive! And if he won't see that, I'll pound it in ter him!" Hagrid roared.

Hermione startled and stared at him. After a moment, tears leaked from her eyes and she'd known that whatever had motivated her to ask what she was about to ask, he was most assuredly the right person for the job. "Hagrid," Hermione whispered, touched.

He cleared his throat loudly, but smiled sheepishly. "So who'm I gonna have ter pound?" he said, his smile growing to a smirk.

"You've got your work cut out for you, Hagrid... it's Professor Snape."

"Prof...no," Hagrid said. He looked as stunned as if Hermione had just squatted down, roared, then hatched a dragon from beneath her school robes. Hermione just nodded. And then, surprisingly, Hagrid's face lit with comprehension. "So that's why you and he were strollin' back from Hogsmeade as if you two were..."

"Yes," she said, not sure if she wanted to hear to what or whom Hagrid was about to compare the two of them. "And as you can imagine, that choice of husband isn't very popular." He nodded, but stayed silent. "My parents have disowned me."

"No!"

"Oh, yes. They were scandalized, and I suppose I can sympathize with that, but they didn't even try to understand. They just shut the door." And that's where Hermione couldn't hold in the sadness any longer. The tears rained down her cheeks and she didn't try to stop them, but neither did she stop saying what she had to say. "They're not coming to the wedding. They sent back the invitation without even opening it."

Hagrid had started to cry with her and this time, as she sat down again, it was she who patted his hand.

"Well, every little girl dreams of her father walking her down the aisle for her wedding, you know. And I know I'm not the usual kind of girl, but I still have those dreams. And if my father's not going to, who will? I couldn't ask Mr. Weasley. After what happened to Ron, it just wouldn't be right." Hermione made a snap decision not to tell Hagrid about Harry's anger or his answer. Harry might face anger from Hagrid that would only aggravate the situation. "So I knew of only one other person who I'd ask for a favor that big." Hermione laughed when she looked into Hagrid's teary face. It was open and just a bit sad. He had no idea what she was trying to say. "Hagrid, would you give me away?"

The curly black beard shuddered when Hagrid's mouth dropped open. "Hermione!" he said, in quiet awe. "Yeh don't really mean yeh want *me* to stand up with yeh?"

"I'd be honored if you would, Hagrid," she answered, smiling. "If you'd like to."

Tears started to run from his eyes afresh, streaking down into his beard and puddling and darkening the shoulders of his thick leather vest. "Oh, Hermione," he whispered. Hagrid brought one enormous hand off the table, away from hers. Extending the long, thick fingers, the pad of his thumb caressed her face, stroking nearly her entire cheek, more gently, she believed, than she had ever seen him touch anyone or anything before. His big hand wrapped around her whole neck, but the cradle of his palm around her head was whisper light. His chest hitched as he hiccupped down a sob.

"I'd be happy to walk yeh," he said. And then, barely audible, "Anybody would be proud to walk with such a beautiful lady."

And those soft words, uttered by such a soft heart, undid her completely and she sobbed both happy and sad as Hagrid swept her into another crushing hug against his enormous chest, stroking her back as gently as he could manage.

A crack like a whip broke the easy chatter she'd been conducting with Hagrid for the last few minutes. Shortly after the sudden sharp noise, a tiny knock sounded on Hagrid's door. "Sit," Hagrid said when Hermione made to get up. "Relax and finish yer tea."

Hermione smiled and sipped as Hagrid opened the door. A squeaky voice soon met her ears.

"Excuse me, Hagrid sir, but is Miss Hermione here? There's a visitor up at the castle waiting to see her."

Hermione set down her tea cup and moved towards the stoop where she saw Winky standing holding a tiny blanket around her shoulders against the breeze that had kicked up.

"A visitor?" Hermione asked, surprised. "Someone is waiting for me at the castle?"

"Yes, Miss Hermione," the little elf said, bobbing a shortly curtsy. "A young lady who said that you is waiting on her. She brought you a package."

"Package?" Hermione mused, unable to account for the idea. "Excuse me, Hagrid. I'm afraid I have to go. Sorry to cut things short."

Hagrid waved away her apology and nodded. "You go on ahead and see who's waitin' fer yeh." As she swung her cloak around her shoulder and made to leave, he stopped her with a hand on her shoulder and a beaming smile. "Yeh just send me a note with whatcha need me ter do fer the ceremony ..."

She smiled and nodded as she left the little cottage and turned to thank Winky, who disappeared with a snap. Hermione chuckled wryly. Three years later, and the little elf hadn't seemed to forgive her for the S.P.E.W. fiasco. Well, she'd just have to think of another way to make it up to her. But as Hermione made her way across the sloping lawn back to the castle, it was the curious mystery of the visitor that held her mind. Expecting someone? She wasn't expecting anyone Very curious. Climbing the stairs hurriedly, Hermione found herself unable to decide whether she was excited or apprehensive at the idea of a visitor with a package for her. The decision was decidedly easier, though, as she came into the entrance hall and set eyes on the dark curls and exquisite velvet cloak of the young girl staring in wonder around the space she occupied.

"Amelie!" Hermione called, grinning in response to the girl's gape-mouthed awe. "It's good to see you; I'd almost forgotten you were bringing the rest of the robes today."

Amelie Moreaux nodded and, smiling, drew a thick, brown-wrapped package from underneath her cloak. She took only a minute to smile back at Hermione before returning to her astonished examination of the foyer of Hogwarts. With a guilty grin flashed to Hermione, she peered into the slight gap of the large doors leading into the Great Hall, but then shook herself and extended a pale hand to Hermione, who took it and shook it gently.

"Excusez moi, Mademoiselle," Amelie said, her face coloring prettily. "I seem to 'ave forgotten myself. Eet is just zat ... zis castle eez so grand!"

"Please call me Hermione," she reminded the girl gently. "And it's fine. I can understand completely; I stared even worse than you the first time I was here."

Amelie laughed a bit and gazed around one last time before directing her attention back to Hermione.

"But aren't you in school?" Hermione asked. She'd been curious about this on their first meeting, but hesitant to bring it up with someone she barely knew. But as the subject had presented itself, she didn't feel it was out of line to ask now. "Don't you attend a wizarding school?"

Amelie nodded and smiled. "I 'ave attended Beauxbatons. Maman, Fabienne and I 'ave only moved to Eeengland zis past summer, so we deed not attend 'Ogwarts. Our school does not begin until next week and Maman shall take us zere. Zis weel be my fourth year." She looked around again. "Make no mistake, Beauxbatons eez beautiful, but zis ... zis castle eez just so ... so ... *grand*. More zan I 'ave ever seen."

Hermione laughed. "From what I'd heard from Fleur, you'd think Beauxbatons was the grandest place on the planet."

Amelie's face hardened for a moment and she scoffed. "Such a primped up leetle princess, zat one. She was a sixth year when I started and so certain zat she was ze best thing Beauxbatons 'ad ever seen. *Parfois, je voudrais la gifler, le gosse de riches!*" Again, she shook herself, as if she'd just realized what she'd been doing. "Excusez moi. My tongue and eyes 'ave run away wiz me much zis evening."

Another hearty chuckle on her lips, Hermione waved away the apology. "No need. I just wasn't aware that anyone from Beauxbatons felt that way about her. She seemed to be the Queen Bee, so to speak."

Amelie shrugged, but this time, ventured nothing but a guilty smile. She then extended a hand and pointed to the package Hermione had taken from her. "Would you like to 'ave me asseest you in trying on ze robes to make sure zat zey are to your satisfaction?"

This time it was Hermione that started and blushed. "Of course! Forgive me, I should have invited you up rather than letting you stand here in the entryway. Would you like to come up to my House dormitory with me? I'll try on the robes and you can meet some of my friends."

The girl's porcelain doll-like face flushed with pleasure. "Oh, Mad-I mean, 'Ermione, that would be most wonderful of you! I would be quite 'appy to make ze acquaintance of your friends at 'Ogwarts."

"And you'll get to see more of the castle," Hermione said, grinning at the girl's eager smile. She waved a hand to Amelie and began to lead her up the long, curving marble staircase towards Gryffindor Tower.

It took the two of them nearly a half hour to make it up to Gryffindor Tower, so enraptured was Amelie by all the sites of the castle, the portraits and tapestries and moving staircases, but Hermione considered it time well spent. Though the girl was three and a half years her junior, Hermione found that not only was Amelie as sweet and eager as she had been on their first meeting, but showed a tendency towards Hermione's own love of books and history. The conversation they'd shared had been a pleasant one and Amelie had devoured every dusty fact straight out of the much maligned *Hogwarts, A History* that the boys had never appreciated that Hermione had ventured about the school. A tiny pang of regret hit Hermione that the bright, engaging girl could not be swiftly gathered into her own House. With a shrug and a smile, Hermione met the Fat Lady's portrait.

"Good evening, Miss Granger," the Fat Lady said jovially. "And you have a guest! Welcome to Hogwarts and Gryffindor Tower!"

A bit nonplussed, Amelie smiled and dropped a curtsy. "Enchanté," she said.

"Whimsy," Hermione said, and the Fat Lady swung open to admit them.

The usual bustle of activity was taking place in the Gryffindor Common Room, though perhaps more muted since the loss of so many students. But Gryffindor House seemed to have begun to understand that it could not stand still to mourn the loss. As such, many of the chairs in front of the fire were full and every seat at each table contained a student with homework out, though whether they were accomplishing anything depended on the person in the chair. Only a few people looked up when Hermione entered with Amelie hiding in her shadow, but one of the people who did was the person that Hermione was most eager for her new friend to meet.

As if this emotion was sensed just in Hermione's greeting smile, the plucky redhead waved enthusiastically from her seat between Neville and Harry at the furthest table and then rose to greet them. "Just made curfew then, didn't you?" Ginny asked, smirking and looking at her watch. "Though I suppose the Head Girl isn't burdened with curfew like us lowly peons ..."

Hermione chuckled and cuffed the girl gently on the arm. "Hush, you," she said. "I'm subject to curfew, unfortunately. McGonagall wouldn't give me any more quarter than

anyone else if I was caught out late and you know it."

Ginny smiled then looked past Hermione to where the other girl stood behind her shoulder, trying desperately to look like she wasn't gawking. "What have we here?"

Hermione stepped away and put a hand at Amelie's shoulder. "Ginny, this is Amelie Moreaux. She's the daughter of the seamstress Professor Snape took me to the other day. Amelie, this is Ginny Weasley, my best girlfriend."

Amelie shook the hand that Ginny held out and Hermione could tell that the younger girl was resisting the urge to drop a curtsy.

"Ginny's a year younger than me," Hermione finished. "And quite a loudmouth, if I do say so myself."

Which earned her an answering cuff on the arm from Ginny. "Nice to meet you," Ginny said.

"Enchanté," Amelie said and smiled shyly.

"Are Harry and Neville busy?" Hermione directed back to Ginny. "I'd like to introduce Amelie to the finest that Gryffindor has to offer."

Ginny scoffed but turned back to the table she'd come from. "Oi!" Ginny called loudly, making Hermione wince. "You two! Put down that rubbish and come meet Hermione's new mate. They're just looking at today's *Daily Prophet* Quidditch results," Ginny added when Amelie opened her mouth to apologize for the interruption.

Harry and Neville both walked over to where the girls stood, drawing the attention of many of the other people in the room. Hermione noticed that in the previous months, Harry had garnered even more attention than usual. It seemed to be common knowledge that he was on the list of eligible Muggleborns and half-bloods for the Marriage Law, but everyone seemed almost frightened of the idea of petitioning him. Hermione couldn't decide whether it was fear of him or the fact that most people didn't bank on the idea of him making it through the end of the war. Either idea was enough to make her scowl. But she brushed it away as he and Neville approached.

"New blood for Gryffindor?" Harry asked hopefully, earning laughter from the rest of the party.

"Hardly, as the sorting was a week ago," Ginny answered.

"This is Amelie Moreaux," Hermione said. "I met her last week in Hogsmeade. Her mother is a seamstress there." Her throat closed up a bit, realizing she'd purposely left out the tie to Snape when introducing Amelie to Harry and Neville. Somehow, she was certain that this would color Harry's relationship to her. "Amelie, this is Neville Longbottom..." Neville extended his hand, shook Amelie's and favored her with a soft smile which the girl returned. "...and Harry Potter."

When Harry smiled and offered his hand to Amelie, she started so violently that the cloak she had looped over her arm tumbled to the floor and Amelie bumped sharply into the stone wall next to her. In a flurry of nervousness, she stooped to retrieve the cloak and knocked head-first into Harry, who had bent to help her. When the two straightened, Harry rubbing at his forehead, Amelie blushed spectacularly and mumbled for a moment in French before she realized what she was saying.

"*Excusez-moi*," she said breathlessly. "I didn't mean to ... I'm sorry," she motioned towards Harry's head, "I just ... I 'ad no idea zat Mad...Ermione was acquainted wiz.... Mon dieu, you are ze *real* 'Arry Potter? "

"No, just a body double," Harry said and laughed, but from Amelie's astonished expression, the joke was clearly lost on her. "Yes, I'm the real Harry Potter."

"*Sacre bleu!*" she responded. "I am sorry, I just didn't expect ..." then, with a shake of her head, she extended her hand, which Harry took, grinning. "Enchanté."

"You bet," Harry answered.

He was still smiling, but from the way Amelie was gaping at him, the smile would probably become forced soon. Hermione decided to gracefully extricate the poor girl before things got embarrassing. Any more than they already had, at any rate.

"Ginny, Amelie has brought the rest of the robes that...were ordered the other day," she pointedly ignored Harry and Neville's confused looks. "Maybe you want to come up to my room and give me your opinions? "

"Sure," Ginny answered and motioned for Hermione to lead the way.

"Eet was a pleasure to meet you, gentlemen," Amelie said to Neville and Harry, a blush still on her face as she followed Ginny and Hermione up the stairs towards the girls' dormitory.

Well. Hermione had certainly understated things when she had said that Madame Moreaux 'knew what she was doing.' The woman was, quite clearly, a genius at her craft. As Hermione tried on set after set of robes, she realized that Snape was indeed correct: the humiliation of the fitting was well worth the quality of the end product. The first three sets of robes she had tried on were the 'day dresses', as Amelie had called them, that were for more casual wear. Though, in all manners they were fancier than most everything Hermione had ever worn, with the possible exception of her fourth year dress robes for the Yule Ball. The day robes looked rather in the Regency style high, empire waist that nipped in just under the bust and draped away from the body and were made of soft cottons in a lovely dusty pink, a soft, buttery yellow and a mossy green with a lighter green flowered pattern in it. All of them made her skin warm and lively, picked up the golden highlights in her hair and eyes and displayed her slender forearms and slim neck.

Even had the sets of robes not been packed to group them in order of usage, Hermione could have easily ascertained which ones were for the more formal evening usage. These robes were in much bolder colors, a saturated sapphire blue and plum purple, had longer, wider sleeves, and featured what Ginny called "tasteful décolletage." Hermione called it "more breast than anyone has seen on me my entire life," but was forced to admit that this was not a result of the cut of the dress but her own modesty and insecurity regarding her usual lack of cleavage. These robes also featured either a bolder pattern or embellishment, to set them apart as more formal. Hermione adored the blue dress with its bodice covered in black velvet burnout patterns of scrolling antique flowers, a band of black satin across her lower bicep, which allowed more of the burnout-covered material to flutter out around her elbows, and sapphire satin detailing a sash that strung across her ribcage and down the back of the dress, draping over a full black brocade skirt that extended to a small train behind her. The plum dress had a lower, square neckline and a bodice that "V"ed at the waist, bordered with ivory lace and gold filigree that clipped in close to her figure and supported a wattleau across the back of her shoulders, giving her the feeling that she wore a cape like a queen. In spite of herself, Hermione did a little twirl, flushed with pleasure, as she gazed at herself in the mirror. She hardly recognized the Hermione Granger reflected back at her; the one she saw was far more a woman than a girl ... and, come to that, far more a woman than she had expected to see. She blushed harder.

Something of her insecurity must have shown in her face because Amelie sat up straight and pursed her lips. "You are unhappy with zese robes?"

"Oh, no!" Hermione said in a rush. "No, they're lovely. I was just thinking..." Hermione cast around for something she could have been thinking, other than what she had *actually* been thinking. Her eye caught on her old dress robes, hanging in her wardrobe. "...wasn't there supposed to be a set of dress robes?"

It was Amelie's turn to blush. "Yes, Mad...Ermione. But Maman could not procure ze seek she 'ad decided upon for your dress robes in time for zis weekend. I believe zat ees part of why she sent me; she was ashamed zat she could not finish in time."

Ginny raised an eyebrow. Obviously she had noted, as Hermione had, that Amelie didn't quite meet her eye contact at that last statement. There was more to the reason Madame Moreaux had not shown up herself, but given the way Amelie seemed to balk at stating it, Hermione decided it best not to press the issue.

"She has nothing to be ashamed of," she said. "These robes are absolutely lovely and the time frame was ridiculously short for someone who is such an artist with fabric."

Besides, I have a set of dress robes that will work just fine, should the situation get dire enough to need them."

Ginny giggled, but Amelie just looked puzzled. Hermione waved a dismissive hand at her confusion. That certainly wasn't worth going into with someone who clearly thought Snape hung the moon. With a purse of her lips and thoughtful expression, Hermione turned back to the mirror to assess her appearance.

"What do you think?" she asked both of the girls who stood up behind her. Amelie smiled and Ginny wrapped an arm around her waist. "Do you think I'll be good enough for His Royal Highness, Snape senior?"

Amelie's smile dropped at once. "You're meeting with His Grace's father?" She suddenly seemed terrified.

"Yes," Hermione said slowly.

"*Mon dieu*," the girl whispered back. "Eet eez a good thing you came to Maman for ze robes. 'e is a strict man. *Bonne chance*, 'Ermione. You will need all ze luck you can get!"

Ginny's arm at her waist became a bracing hug as Hermione scowled. The weekend wasn't even here yet and she already wished for Monday.

A/N "*Sacre bleu!*" Translation: technically it means, "Holy blue!" but is the basic equivalent of the American slang, "Holy crap!"

"*Bonne chance.*" Translation: "Good luck."

"*Parfois je voudrais la gifler, le gosse de riches!*" Translation: "Sometimes I would like to slap her, that spoiled rich brat!"

The Blood Knot

Chapter 17 of 23

"Thank you for inviting us so warmly into your home. This weekend will be an adventure for Severus and me, I'm sure,"
Hermione said in a tone of complete sincerity.

Chapter Seventeen The Blood Knot

Blood Knot "*A blood knot*(Barrel knot) is most usefully employed for joining sections of ... line while maintaining a high portion of the line's inherent strength. Other knots used for this purpose can cause a substantial loss of strength. ... The principal drawback to the blood knot is the dexterity required to tie it." from Wikipedia

Hermione fumed, positively *fumed*, as she strode down the corridor towards her office. Harry was next to her, going on about some inane thing that had happened in Transfiguration that morning, but she barely heard a word of it. Anyone who'd had the guts to remark upon Harry's story and Hermione's obviously unrelated expression of fury would have told her that with her chin lowered under the weight of her anger, the permanently pinched state of her eyebrows, and the sour scowl drawn across her lips, she quite resembled the dour fiancé who had engendered the current rage in her. Thankfully, one glance at her posture and face as she stalked the halls had silenced any comments that passersby may have been tempted to make. A good thing, too, as Hermione would have unleashed a rather scathing invective on anyone foolish enough to trust her normally good will to save them, and poor Harry would have been bewildered at the response, and most likely indignant at her obvious inattention.

"And when Hannah told him off for insulting her, that bloody little ferret actually had the bollocks to..."

"Insufferable!" Hermione mumbled under her breath. The man was insufferable. That's all there was to it. "Arrogant, petty, self-righteous, cruel, misanthropic recluse." A sick smile lit her face as she continued cataloging his faults and mentally abusing him within an inch of his sorry existence.

"And he had the nerve to imply that she...Hermione, are you even listening to me?"

Harry's scowl was apparent and, if she was quite honest, completely justified as he grabbed her by the arm and hauled her to a stop in the middle of the corridor.

"What is your problem?" he asked, studying her with a pinched brow.

Hermione massaged her temples. "I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't mean to ignore you; I've just had a *very* trying morning."

"Got an E on an assignment instead of an O, did you?" he asked, a small but flippant smile on his lips. It evaporated as he saw her frown deepen. "What happened?"

A growl just barely restrained, Hermione said, "I spent the morning with my fiancé," she spat the word, "learning how to present myself as a proper wife with table manners."

Harry stayed silent for a long moment as he watched her face harden. "Uh oh," he said after a moment.

"Oh, yes," Hermione said, with fake enthusiasm. "This morning was the best study in patience I've ever had as we 'ate breakfast together.' Or so he'd called it. What it actually amounted to was him reserving that chamber off the side of the Great Hall and torturing me for three hours."

Harry winced. As they started walking again, he merely stayed silent and let Hermione have her tirade. He could only pray she wouldn't take it out on him.

"First of all," she said acidly, "he stationed himself at the end the table, scowling at and verbally berating me, while he just sat there and sipped coffee, cool as you please. Except that not one damn thing I did made him happy! 'You hold your fork oddly, Granger; only savages would eat that way. Stop gulping your tea, you're not a sow at a trough!'"

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but Hermione steamrolled over him. The mock-critical voice she used was an uncanny impression of Snape. So much so that it made Harry just a tad nervous. She took a deep breath and continued, arms beginning to flail in angry, impotent gestures.

"Don't make so much noise.' 'You take bites far too large.' Then, when I tried to appease him, 'Oh, really, Granger, no one would look at you and believe you actually eat that little.'"

The righteous indignation on Harry's face at that remark just spurred her on.

"An absolutely *litany* of my faults and a barrage of rather stinging remarks about my upbringing, and through all this I had to try to eat! I admit, for the first twenty minutes, I just tried to ignore him and keep eating, but the longer he railed away, the less I could take it. Eventually, after two hours of what *should* have been a thirty minute breakfast, he insisted...for the fourteenth time...that I was slouching, and he tied my arms to the back of my chair with his House scarf. TIED me, Harry! He *tied me to a chair!*"

As they approached Hermione's office, he slowed down, hoping she'd match his pace. The ploy worked, but it didn't seem to calm her any. She just stood at the corner of the hall, leaned against the stones and continued to fume.

"Well, of course, by that point I'd become so incensed that I guess I started retaliating without knowing it. From there, the whole meal just went completely to hell. He had to heal his ridiculous bloody nose because I sent out a Stinging Hex inadvertently and..."

"You hexed him?" Harry said, aghast.

"Wandlessly!" Hermione cried, a tad hysterical and nervous. "I didn't do it on purpose! But he made me so absolutely furious! He was completely beastly, and yet he took fifty point off of Gryffindor just because I..."

Sensing that the continued complaining was just making things worse, Harry sighed and tapped Hermione on the shoulder. When she ran out of steam and looked where he was pointing, her knees wobbled and the pit of her stomach to drop into her knees. Down the hall from her and just outside the door to her office sat the little bird of a girl with the close cap of blonde curls that she'd seen at the start-of-term feast. *Charlotte Greengrass*, Hermione's mind supplied. After her session with Charlotte Greengrass, there would only be lunch separating her from an entire weekend spent not only with Snape but with his father, a man that she gathered was so difficult that *Severus Snape* found him to be cruel and intolerable, and the best words that the determinedly-sweet *Amelie Moreaux* could muster to describe him were that he was 'a strict man.' Raising a hand, Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose. This weekend would be ghastly, no doubt.

"Your next appointment?" Harry asked.

Hermione nodded and sighed. The girl sat on the cold stones of the floor across from her office, staring at the floor, but looking decidedly less lost and uncertain than she had the previous week. She looked ... wary, Hermione decided. Not exactly timid or unsure, but more that she was reining in the instinct to distrust her motives for being there.

"I guess I should go then."

Hermione nodded again. "Thanks for listening to me whinge, Harry," she said, earning her a small smile.

"No problem," said Harry. "She's a Slytherin, eh?" When Hermione nodded, Harry chuckled. "Good luck with that, then."

Hermione pursed her lips, still quite ready to rail on about the last Slytherin she'd had to deal with, but there was no sense in punishing the little girl for that; fixing her most welcoming smile on her face, hoping that it appeared genuine, Hermione strode forward to meet the girl.

"Good afternoon. You must be Charlotte." The girl leapt up from the floor gracefully, even more slim and nimble than she had appeared from a distance, and nodded. She said nothing. Hermione reached out a hand for her to shake.

"I'm Hermione," she said. "It's nice to meet you."

The girl didn't speak, just nodded, but her face seemed to smooth itself a bit. Her hand was slow to rise, but when she pumped Hermione's hand up and down, Charlotte's grip was firm.

"Would you like to come in?" Hermione said, gesturing to the door. Another nod was given in return, and Hermione hoped silently that this session wouldn't be as hard to get going as Neville's had been. *Then again*, Hermione thought, *the girl is a Slytherin*. Resolving not to judge the situation until she spoke to the girl (IF the girl ever spoke), Hermione opened the door with a flick of her wand and gestured for Charlotte to enter. The little first-year strode into the room without hesitation, her chin high. Hermione followed, folding herself into the chair opposite Charlotte.

For a minute, there was silence as the two regarded each other, then the girl opened her mouth, and quietly said, "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

"Of course!" Hermione responded, perhaps a little too eager. Clearing her throat, she smiled. Charlotte was wary of her, certainly, but seemed to be genuinely interested in her counsel. "I'm glad you came to see me today. I was very intrigued by you at the feast last week."

Charlotte's face tightened as she searched Hermione's face and words for any tone of mocking or sign of an ulterior motive, but soon her expression relaxed. "Intrigued how?"

Hermione sat back and crossed one leg over the other. "You were very strong and confident even though you're very young, and I'm sure the ceremony must have been very hard for you. I envy that; I wasn't so strong myself."

Again Charlotte seemed to search her face for honesty, and then she nodded. "It was hard," Charlotte said, her voice soft but firm, face betraying nothing. "But thank you."

Hermione smiled in response to the thanks, and then let her face drop serious. "I'm sorry to hear about your sister. I didn't know her well, but Professor Snape informed me that you were close."

"I don't want to talk about Daphne," Charlotte said immediately.

Her voice had again been firm, untainted by emotion. The response, though, had been exceedingly quick. Keeping her face as carefully calm as she could, Hermione nodded, and said, "All right. What would you like to talk about today?"

The little girl's composure wavered. "I ... don't know," she admitted. Her face twitched a bit and Hermione could tell that there were things that she wanted to say, things that she needed to be able to confide in *someone*, but as sure as Hermione knew Harry's eye color, she knew that it was too soon for this cautious little mouse to trust her with any deep revelations.

"Well," Hermione said, offering her a friendly smile. "Perhaps we could just get to know each other then?"

After a slight hesitation, Charlotte nodded, looking at Hermione expectantly. She had to fight down a chuckle. This girl was, quite obviously, a Slytherin to the heels of her Mary Janes: she would volunteer no information until Hermione had done so first, letting the older girl set the benchmark of the depth of her confidence so that she could choose to meet or not as she pleased. No, this little Slytherin had learned well the art of not charging heedlessly into battle.

"As I said, my name is Hermione Granger," she started. "I'm a seventh year and Head Girl, but you probably already knew that. My best friends are called Harry and Ron, and my favorite subjects are Transfiguration and Arithmancy."

Charlotte nodded, her face pensive for a moment. "Your best friend is Harry Potter."

Hermione kept her face carefully calm. "Yes, that's right. Harry and I met on the train ride on the first day of our first year. We had a bit of a rough go of it to start, but we became friends quite soon afterwards." Charlotte was keeping her face nearly as smooth as Hermione's and, much to the older girl's chagrin, she couldn't tell if Charlotte's

statement about Harry was meant to be argumentative or inquisitive. Perhaps both.

"Harry is supposed to defeat You-Know-Who."

Smooth as silk. "Yes, he is, but we don't really talk about that much," Hermione lied flawlessly, smiling all the while. "To me, he'll always just be Harry. Nearly a brother to me." *If one goes around snogging one's brother.*

"He's very interesting," Charlotte said, and for a moment, Hermione caught a glimpse of something that flickered in the little girl's face. For barely an instant, a flicker of curiosity and excitement had flashed across Charlotte's gray eyes, the corners of her lips pulling up just a tiny bit before she remembered herself and schooled them straight again. She hadn't come right out and betray herself as a supporter of Harry, but that flash of inquisitiveness and the circumstances surrounding her sister's death gave Hermione hope enough to believe that whenever this little girl's façade cracked enough to admit Hermione into her confidence, she would fall to the right side of the issue. Whatever her feelings about Harry, though, this girl was a Slytherin, no doubt, and for the first time that idea made Hermione smile without hesitation.

"So, tell me about yourself," Hermione said warmly. "How do you like Hogwarts so far?"

Apparently the question had been innocuous enough, Hermione's tone warm enough, that Charlotte relaxed visibly and settled back into the chair; her face broke into a small but easy smile. "I like it quite a lot," she said in her high, quiet voice. "So far, anyhow. I'm quite fond of Transfigurations as well; it's not my favorite, but nearly so." Her face pinched thoughtfully but not unhappily. "Professor McGonagall is very strict."

Chuckling, Hermione nodded. "She is that. But fair, I think. She just expects everyone to do their best, and she won't accept anything beneath that."

Charlotte nodded after a moment. "Yes, I think she's very fair. She hasn't treated the Slytherins any differently than her own House."

"Why should she?" Hermione said. She knew that this statement, coming out of her own mouth, was probably more than a little hypocritical and she believed that Charlotte had sensed some of that emotion but the girl just narrowed her eyes a bit before shrugging.

"Not every professor here is unbiased."

Hermione laughed again. "That's certainly true."

As if the thought were completely and rationally connected, Charlotte suddenly said, "You're marrying Professor Snape."

The leg that Hermione had crossed over top of her lap thumped to the floor loudly and gracelessly as her mouth dropped into a surprised 'O.' "How did you know that?" she squeaked. "Did he tell you that?"

Charlotte smiled, and the grin was a cross between something that belonged on the Cheshire cat and a smirk that she seemed to have picked up surprisingly quickly from her Head of House. "No," she said, still smiling. "Professor Snape is a very private man; I don't know him that well."

"How did you know?" she repeated, dumbfounded. A little annoyed at having to wrestle information from an eleven-year-old, Hermione fought to keep the flush from her cheeks.

"He's an interesting man," she said cryptically. "I watch him. He watches you. And the way you've looked at him in the Great Hall a few times, it's obvious that the two of you have quite a lot of tension between you. And you're a Muggle-born. It was a guess, but from the look on your face, it was a good one."

The pit of Hermione's stomach seemed to have sunk through the floor. She tried to collect herself, but didn't manage very well. "I, er..." There seemed to be no sense in lying, especially as the girl had guessed the truth so easily, so Hermione cleared her throat and looked Charlotte dead in the eye. "Yes, I am marrying Professor Snape."

A long time passed where Charlotte just stared into Hermione's eyes; after a moment, she nodded shortly, as if she'd come to a quick but hard decision. "I won't tell anyone," said Charlotte.

Hermione exhaled slowly, but in obvious relief. "Thank you. I appreciate your discretion. It's a tricky situation," she said. When Charlotte nodded again, Hermione gave her an appraising look. "You are ... very sharp for your age, Charlotte."

A smile appeared on her face as suddenly as if the previous pensive determination had never existed. "Daphne always said I was sharper than a scorpion's sting and craftier than a spider. She always called me Spider. Like the character from that American novel: Charlotte, the spider."

"*Charlotte's Web*," Hermione said, nodding. She hardly dared breathe in the moments after Charlotte had mentioned her sister, so she figured that this would be a perfect opportunity to make their way to the issue without it being jarring or forceful. "I didn't know you knew Muggle novels."

Charlotte's smile faltered just a little bit. "My father's American," she said shortly. Then, "And a Muggle. Mum's the witch."

Masking her surprise, Hermione smiled. "Really? How did he and your mother meet?"

A little of the smile crept back onto her face. "Dad's a witch, too, in a manner of speaking." When Hermione looked puzzled, Charlotte grinned again and continued. "He's a wicce, you see. A male follower of Wicca, the Muggle form of witchcraft. He came to Stonehenge one year to celebrate Beltane...during the first war with You-Know-Who...and there was some trouble. Death Eaters trying to hurt the Muggles that were celebrating. Mum's an Obliviator for the Ministry, and she met Dad when she was called in to contain the situation. Said he was so charming she didn't have the heart to knock the wits out of him." Hermione laughed at the mental image, and Charlotte giggled with her. "I dunno about that, really, but they've been batty about each other ever since. Dad says he couldn't believe his luck, meeting a real live witch that can do all the tricks kids read about in books."

Hermione nodded, smiled. "That's how I felt when I first got accepted to Hogwarts. It was Professor McGonagall who came to my parents' house, actually, to give me my letter. Just a coincidence, I suppose, but it felt like destiny once I got sorted. When she explained everything and proved it wasn't a trick by turning our coffee table into a pony and back I felt like Alice, falling down the rabbit hole."

Charlotte smiled and opened her mouth, clearly intending to say more, but then, without warning, she started and looked at her watch. "Time's almost up," she said.

Hermione looked at the mantle clock. They still had seventeen minutes left, but a quick glance at Charlotte's face told Hermione that the girl had suddenly become slightly panicked and uncomfortable. Clearly, something had hit too close to home. Not wanting to scare her but also not wanting to lead her to a place where she didn't want to go, Hermione answered with a calm, non-committal, "So it is."

Charlotte stood and slowly began to gather her things. Quietly, Hermione rose, and when the girl made to move that direction, she followed Charlotte to the door. The little girl paused at the frame, knob in her hand as she swung her rucksack over her shoulder. Chewing one corner of her lip, just as Hermione did when she was thinking, Charlotte said, "Next Friday at eleven? Is that time still all right for you?"

Hermione realized she'd been waiting to see if the first-year would want to come back. She smiled; Charlotte Greengrass had a long way to go before she trusted Hermione, but she seemed to want to try. "Perfect," said Hermione. "The time is all yours."

Charlotte nodded, and then her face became serious. "I won't tell anyone," she said again before slipping out the door.

Hermione stared at the wood as the door closed behind the girl, chewing her lip in thought.

"Oh, God. Oh, God; oh, God; oh God."

Hermione was only whispering, mumbling really, as she pushed her food around her plate, but she didn't seem to have the strength to hold back the words.

"Oh, God," she mumbled. "Oh, God. Oh, God ... I don't think I can do this."

Ginny Weasley turned to look at her babbling friend. Hermione was pale, almost sickly-looking with worry, and her eyes kept darting to the Head table where her fiancé seemed to be glaring holes either in his plate or the pork chops that he sawed at with unnecessary force. When Ginny reached out and laid a cool hand on Hermione's wrist, the older girl jumped half a foot, spilling her pumpkin juice, before resting an elbow on the table and letting her head drop into her hand.

"How am I going to do this, Gin?" Hermione whimpered, her words muffled by her hair and fingers. "I don't think I can do this. If I can't even deal with Sn..." she caught herself before saying his name, looked around, then corrected, "my fiancé these days, how am I going to deal with his father, too?"

Harry looked up from the sandwich he was in the process of devouring. For a brief moment, Harry looked up at the scowling professor and favored him with a scathing glare, but, much to Hermione's surprise, when the green-eyed gaze refocused on her it was gentle but determined.

"Hermione," he said bracingly, "you've dealt with his riddles when the Stone was at stake, you stole from his personal cupboards right under his nose. As a second-year. You survived a Basilisk, a werewolf, about a hundred Dementors, a battle in the Ministry... and what happened to Ron. You're one of the strongest people I know." He trailed off when he realized that both Hermione and Ginny were staring at him with a mixture of surprise and fondness. His voice turned gruff when he said, "You're a Gryffindor, for Merlin's sake! I think you can handle a weekend of sarcasm and predictable pureblood bias. You've handled worse."

One short bark of laughter escaped her before she looped an arm around Harry's shoulder in a bracing hug. "I think you're right, Harry. That was just what I needed to hear. Thanks."

Just then, Hermione looked up to the Head table and caught the eye of her surly fiancé. Scowling deeper when Hermione flashed him an overly smug smile, Snape flicked his chin almost imperceptibly toward the door heading out into the entrance way. Her stomach swooped a bit, her smile faltered, but she gave him back a small nod before turning back to the table. Whether or not they had witnessed the exchange, Ginny and Harry seemed to understand: Ginny gave her a reassuring smile and a squeeze of her hand; Harry leaned over and rested his chin on her shoulder as he returned her one-armed hug.

He caught her wrist as she rose and made to leave for Gryffindor Tower to retrieve her overnight bag. "Don't forget who you are," he said, his voice strong and his eyes intense. "Be proud of it."

When Hermione reached the bottom of the wide marble staircase, Professor Snape already stalked the entrance way, pacing back and forth in front of the House points glasses. Out of nervousness, she hitched her leather satchel higher up on her shoulder before moving down to where he stood. As she moved closer, his eyes raked over her, and he sneered.

"Wasting all my money, are you?" he asked. When her brow furrowed in confusion, he sighed heavily. "Where are the robes I bought you, and why are you still in your school robes?"

Hermione looked down at herself for a moment, as if she'd forgotten that she'd been wearing school robes, and then managed to quiet her shaking hands as she said, "I didn't want to raise the attention of anyone still in Gryffindor Tower. Plus, I couldn't decide which ones to wear, so I thought that I'd ask your opinion and then change in the girls' bathroom down the hall from here before we left."

He had an eyebrow raised as she spoke, but seemed to approve of asking his opinion. "What are the colors of the day robes?"

Wordlessly, she opened her satchel to show him the soft yellow, dusty pink, and moss green of the robes at the top of the bag.

"The pink," he said decisively.

Expecting some sort of explanation as to his choice, Hermione stared at him blankly, waiting for Snape to break the silence. He sighed heavily again and pulled the set of pink robes from her bag. His index finger and thumb caressed the material, as if checking its sturdiness and suitability.

"The color will play your hair and skin to the best advantage without having the obvious kiss-arse quality of dressing you in Slytherin green for your first meeting. That would appear far too sycophantic. He must not get the impression that we are attempting to win his favor, simply that we are placating his childlike temper."

"Ah," Hermione said. She was tempted to point out that he had almost given her a compliment *almost* but figured that doing so would result in a doubly scathing insult. She was also tempted to snort loudly at Snape's mention of his father being in possession of a 'childlike temper'; apparently, personal appearance wasn't the only trait that could be passed genetically. Resisting the urge to make either of these comments, Hermione simply took the robes from him, and said, "I'll just dash off to change then, shall I?"

"Please do," said Snape, looking pointedly at a pocket watch that she'd never seen before, but which now dangled from the front pocket of a frock coat he wore underneath his robes.

Rather than stopping to consider Snape's new fashion choices, Hermione dashed away to slip into the pink dress robes. It took longer than she would have liked to wrestle her hair into a somewhat messy but generally tasteful chignon at the back of her head, and she debated for a moment or two about whether to put on any makeup, but at the last decided that Snape's father would just have to take her as she was. Like Snape. Glancing at her watch once more, Hermione gathered up her leather satchel and hurried back down to the entrance hall, swinging her travelling cloak over her shoulders as she went.

Snape stood almost exactly where he'd been before, still scowling; he seemed to have given up on his pacing. When Hermione reemerged into his presence, his eyes swept over her swiftly, but, much like the first night of term when they walked together to the Headmaster's office, she got the impression that the bottomless black eyes missed barely a thread of her dress or a kinky lock of hair. Saying nothing, he swept past her and out the large doors into the mid-day sunshine. Hermione hurried after him enough so that she would not fall too far behind, but didn't trouble herself to jog to keep his pace. In fact, she hung back deliberately, watching his strangely stark figure moving swiftly along the long green lawn that led down to the gates. Eventually, Snape seemed to have realized that he had left his fiancée behind and slowed his pace, throwing her a sharp look over his broad shoulder. Raising his wand as they neared the stone boars standing as sentinels at Hogwarts' gates, Snape waited as Hermione caught him up, and then gestured for her to precede him off the school's property.

"I take it we're Apparating?" Hermione began to ask, but she had barely gotten out the first two words before a long arm reached out and swept her into his wool-clad body in a swift and iron grip. She let out one short squeal of surprise before he turned on the spot, and the crushing sensation of magical travel squeezed her against the long, broad chest of the professor she could no longer see through the ebony void of Apparition.

Severus Snape let go the hold on his fiancée with such perfect disdain that he could have been dropping a sack of rotten apples into a rubbish bin. Hermione stumbled more than a little before gaining her balance. Once she had, she favored her scowling betrothed with a glare that should have scorched his wool robes to cinders.

"*Must* you always insist on ambushing me with Apparition?" she spat irritably. She took a moment to close her eyes and let her inner ears regulate her balance once more. When she felt right again, she looked up into his hawk-like face to find his lips curled in an amused smirk.

"Why, Miss Granger," Snape replied in a silky voice, thick with mock-astonishment. "One would think that the 'brightest witch of the age' would be able to handle the pithy discomfort of magical travel."

She scowled at him, brushed off her robes, and adjusted her traveling cloak to sit straight on her shoulders. "I didn't give myself that particular appellation, you know," she said sulkily. "And I completely resent the number of times it's bitten me in the arse."

Snape chuckled honestly chuckled and Hermione found herself staring at him in surprise. She was quite certain she'd never seen him look ... happy. Or, at the very least, devoid of his usual disdain and sullen anger. This new twist to his features was surprising and unsettling to say the least.

"Oh, do stop gaping, Granger," he said as he bent to retrieve her discarded satchel. "It's most unbecoming. I can't imagine why people are so surprised that I'm capable of laughing; I do have all the requisite muscles, you know."

"It's probably because no one's ever seen you use them," Hermione replied before she thought better of it. Wincing in anticipation of the biting reply she was sure to receive, Hermione gaped even further when he simply chuckled a little more and nodded.

"You are most likely correct," he said, then offered his arm.

Hermione stared at it as if it were a hissing viper. "What's the matter with you? What are you doing?"

Snape rolled his eyes and she noticed his posture stiffen as he grumbled. "How soon you forget the proprieties." When she narrowed her eyes at him, he sighed and said, "I'm offering you my arm, Miss Granger." She glared. "Because we should walk to the house together."

With that reminder, Hermione took in her surroundings for the first time. And her jaw dropped nearly to her knees. The two of them stood in the center of a long gravel path that split a lush green lawn; to her right, the fragrant grass chased away towards a verdant forest of what appeared to be beech trees at the edges, thickening into a walnut grove. To her left, the lawn rolled gently down to the bank of a large pond that she supposed could be called a lake. Ahead of her, just sitting on the top of a hill in the distance, was a long, sprawling manor that could only just be qualified as a "house." Suddenly, nervousness jumped back into her body, so much so that she nearly shook.

"Can't we just act normally for a little while longer? The house is still so far away."

Snape huffed out a breath beside her. "So much for Gryffindor bravery," he said, which made Hermione's spine straighten instantly. "Besides, I can guarantee you that however far away the house is, we *are* being watched."

"Watched?" Hermione said, turning to look around her, as if the very trees had eyes.

"Yes, watched. My father, being both very careful and extremely paranoid, has some very strong, very particular wards will are currently monitoring everything we do."

"So," she started, uncertainly, "he can see us right now? As if we're on a surveillance camera?"

"More like as if he's wearing binoculars," Snape said, and his voice was starting to show his impatience. "Once the signal on the perimeter wards go off, he casts the charm on himself, not on us. Now, I highly suggest you start playing the part if we're to get this done properly."

Snape extended his elbow to her again, but this time, Hermione took it without question. They walked up the long gravel drive for quiet some time without speaking.

"What do I call you?" Hermione said suddenly.

Without indicating any surprise at the odd question, Snape asked, "Aside from 'greasy git,' you mean?"

"I have never called you that!" Hermione said. "Nor would I ever. Unlike some people I could name, I do not judge or belittle people for things that they can't help, like intelligence or blood status or personal appearance."

Severus cast his eyes over his fiancée, whose grip had tightened on his arm. Her eyes blazed with intensity and conviction and, strangely, he believed her. He grunted, not willing to admit the fact.

"So, erm, what *do* I call you?" When he raised an eyebrow at her, she cleared her throat and continued. "Well, I can't very well call you 'Professor' if we're trying to convince him of the legitimacy of our engagement. Also, people here must know you're a duke; Madame Moreaux did, and I gathered you knew her from...where are we, by the way?"

Severus blinked for a moment at the decidedly abrupt topic change. "We are at an estate that once belonged to the Lorraine family, just outside of Metz, France. It has been protected from being visible to Muggles. And yes, I've known Etoile since I was a youth, living here in France. Would you please finish one thought before proceeding to a second?"

Hermione huffed out a breath and scowled at him, but resumed her former topic. "So do I call you 'Duke'? 'Your Grace?'"

His lips pinched into such a thin line, Hermione thought they might vanish. "There is some debate as to whether I'm actually the Duke of Guise." Hermione's raised eyebrow was a startling good likeness of his own favored expression. "My father disowned me when I was seventeen, but as the peerage line is matrilineal, he couldn't formally remove the title. However, I never formally renounced it."

"Why not?"

He scowled at her. "Because one cannot simply say, 'I don't want to be duke!' It's more complicated than that, and by that time and since any contact with my father, for whatever justification, was far too much."

"That's just silly," said Hermione, earning her another scowl. "Well, it is! If you didn't want the title and you'd just taken the time to do it then, we wouldn't have..."

"The reasons behind my actions are irrelevant and none of your business," Snape said loftily. "The pertinent matter is that there are two distinct sides of the issue. My father believes that I'm not the duke and will treat me as such. However, as you noticed in *The Needle Fairy*, there are people who believe that I am. As such, when in front of anyone who is not my father such as house elves you will refer to me with the honorific 'Master.'"

Hermione narrowed her eyes and opened her mouth to retort, but Severus cut her off. "It acknowledges that you know of the controversy but choose not to take sides, simply giving me the respect due to someone of a family in the peerage. In front of my father," he started, then cleared his throat uncomfortably and glared at her, "you may call me Severus."

Thoroughly amused that Snape was so obviously disapproving of her using his given name, Hermione flashed him her most winning smile. "Excellent. You may call me Hermione."

If possible, his glare intensified. They finished the rest of the long walk in silence, Severus fuming, and Hermione trying not to smile and incur more of his wrath.

As they stood on the doorstep waiting for someone to answer the long, deep chime of the doorbell, Hermione fidgeted with her robes, casting around for something to think

of that would distract her from her nerves. "So what do I call *him*?" she asked. "Your father; what do I call him?"

"Unless he invites you to do otherwise," Snape said, with an expression that quite clearly stated he knew that no such thing would happen, "you should refer to him as Marquis. It is the next step down in the line of nobility, and is an honorary title given to him when my mother passed away. As he wasn't a direct part of the line, he wasn't given the dukedom, but still acknowledged as a member of the nobility by marriage."

Hermione's head spun at all the information she'd been forced to digest in the past week. "He's going to hate me, isn't he?" she said, her heart in her throat.

As the locks and wards on the door began to whoosh away in front of them, Severus said, "Most definitely."

By all rights, that *should* have made her nervous, but the tone in his voice had been amused and almost ... pleased. As if he wanted his father to hate her. Given the descriptions she'd heard of him, and her fiancé's past, this was most likely the case. Hermione drew a deep breath as the wide oak door swung back in front of them. Then she tried not to gape in surprise. The door had not been opened by a house elf, as they had both suspected would be the case. Instead, the man who gripped the doorknob could have been a painting of a twenty-five-years-old Severus, done by an artist who had not paid attention to all the details. Looking at the Marquis Snape reminded Hermione of what Harry had said after viewing his fifteen-year-old father in the Pensieve: it was as if someone had copied Severus but made a few distinct, purposeful changes to tell them apart.

Tobias Snape stood nearly as tall as his son, and nearly as broad about the shoulders, but his frame was fuller; he didn't have the same look of the haunting thinness of a stray dog that Severus had to him. On the contrary, Tobias was a broad and powerfully built man who obviously enjoyed the comforts of good food and leisure time for healthy exercise. He had the same slender hands and long fingers as his son, and the same wide, square shoulders. The strangest thing, she realized, was that they had the same face, but for the one unmistakable characteristic that defined Severus Snape; the hawk-like face that Severus had clearly inherited from his father seemed so odd, incorrect even, without the protruding aquiline nose. His features were softer, Hermione decided, with the thin, straight nose, and made even more so by the warm mahogany shade of his eyes, and the mahogany hair shot through with nearly as much iron grey as color. Yes, the Marquis Snape appeared to be a much less severe man than his son, but the steely glint to his eyes spoke of the temperament of which she'd heard.

"Severus, what a surprise." He sounded completely unsurprised, as if he'd planned the whole event himself. "If I hadn't recognized your magical signature on my wards, I'd have never believed it. I see twenty years haven't improved you much."

Hermione nearly hissed at the immediate insult, spoken in that voice so much like that of the man on whose arm she currently hung. She gritted her teeth to keep from snapping back, held in check by the look of complete indifference on her fiancé's face.

"Likewise," Severus replied easily. "I see twenty years haven't given you any more breeding than you had previously. You've started answering the door for yourself; planning on supporting yourself in old age with a career as a house elf?"

The Marquis pointedly ignored his son's last comment in favor of turning his gaze to Hermione. The assessing stare that he raked over her body made her feel as if he was either sizing up a brood mare or appraising the quality of a Knockturn Alley whore. She had the sudden mad urge to take a bath, and it was all she could do not to glower at him.

"Ah," the Marquis said in a smooth, deep voice. "So this must be the blushing bride. So to speak." With a smirk, he turned back to his son. "Really, Severus, I've never understood your taste. Another Mudblood?"

This time, Hermione couldn't resist the urge to clench her teeth, setting her jaw into a hard, square line of tension. Through a tight smile that made her seem more like she was bearing her teeth at her future father-in-law, Hermione said, "Muggle-born."

"Oh, and one with *opinions*." Tobias smirked. Far too much like his son for her taste.

"Many," Severus said. The comment itself seemed harsh, but both the expression that he directed towards her and the tone in his voice were fond. Severus Snape was a good actor, it would seem.

"Well done, Severus," said Tobias. "As always."

Having had quite enough of being talked about not only as if she were not there, but as if she were a child who could not understand the obvious digs being thrown her way, Hermione plastered her face in the best smile she could manage and spoke clearly and confidently. "Marquis Snape, it's an..." Hermione stopped with a short but obvious pause as she conspicuously searched for an appropriate word. "...honor to meet you. I've heard so much about you."

"Is that so?" he asked, an appearance of polite surprise on his face. "I'm surprised Severus could manage to work up any polite or positive words to say about anyone, especially me."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Marquis, I think you must have misunderstood me. I heard about you from many sources, not just Severus. And I said that I was told all about you, not that anyone had anything positive to say."

Suddenly, Hermione realized that Snape's father had left them purposely standing on the doorstep, a subtle but powerful move signifying the Marquis's control of the situation and the need for his approval. Amidst the raised eyebrows of both of the Snape men, Hermione pushed past their host regally and took off her cloak, handing it to a quaking house elf standing behind the door.

"Thank you for inviting us so warmly into your home. This weekend will be an adventure for Severus and me, I'm sure," Hermione said in a tone of complete sincerity.

With a chuckle, Severus followed her into the foyer without a backward glance at his father. *An adventure, to be sure.*

The Double Englishman Knot

Chapter 18 of 23

Hermione sighed. "It all sounds so Machiavellian. Don't you find it deceitful to lead people by the nose to a certain conclusion, even if what you're saying is mostly true?"

"Says the cauldron to the kettle," Snape said, a thick smirk melting across his face.

Enjoy,

~~ ** Lady Tuesday ** ~~

Chapter Eighteen The Double Englishman's Knot

The Double Englishman's Knot (also known as the Double Fisherman's Knot) "The double [Englishman's] fisherman's knot is a bend, or a knot used to join two lengths of rope. This knot and the triple fisherman's knot are the variations used most often in rock climbing, but other applications include search and rescue. The primary use of this knot in rock climbing is to form high strength loops of cord for connecting pieces of the rock climber's protection system." from Wikipedia's List of Knots

Hermione fought not to fidget as she sat at the edge of one of the tall, ladder-back chairs in the study of what was clearly a large, sumptuous mansion. Under other circumstances, her eyes would have been devouring the room, filled as it was with bookshelves. Instead, she was gazing out the picture window behind the large mahogany desk, trying to appear serene as the Marquis looked her over. She still felt as if he were examining an animal he wished to purchase for a farm; perhaps that really was the way he imagined the situation: sizing up the brood mare to extend the bloodline through his son, the stallion. It was a difficult fight to keep her face calm and polite. When the Marquis finally settled in the leather wingback behind the desk, he steepled his hands in front of his face, a smooth yet obviously insincere smile crossed his features.

"So you are the Miss Granger who wants to marry my son," he said. It wasn't a question.

"I am," she said confidently, refraining from scoffing at his choice of words quite easily. It wasn't about 'want,' and he damn well knew it.

"I'm intrigued."

"Really?" she said, tilting her head to one side. She studied him in return. "I can't imagine why."

Snape stood behind her, tall and rigid, his long-fingered hands just touching the back of the leather chair. Keenly aware of his hovering, Hermione got the distinct impression he was trying to tell her something. As she hadn't the foggiest idea what it was he was trying to impart, Hermione decided to brave the waters with his father alone and hope that circumstances would lead her right.

The Marquis smirked, entirely reminiscent of the sneer she'd seen on his son. "Because Severus has never exactly been a ladies' man. In fact, he'd never been any kind of man, in my experience; though, the last time I saw him, he was still battling puberty. So you can imagine my surprise when, after more than two decades of silence, I hear from someone else's lips that he is taking a Mudblood wife. One who is still his student, no less." He smiled slowly as Hermione's face colored at the insults to both her and Severus delivered in a smooth, deep voice that just hinted at a Scottish accent. "Any father would be concerned at what type of man would do such a thing, especially if the man was his son."

Snape's breaths were distinctly louder to Hermione, sitting just under him; she could feel the force of his exhalations ruffle the curls at the top of her head. Clearly he was reining his temper to avoid a confrontation; Hermione had no such compunctions about niceties.

"Well, firstly," she said, letting into her voice a little of the crispness she felt towards the man, "the 'sort of man who would do such a thing' would be a man who had little choice as to getting married. Given the unavoidable nature of the circumstances, he chose to marry someone best suited to him, regardless of age. I'm perfectly confident in saying that your son's proposal was the finest I received. I was quite happy to take it."

Okay, that last bit was stretching the truth like taffy, but the rest was ... close enough to true. It didn't seem to fool the Marquis, though.

"My dear, you can't be more than eighteen, and while you're certainly not a beauty, you aren't so unfortunate looking that you couldn't have caught a respectable husband. Especially being so close to the Potter boy."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. Not only had he called her ugly, he had insinuated that only Harry's influence could "catch" her a husband. Insufferable man! And he didn't stop there.

"I can't imagine that Severus's proposal was the shiniest version of a future that you could have hoped for. If it was, he'd have been married long before now to a woman with far more means and maturity than you could possibly have. So one must wonder why a young witch such as yourself the 'finest witch of your age' I've heard you called by some sources would choose to accept the proposal of a man who would stoop to marrying his student."

Hermione bristled. Her spine straightened until it felt like a girder. And then she realized that this question, this moment, was her chance to gain a little footing on the Marquis.

"Severus is a fine man," she said in a prim and lofty voice. "And an incredibly capable wizard. The only I know of that would be a match for the 'finest witch of her age.' I am not the sort of woman," the emphasis on the word was light, but intentional, "to lie down docilely in front of a man at his whim. I wanted a husband who would challenge me. Severus will do so."

The Marquis smirked, started to open his mouth to rebut, but closed it again. Hermione wondered at this for only a moment before she found out the reason: Severus's hand left the back of her chair and snaked around behind her to clasp at her shoulder. Gazing up into his face, she found the hawk-like face of her fiancé looking down at her with an expression of faint pleasure and steely pride. Whether or not it was an act, it helped the self-satisfied smirk settle more firmly onto her face. Then she felt his long fingers pushing gently on her shoulders, and she caught what he'd been trying to silently impart to her before. Following Snape's lead, she sat back in her chair and crossed one leg over her knee, lounging and regarding the Marquis as if he were the one on trial. They were equals now.

"And in answer to your question regarding what sort of woman would marry Severus," she said, letting her smirk change to something sweeter. Something that seemed more like regard. "I'll tell you that it is a woman who accepts nothing less than the very best that can be offered to her. Whatever your thoughts regarding your son and I'm not so much a fool that I can't gain some idea I have no qualms about telling you exactly why I accepted his proposal, and why I feel we can be quite comfortably and contently married." She took a breath, trying not to make it obvious to be a steady one, and smiled up at Severus as she talked. *No lies*, she told herself, *no half-truths*. *The Marquis will know in an instant if you exaggerate*. "He is a good man with strong morals, and an intelligent and capable wizard with very exacting standards. Much like myself. Severus may not be the kindest of men, I grant you, but he is strong and honest; I respect him, and I believe that our life together will be quite mutually satisfactory."

There, Hermione thought. *That was close enough to being true that it won't scream a lie*. She looked back at the Marquis, slightly unsettled to see the expression on his face to be that of a hungry cat regarding a broken-winged bird.

"No platitudes of gratuitous affection, then?" he said, and chuckled. "No heart-felt declarations of regard or pleas not to stand in the way of true love? Not that I expected any. One could hardly count on that with Severus. Not particularly loveable, though he never has been."

She couldn't stop herself from whipping her head around to regard her fiancé. His fingers had tightened on her shoulder so much that his grip was painful, and his face had hardened into the stony lines she usually saw in school, but he said nothing. How could he sit there as his father abused him so dreadfully and still say nothing?

"Come now, girl," the Marquis said before she could speak, with the tone of someone redressing a six-year-old for fibbing. "You can't actually expect me to believe you think so highly of him. I've heard reports of his behavior at that school; I know what the students think of him. There must be some other reason for your betrothal; what is it? Money? Surely, you can't imagine he's inheriting all this. Is that your reason? You fancy yourself a wealthy, powerful Duchesse?"

A loud screech of wood against stone rent the air as Hermione flew up from her chair, nearly knocking it over in her haste to be up and away from the Marquis. Hermione's

temper flashed so quickly her whole face reddened with it.

"You are quite mistaken, my Lord," she said, her voice knife-blade sharp. "I imagine myself no Duchesse; I make no attempt to play at putting on airs. I'm marrying your son because I choose to and..." She stopped abruptly as she saw the Marquis's expression move from disbelieving to amused at her anger. Hermione squared her shoulders.

"And, if you must know," her voice quavered just a bit as the enormous lie coated her tongue, but she seemed powerless to stop it. "I'm also marrying him because ... not that it's any of your bloody business, but ... Severus is an excellent lover!"

She nearly stomped her foot in anger towards the end of the speech. Feeling her cheeks redden even further, Hermione snuck a peek at the tall, dark Professor standing next to her. His gaze, quite surprisingly, was not on her but on his father, a steady, self-satisfied smirk just tipping his thin lips. The Marquis returned the gaze to Severus with a touch of surprise, and then slid his attention over to Hermione, where it changed back to amusement.

"Is that so?" was all he said before Hermione could stand the anger no longer, made a quick excuse, and walked out of the room with as much haste as she could muster while still retaining her dignity. After a long moment of watching her leave, Tobias Snape turned his attention to his son.

"Well, Severus," was all he said for a minute or two, and then, "You certainly have gained yourself a wild hippogriff in that girl."

One corner of Severus's mouth quirked up at the corner. "So I have," he said.

"I suppose you enjoy that about her," Tobias responded. His voice abandoned all of the previous attempts at civility and dripped with disdain.

"It just so happens that I do," Severus returned. Now it was he who smirked. "It seems to be a family trait to attach ourselves to women with ... *spirit*. Surely you remember Mother's."

Tobias's face hardened, just as Severus had intended it to do. The Marquis's gaze was hard and cold now, his face smooth again under the mask of polite disdain. "Only too well. But really, Severus, 'spirit' isn't exactly how I would put it." The Marquis rose from his desk and strode around it, standing face to face with his son. "She's an appalling liar. If the girl was any more virginal, we'd be announcing the next immaculate conception. So perhaps you should ask yourself why a..." he sniffed condescendingly, "pretty young thing such as Miss Granger, who is so clearly appalled by the idea of marrying you, would be willing to lie herself crimson about your entirely invented, I'm sure sexual prowess?"

Without waiting for a response, the Marquis turned and strode from the room. Severus watched him go, scowling, before walking from the room himself, pondering that same question.

It only took Severus a few minutes to discover the location of his fuming future bride. After Hermione had stomped from the room, she had asked a house elf to take her bag to her chambers a sure sign of her distress, given her opinions about the servitude of elves and had marched straight out onto the grounds, most likely hoping to clear her head. He had observed her for a few minutes from a drawing room, watching her storm around one of the nearer gardens, pacing in a huff as she worked off her frustration. When her circling began to slow, Severus knew he could delay no longer, especially as he knew his father to be watching from some other window, and walked out to meet Hermione as she began to actually take in the sights around her.

He came upon her near one of the hedgerows bordering the manor, kneeling down to look at a particularly lovely specimen of Roaring Tigerlily, which turned its orange-tipped head up to growl at him as he approached. Lifting a hand to shield her eyes against the sun setting behind him, she gazed up into his face, clearly trying to gauge his mood. Knowing that the position of the light gave her only a silhouette, Severus waited a moment before he offered a hand to help her up from the ground. Wordlessly, she took it, letting him lead her out through a space in the hedge, heading out and over the hill rolling away from the house. They walked in silence for a moment before she turned to him.

"How can you let him speak to you like that?" she spat suddenly, as if they had been in the middle of a heated argument.

"My father despises me, and I him." His voice was calm.

"Exactly!" she said, passionately. "How can you just sit there, hating him, and not say anything? I could never let someone talk to me the way he talked to you, and you didn't say a single bloody word!"

A raised eyebrow in response to her swearing quashed her rage, and then she let out a sigh. "Honestly, I don't understand how you can do it."

"Would arguing with him do any good to either of us?"

"No, I suppose not," she responded petulantly. She took his arm as he offered it, sulking all the while.

"Then why fight with him? It's what he wants." Severus waited a moment before smirking just a bit. "You certainly gave him more than enough of your mind; had I given him a piece of mine, he'd have choked on it."

"Good," she said harshly.

To her surprise, Severus chuckled. "Such venom, Miss Granger. It's not at all fitting in such courteous society."

She scoffed loudly, but allowed her temper to ebb away. After another long pause, she said, "It's beautiful here." He nodded. As she looked out again, she started to laugh to herself. "You know, it's just like the first day I got my letter for Hogwarts."

The comment had been more thinking aloud than an intentional conversation topic, but when he looked down at her with an eyebrow lifted, she smiled and gestured out towards the sprawling estate ahead of them. "This. All this." He still looked confused, so she continued. "When I first got my Hogwarts letter from Professor McGonagall, I felt as if someone had lifted me out of my normal life and dropped me into a fairy tale, only now that life has become normal and this is what feels surreal. Walking over the green lawn of some fabulous estate, in these very Regency robes, on the arm of a tall, dark, brooding man ... I've been plunked down in the middle of *Pride and Prejudice*."

Hermione started a bit when he started to nod, a wry smile on his face; she'd been just about to explain about Jane Austen and her writing.

"You are a Lizzie to the core," he said.

A bemused smile on her face, Hermione nodded. "I suppose I am, really; I even have a much prettier, much sweeter sister, though she's called Gen, not Jane."

"A Jennifer?" Snape asked. "With a first daughter called Hermione, I would have expected something more ... intellectual."

At this, Hermione laughed heartily. "Gen with a 'G'; her name is Imogen, but she insists that everyone call her Gen. She can't stand the snooty Shakespeare references her words, not mine," Hermione said, holding up her hands, "so she insisted on nicknames for both of us."

Snape nodded. "Ah, I see. Well, if she's nicknamed herself Gen, what, dare I ask, is short for 'Hermione'?"

With a distinctly artless clearing of her throat, Hermione remarked on the beauty of the sunset. Snape smirked down at her for a moment, but seemed content to let go the fact that she'd not answered him. Her cheeks reddened under his raised eyebrow and steady gaze, but he didn't ask and she didn't volunteer. She felt the embarrassment

flow away as they walked, and Hermione took in the breathtaking surroundings. Just as they had rounded the last of the hedgerows and headed out of the gardens, a loud crack alerted her to the presence of a small house elf, her arms full of a sleek bundle the color of rich cream. Fringe dangled over the long, spidery fingers.

The tiny elf dropped a curtsy first to Severus a muttered "Young Master" on her lips and then to Hermione, before offering the material out to both of them.

"The Master, he says that the new Miss is being cold, so I is to bring her the old Mistress's shawl," said the little elf in a high, girlish voice.

Hermione looked to Severus a moment, perplexed, before saying, "That's kind of him, but I'm not..."

Before she could finish her polite refusal, Severus bent down to the little elf and took the shawl from her fingers. "Thank you, Lalu," he said and straightened, the garment clutched in one hand. "That will be all."

"Yess'r, Your Grace," she said, and vanished with a whip-crack of noise.

When she was certain the elf was gone, Hermione turned a questioning face to her fiancé, who had already taken the wrap in both hands and shaken it out to its full length.

"What was that all about?" said Hermione. "I really don't need anything. It's not even cool, let alone chilly enough for a shawl."

Severus sighed and his face took on that pinched, hard quality that it had gained when in his father's presence. "More games," he said gruffly.

"Games?"

"My father's, of course," said Severus. He lifted the shawl and gestured towards her with it. "This was not a statement of concern for your comfort, Miss Granger. It was a test."

Hermione looked from the shawl to her fiancé and back. "How is a shawl a test?"

He sighed and stared down at the shawl. "It was a treasured possession of my mother's. That he offered it to you without provocation is undoubtedly a test of emotions."

"How could he possibly test me on that? I'd have no idea of its history," Hermione asked.

"It was not a test for you." Severus's thumbs ran over the silky material as he held it in both hands; he stared down at the garment as if he could see his mother wrapped in it. "Given my partiality for my mother and hers for me, coupled with his hatred for both of us, he clearly wished to observe my reaction upon receiving the shawl, and as such, would expect me to relate the significance to you. I'm certain that he expects you to reject it on principle."

Hermione watched the tall, proud, sullen man gaze down at the filmy creation in his fingers as if touching it could strike his father down simply for arrogant presumption. With a sharp nod, Hermione stood in front of him and turned her back, offering her arms and shoulders to him. She heard a soft exhalation of air that sounded half-sigh and half-chuckle before she felt him lay the material across her outstretched arms. Slowly, she spun to him and looked up into his face for his feelings. They were inscrutable as ever, under the smooth mask of emotionless human marble. Trying not to fidget with the shawl now that it was on her clearly, this token of the dead mother hurt and unsettled her unpredictable fiancé. Hermione took up his arm again and pulled him into continuing their walk towards the lake. Throughout their walk away from the manor, they settled into a relatively easy silence. They skirted along the edge of the water, Hermione bending down to touch her fingers to the warm surface momentarily before straightening and strolling on. Now that Jane Austen had rolled around in her mind, Severus's behavior made her think of the snappish and proud male 'hero' of her favorite novel, who, now at his family home, seemed to have changed completely and become well-mannered and affable. This brought her thoughts back around to something that had gnawed at her earlier in the week. She chewed on the inside of her lip as she watched him out of the corner of her eye, tall and straight and silent as they walked.

"What now?" Snape asked, his lips curling into a little half-sneer. When Hermione turned a questioning face to him, he shook his head. "After six and a half years of having you under my eye, I can tell when you are pondering something you don't particularly want to share. Out with it, Granger; what has caught your mind?"

Hermione scowled a bit annoyed that he could read her so effortlessly yet again and chewed a corner of her lip before answering. "I was just wondering how many different faces you have." When he quirked an eyebrow at her from his height, she sighed. "That first night you taught me to walk, you quoted Oscar Wilde, and then on our way to Hogsmeade, it was Shakespeare. Earlier, you were discussing Jane Austen as if it's the most natural thing you've ever done. And yet, you let Madame Moreaux call me a disaster and a whore, you're never nice to me unless you feel you have to be or you're putting on a show, and you can't give a compliment without couching it in terms so obtuse that it sounds like an insult. How many faces do you have? I'm still not sure whether I like this cultured, genteel Snape any better than the real one who gives me detention for breathing too loudly."

Snape shook his head and turned his attention forward to the long expanse of lawn they traveled, heaving a sigh. "You Gryffindors are all alike. You can glare at me all you like, Miss Granger," he said, a dry expression on his sharp features, "but it's true. You Gryffindors only ever see things in black or white. People are good or evil, nice or nasty, the pedestal of Heaven or the pits of Hell. Everyone is either a noble hero or a degenerate liar. Never anything between. You all lack any ability to differentiate further than the extremes. Who is to say that what you've seen here is any less 'real' than the glowering, relentless task master you've met at Hogwarts? I assure you that they are one and the same man."

"But the nicer things you've said all seem like lies when you go back to being nasty."

"Such an overly simplistic view of things," he said, and the long neck crooked his hawk-like face over to regard her as they walked. "Being a Slytherin and a spy two things that apply to the 'real' Snape, as you call him are quite similar. Being a spy does not necessitate the ability to lie heedlessly and make it seem like the truth. In fact, being a *good* spy means being able to speak the absolute truth, crafting it in such a way that you do *no* heed to lie." When she gazed up at him with a dubious expression, Severus's voice became the assured, confident tone of the teacher. "To be a truly successful double-agent, one must learn to smith words and actions carefully, not to mention innately. It is not about bending the truth to fit the situation and creating duplicity. It is about bending the situation to fit the truth and creating reality. Sculpting the world to fit your truth is an art form only a true adept can master."

Hermione sighed. "It all sounds so Machiavellian. Don't you find it deceitful to lead people by the nose to a certain conclusion, even if what you're saying is mostly true?"

"Says the cauldron to the kettle," Snape said, a thick smirk melting across his face.

Hermione blushed. "Whatever do you mean?"

"You sculpted the truth yourself rather obviously not a half hour ago," he said. When she blushed further and cleared her throat, Snape sneered. "Did *you* feel deceitful?"

"I assume you're referring to my statement to your father regarding you being," she gulped, "an excellent lover?"

"How astute of you to catch on so quickly," Snape responded.

Hermione bristled at his smugness and straightened her back. "I didn't lie, you know."

"Is that so?"

"I didn't!" she cried. "I didn't say that we were intimate, just that you were an excellent lover. He came to whatever conclusions he came to on his own."

"Mmmm," Snape said, a smirk still on his face as they walked.

Following a pregnant silence, Hermione quietly asked, "Did I lie?"

"About us being sexually involved?" Snape said. "That much should be perfectly obvious. If it is not, we have larger concerns to deal with than lying. Your being delusional would certainly be an issue that we'd need to resolve before marrying."

"I meant," she started but had to stop. Hermione found that a deep breath was necessary made more so by the potent stare she felt from Snape before she could continue. "I meant did I lie when I said you're an excellent lover?" Hermione felt her face heat considerably as he chuckled low in his chest and walked on for a moment.

"Honestly, Granger," Snape said, disdain heavy on his tongue, "that is the worst kind of leading question. How could I possibly answer it correctly? If I say 'no,' you assume either that I am lying to inflate my own ego or that I'm telling the truth and am an egotistical, pompous arse. If I say 'yes,' I'm either lying to make you nervous or telling the truth and priming you for sure disappointment. Beside that, I'm not entirely sure you *want* to know the answer. I think you just can't help but question everything."

Unsure of how to respond, Hermione settled for twining the fingers of her right hand in the folds of the shawl at her shoulders and trying not to change her grip on his arm with her left.

"Instead of providing you with the answer," Snape said, his voice cool, "I shall allow you to make your own conclusion through a series of logical deductions."

"All right," Hermione said warily. She had a feeling that this would be ghastly.

"Very well." His tone suddenly became clipped and oddly business-like. "Firstly, being an excellent lover is largely similar at least in fundamental personality traits to being a powerful wizard or a competent Potions master. List for me the qualities you feel are necessary to be a powerful wizard."

Hermione looked up at him for a moment, a bit dizzied at being so strangely side-tracked, but grateful for the distraction. "Innate talent, I suppose," she started, then gained strength as her mind snapped into student mode. "Strength, compassion, integrity, observance, judgment, prudence, instinct..."

"That will do," he said. "And a competent Potions Master?"

"Many of the same," she said, chewing her lip in thought. "But I'd add a few to the list: Diligence, concentration. Precision, certainly..."

"Patience?" he prompted.

"Absolutely!" Hermione responded enthusiastically, her mind whizzing through all the qualities she'd read about famous Potioneers. "Patience is essential in nearly every potion. I suppose those would be the foremost I'd think of, mostly."

"You forgot one quality that is utterly essential, Miss Granger." His voice was firm and commanding, though not displeased. He raised his arms and spread his long, pale fingers out in front of her. "A Potions Master's hands are his greatest tool, Miss Granger. There are no silly incantations, no foolish wand-waving in Potions," he didn't even notice Hermione's covert smile at the resurgence of the speech he gave to first years, "only the master's mind and his hands. A Potions Master's hands must be swift, precise, strong, and unforgiving. They must be able to coax magic literally and figuratively out of the most mundane of ingredients. Every move must be intentional; every reaction must be pure and perfect. His hands, Miss Granger, are his most potent weapon."

Something in the quality of his voice made her want to shiver. She restrained it as best she could as he flexed and extended each of the slender digits in turn before replacing them in the folds of his robes.

"Now," he said, "would you say that I am a powerful wizard, Miss Granger?"

"Of course," she said quietly, a little disoriented at another sudden turn.

"And a competent Potions Master; what of that?"

"One of the best," she answered dutifully, though no more loudly. Hermione quickly averted her face from his dark-eyed stare when he directed it at her. "Sir," she added, in want of something else to say.

"Then it stands to reason that I am in possession of these traits that you just listed?" he asked, an eyebrow lifted.

"Naturally," Hermione responded, trying not to clear her throat.

Snape nodded brusquely, as if he had expected no other reply. "Then apply, if you will, those traits that you listed as being essential for both a powerful wizard and a competent Potions Master traits that you agreed that I possessed to being a lover." He smirked as she flushed about the cheeks, but he could almost see her mind working as she chewed her lip when he spoke.

"Innate talent," his voice was so smooth, "strength, compassion, integrity, observance, judgment, prudence, instinct..." Hermione squeaked just a tiny bit; Snape sneered. "...diligence, concentration. Precision. Patience," his tongue caressed that last word strangely, making her breath speed up. She felt as if she were gulping air as he raised his arms again. "And my hands, Miss Granger. Observe my hands."

Though she knew it was exactly what he wanted, she glanced at them and then had to look away from the long, slim and elegantly-boned hands that rose into her line of vision again.

"The greatest tool," he said, flexing the fingers again, seemingly for his own amusement.

The glossy liquid that was his voice flowed like dark molasses, gelling the joints in her knees and elbows. Hermione felt shaky and weak, as if she had instantly come down sick and might at any moment break into a fitful sweat. Her stomach heaved queerly, perplexed and off-kilter, and her lungs pawed at the air before she could get a handle on whatever had just happened. Clearing her throat uncomfortably loudly, Hermione wrenched her spine straighter and couldn't help but stiffen her grip on the pool of black wool at his elbow.

"I do not believe I need to answer your query, Miss Granger," Snape said, his voice still strange and silky. "The conclusion should be rather obvious. So tell me: did you lie?"

Something in the remark compelled her. She turned her head to meet the penetrating stare from above and she nearly felt the dark eyes bore into her mind. Her mouth opened dry as a desert with no warning but only a peep left her lips. She snapped them shut. Turning his face back towards the trees ahead, Snape chuckled. They finished the rest of the walk in a strangely charged silence.

Severus couldn't help but be impressed by his Gryffindor fiancée, whatever her short comings. Miss Granger had taken his father's smooth insults with more grace than he would have expected and she had risen to the challenge that he had offered without so much as turning a hair at the fact that the shawl belonged to his long-dead mother. He had no doubt that they were still in line for a fair amount of grief before the next two days were over, but, surprising even himself, Severus had confidence that Granger would ride it out well enough. Well enough for a head-strong, emotional Gryffindor, at least. Shifting on the chaise he had claimed near the hearth, Severus raised the Potions periodical in his hands, gazing at his fiancé with his eye-line still appearing to be on the text.

If she had the intent of maintaining the dignified front of adulthood, she was failing parlously. It had taken him the course of nearly an hour to extract her from the family's library (that his father had decided to give her a tour of; why, he still couldn't be certain), but when he had finally managed it, she had nearly skipped down the corridor, clutching a first-edition copy of a tome that apparently contained her favorite stories as a child. Only his sternest glare and the bell for dinner had convinced her to abandon it here in the sitting room, and the instant the meal had been over she had dashed back to the room and picked it up immediately, seizing the chaise near the window that

she now occupied. Her legs were tucked up under her, lost within the folds of her robes, and her eyes darted across the pages with dizzying speed. The caress of her fingers on the cover was nearly childlike in its reverence. The fact that his father engaged himself in returning business correspondences didn't fool Severus; if Tobias was missing anything of Hermione's posture or occupation, Severus would skip through the courtyard naked, painted Gryffindor red. No, he was certain that the Marquis was well-aware of her reversion to adolescence.

Severus sighed heavily, eyeing the porcelain pot on the table next to him. With a quick tap of his wand to the pot's rounded belly, Severus refilled his cup with steaming, dark liquid. The first tang of the achingly strong and sweet coffee had him not quite suppressing a grin. Her behavior before dinner had been quite satisfactory indeed. Just after Severus and Hermione had come in from their constitutional, the Marquis had been making his way through the eastern wing of the house and suggested a tour of the family library. Shortly after Hermione had disappeared within the rows of shelving, a whip-crack of noise heralded the arrival of one of the house elves. Spreading the doily at her waist as she curtsied to both Severus and his father, the little elf squeaked out, "Is you be wanting tea now, Master?"

Hermione walked to the end of the aisle she had been perusing, seemingly absorbed with the book in her hands. Severus could tell she was practically burning a hole in the page with her effort not to show interest.

"Yes, we shall take it here," the Marquis said smoothly. Then, before anyone had a chance to reply, he added, "The White Darjeeling. We'll all take it light, with milk and no sugar."

Nearby, Severus heard the muffled thump of a book snapping shut. "Severus hates tea," Hermione said abruptly, her voice cold and calm as she strode past the Marquis to bend down to the elf who had turned to go.

"What is your name?" she asked the tiny creature that had started to crumple her doily apron beneath her long fingers in nervousness.

The elf had looked to the Marquis, who only looked back her with a blankly inquiring face, before answering. "Shula, Young Miss."

Hermione forced a smile. "Well you see, Shula, Master Severus hates tea and I prefer something with a bit more punch than your Master's tastes. Could you please bring Master Severus a coffee? Black, as strong as you can make it and with three lumps of sugar. I'll take whatever black tea you have on hand, prepared the same way as Master Severus's coffee, but with a slice of lemon."

The elf looked to the Marquis again, this time receiving a raised eyebrow and minute nod. "Yes, Young Miss. Of course," Shula answered. She Disappeared so quickly most likely to escape any possible retribution for contradicting the Master that the noise made Hermione flinch. Her face was calm again, though, when she had straightened. Eyes raised to the Marquis, she nodded to him with a tiny, absent smile and returned to the books. Tobias had watched in silence as Severus had stationed himself in the alcove near the door to wait for Shula to return. When the tray had appeared on the small breakfast table in the middle of the room, Hermione wandered back long enough to pick up a steaming cup of Oolong in a small silver filigreed pot.

Hermione settled herself at the table, a large tome on the origins of the French magical community open in front of her, and sipped at her cup with an appreciative if vacant smile.

"Well, Severus," the Marquis said in what should have seemed an approving tone, "you've certainly caught yourself a fiancée who isn't afraid to take charge of a situation. And she seems to know your preferences quite well."

Hermione glanced up from her book and smirked. Harry was right; if she could handle the Malfoys, a Basilisk, and Lord Voldemort, she could *certainly* handle Marquis Tobias Snape, Lord Bossy Bottom Snarky Pants. "It's true, Marquis; I've never had trouble commanding a situation. In my experiences with Ron and Harry, if you leave the running of a situation to the men, nothing productive ever gets done." She laughed gaily at her own joke, sickened at the fact that her voice barely sounded like herself any more.

"That is certainly an apt statement," Severus replied slickly. "Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley wouldn't have made it out of first year Potions without your omnipresent guidance."

A quick, hard glance was directed at Snape before she turned back to the Marquis. "And *anyone* who knows Severus would know he positively loathes tea. Simple really. And," Hermione turned a dotting smile on Severus, "any fiancée would pay attention to her betrothed's likes and dislikes. So how could I not know that Severus likes his coffee strong and sweet? Just how I like my tea. It's the little things that make a gesture romantic, don't you think?"

"I've never really seen benefit of romantic gestures," the Marquis said. "I've always felt it much more useful to be practical."

"Now that, I believe," Hermione answered. "And so does your son, it seems."

Not able to stomach any more of the ruthless politeness and constant stage-acting, Hermione rose from the table and wandered away with her tea. When she knew that she was far away enough that no one would hear the incantation, Hermione muttered a quick silencing charm before screaming her frustration and hurling her teacup at the wall.

Dinner had passed fairly uneventfully, only disrupted by the occasional expected digs; Severus merely had to wait out the Marquis until he turned in for the evening, which wouldn't be long. His father had always been the 'early to bed, early to rise' sort, yet another showing that despite their mirrored faces they were as opposed in nature as it was possible to be. Hermione continued her tireless reading despite the waning light. When her eyes started to feel the strain, she had merely pulled her wand from a place up her sleeve and lit it, using her left hand to hold it against the outer spine of the book, throwing light down upon the pages. He smirked just a tiny bit at what was obviously an age-old gesture for her.

"My, my," Tobias said suddenly, pulling Severus from his reverie. "Your affianced certainly does have a thirst for the written word, doesn't she? She's hardly torn her eyes from those nursery rhymes since she finished eating."

Her head snapped up and the cinnamon eyes threw daggers at the Marquis. "Alice in Wonderland is a brilliant work of fiction, *not* a collection of nursery rhymes. And yes, I do have quite a healthy appreciation for literature." Her tone was so prim and lofty that Severus nearly laughed.

"Yes, you've studied that work quite closely," Tobias said with a slick smile. "Nearly as closely as Severus has studied you. I must admit, he seems quite smitten."

Hermione stiffened and darted a surprised glance at her professor. Had he really been watching her? Or was it another of the Marquis's attempts to goad them into admitting something? A shaky smile appeared on her lips. "He is an attentive fiancé," she said. Her voice hadn't quite cracked, but it wasn't as strong as she clearly would have liked.

Severus's jaw clenched before he purposely released it and spoke. "A much more fitting description than 'smitten,' certainly. 'Smitten' is for teenagers and simpering idiots. However, only a fool would ignore a woman gracious enough to accept his hand. I am no fool."

"Hmmm," the Marquis responded non-committally. "Well, however you describe it, Severus, I'm quite amazed to discover that you have such a romantic side. As Miss Granger so aptly pointed out earlier, you seem to have followed my example on that score. What with the close regard you've been giving her all evening, one would expect flowers, candy and a serenade next."

Hermione flushed red and opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't manage anything. Dropping her eyes to her lap momentarily, she waited for a snide remark from Snape and was surprised when none came. Eventually, to break the silence and the tension, she forced herself to her feet and affected a dainty yawn. Glancing at her watch, Hermione feigned surprise at the hour.

"Goodness! I've had ever such a long day; no wonder I'm tired!" She wasn't, but ten o'clock today seemed to have taken ages to get there. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen," she nodded to the Marquis, then to Snape, "I believe I'll retire for the evening." Hermione tucked Alice under her arm and crossed the room.

"I'll accompany you to your suite," Snape said, making to stand, but as she moved past him, Hermione laid a hand on his arm and gently pushed him back down.

She knew he was probably desperate to leave, but Hermione had suffered under quite enough emotional strain for the day; she just wanted to retreat to peace and quiet. "No need," she said and smiled gently.

Perhaps it was something about being around such formal manners. Perhaps it was that the play-acting she'd been doing all afternoon had finally settled into a place where she no longer had to think about it. But for whatever the reason, Hermione's actions came without any forethought or contrivance: in a purely instinctual gesture that rose from God only knew not where, Hermione leaned down and placed her lips against Severus's cheek in a gentle kiss goodnight. For a moment, she seemed frozen there, realizing what she'd just done, but her mind screamed at her not to clam up, so she pulled away and tried to smile. In a startling moment of brilliance, Snape drew up the hand she had placed on his arm and laid his lips on the back of her knuckles.

Sometimes, Hermione forgot that he was a spy. It was easy to forget, seeing him stalk the halls every day like a sepulchral, vitriolic human bat, that Severus Snape was a man whose livelihood and the continuation of his life functions hinged on his ability to put forth whatever front was needed. She supposed that this was why she could still be surprised when he acted out of character so smoothly. If she hadn't known better, Hermione might almost have believed the soft, warm expression on his face, the way that his long, slender fingers caressed hers and he touched the back of her hand to his cheek before letting it slide from his grasp. Hermione felt a sudden heave of her stomach that was more flutter and less nausea than she'd expected; he was a far better actor than she had given him credit for. The only thing that allowed her stunned equilibrium to right itself was the fact that even within that soft, so very un-Snape-like face, his dark eyes were no less cold and inscrutable than ever. At least that had not changed. But she needed to leave.

Right now.

"Goodnight, Miss Granger," Severus said, his voice quiet.

She scurried to the door.

"Sleep well," the Marquis called after her with a chuckle as the heavy door clicked shut.

Thanks for reading, reviewing *hint hint* and for sticking with me!

The Constrictor Knot

Chapter 19 of 23

"I'm sorry for disturbing you," she said, only a tiny hitch in her voice. "But I figured it a safe bet that your father is having me watched, so I thought it might help our case if I came here in the middle of the night and asked to come in. I thought that anyone watching me would think that ... well, you know ... that I'm—"

"So desperate for my company that you'd sneak down here for a quick, late-night shag?"

"Er, something like that, yes," Hermione said in a rush.

Chapter 19 The Constrictor Knot

The Constrictor Knot "The Constrictor Knot is one of the most effective binding knots. Simple and secure, it is a harsh knot which can be difficult or impossible to untie once tightened. ... The Double constrictor knot is an even more robust variation[,] having two riding turns. ... The Constrictor knot is appropriate for situations where secure temporary or semi-permanent binding is needed." from Wikipedia's *List of Knots*

The determined pacing Severus had been indulging in for nearly an hour halted abruptly with the presence of the timorous knock on the outside of his chamber door. Even as a child, Severus had been possessed of such a wealth of physical restraint that he seldom resorted to such impotent and weak gestures as pacing or fidgeting, but being back in France, near his father, had rattled his composure and the constant motion of pacing helped burn off some of the nervous energy. He glanced at his pocket watch then scowled at the door as the nerves coursing through his system peaked. No one in this household would knock on his door at nearly quarter-past two, so it had to be Granger. *What in the hell could she want at this hour?* Fully intending to set down the impudent girl for disturbing him at such an ungodly time, Severus wrenched open the door. The sight before him, though, halted the tirade. She stood before his door in nothing but a knee-length lavender nightgown, her hair in a wild tumble around her shoulders and her feet oddly bare. The gown was unbuttoned at the neck, showing a wide yet not indecent span of pale cleavage. Granger glanced down the hallway in either direction, biting her lip as she seemed to search for someone. Severus leaned on the partially open door and watched her, intrigued. Her body language would have suggested that she was nervous the way her teeth gnawed on her lip, the hurried glances to search for onlookers but the pinch in her brow wasn't quite complete and her eyes were steady; she was acting a part, and Severus found himself inexplicably interested in why. Suddenly, her eyes lifted to his, her cheeks flushing just a bit as she gave him a small, quick smile.

"I'm sorry to wake you," she whispered.

"You didn't," he said simply.

"Oh," she returned, and this time she looked genuinely discomfited. She looked left and right again, her gaze sticking for just a second at the curtained alcove just down the hall from his suite. "Good. Would you mind if I came in?"

He raised an eyebrow, leaning even more heavily on the door. Unable to tell what she was on about, Severus figured he'd simply wait until she betrayed something.

Granger flushed again, this time much more brilliantly; she took a quick breath before speaking. "I thought we could" As her voice trailed off, the girl dropped her eyes and shrugged her shoulder in a strange fashion, causing the loose strap of her gown to fall down her arm. The shifting neckline exposed more skin, this time giving him a view of just the top of a breast; she looked back up at him with a timid smile. Her eyes darted again, lightning quick, to the alcove lying in shadow, and suddenly her plot made itself clear. With a thick smile, Severus stood straight and moved away from the entrance of the door only slightly, causing her to brush her bare shoulder against him as she passed by into the darkness of his sitting room. She gasped just a tiny bit; Severus pushed the door shut quietly.

The instant the latch clicked behind them, Hermione removed her wand from a band she had tied to her thigh and muttered a few charms, the first of which being a

Silencing Charm. Struck with that same sense of nerves, Severus averted his eyes as Granger's hands flew to her nightgown, wrenching up the neck and rebuttoning as fast as her fingers could move. When she had replaced the neck, she reached underneath the gown and pulled a small square of cloth from the same band as her wand, restoring it to its normal size and shape. The pink, fluffy robe looked strangely out of place as she threw it around her shoulders. Only when she was fully dressed covered did Granger raise her eyes to his.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you," she said, only a tiny hitch in her voice. "But I figured it a safe bet that your father is having me watched, so I thought it might help our case if I came here in the middle of the night and asked to come in. I thought that anyone watching me would think that ... well, you know ... that I'm..."

"So desperate for my company that you'd sneak down here for a quick, late-night shag?"

"Er, something like that, yes," Hermione said in a rush. "So, I guess I'll just ... stay for a few minutes."

Severus strode across the room towards her and, while she didn't back away precisely, Granger studied her toes, wiggling them and gripping the strands of the thick rug beneath her. "A few minutes?" Snape said, a tiny smirk curling his lips. "Is that the extent of my stamina as an 'excellent lover'?"

Granger's face darkened another shade of red and she chewed on the inside of her lip as she glanced between him and the floor. "Well, I didn't think that if it were a ... erm, quick encounter, that we'd be all that eager to linger, you know. I figured ten or fifteen minutes ought to do it."

Severus laughed, a clipped bark of noise. "An hour, Miss Granger. At the very least."

She looked up at him, astonished, before paling and clutching her robe tighter about her. "An hour? Don't you think that's a bit excessive for a fast tumble in the middle of the night at your father's house?"

"An hour," he said firmly. "If we're going to make him talk, we may as well give him something to really chew on."

"Right," Hermione said, and a nervous chirp of laughter eked out of her. "Right. So, I'll just ..." She glanced around the sitting room, lit only by a low fire, clearly searching for something to occupy her for the next hour. "Bollocks, I should have brought something to re-re-re..." Her jaw nearly cracked under the force of an enormous yawn.

"Read," she finished.

Snape studied her for a moment, taking in the dark circles under her eyes, the riotous bramble of hair and the light crease in her right cheek.

"Had you already been to sleep?"

She nodded, stifling another yawn. "I set the mantle clock in my room for 1:45. I intended to be here at two, but I got lost on the way into the east wing." Suddenly, she scowled and her arms went akimbo, seemingly of their own volition. "I don't know what's below the corridor leading between that pink drawing room and the upper level of the library, but it made the floors bloody freezing."

"And that's your lesson regarding running around unshod like a heathen."

Her scowl started to deepen, but she shuddered with another yawn.

"Rest, Granger," said Snape. With a non-committal wave of his hand, he indicated a tapestry hung on the wall behind her and to the right. "The bedroom is through that passageway. I will wake you at the appropriate time."

Without thinking, Hermione started off in that direction, but halted quickly. Staring at the wall hanging but not really seeing it, Hermione felt a sudden surge of queasiness. Sleep in Snape's bed? Could she even bring herself to? And what if he got tired? Would he wake her and throw her out? Sleep out here on the sofa? Or, worse yet, get in bed *with* her? Unconsciously, a hand went to her stomach.

"You know, I don't think I'm that tired after all," Hermione said, turning back and walking toward the sofa near the fire. "I think I'll just..."

"Don't be ridiculous," Snape said and placed both of his large hands on her shoulders. Without waiting for a reply, he turned her back towards the tapestry and gave her a shove. "You're nearly dead on your feet. Sleep. Tomorrow will be all the more difficult if you are not well-rested."

"No, I..." She yawned again.

"You're half asleep as it is, Granger."

"But, I..."

"I won't forget to wake you."

"Yes, but you..."

"Nor will I tease, bother or molest you in your sleep." She whirled around to gape at him, but he looked as stony and unmoved as ever. "Go," he said, with an air of finality and, assuming her compliance, turned his back to her and planted himself at a desk near the window.

As if her presence had never been acknowledged at all, Snape withdrew a quill and parchment from an inner drawer in the desk, hunching over so low that the lank strands of his hair brushed the paper, shadowing his quick, spiky script from her view as he wrote. Hermione found herself overcome with curiosity; she took a few tentative steps forward, intrigued by the idea that something could be so terribly pressing at 2:15 am on a Saturday.

"Shoo," Snape said so suddenly that Hermione squeaked in surprise.

This time, she complied with his request immediately and scuttled off behind the tapestry.

Waking in a cold sweat, Hermione nearly screamed, but not from terror. It was the worst nightmare she'd had in a long time (at least, the worst that didn't feature death or Lord Voldemort somehow), but oddly, she didn't feel scared. The details of what she'd seen tried to slip away, but Hermione forced her mind to clutch onto them. True, she'd never been one for Divination or dream interpretation, but this one seemed inexplicably important. She remembered that it had started in Potions class. Fairly innocuous, at least in the beginning.

No sooner had she begun to unpack her bag upon the table than Professor Snape appeared and instructed the class that they would be making an elixir to reveal the perfect lover. It had occurred to her, in the dream, as only mildly strange, but she felt exhilarated by the challenge. The perfect lover and it would be her that created the elixir perfectly, she knew it! She was determined to discover the secret held within the depths of the potion.

Hermione worked tirelessly over her cauldron, sweating and straining, stirring, chopping, grating ingredients; a woman possessed, she barely raised her head from her cauldron. The longer she worked, the more she'd felt his dark eyes on her, watching, studying, waiting for her to make a mistake. But she didn't. Her motions were pure and perfect; she would make more than just magic, she'd make perfection! It seemed like hours passed. Bells rang to signal the changing of numerous classes. She ignored them. The perfect lover ... she would make this elixir if it killed her. She had to know, had to see what her perfect lover would look like. At last, panting and exhausted,

Hermione peered into her cauldron at the slowly simmering deep green liquid and knew she was finished. A weary smile on her face, she ladled the potion into a flagon and raised her hand.

Barely noticing the students working away at the tables all around them oddly, not her classmates, but first-years Snape strode to her, a thick smirk on her face. "Finished, have we?" Snape said.

"Yes, sir," Hermione answered with enthusiasm. She handed him her sample, all but bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"And you think you know what makes a perfect lover, do you?" he said slickly.

"Well, I..." She stopped. She'd never considered that knowledge of the thing itself would be necessary; it never had before. But then again, in all her previous Potions experiments, she'd done tremendous research first. "Well, no, sir, but I..."

"No, I thought not," said Snape. "Let's see how you've done then, shall we?"

Without waiting for a response, Snape downed the contents of her bottle in one go. With a horrified shriek, Hermione watched as her scowling professor's face shivered as if he'd taken Polyjuice Potion. Snape clamped his eyes shut as if the potion pained him, and his long, thin hands pressed tentatively against his facial features; clearly he expected that they would have changed somehow, but as far as Hermione could discern, nothing discernable had altered. It wasn't until Snape opened his eyes and blinked at her, nonplussed, that she noticed a difference. A stark one. Staring back at her out of the sharp, hawk-like face of her professor was a set of eyes that was unmistakably Harry's. And as Snape's fingers combed across his skin, light brown freckles darted across his nose and cheeks. Just like the ones that Ron's face had once sported. Hermione backed away from him in such a hurry that she stumbled over her stool and nearly tumbled to the ground. With a lightning-quick reach, Snape's hand closed over her arm and yanked her up towards him.

"What have you done?" he asked in a harsh whisper.

"Nothing," she cried in a broken voice. "Nothing!"

"You must have done something wrong!"

"No, no, that's impossible," Hermione insisted. She tried, in vain, to wriggle from his grasp. "It was perfect; my potion was perfect! I followed all of your directions to the letter. I made everything right."

"So this is your idea of a perfect lover, then?" said the horrible Snape-Harry-Ron homunculus.

"No!" she bleated as tears poured down her face.

"Lies, Granger, lies! The potion transforms the drinker into the potioneer's perfect lover!" Snape spat. "You must have made an error. And no wonder! How could a potion ever be perfect from those hands?"

"What's wrong with my...?"

But Hermione trailed off as she looked down at her hands. They were hers, and yet, somehow, not hers. She blinked and stared for another moment before she realized what was wrong; they were her hands, but they were far younger than the rest of her body. As she looked down, Hermione saw her body shrink and change, morphing into that of her eleven-year-old self.

"A child," Snape cried. "You're nothing more than a child! You've got to finish it; you've got to complete the potion and put me right."

"I already have finished the potion," Hermione said, her voice gaining a higher pitch even as she spoke.

"No, Miss Granger," said Snape, "you missed the last and most important step."

She could barely stand to look at him anymore. The longer she looked, the more his features slid and shifted and shivered into something else. His face seemed to blink into Harry's, then Ron's, then back to his own or Harry's again; his hair changed from lank and greasy to black and unruly, then red and shaggy.... Over and over, features reassembled themselves, not always together with the rest of the face that owned them. The only thing that stayed the same were his hands; the hands were always Snape's. He used one slim digit to gesture to the chalkboard, where a new instruction began to scrawl itself across the surface in swift, spiky writing.

Three kisses, it said. A kiss to create. A kiss to confirm. A kiss to hold perfection.

"Finish the potion," Snape said.

"But, sir," Hermione protested.

"Finish!"

"A kiss to create," Hermione said slowly. Without questioning how she knew what she was doing the right thing, Hermione rose on her toes and placed a kiss on Snape's left cheek. A golden sort of light spread from where her lips had touched his cheek, changing his face as it spread. "A kiss to confirm," she said, this time kissing his right cheek. The light spread to the other side of his face and Hermione knew instinctively that her perfect lover was being revealed as it spread. Suddenly unready to see the truth, Hermione clamped her eyes shut.

"A kiss to hold perfection."

This time, it was Snape's voice that spoke the words. She felt his fingertips sweep gently across her forehead and move down her face. A strange tingling chased his touch down her body as his hands moved. Opening her eyes, Hermione saw her body reform, shaping back into her current gently-feminine curves. A deep blush painted her cheeks as he swept his hands across her breasts, testing their weight for a moment they seemed to weigh heavier in his grip; along her ribcage, which inflated with a sharply drawn gasp; across her buttocks, tightening as she stood on her toes to seal the potion with the last instruction. Only when her lips met his did she open them to see her perfect lover. The serpentine fingers closed once again over her breasts, traitorous mounds of skin that leapt under his touch even as Hermione tried to wrench away. The face of her perfect lover was unmistakably that of her grouchy, scowling professor, with no additions, deletions or changes in sight; not even the damned nose.

Snape's tongue swept into her mouth as she opened it to cry out in repulsion.

"A dream," Hermione whispered to herself, curling into a ball and trying to calm her racing heart. "Just a dream ... just a dream ..."

Her face flushed, trying desperately to stop sweating, Hermione whimpered as she tried to slow her breathing. So strange, the dream had been so strange. And what in the world could it mean? The prompting of it was obvious: her subconscious seemed to still be mulling over the conversation that she and Sn-Severus had carried on in the gardens, and clearly their actions before she retired to bed had aggravated those thoughts. With a violent startle, she realized the fact that she was also actually in his bed probably didn't help. Hermione jumped out of the bed with a squeak and couldn't quite help her hands brushing at her clothes as she she'd been dirtied somehow. The minute her mind caught up with her hands, though, she felt thoroughly ashamed; she'd meant what she'd said to Snape: she refused to hold things against people that they couldn't help. Snape certainly couldn't help his appearance; to be fair, though, it was his personality that was the more repugnant of his qualities.

Hermione sat down on the bed gingerly. He'd changed, though. These last few hours in France seemed to have rendered him a wildly different person. All right, he was still curt and surly, imperious, and endlessly pleased with himself and disdainful of others, but something had ... softened strangely. If Hermione hadn't known it was largely, if not completely, for show, she would have even ventured to say that he was being *nice* to her. That he actually enjoyed her company. It was all an act, but it would be nice while it lasted. For however short a time it would be, Hermione would feel as if she had a fiancé that cared for her. A surprising novelty, given her situation.

Even more surprising was that the favorable change in his disposition suited him. Before this afternoon, a 'nice' Snape would have ranked near a relaxed Filch or a benevolent Umbridge on the list of Things Going against the Very Fabric of the Universe. But no, she thought as she lay back down on the soft cotton sheets, this change seemed to have settled into his skin effortlessly. Was it the change of scene? It couldn't be the presence of his father. The man was cantankerous enough to force the Dalai Lama to act as if he had a cavity and a hernia at the same time. Maybe Snape really was warming to her ... or, she thought, with a sickening plunge of her stomach, *it really is all just a very convincing performance from a very skilled actor*. For some reason, that thought upset her more than she cared to admit, which confused her more than she could explain.

Hermione inhaled tentatively as she lay her head back down on the pillow. She'd been afraid that it would smell like that familiar mix of herbs, old books, and the sick-sweet smell of dungeon dampness that always lingered around his teaching robes, but the crisp smell of laundry soap made her smile. And then frown. He'd said that she hadn't woken him, but she'd assumed that he'd been lying; the only smell lingering on his pillow, however, was the aroma of the laundry soap and a tiny fragrance of her own shampoo. Four hours had gone by between when she went to bed and when she showed up at his door, and yet he hadn't even lain down? She glanced at the mantle clock. Nearly four a.m. and he hadn't slept at all? True, she'd been in here for the last hour and a half, but...

"Hour and a half?" Hermione squeaked and leapt from the bed. "Four o'clock!" Throwing her dressing gown back over her shoulders, she strode across the room and pushed through the tapestry into the sitting room. For a moment, she circled the small room frantically before realizing that Snape was not there. Odd, certainly, but the fact that he wasn't actually calmed her nerves. A hand to her chest, as if it could slow her thumping heart, Hermione walked over to his desk, intent on writing a short note to him before ducking out and back towards her room. The parchment on the surface of his desk, the scrap he'd begun writing on when she entered, caught her eye and nearly made her gasp aloud.

The picture didn't move, but she had a feeling that was only because it wasn't finished. Scrawled across the page was a half-completed sketch of her face, with such a striking likeness that only the obvious pen strokes convinced her that it wasn't a photograph. The black and white likeness of her stared up from the page, the inside corner of the drawn Hermione's bottom lip drawn between her teeth. The right side of her visage was fully formed, shaded in such a manner that suggested a dim light source spilling onto her from directly ahead. The left side receded into a simplistic line drawing; clearly this was the portion that the artist, whomever he or she was, hadn't finished yet. Despite the fact that the drawing was incomplete, the expression on the portrait Hermione's face was clear: she looked uncertain, wary and, somehow, anxious to please. The artist had certainly glorified her eyes, as she was certain that they were neither that clear nor that expressive, but the finished right eye practically leapt from the page. Her hair was the only aspect of the drawing that was complete in its entirety, the wild spirals escaping in all directions, as if it threatened to take over the whole page.

Hermione couldn't help staring at the drawing in complete surprise and bizarre entrancement. Who in the world would have taken the time to draw such an intense and realistic portrait of her? Certainly no one in this house. And why would Snape, of all people, have it on his...With the force of a stampeding herd of hippogriffs, the memory of Snape bent over his desk, scribbling away on a piece of parchment assaulted her. She had assumed he had been writing some form of correspondence. Never in her most feverish assumptions would she have presumed to think that Snape would do anything at all connected with creativity, especially not something so very personal as a drawing of her face, of all things. The longer she stared at it, the more it dawned on her that this was a rendering of her appearance as it had been when she came to his door that very night. His pen had not marked anything below her chin, yet she felt certain that if it had, she would have seen a single bare shoulder, the other supporting a loose, falling nightgown.

Her hand trembling, Hermione extended her fingers toward the drawing before suddenly pulling them back as if she'd been stung by her own representation there on Snape's desk. Something in Hermione felt almost as if she'd been violated. This picture seemed too familiar, too personal almost. A horrible creature living in her imagination clouded Hermione's vision with pictures of Snape beckoning her into his bedroom, of those horrible, scratchy teaching robes brushing against her as his long-fingered hands pushed away her nightgown. A powerful wave of some sensation that felt a cross between anxiety and nausea swept over her. One hand clutching her dressing gown closed at her throat and the other clamping tightly over her lips, Hermione turned as quickly as she could and bolted from the room. Her bare feet didn't stop slapping the cold wooden floors until she was safely ensconced in the guest room in the west wing of the house, far away from that drawing, her fiancé, and his dark, piercing eyes that saw far, far too much.

That damn girl was bloody-well driving him crazy. If he'd thought that his nerves were peaked last night, he'd cursed himself by speaking too soon. From the instant he'd knocked her up that morning for breakfast, she'd acted as if she were just a few very small steps short of screaming in horror and running from him like a scared doe. True, their dealings last night had been somewhat strained and more than a tad awkward, but it didn't explain the way she was currently sitting across from him at the small table, picking at her salade nicoise as if afraid that its very presence might make her vomit. Severus laid his fork on his plate which caused her to flinch, making him grimace and kneaded the bridge of his nose with his fingers. At least his father had left them to eat in private, temporarily devoid of his usual antics. Merlin, he was certain that this interminable weekend couldn't possibly get worse. A loud, boisterous voice sounded from somewhere a few rooms away, and Severus forced himself to restrain a groan. Yet again, he'd spoken too soon; by now, he should simply kick himself for making assumptions at all, as fate would be less tempted to prove him wrong.

"Well then, well then," said the full, distinctly feminine voice in the adjoining parlor. "What's so important that I just simply had to Apparate here all the way from Galway? It is busy in Ireland you know, despite your lofty opinions of such, Uncle."

Severus kneaded harder. He had known the voice instantly, of course, and exactly why his father picked this particular person as someone that 'simply had to be here.' A sigh escaped him and he drew his napkin from his lap, pushing away his chair and rising to greet the guest obviously making her way towards the library they currently occupied. Granger still sat at the table, her fork hovering in mid-air with a piece of tuna dangling precariously from the tines. When he looked directly at her, she paled but set down her fork and gazed up at him for direction. Before he could open his mouth to give instructions, their impromptu company had crossed the threshold and was making her way towards the pair, depositing her dove-colored wool traveling cape and leather gloves with a waiting house elf as she went. With a surreptitious glance at his father, Severus turned to Granger who sat practically frozen at the table, her eyes gazing up at him in restrained panic and gave a quick two-fingered gesture to indicate that she should rise from the table. Wordlessly, she followed his directive, calming her face and running her hands over the moss-green gown to smooth wrinkles that she only imagined were there.

A tall, reedy woman with auburn hair liberally shot through with gray, the guest surprised Hermione with her full voice and quirked smile. "I must say, Severus, you do look the most frightful shit after twenty years."

Hermione snorted loudly as she tried to restrain a gale of laughter. The tall woman favored Hermione with a lopsided smirk. The wide set of her square shoulders and the single raised eyebrow immediately marked her as a member of the Marquis's family.

"High praise, as usual," Severus said dryly.

His words carried his usual biting tone, but, much to Hermione's surprise, the tiny quirk of his lips seemed entirely genuine. He actually *liked* this woman. Snape didn't like anyone, especially not those who belittled him, and yet, he seemed to actually like this woman who'd insulted him with her first breath in the room. When near enough, the

woman put out her hand, which Severus clasped lightly in his larger one as he leaned forward and lightly kissed her cheek. Her slim auburn eyebrow rose again as she directed her gaze to Hermione, who was still stifling a smile.

Snape's face hardened somewhat, Hermione noticed, as he moved to stand next to the statuesque redhead. "Lady Martine Iona Stanhope Snape," Snape said in a calm, clear voice. "Youngest daughter of William Stanhope, 11th Earl of Harrington. Through a series of extremely unfortunate events for her, such as birth and marriage to a complete prat, she also happens to be my cousin."

Unsure of how to take this last pronouncement, Hermione's eyes darted nervously between Snape who smirked just a tad and Martine who swatted him across the chest with the back of a heavily-bejeweled hand. Lady Snape extended that same hand to Hermione, palm down, who darted a quick glance to Snape for guidance. He simply looked at Lady Snape's hand, back at her, then at the floor and up again. For a moment, Hermione was at a total loss, before a flash of their first walking lesson came back to her. She picked up Lady Snape's hand and bent over it as she curtsied.

"An honor to meet you, milady," Hermione said dutifully.

Only when Martine chuckled and threw a glance at the Marquis did Hermione chance to look at Severus, whose face was impassive. She could only guess that if she'd done something wrong, he'd look angry. Aside from that, she'd have to go on instinct.

"Charmed, I'm sure," Lady Snape said in response, but she looked far more amused than Hermione thought was 'proper manners.' "I'm sure it was Tobias who fed you that load of bollocks, my dear, as I know how very much Severus despises it all. But you performed admirably at least." Martine chuckled again and turned to Severus. "That doesn't explain what the lovely and unfortunate young creature is doing trapped in this house with you two louts, though."

Again, Hermione fought to keep her face straight, as did Severus, but for obviously opposite reasons. "I, er," Hermione started, but the Marquis took this opportunity to rise from the chair he had silently occupied upon entering, as if he were party to a marvelous circus of some kind.

"But surely you've heard of the new law enacted by the British Ministry, Martine," he said sleekly. "Being so close up in Ireland, I've thought it would be all the talk among your tenant farmers."

"My tenants have better things to do than gossip idly about another country's misfortune," Martine answered, her voice suddenly (and effectively) frosty as she spoke to the Marquis. It thawed quickly when she turned back to Severus. "You don't mean to say that you..."

The muscles along Severus's jaw worked heavily, but he unlocked them to speak. "Martine, this is Miss Hermione Granger, of Bedfordshire," he said. Then, dryly, "We are to be married."

The Lady Snape's face opened up into one of pure astonishment for a moment or two. Then for just a moment, it pinched into thoughtful concern. "You poor thing," she said, and reached out to pat Hermione's hand. "I don't envy you a jaunt, trying to live with Severus ad infinitum. All available sympathy to you."

Inexplicably, Hermione burst into full throated laughter. Martine smiled back at her, restraining from commenting any further as the Snape men donned identical scowls.

In the back of her head, Hermione offered at least a hundred prayers of thanks to her deceased maternal grandmother, who'd insisted on instructing Hermione in the staunch etiquette of a formal afternoon tea. Despite the extended "lessons" with her sullen fiancé, they hadn't gotten around to covering a tea service. Hermione fancied herself quite a smart young lady, but had she not known them already, the 'rules' of tea service would have been mind boggling. One was not to stir one's tea in circular motions; instead, one should make gentle folding motions from the six o'clock of one's cup to the twelve o'clock position and back. One should never loop one's fingers through the handle of the cup; one should rest one's thumb behind the handle, one's index and middle finger in front of the handle, and gently lift the pinkie for balance to avoid spills. The saucer was to be held in the left hand and was never to be lifted with the cup unless the tea took place in a standing room. A napkin could only ever be placed on the left side of the place setting, with the folded edge to the left and the open edge facing into the place setting. Somehow, facing the other direction was considered common. As was slicing a scone completely through; a scone could only be delicately broken into bite-sized chunks before applying jam or cream. The knowledge had been pounded into her years ago, back when it had seemed a refined, grown up treat to play at a dignified formal tea service. Now, the gentle movements were effortless, and Hermione could not have been gladder about it.

Delicately using a lemon fork to add a slice to her tea, gently inhaling the fragrant aroma of the clove wedged in the center of the round, Hermione smiled at Severus, whom she knew was watching her from behind the ebony curtain of his hair. He had somehow managed to get away with asking Lulu and her companion for coffee, so he filled his cup from the French press that Mitsi had left on the small table at his left elbow. Hermione had to stifle a giggle as she watched him lift his serving of coffee; the bowl of the cup, delicately scrolled in gold filigree and moss green swirls, seemed tiny in his big hands, and she couldn't put out of her head the image of the giant from Jack and the Beanstalk sitting down to tea.

Lady Snape watched her for much of the beginning of Low Tea, regarding Hermione with an assessing yet not unfriendly eye as Martine acted as hostess and poured the tea. Hermione simply smiled and offered another round of silent thanks that she had not been asked to be hostess. Grammie Mona had passed away when she was nine, and as such, had never passed on the many points of etiquette tied to the role of the hostess.

"So, Miss Granger," Martine said with a quirked grin as she passed Hermione a porcelain cup, "you must tell me more about yourself. I'm dying to know what sort of woman," the Marquis's snort of disdain was immediately ignored, "Severus has deemed good enough for him."

Hermione blinked a few times. "Well," she started slowly, "I'm not so sure it's a matter of no one else being good enough..."

"You are too polite, I'm sure, Miss Granger," Lady Snape replied.

"Far too polite," Tobias said, his voice poison smooth. "Severus's standards, as we know, are legendary."

Hermione cleared her throat gently, casting her eyes to Severus momentarily. He just stared back. Obviously he was going to make no move to defend either her or himself.

"Indeed, they are," she finished strongly. "He accepts nothing less than the very best." Her spine straightened as she turned her gaze back to Martine. "I can only hope that I live up to the standard."

Martine gently waved away the comment. "Of course you will, darling; I'm sure you already have. Now, tell me more about yourself. I'm not normally so very gauche as to ask, but I'm curious, and as Severus will tell you, my curiosity is my undoing. How old are you, Miss Granger?"

"Martine," Severus said quickly, his voice a low warning. "Apart from the impoliteness, I think you can most likely glean that fact without having to ask."

Martine opened her mouth to return Severus's banter, but Hermione answered before she could speak.

"I don't mind owning it," she said, slewing a glare to the Marquis, who'd sat up all the straighter and watched her like a hungry tiger. "I am very nearly eighteen. My birthday is next Sunday."

"Whatever happened to 'a lady never reveals her age'?" Severus asked. The smile on his lips was teasing enough that any outsider would have thought him to be sharing a joke, but his eyes were cold and his glare sharp. Hermione swallowed heavily.

"A lady never does," Tobias returned, letting the unspoken insult hang in the air.

It only remained unaddressed for barely a second.

"That is thoroughly uncharitable, Uncle," Martine said to Tobias.

Hermione couldn't help tilting her head and regarding Lady Snape with a curious expression: her tone was unmistakably prickly and censoring.

"Not to mention untrue," Martine continued. "These days, I find that the issue of revealing one's age is decidedly less frowned upon than it used to be. I have little reason to conceal my own, come to that." She leaned over to Hermione and, in a loud stage whisper, said, "I'm fifty-two, but don't you dare tell anyone."

When Hermione let a flurry of giggles leave her after a sip of tea, Martine smiled and sat up again. "Well then, a birthday next week. Many happy returns, Miss Granger!" Martine said, nodding to her and smiling over her tea cup. "Severus, perhaps you'll want to write down the date, so you don't forget?"

"I think I'll be able to manage, Martine," Severus said dryly. "Six days before the wedding is not likely to go out of my head."

"So soon?" Lady Snape asked, and her astonishment was clear for the first time. "You're getting married so soon?"

Not waiting for a response from Hermione, Severus answered. "A necessity, really," he said. "The ceremony must be preformed within six months of the proposal, and this seemed like the most convenient time for the both of us."

Hermione barely refrained from huffing aloud. *Convenient. Bah! Not a damn bit of this marriage was convenient, least of all this nonsense!*

Something of her annoyance must have showed in her face because the Marquis immediately clucked his tongue. "Oh dear, I have a feeling Miss Granger disagrees," he said, shaking his head in mock sympathy. "Not bullying her about already, are you, Severus?"

Severus flashed his father an annoyed scowl. "Hardly," he snapped, "as she was the one who set the date."

"Perhaps she just wanted it over with?" Tobias offered in a polite voice.

"Perhaps she's just keen to marry dear Severus," Martine offered hopefully.

Hermione's teeth ground so heavily she was surprised they didn't crack. "Perhaps she dislikes being talked about as if she's not here."

The entire rest of the party regarded her with varying shades of disbelief: Martine's eyes held surprise at her sharp tone, but pride as well; Severus's had narrowed in assessment and warning; Tobias allowed his mahogany eyes to transmit an apology that clearly went no deeper than the surface.

"Forgive me, Miss Granger," Tobias answered, dropping a tiny half-bow. "I was merely offering that you were eager to be through with the formality of a wedding and head straight to the more interesting parts of connubial bliss." Tobias turned to his niece with an air of polite interest. "Apparently, he's quite an excellent lover."

Hermione's cup rattled so loudly in the saucer that even she was astonished that it hadn't broken. Cinnamon brown eyes shot a look of utter contempt at the Marquis that she was unable to mask.

Without a pause for a second breath, Martine raised her tea cup to her lips and sipped delicately, but not before saying, "I've no doubt of it. It's all in the hands, my dear. You can always tell a good lover by his hands."

Hermione dropped her eyes back to her tea, certain that if she stared hard enough at the floating lemon slice, she could entirely block out both her embarrassment and Snape's smirk of triumph.

For the first few minutes of the leisurely walk around the gardens, Hermione was completely silent. She listened to Martine's lively voice chatter about the goings-on in Galway while the tall woman smiled into the Marquis's condescending and thoroughly disinterested face as he escorted her down the gravel path circumnavigating the gardens. Once or twice, Lady Snape's face would turn just far enough that Hermione could see her profile, and when she did, Hermione caught a mischievous, merry glint in her eye, which gave Hermione the impression that she was purposely digging up the most mundane, uninteresting nuggets of news with the express purpose of boring Severus's father to the point of madness. Hermione snickered, and when Severus stared down at her with a raised eyebrow and blank face, she grinned up at him winningly, quickening her pace to catch up with the pair ahead of them. Severus cleared his throat pointedly and glared at her, but allowed himself to be chivvied along.

"...think it's my favorite time of year in Galway, with the air being so crisp and the last harvest coming in. Lovely time of year to be outdoors. And it's absolutely abominable that not a *one* of you notified me that Severus was getting married." The abrupt topic change had disoriented nearly all of the party, Hermione included. She quickly gathered that this had been Lady Snape's intention, however, as neither Severus nor the Marquis had recovered quickly enough to comment. "I do hope the wedding will be outside."

Martine turned more gracefully than Hermione would have imagined someone of her height could and settled herself on a stone bench at the edge of a lily pond. "So if Severus is marrying you, then you must be a Mudblood, eh, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, I..." Hermione began, before Lady Snape's word choice sank in and she abruptly dissolved into silence. All Hermione could seem to do was gape at her, her mouth open, cheeks flushing in quick surprise and indignance.

"Nothing to be ashamed of, dear," Martine answered. Her cheery smile seemed so out of place with the crude insult she'd delivered just seconds ago. "We all have our shortcomings. You seem an intelligent girl and you're a pretty young lady; I'm sure Severus won't hold your blood status against you."

From Lady Snape's facial expression one of kind concern and reassurance Hermione gathered that she meant this comment to be some sort of comforting balm to Hermione's potential anxiety. Her mouth still hanging open a bit, Hermione tried to recover but it was the Marquis who spoke first.

"Yes, of course," he said silkily. His face had lit in what Hermione considered to be a grotesque show of giddy excitement. Clearly, this benevolent discrimination was the exact reason for his entreaty to Martine for a visit. "Severus is well known for being endlessly magnanimous." By now, Hermione had nearly recovered the powers of speech, but the Marquis continued. "But perhaps it is simply his taste for Mudbloods that drives his choice."

Martine nodded and gave a graceful shrug. "No harm in it, I suppose," she said thoughtfully. "We all have our strange penchants, eh, Severus?"

Unable to control her burgeoning temper but unwilling to stoop to snapping at the Marquis's obvious bait, Hermione simply muttered, "Excuse me," and took off down the gravel path ahead of her as quickly as she could without actually running.

Stones crunched beneath her feet and she fought a growl that tried valiantly to release itself from her throat as she put all possible distance between herself and the confusing, infuriating scene behind her. After a few moments, Hermione slowed to an insistent walk, trying to keep her hands from balling up and ruining the soft fabric of her green robes. After a moment, Hermione felt a strange heat upon the back of her neck.

"How could she?" she nearly shouted. "How could she! She seemed so nice. I actually liked her!"

"You have no reason not to," came the quiet, smooth response from behind her.

Unsure of how exactly she knew that Severus had followed her somehow he'd managed it, though she'd heard neither footfall nor Apparition Hermione whirled to face her

fiancé. He leaned unceremoniously against the trunk of a tulip tree just bordering the path she stood on, as if he'd been lounging there for hours, waiting for her to show up.

"No reason not to?" Hermione cried indignantly. "Did you even hear what she called me? I thought she liked me!"

"She does," said Severus.

"Then how could she...?"

Snape sighed heavily and crossed his arms over his chest; the familiar sneer that had been noticeably absent the last twenty-four hours reappeared quickly and settled into the usual lines in his face. "Always the Gryffindor."

"Oh, for God's sake," said Hermione in a huff. "Don't start that nonsense again about House differences. She insulted me; plain and simple."

"You really can't see the difference, can you? You can think of no way that Martine could be friendly and still use that word. You really can't, can you?"

To Hermione's surprise, Snape's expression was genuinely inquisitive and perplexed; no hint of sarcasm lingered there. Speechless, Hermione shook her head. Severus sighed heavily again and sat on a wrought iron bench that had been riveted into the broad trunk. He gestured lightly for Hermione to join him. Still flushed with anger, she took a few steps towards him but did not sit. He shrugged before stretching his long legs ahead of him, reclining against the tree.

"Something that has always amazed me about Gryffindors this is not a House prejudice, Miss Granger, simply an observation of a common trait among your housemates," he responded to her scowl, "is that it seems to be completely against your natures to see people with any shades of grey. As I said before, people are either evil or good, innocent or guilty, angels or demons. Nothing in between."

"That neither explains nor excuses what she said to me," Hermione said in a frosty voice.

Here, Snape sat up and regarded her thoughtfully. "Perhaps not. But did it not occur to you that she clearly had no idea that she was insulting you?"

For a moment, Hermione faltered. It had seemed as if Lady Snape had not realized her egregious faux pas. "How could anyone not recognize that as an insult? Anyone who wasn't a Death Eater..."

Hermione bit her cheek in an effort to stem the deluge of words that had nearly rained from her mouth. Snape's face pinched in anger at her last statement, unsurprisingly. When he spoke again, his voice was even harder.

"Ah, the House cliché finally rears its ugly head," he spat. "Despite what your capers with Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley and the ever-so-sagely Mr. Longbottom have taught you, the world is not split up into two even groups: nice people and Death Eaters. There *are* more nuances than your pithy wits can comprehend."

"I..." Hermione started, but she knew that there was no way she could rescue herself from that particular line of discussion. Not without thoroughly insulting the man in front of her, and she wished to do that as little as possible just at present. Instead, she yanked the topic back to their previous discourse. "Yes, but with the term she used, it's awfully hard to mistake that for anything other than an insult. Even the word itself suggests an inferiority of the person to whom you're directing your statement."

"Now there, you happen to be correct. On the inferiority charge, at least," Snape said. "You see, Martine was raised by parents who came from a long line of purebloods. She also married into the Snape family. The difference between her family and mine, however, is their outlook on Muggle-borns. Unlike my father, my uncle instructed his children as he had been instructed: that while Muggle-borns were not the vermin that some witches and wizards purport them to be, they are simply a lower, more unfortunate class of people among the magical community. She has been taught to view your status in the magical world rather like the way you've been taught to view Squibs like Arabella Figg and Argus Filch: not exactly unworthy of your time or regard, but in a distinctly different class level."

Hermione was silent for a long moment, her mind churning over what she'd just heard. Although she longed to rage against the unfairness of it, the effrontery inherent in what Lady Snape had said to her, she had to admit that Professor Snape definitely had a point. Unknowingly, she *had* been taught to view people like Filch and Mrs. Figg as lower on the magical evolutionary ladder, simply because they couldn't do magic like she could. Sick to her stomach with shame, Hermione felt her cheeks redden as she picked at the lap of her robes. Quietly, Snape rose from the bench he'd settled himself on and extend his arm to her.

"Now," he said brusquely, "I suggest we go back there with all haste and you make an apology to Martine."

"Apologize?" Hermione asked, as if she didn't understand the word. "You want me to apologize for being insulted at that horrible word?"

"No. I want you to apologize for dashing off so quickly. Despite your perceived insult and your wounded ego, I know Martine and I can tell that she does like you. As such, she will be confused and hurt as to why you ran away during what she considered a perfectly congenial conversation, without a visible reason to your actions. I am not asking you not to be insulted," he said, his voice suddenly soft, "I am asking that you swallow your pride, try to understand her position, and act in a mature and diplomatic fashion to ensure that this weekend proceeds smoothly. Are you able to do that?"

With a deep breath, Hermione reached out and took his proffered arm. After a moment, she nodded. With a brief nod of acknowledgement, Severus turned and escorted her back to where they could hear Martine laughing and chattering to the Marquis.

The Falconer's Knot

Chapter 20 of 23

A bizarre feeling of buzzing lightheadedness had overtaken her, and she found herself leaning into him, her hands clasp tighter to his. Her heart raced insanely and she found herself lifting to her toes, though they had stopped dancing. Snape's face showed a flash of emotion dreadfully close to panic before something clicked into place; he was leaning towards her, the hand at the small of her back pushing her inexorably closer.

Chapter Twenty The Falconer's Knot

"*The Falconer's Knot* - The Falconer's Knot is a knot used in falconry to tie a bird of prey to a perch. As the left hand would have the bird sitting on it the Falconer's Knot must be tied using only the right hand." from Wikipedia's List of Knots

Hermione sighed heavily as she stared into the mirror. The two house elves in the room had hovered behind her for a good, solid hour before she'd become so frustrated at

the looming presence that she'd asked for help with her hair just to give them something to do and keep them from staring at her with a mix of disapproval and yearning. Unfortunately, the artful tumble of curls at the back of her head really did look quite splendid, bugged it. From the flurry of excitement that had run through the little creatures as soon as she had requested help, Hermione gathered that they didn't often have a chance to use these particular talents.

"Isn't it lonely in this great big house with just the Marquis here?" she asked as she sat down at a vanity table in front of a large mirror. The instant her bum touched the stool, both house elves leapt to attention, one snapping her fingers to light a series of candle sconces around the mirror, the other clambering up onto a nearby stool, clearly awaiting direction.

"Not lonely, Young Miss," the first elf Gigi? Hermione thought that was her name responded as she waved a hand, adjusting the level of the lamps as Hermione picked up the small bag of cosmetics she'd laid out. "Old Master is always having dinner parties and balls, so we is kept plenty busy. And the manor is big, so we has plenty of cleaning to do every day."

"Parties?" Hermione asked, incredulous. "He doesn't seem the type."

Seta, the second elf, nodded. "Plenty of parties, Young Miss, with lots of important wizards and witches who runs France. He also invites wizards from the Ministry in Britain, Young Miss."

"And he never invites Prof...Young Master Severus?"

Both elves' faces had a distinctly sorrowful cast to them, despite their efforts to mask it.

"No, Young Miss," Seta answered. "He is not inviting Young Master anymore. He and Young Master never gets along when Young Master was a boy, Miss, but the fight they had just after Young Master finish school made Young Master so mad he say he never come back. And he never did." Seta shook her head.

"Never," Gigi repeated, shaking her head as well. "Not until he bring you, Young Miss."

"Hmmm," Hermione murmured, but couldn't think of anything else to say, so she fell silent. In the quiet, she opened the zippered bag of her make-up and began to apply the sparing amount of cosmetics that she used for special occasions. Smudging eggplant-shaded eyeliner at her lashes, Hermione tried to keep in a sigh. She was rather annoyed that this had become a special occasion. With the arrival of Lady Snape, the Marquis seemed to want to roll out the red carpet, use the most formal china, and treat the late supper as if it were an estate ball rather than a small dinner of four. Which, she supposed, was the whole point: he wanted to see if Hermione could hold up to the standard of high formality. Arrogant bloody lout. Well, she'd show him, anyhow. Slicking on mascara over the delicate purple eye shadow that brought out her warm brown eyes, she thought that despite the fact that she'd never be a real beauty, the effect was quite nice. And, in marvelously unexpected serendipity, her good cosmetics matched the remaining set of evening robes, hued a rich plum purple. After carefully applying her make-up without allowing the ivory lace sleeves to drag in it, Hermione sat back to judge the effect.

"What do you think?" she asked the waiting house elves. "Will I pass muster for the Marquis?"

"You look very pretty, Young Miss," Seta said dutifully.

"Though, Young Master's favorite color is red," Gigi put in. "Young Miss may want to consider scarlet-colored robes in the future. She is wanting to please Young Master, I'm sure."

"His favorite color is red?" Hermione asked, dubious. For all the man paraded around in and the ruthless bias towards his house, she would have assumed green or black. "Well, I'll ... take that into account for the future. I just wish I knew how to get my lipstick to stay on past the drinks," she added with a rueful smile.

Seta rushed forward eagerly. Bringing Hermione towards her with a delicate, bony hand on her chin, the little elf brushed her fingertips across Hermione's face lightly. For just a moment, she felt a cool sensation, then a tingle.

"It will stay on all night now, Miss," she said, beaming.

"Really?"

The little elves both nodded proudly. Regarding her face in the mirror, Hermione noticed that there was a bit of sparkle about her, but nothing else seemed different. As if in disbelief, Hermione scrubbed her hands across her eyes, then her lips, but was amused to see that not one tiny fleck or smear graced her fingers or her face.

"How clever you are!" she chortled, causing both elves to grin in pleasure. "What a helpful charm."

"We hasn't had much chance to use it, Young Miss," Gigi said. "Not since the Mistress passed away many years ago. But it's very handy for pretty ladies."

"Thank you," said Hermione. "It's perfect."

"Best go now," Seta said, gently urging Hermione towards the door. "Dinner begins at nine, and it's getting close."

"Yes, I'm off," Hermione said, putting her hand to her hair and taking one last, quick glance. "Thank you both."

The little elves both watched her go, expressions of amusement and curiosity reflecting in their large eyes.

Hermione stood at the railing of the gallery alcove that looked down into the library. Unable to cap her nervous energy, she banged her palms against the wooden balustrade and tried to keep from chewing on the inside of her lips. Damn the Marquis; damn him to flaming, choking, seething, polyester-coated Hell. Obviously he had insisted on all this pomp and nonsense just to unnerve her, or failing that, to prove once again that she wasn't on the same societal or financial level as he congratulated himself on occupying. Her bare hands slapped against the rail again, warming them with the little stinging slap. There would only be four of them at the dinner table, yet he was insisting on six courses, formal dress, and Merlin only knew what else afterwards. No wonder Professor Snape had been only too eager to leave this nonsense behind.

"If you keep doing that, you're liable to get a splinter," a voice from behind her said with a hint of amusement.

Hermione looked over her shoulder to see Lady Snape striding up to her, her whippet-thin body clad in a set of copper-colored dress robes that flattered her auburn hair quite well and was resplendent with winking crystals here and there. Elbow-length white gloves adorned her slender arms, a diamond bracelet covered her right wrist, and a triple-strand choker of creamy ivory pearls supported a long chain of gold that dripped a larger pearl down her sternum towards her cleavage. Hermione couldn't help being dazzled by her stately elegance, topped off with the myriad of pearls scattered through her rich red hair. She stared down at herself to give the appearance of scanning her hands for splinters, but Hermione felt terribly underdressed compared to Lady Snape's grandeur.

"Don't you look lovely, my dear," she said, her voice a warm caress. "Might I be so rude as to ask who made your robes?"

"Madame Moreaux, of the..." Hermione started.

"*Needle Fairy*," Martine finished, nodding. "Yes, I'm familiar with Etoile, as she was a playmate of Severus's once upon a time. She does lovely work, as you are clearly exhibiting."

Hermione had started to snicker at hearing the stern and disapproving Madame Moreaux as a 'playmate' of her even more stern and disapproving fiancé, but it melted into

a nervous laugh at the effusive compliment.

"You're very kind," Hermione responded, "and given to exaggerate, it seems."

Martine laughed a musical chuckle. "Nothing of it, dear; you look splendid. And Etoile always did have a knack for creating absolutely lovely work at very reasonable prices. Perfect, I'm sure, for a Muddblood on a limited budget."

Cringing at the insult, Hermione fought to keep her color down and her tongue in check, remembering Snape's chiding direction from earlier. It only worked for a moment.

"Lady Snape," Hermione said quickly, trying to keep acid from her tongue, "I would ask you, please, to cease referring to me with that term. I find it offensive in the extreme." Lady Snape's features dropped into a moue of surprise, but Hermione couldn't stop herself. "I'm informed that you do not mean it as an insult, but I don't see how it could be taken as anything else, so I would beg you to please refrain from using it in my presence."

Martine's features shifted from surprise to thoughtful consideration as she gazed at Hermione. After a long moment of silence where she simply gazed into Hermione's eyes, she said, "You are an interesting young woman, Miss Granger."

Hermione couldn't help but laugh. "That is a very diplomatic way of stating it, my lady. 'Bossy' and 'forceful' seem to be the usual ways."

Martine responded with a rueful smile. "Terms that I've heard spoken about me quite often." Again, she seemed to consider Hermione thoroughly before speaking. "I did not mean to insult you, Miss Granger; you have my humble apologies."

Hermione couldn't respond immediately, so she simply nodded in response to the apology. Lady Snape turned to move towards the marble staircase leading to the dining room with Hermione accompanying her.

"I'm sorry, Lady Snape," Hermione said in a rush as they rounded a corner. "I don't mean to flog a dead horse, but I just can't understand how you could see that term as anything other than an affront." Realizing that she'd just implied Lady Snape's ignorance, she amended her statement by saying, "Perhaps you could explain."

Lady Snape sighed heavily. "I'm afraid I have no more dignified explanation than the teachings of youth; an explanation which, when put into perspective, seems rather flimsy. And," she said, obviously pondering the matter, "when you put that fine a point on it, I can't say I'd much care for someone implying that my blood was dirty."

An unwitting snort left Hermione. "I'd say not. No one has ever confronted you on it before?"

"I can't say that they have, in all honesty," Martine replied. "But you have to understand, my dear, that between my young life, my schooling, and my current status as a very influential landowner, I suppose that anyone who would want to challenge me was most likely afraid to do so."

"Well, I'm not," Hermione answered immediately.

"So it would seem," Martine responded.

Hermione started to apologize for the impertinence, but Martine waved it away with a gloved hand and a wry smile. Suddenly, Lady Snape broke away from her at the top of the stairs and stood back to regard her with an assessing eye.

"Something is missing," she muttered as she gave Hermione a penetrating look across her entire body. She quickly withdrew a handkerchief from the top of her left glove and an applewood wand from a deep inner pocket. Tapping the handkerchief with her wand, Martine charmed it into a pair of long white gloves, detailed up the outside with gold swirls of embroidery. She absently handed them to Hermione, who tugged them on quickly. Martine didn't seem satisfied, though, as she muttered, "Almost, but" Martine's gaze fixed at Hermione's neck. "Ah!" she cried with satisfaction. "That's it. Easily remedied, dear; easily remedied."

Bemusedly, Hermione watched as Lady Snape reached up to the back of her neck and unhooked the clasp of her pearls. Too stunned to protest the action, Hermione stood still as Martine fastened the expensive piece around her own throat. The heavy weight of the ropes sat cool and smooth against her throat, with the larger pearl dropping into the valley of her cleavage, just above the neckline of the robes. Hermione looked up to the much taller woman, her face coated in surprise but unable to articulate a response.

"Much better," Martine said simply, a wide smile on her thin lips. "You look perfect. Severus won't be able to keep his eyes off you."

Hermione cleared her throat heavily. "Be that as it may, my lady, I couldn't possibly accept such a generous but obviously expensive gift. It is kind of you to offer, but I couldn't..."

"Nonsense, my dear Miss Granger," she responded, laying a hand atop the one Hermione had raised to return the necklace. "First of all, I have ropes and ropes of them at home. I certainly won't miss this one, so put your mind at ease that you're robbing me of something." Hermione started to respond, but Martine continued. "Secondly, this particular piece was an heirloom that was passed to me upon the death of Severus's mother, Solange. It seems only right that you should have it. And thirdly, I feel I owe you a boon for my blundering insults earlier. It would make me very happy and assuage my conscience if you would take it."

Hermione started to form another polite refusal, but shut her mouth over it. Almost as if she had no control over it, one hand moved up to stroke the cool pearls at her throat then trace the line of the gold chain that descended over her sternum. Whether or not she looked lovely in it, she certainly *felt* lovely. Hermione flashed a smile to Lady Snape, who looped her arm threw Hermione's and began to walk again.

"Thank you very much, my lady," Hermione said with a shaky voice.

"You're entirely welcome, my dear. And as we're going to be family soon, please call me Martine." The older woman gave her an impish grin as she propelled the two of them towards the long marble stairs ahead. "Now," she said. "Let's see if we can't go to dinner and bore those two fools out of their heads with more talk of farming."

Despite her tease about farm talk, Martine proved an articulate and vivacious conversationalist at dinner. Hermione found herself thoroughly surprised that her topics varied widely, from animagi Transfiguration to advancements in Potions to current politics. Her discussions were thought-provoking and just a little bit exasperating, as she seemed to have a great fondness for playing the devil's advocate, but Hermione felt thoroughly cheered by a conversation that challenged her intellectual stature. Much as she adored Harry and Ginny and Ron, they just couldn't debate the same topics she could. And, very much to her surprise, the debates Martine sparked even encouraged Severus to participate, delivering his point of view in his typical knife-point invective, but somehow, in this context, it carried less of his seemingly inherent desire to wound people. Hermione's brows pulled together as she glanced down at the wine-poached pears, her thoughts returning to Ron. She could function reasonably well most days, but sometimes like now a horrible melancholy would descend upon her and it was all she could do not to burst into tears. A pre-wedding dinner with Ron's family certainly wouldn't have been so treacherous to navigate. She could actually be herself. They could have celebrated it, even, and maybe even Harry...

Hermione looked up as the high-pitched cry of an owl echoed through the chamber. She jumped in surprise as Hedwig soared in through the long stained glass window that had been pushed open to admit the cool evening breeze. The snowy owl circled for a moment before dropping a tightly-furled scroll in Hermione's lap, perching on the arm of her chair. Cheeks reddening under the sudden scrutiny from every side of the table, Hermione's shaking fingers reached down and plucked open the seal of the parchment. Strangely, it was Ginny's handwriting not Harry's that covered the small piece of paper. With trepidation, she read:

Hermione,

Don't forget the stag's advice: the snake's venom isn't as strong as the bite.

We've found a raven that's willing to claim the stag.

She's quite the lovebird, so she'll set him free.

Details when you get back.

Chin up,

Ginny

Screwing her face up in concentration as she read, Hermione bit the inside of her lip absently as she tried to make out what Ginny had tried to tell her. Clearly, her friend had been suspicious that someone else might read the letter, and as such, had written it in code. Some parts of it were obvious the reassurance against the collective Snape family "bite" but other parts were nearly incomprehensible. The stag, of course, had to be Harry, but she couldn't for the life of her figure out who the "raven" could be. Before she could wrinkle it out, though, a long-fingered hand snatched the letter from her grasp. Hermione turned a scowl towards the Marquis, but was surprised to find that it was Severus that had stooped to a moment of flat-out rudeness. His dark eyes darted over the parchment quickly before a condescending sneer touched his lips and he tossed the paper back to Hermione.

"Well," he said smoothly, "I shall remember to cross Miss Weasley off my list of people who can be counted on for delicate subterfuge."

Hermione focused her scowl on her fiancé, barely noticing the concerned and puzzled look on Martine's face or the unwillingly amused expression on the Marquis's.

"Is everything quite all right, Miss Granger?" Martine asked, gently glossing over Severus's comment. "You haven't received bad news, I hope."

"No," Hermione said, forcing a smile. "Good news, actually. We've been having a spot of bad luck with one of the animals in our Care of Magical Creatures class..." She pointedly ignored Snape's disdainful snort. "...but my friend Ginny's just written to say that he's doing much better. It was uncertain for a while, but we've all got quite a bit invested in this animal, so we want to keep him safe until he's reached full maturity."

Snape's eyes narrowed at her with an assessing gaze, but the sneer disappeared and he said nothing. Martine simply nodded and smiled, still obviously puzzled but too well-mannered to pursue the matter further. The rest of dessert passed in near silence, for which Hermione was profoundly grateful. When the last of the plates had been removed by the house elves and Hermione rose from the table, ready to declare the evening over and, for the most part, a success, the Marquis stood and offered his arm to Martine, a slick smile on his face as he threw Hermione a darting glance.

"In honor of your presence, my dear niece," he began, "I thought we might have a little music and dancing in the ballroom. Might you favor me with a dance? And of course, Severus can dance with his charming fiancée."

Martine smiled and nodded, but slewed her eyes to Hermione as the Marquis escorted her from the dining room. A full smile flashed to Lady Snape, Hermione accepted the arm that Severus extended to her; the instant they were alone, Hermione's face dropped into a scowled and she fought the urge to scream.

"Dancing?" she hissed. "This isn't a bloody state ball; it's a bloody dinner with four bloody people!"

Snape glared down at her as she fumed, hissing a remonstrance from the corner of his lips as he escorted her out of the room. "You will keep your vulgarity in check," he snapped. "Need I remind you that you never know who is listening? Besides," he said when she made to retort, "the more important issue at hand is whether or not you can dance."

Hermione colored slightly. "A little," she admitted. Panic began to set in. "But only the few things we learned for the Yule Ball. Do *you* know how to dance?"

Snape sniffed disdainfully but ignored the question. "Which dance do you remember the best?"

Hermione clenched her eyes shut for a moment, humming tunelessly for a bit as she feverishly went over the steps in her mind. "The waltz," she said eventually. "Definitely the waltz, but I really don't know how well I'll do it..."

"The waltz it is," Snape said and gestured for Hermione to precede him into what she assumed was a room more fit for entertainment.

In actuality, it was a ballroom the likes of which she'd never seen in real life. The first image that leapt to mind was that of the ballroom in *The Sound of Music*. Gilt mirrors reflected the light of four chandeliers that cascaded down towards the floor, heavy with candles and crystals that winked rainbows all over the room. Gold swirls in the burgundy velvet wallpaper glittered under the light of hundreds of flickering wicks. Hermione found herself gasping, one hand to her chest. In the corner of the room, the Marquis was just raising his wand to what looked like an old-fashioned Victrola. When he tapped it, music surged out of it, but not the scratchy, hollow sound of a record player that Hermione had expected; the sound issuing forth made it seem as if a twelve-piece orchestra lingered somewhere just out of sight. Unwillingly, Hermione felt a delightedly smile tug across her lips. Whatever the circumstances driving this situation, she most certainly felt like something out of a fairy tale, dancing in place like this.

Severus stepped across the room swiftly and met his father's smug smirk with a calm smile. "May I?" he asked, gesturing towards the Victrola with his wand.

"Of course," the Marquis answered smoothly. "Choose the perfect song for romancing your betrothed."

Hermione fought the embarrassed blush on her cheeks, hoping that it would read as a flush of pleasure. Tapping his wand to the device that would have been the record needle, Severus nodded shortly when the lilting strains of a waltz began. Much to Hermione's surprise, the waltz was sweet and simple, featuring only a piano and cello, making her raise her eyebrows to her somber fiancé as he crossed back to her. Without addressing the look of astonishment in her eyes, Snape extended his hand to her, quite obviously asking for the dance. Her cheeks aflame, Hermione raised her hand and placed it in his, wishing desperately that she hadn't left her gloves on the arm of her chair at dinner. Her palms felt unspeakably clammy as Snape's long fingers twined around hers, cool against the back of her hand.

Conscious of the two people watching them, Hermione forced herself to relax into Snape's arms as he circled her waist with one and used the other to raise their joined hands. A few moments went by as he rocked them back and forwards slightly to digest the beat pattern, but soon, Hermione felt herself being gently guided into the pattern of the dance that she'd learned nearly three years ago. Strangely, she didn't have to wrack her mind for the proper movements and counts as much as she thought she might; the pressure of Severus's fingers against the small of her back warned her when he was about to push her into a turn, the clasp of his fingers indicating a change of direction. Being that he was so tall, Hermione could only see his shoulders and the base of his neck without gazing upwards, which she tried not to do as she was concentrating on the dance.

Before long, the need to concentrate fizzled into the background. Snape's steps were definite and his motions smooth; with his inherent driving energy, he couldn't really be called graceful the word seemed too delicate for his swift sureness but there was a confident, almost feline polish to his movements. At one particularly effervescent point of the melody, Hermione felt herself being effortlessly lifted in the air. Her hands automatically pushed down at his upper arms to steady herself as he turned on the spot, but it wasn't until she was back on her feet whirling around the floor again that she realized that the dance she had learned three years ago didn't contain a lift. Startled in this realization, she turned her face upwards, only to find that he was already gazing down at her. The smile that had tugged at the tips of her mouth slipped away as she fought for composure. Charged with strange energy, Hermione grappled with the concurrent need to say something and complete lack of any discernable topic. Severus was the first to break the silence.

"You look ... very nice this evening, Granger," he said.

Feeling her cheeks warm with both pleasure and discomfort, she favored him with an unsteady smile. "Thank you, sir."

"Severus," he said stiffly after a moment. "You should call me Severus."

Hermione's cheeks flamed. "Thank you ... Severus."

Snape nodded, but said nothing more, gazing out over her head at the ballroom whizzing by them.

"When did you learn this dance?" she managed eventually.

"For the Yule Ball, of course," he answered easily. "As did you."

"You didn't dance at the Yule Ball. At least, not this one; this was the champions' dance."

"I watched the dance and learned."

Hermione nearly bobbed the steps. "You learned an entire waltz just from watching, and then can repeat it three years later?"

Snape's lips quirked up in a smirk. "When one knows the basics, it isn't all that difficult to pick up a dance by watching. It's just variations on a theme, really."

Unable to help the innate gesture, Hermione chewed the inside corner of her lips as she digested this information. It was hard to remind herself that this was *Professor Snape*, of all people, suggesting that repeating a dance he'd only ever seen done once was as easy as all that. Then again, moments like this reminded Hermione of just how little she actually knew about her sharp-tongued fiancé. In the background, the gentle strains of music caught her attention. It really was such a strange choice for such a forthright and brash man.

"The song is lovely," Hermione said, staring at the knife-straight line of buttons on his chest. He made no response, so she filled the silence herself. "What's it called?"

"Butterfly Waltz," he said, his voice oddly strained. "It reminded me of you."

"This ... made you think ... of me?"

Turning her head up to look into his hawkish features, her mind reeled with knowledge and sensation. Her pondering of the matter was short-lived, however. A particularly tricky spot in the dance pattern caused Hermione to stumble just a tad, and she found herself pressed against his chest, her feet barely touching the floor as he pivoted them both together to cover her fumble. Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but it died on her lips. A bizarre feeling of buzzing lightheadedness had overtaken her, and she found herself leaning into him, her hands clasping tighter to his. Her heart raced insanely and she found herself lifting to her toes, though they had stopped dancing. Snape's face showed a flash of emotion dreadfully close to panic before something clicked into place; he was leaning towards her, the hand at the small of her back pushing her inexorably closer.

Suddenly, as if time had skipped ahead in a condensed lump, Hermione found herself so close to Snape that she could feel his breath rushing down across her nose and cheeks. His mouth parted and she could smell the mild, sweet scent of pears on his breath. Hermione's fingers trembled within his; dear God, he was going to kiss her. She waited, vibrating with energy and uncertainty, but he moved only a fraction of a distance closer to her. Her whole body cried out to push herself closer, to take his lips without waiting for him to make that last crucial move. It was that instinct that had Hermione stumbling away from her professor, hands fluttering at her chest as if they could still her erratic pulse through sheer force of will. Vaguely, Hermione noticed that the music had stopped though she had no idea when and that the Marquis and Lady Martine were both staring at them, the Marquis slightly gape-mouthed, Lady Martine with a tiny smile.

"Sorry," Hermione mumbled. One hand pressed more firmly against her rib cage, the other floated between her lips, her heated cheeks, her hair. "I ... sorry, I just ... sit ... need... I...air. I need air."

Almost out of her mind with panic, Hermione turned blindly and scurried out the double doors of the ballroom, down the short corridor and out a set of French doors into the courtyard beyond. Bending over with her arms wrapped around her stomach, Hermione gulped lungfuls of cool, autumn air, hoping that it would help clear her head. Legs wobbling beneath her, she toddled along a gravel path that wound in and out of little clusters of flower bushes and beds that were scattered around a lily pond at the center of the courtyard. Professor Snape had very nearly kissed her just now. And, Merlin help her, she'd *wanted* him to. Both of her clammy, shaking hands pressed against her forehead as Hermione tried to clutch at whatever self-control she had left. Her mind whirred wildly, speculating if there'd been something in her drink to make her act this way, whether it was the peculiar new version of her professor that had thrown her. It couldn't possibly be that she actually wanted to kiss him; the thought was perfectly ludicrous. She couldn't quite seem to control the fact that she was shaking out her hands on either side of her body, as if to rid herself of the pins-and-needles sleepiness that came from sitting in one position too long. The sound of footsteps on the gravel behind her forced Hermione to wrench her spine ramrod straight, though she couldn't quite bring herself to look at whomever was behind her. The weight of the footsteps spoke quite clearly that it was not Lady Martine, and as such, she had no desire to look into the face of whichever Snape had come after her.

"Well, well, well," the smooth voice said in a thoroughly amused low whisper.

Hermione's breath caught in her throat as she remained staunchly turned away under the guise of looking out over the lily pond.

"I must say, Miss Granger, I find myself most unusually impressed."

She could hear the crooked smile in her professor's voice, and because she wasn't sure she'd ever heard him sound quite so approving certainly not of her, at any rate she didn't want to destroy it by revealing her turmoil.

"Oh?" she said, forcing levity into her words.

"Indeed," Snape responded. He closed some of the distance between them and allowed himself a small chuckle. "That was quite a performance; I didn't think you were capable of such."

"Didn't you?" She sounded like a complete idiot, but any more words and she'd betray herself.

"I didn't, and I can see now that I'd underestimated you. That doesn't happen often." He paused for another light chuckle. "It was absolutely brilliant. Fudging the steps so that I might pull you in, clammng up as if you expected me to kiss you ... I admit, Granger, for a long moment, you even had me fooled. You could have told me what you were playing at, but I suppose that was for authenticity's sake."

"Mmm," she said noncommittally. Hermione supposed that she should have been happier that he hadn't wrinkled out that it wasn't an act, that she really had expected him to kiss her, but she still felt a little off-kilter by the whole affair.

"Yes, well," she said, then cleared her throat. "Couldn't make it look rehearsed, you know? Spur of the moment and all."

"To say the least," Snape responded, a note of amusement still in his voice.

Hermione nearly collapsed with surprise and tension when she felt his fingers gently cup her chin and turn her face so that she glanced backwards at him over her shoulder. Ever so lightly, Snape ran the backs of his fingertips across her cheek in what was all too dangerously close to a lover's caress, his face strangely relaxed, a tiny smile on his lips. He needed to stop; he needed to stop this right now, or Hermione would never be able to grab a handle on the situation. Hermione reached up and clasped his wrist in her small hand, still the movement that his gesture had taken down her throat towards her shoulder.

"What are you doing?" she whispered hoarsely.

Snape kept his face serene, but there was a deliberate, stiff quality to it now. "Every damn wall of this courtyard has a window. I'm playing to the audience."

"Ah," Hermione managed, her stomach flip-flopping. She eased the grip on his wrist and spread her fingers out to cover his hand, trying to make it look affectionate, but still impeded his progress towards her collarbone.

"Must we really continue this charade?" she said desperately. "Can't we just drop the act for a bit? I mean, they mightn't even be watching..."

Snape took a very large step towards her, so close that the delicate lace of her cuffs caught on his stiff wool robes; his large hands twined around her cheeks to the back of her head as he bent down to her, his face still carefully serene as he loomed over her.

"You're the one who kicked open the door, Granger. I had no choice but to walk through it," he said quickly. "Do you really think that after that performance in there, the curiosities won't be piqued? That was the whole point, wasn't it?"

Snape descended suddenly, and Hermione's heart nearly stopped in her chest as his face came down near hers. Much to her surprise, however, he stopped just as the curtain of his lank hair rained down in a tickly stream across her face. Using his long fingers to change the angle of her head, Snape laid his cheek against hers. Hermione found herself unaccountably surprised that his pale skin was so warm against hers; something in her probably years of classes spent in the dungeons expected him to be cold-blooded like a serpent. Frozen, Hermione stood stock still as Snape's face moved against hers in tiny, undulating movements. Eventually, one hand left her nape to push at the small of her back, bringing her ever closer to him.

"Wha...?" Hermione stammered in a weak whisper. "What are you doing?"

"Staging the kiss you half started, obviously," he said. After turning just a bit so that the door she'd entered from was at his back, Snape twined one hand in the sweep of curls at the back of her head. "Put your arms around my shoulders."

"Why?" she squeaked.

Snape let go of a harsh sigh, which dampened her cheek with his steamy breath. "Good Christ, Granger, no wonder you're a love pariah, if you're really this much of a cold fish. Make it look convincing! Haven't you ever had a snog before?"

"'Course I have!" Hermione cried indignantly, not caring that he winced at the volume of her voice in his ear. Getting a rein on her temper, she dropped her voice to a whisper. "It's just that this play-acting seems such nonsense. Wouldn't be easier if we just kissed?"

A throaty chuckle landed on Hermione's ear lobe as Snape moved closer to her ear. "You don't really want me to kiss you, now do you, Granger?"

Heart racing, Hermione couldn't help but claw her hands into the firm pleats of robes at his shoulders, unable to make noises other than babbling squeals of incoherent gibberish. Snape seemed to take this as noises of protest and cocked his eyebrow to compliment the smirk on his lips as he drew back, regarded her flushed face, then moved his head to the other side.

"I thought not," he said knowingly. "Now, for God's sake, could you try to make it look like you actually want to kiss me? You were doing a bloody good enough job in the ballroom, and this was your idea, so I don't see why..."

Lightening quick, Snape's whole body stiffened as he clutched her tight to his body.

"Bollocks!" he spat harshly.

And then he was upon her.

His arms suddenly felt like bands of steel as he wrenched her against his chest and crushed his lips to hers. Her nails sunk into the knife-blade pleats across the back of his broad shoulders and her squeak of surprise was stifled against his lips. Hermione felt dizzy-drunk, confused and unbalanced at this sudden turn of events. He'd just been protesting that she didn't really want him to kiss her, and yet, here he was pressing his lips against hers so suddenly and desperately that she would have sworn that her stalwart professor was an ardent lover. Snape tilted his head to change the angle of the kiss but didn't move his lips to part hers; Hermione couldn't decide if she was relieved or offended. After the moment of panic passed, though, she felt some of the tension leave his arms. Slowly, tentatively, Hermione released her grip on his robes and allowed one hand to sneak upwards and thread into the sheet of hair at the base of his neck, the other sliding down to lay against his arm. Just as Snape's lips seemed to be softening against hers, she heard what he must have heard moments ago: the crunch of the gravel path beneath approaching feet.

"...Uncle, I really don't think it's necessary to...oh!"

Startled at the surprised ejaculation of Lady Martine's voice, Hermione squealed and leapt away from her professor as if his touch had scorched her. Her skin immediately turned crimson as she clapped a hand over her mouth. Snape slowly turned to face his relatives, a scowl settling into the familiar lines on his face as he stepped in front of Hermione to shield her from view.

With a growl, Severus barked, "Bugger off. We're busy."

"So I see," the Marquis replied smoothly, but as Hermione peeked around Snape's arm, she noticed a nearly suppressed furrow of unhappiness between his brows. "We came to see about Miss Granger, of course; she seemed quite upset when she left the ballroom."

Snape opened his mouth to grumble fiercely, but the Marquis pre-empted his response.

"But I can certainly see that she has recovered herself."

At this, Martine let out a huff of indignance, her balled fists flying to her hips. "Which I mentioned was more than likely the case when she left," she said sourly. "Forgive us for interrupting, Severus," she grabbed a hold on the elbow of Tobias's robes and yanked him towards the door. "My apologies, Hermione. We'll leave you two in peace."

Her limbs wobbling slightly, Hermione scurried around her fiancé and held out her hand towards Lady Martine. "That's all right. No harm done. But actually," Hermione turned to look at Snape's scowling face for just a moment before turning back, "I'm quite knackered, so I think I'll just ... you know ... bed."

Trailing off as the three of them simply stared at her, Hermione gestured weakly in the direction of the guest wing. There was a tense moment of silence before Lady Martine spoke again.

"Oh!" Martine said, coloring a tiny bit and giving Hermione a conspiratorial smile. "Yes, of course, my dear; you'll want to retire for the evening. And, of course, Severus will want to bid you good evening properly. Without a crowd of onlookers."

Lady Snape gave Hermione such a pleased grin only one step away from winking theatrically that Hermione felt her face turn practically purple with humiliation. She started to mumble that that's not what she meant, but Martine waved away the protest and smirked as she led her uncle away. Martine called a quick "Good night!" over her shoulder as the rustling of her robes died away. Hermione turned back to Snape, who merely stared at her with an inscrutable expression on his sharp features. After a long moment, he seemed to snap out of a trance and walked towards her.

Offering his arm, Snape asked, "To your room then?" in a cool, quiet voice.

Despite her panic, Hermione felt it would be rude and wholly unnecessary to decline, so she took his arm and allowed him to lead her out of the courtyard, gravel crunching beneath her shoes as she fought to keep up with his swift strides.

The Albright Special

Chapter 21 of 23

"You really are a beast, aren't you, Severus? Always so rash when someone plucks at the strings tied to your Mudbloods."

Severus's face didn't change one iota as he clamped his fingers even tighter against his father's throat. "You will also keep a civil tongue in your head when speaking about Miss Granger, or I will squeeze hard enough to cause it to shrivel up and fall out."

A/N - Okay, so I pretty much squealed in horror when I realized how long it's been since I updated this fic. I'm SO sorry. Thank you all so much for supporting my lazy @\$\$ and the abusive, on-again-off-again relationship I have with my whore-muse. She's so damn fickle. Anyway, here's the latest chapter and I promise I'll have the next one up as soon as humanly possible.

Chapter Twenty-One The Albright Special

Albright Special *"The Albright Special ...is a strong knot used to tie two different diameters of line together, for instance to tie monofilament to braid. The Albright is relatively smooth and passes through guides when required. Some anglers coat the knot with a rubber based cement to make it even smoother and more secure. When tying, it is important to wind the loops neatly around the loop of larger line."* from Wikipedia's List of Knots

Hermione found herself most unusually grateful for the professor's distaste for small talk. The walk back to her guest suite seemed interminable, but at least she didn't have to drudge up something to say. Professor Snape seemed to feel just as uneasy as she did, if his stiff arm and swift strides were anything to go by. He was in just as much of a hurry to get rid of her as she was him.

"So Mr. Potter is safely delivered from the Marriage Law then, hmmm?" he said suddenly.

Hermione turned to regard his face momentarily, trying to gauge his mood. His sharp features were typically inscrutable, with the exception of the small smirk on his lips.

"So it would seem," Hermione answered stiffly. "But I'll be hanged if I can figure out who Ginny was talking about."

Snape scoffed loudly. "Please, Granger, an infant could have gleaned whom she was referring to. Subtlety is certainly not Miss Weasley's strong suit. Or yours, for that matter."

Snape glanced down at her briefly. When he saw the consternation plain on her face, his stride slowed and his small grin turned to a sneer.

"You mean to tell me that you honestly do not know to whom she was referring?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, unhappy about admitting her ignorance, before shrugging jerkily. Snape chuckled, a clearly mocking tone to the laugh, then hitched her hand up further on his arm and resumed his breakneck pace. After several long minutes of quiet chuckling from her fiancé, Hermione finally huffed aloud.

"Well, are you going to tell me or not?"

"Not," Snape said, enjoying the refusal immensely. "If you can't wrinkle out such a pathetic code, then you deserve to wait and wrack your pithy brain."

Hermione couldn't stop an angry rolling growl. "Insufferable man," she muttered.

"Ah, there's the brilliant command of subtlety that I knew you were in possession of," he said sleekly. "Well done."

As they reached Hermione's door, Snape turned to regard her, his posture suddenly stiff, his face taut, and his brows drawn together. His lips pinched together and relaxed several times before he actually spoke.

"You did well this evening, Granger," he said shortly. "Even in the courtyard garden, though I'll admit I have no idea why you suddenly decided to play the shy maid." He seemed to shake himself out of that train of thought before saying again, "You did well."

Hermione felt herself flush at the mention of what had happened in the courtyard. "Thank you, sir. Severus," she corrected almost immediately. Then, when he raised an eyebrow, she again amended, "Sir."

"Severus," he said.

His dark eyes were inscrutable as they held hers, but Hermione couldn't help but notice that this was the first instance of him instructing her to use his first name without a scowl on his lips.

"Severus," she repeated.

For another long period of silence, Hermione gazed up at her tall, hawk-face professor as he loomed over her, completely devoid of movement or expression. He simply stared back at her, black eyes absorbing whatever it was that they saw in her face. She had to tilt her head backwards to look in his eyes now, but even that seemed impossible when the steady ebony gaze left her eyes and drifted slowly down away from her face. Flabbergasted at what could be drawing his attention so thoroughly, Hermione's lungs pawed at the air, chest heaving as she fought panic. What could she possibly have done to gain his anger, especially so much so that he wouldn't even look her in the eye? Realization struck suddenly, and her hand flew to cover her throat.

"Lady Martine gave them to me," she gabbled. "I knew I shouldn't have accepted them, I knew it would make you mad, but they were just so pretty!"

"What?"

Snape's usually silky voice sounded worked over with sandpaper, as if he hadn't used it in quite a while; he shook his head as if to clear it. Once again his eyes locked with hers, but this time, they held distinct confusion.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to make you mad..."

"Granger, what are you babbling about?" Snape said, a scowl settling into familiar lines and his tone resuming its customary frostiness.

"The pearls," Hermione said. Her cold fingers clutched at the strands at her neck as if he had just that minute threatened to rip them from her throat. "Your mother's pearls. I didn't...that is what you were looking at, isn't it?"

Leaving her question unanswered, Snape snapped, "Keep the damned pearls, I don't care."

Bewildered by his sudden anger, Hermione looked up into his face, then back down at herself, trying to figure out where things had gone wrong.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled again. "Martine gave them to me, and told me that they looked pretty. That I looked pretty. She seemed to think that you'd be pleased. She said that you..." Remembering with a crash of nervousness *exactly* what Martine had said regarding her appearance, the pearls, and Severus, she shut her mouth with an audible click of teeth.

Snape's attention snapped back to Hermione's face. "She said that I what?"

"That you..." Hermione started, but trailed off. Her cheeks flushed again, and Hermione raised a hand to her throat, this time using it to cover her fluttering heart rather than the strand of pearls. "That you wouldn't be able to keep your eyes off me."

A sneer bent the tips of his lips. "Such romantic rot. Cinderella is transformed to a princess with just a necklace, is she?"

Hermione started to bite back defensively, stung by the reemergence of the acerbic professor of her school career, but that was before she saw his eyes. The sneer curled his lip and created the same angry lines in his face as ever, but for just a moment, she thought she saw something flicker behind his eyes. For just a moment, she thought she saw that same alarm that had flashed across his inky eyes in the ballroom, when he'd nearly kissed her. So she drew herself up as much as she could and thrust out her chin.

"It worked, didn't it? You were looking while we danced, and you were looking just now."

"Naturally, only a stone would be immune to your charms," he responded dryly.

Snape took two swift strides forward, causing Hermione to back away until her bum bumped against the corner of her bedroom's doorjamb.

"What's the matter, Granger?" Snape said in a mocking hiss. "Your grand plan was to make me look, wasn't it? Well, you win: I'm looking."

Snape had planted himself just far enough away from her that his gaze could trail fairly far down her body without having to shift his position. Almost able to feel the scorch of his roving observation, Hermione fought to stay still and allow the inspection, refusing to let him intimidate her into quailing. As his eyes came back to her face, however, his expression had changed, had lost some of that hard, venomous quality to it. His dark eyes bore into hers, and she felt an odd, fluttery sensation in her mind, like butterflies had taken flight inside her skull. When the sensation stopped, Snape's expression held just the tiniest quirk of surprise.

"You should go to bed," he said at length, his words a low drone that was too quiet to be normal speech but too loud for a whisper.

Instead of backing away to allow her to retreat into the dark safety of her bedroom, Snape leaned towards her, dominating her field of vision nearly completely. Several minutes passed; neither of them moved. Eventually, Snape leaned in even farther, so close that a fall of heavy wool brushed against her forearm as he moved one long, slim arm around behind her. He was going to kiss her again! Hermione's thoughts scattered like ants, her breath racing and heart hammering, her skin flushed hot in places, cold in others. She let her head tip back, her eyes sliding shut as she took a few steadying breaths, trying to grab hold of her composure as she waited for his lips to descend upon hers. The quiet banged at her ear drums for a few heartbeats until she realized that Snape had jerkily stopped his forward progress ...

She felt his arm turn at her side, and the door behind her swung open with a loud creak. Snape stepped back from her as if he'd been burned.

"Goodnight, Granger," he said shortly, turned on his heel, and strode away down the corridor as if Lord Voldemort himself were pursuing him.

Hermione sat curled upon the enormous bed, her knees pulled up to support the weight of the psychotherapy text she'd special-ordered from Flourish and Blotts. No matter how many times her eyes scanned the page in front of her, little of the content sank into her consciousness. Trying valiantly to focus on the research she was supposed to be doing and not on Snape, Hermione scrubbed her hands across her face, readjusted the book against her legs, and reapplied her concentration to the chapter on grief counseling. It only worked for a few moments.

She honestly hadn't the foggiest idea of what to make of all this nonsense with Snape. Ever since she'd gotten here, she'd felt completely discombobulated. Snape was bandying back and forth between treating her like an adult and like a student, a prized pupil and a complete idiot. And worse yet, he insisted on maintaining the ridiculous charade of culture and refinement and ... well, *niceness*, and she didn't know what to make of it at all. The minute she thought she had him pegged, could see where the seams in his acting were so that she could orient herself, he changed again. He made it seem as if he wasn't really acting at all, and yet, she knew he must be. The whole performance was just so bloody convincing. *Then again*, she thought as she dropped to her feet on the chill floor and began pacing *he'd have to be convincing, wouldn't he?* If he let the mask slip even the tiniest bit, surely everyone would see the truth, not just her. Especially his father, whose sharp eyes seemed to slice through people, not just gaze into them. So it must all be fake. And yet...

Her fingertips went to her mouth, skimming her lips as she knit her brow in thought. And yet, that kiss in the courtyard Well, it certainly hadn't *started* as anything more than an act, but just at the end, she felt something change in his arms, in the way he held her, she was nearly certain that had Lady Martine and the Marquis not stumbled upon them, he would have kept kissing her, charade or not. But then again, their presence had been the reason for the kiss in the first place, so was that softening not part of the act as well?

Hermione growled aloud and clawed at the back of her hair in frustration. How was she to have any idea which face was real, which actions were the truth? Or was nothing the truth? Then, suddenly, she thought about the way his gaze had seared over her in the hall, the way his dark eyes slid down from her face to her...Hermione gasped and clasped her hands over the neck of her nightgown. Suddenly, his confusion made perfect, horrifying sense. He hadn't been looking at her necklace, he'd been looking at her....

Hermione dropped to the floor, her bottom making a muffled thump against the carpet. Perhaps she wasn't crazy. Perhaps the actions weren't as fake as she thought they were. As he tried to pretend they were. As he no doubt wished that they were. Her pulse started to race against her will and a strange tingle zipped through her belly; Hermione hoped that she was wrong and that Severus Snape was a far better actor than she gave him credit for. Either way, Hermione Granger was damn confused.

Severus tried not to grit his teeth when he realized that the parlor he'd walked into wasn't vacant. He'd come to the music room counting on the fact that his father would have either parted company with Martine and retired to his chambers or taken her to one of the drawing rooms or the library for a nightcap before bed. Unfortunately, his father had anticipated Severus's desire for solitude and his habit of smashing violins to vent his frustration. Damned instruments; he'd never liked them they sounded far too much like a whiny student and as a child, he had found a visceral release in bashing them relentlessly against the antique molding of the music room. His scowl deepened as Martine looked up from her position at the piano keyboard, surprised, while Tobias's smirk deepened.

"Well," his father said sleekly, "that was quite a quick tumble, Severus." The Marquis removed a filigreed pocket watch from a fob pocket and gazed pointedly at the face. "Ten minutes? Your age is catching up to your libido."

"Don't," Severus hissed warningly.

His eyes slewed to Martine, whose thin, high brows drew together with a wary pucker. Tamping down on his quicksilver temper, Severus moved across the room to the large bay window just to his father's left. Leaving after spotting his father would have been a gesture of defeat or cowardice, but the way his nerves were roiling, Severus wasn't all together sure that it wouldn't have been the more intelligent move. Never one to back down when his spine got called into question, however, he continued to the window, putting his back to his father.

Obviously not dissuaded by the dismissive gesture, the Marquis continued with an expression of mock concern. "Poor Miss Granger must be going to bed quite unsatisfied."

Feeling his last vestige of control snap, Severus crossed the distance between them in only three ground-eating strides. In another two, he had curled his fingers around the Marquis's slender throat and slammed him against the nearest wall. Lifting just enough that he heard the gurgle of trapped air in his father's throat, Severus leaned down to glare into Tobias's quickly reddening face.

"You will refrain from commenting on my private life with the future Madam Snape."

Martine spoke in a voice tight with restrained concern, uttering a quick, "Gentlemen, please..."

The Marquis attempted to chuckle, but all that came out was a half-hearted wheeze of air. Wriggling to take a breath around his son's fingers, Tobias didn't fight Severus's grip, only smiled into his face and raised an eyebrow.

"You really are a beast, aren't you, Severus? Always so rash when someone plucks at the strings tied to your Mudbloods."

Severus's face didn't change one iota as he clamped his fingers even tighter against his father's throat.

"You will also keep a civil tongue in your head when speaking about Miss Granger, or I will squeeze hard enough to cause it to shrivel up and fall out."

By now, the harsh compression of his wind pipe caused Tobias's face to heat unbearably and sweat to pop out on his forehead. His arms jerked up once as if to try to loosen his son's grip, and even though he fought to keep his expression serene, panic flashed behind the Marquis's mahogany eyes. Clearly measuring his son's hatred of him against his ability to survive any further attack, Tobias opened his mouth to retort but seemed to think better of it when Severus let a low growl of anger out from between his lips. Before either of them could make a move, Severus vaguely registered the noise of a bang like a gunshot before he was propelled forward, knocking foreheads with his father and tumbling to the floor. The Marquis stayed a groaning heap leaning against the wall, but Severus flipped himself over quickly, clutching at his head as he stared up into Martine's livid face.

"Stupid, testosterone-driven, barely-civilized apes, all of you," she spat quickly, but her lips quirked up at the ends just a tiny bit when Severus started swearing himself blue. "Forgot I had a wand, did you? Poor little woman will only flutter her hands and cry for peace when the big, scary men are fighting?"

Severus swore a few of his choicest curse words for good measure as he rubbed at the angry welt just above his brow where his head had knocked into the bridge of his father's nose. Glancing up, he couldn't help a slight smile despite the fact that hot fury still ran like mercury in his veins: he'd nearly forgotten how formidable Martine was when she got angry. Tall as an Amazon, Martine's auburn hair made her seem like a torch when angry, and her scowl was epic as she glared down at him, tucking her applewood wand back into a concealed pocket. Martine heaved a thick sigh before extending a hand down to him to help him off the floor. Severus merely stared at it, chuckled, then hoisted himself off the floor. Brushing at his robes absently, Severus turned a half-hearted grimace at his cousin.

"Your aim has deteriorated somewhat since Hogwarts, Martine. I would have appreciated it if you'd confined your spells to the deserving party."

"I did," she said in a clipped voice. "You're both as bad as my bitch water spaniels. One would think that after twenty years, you would have learned to restrain your temper, but I can see that you are still as quarrelsome as you ever were. Can't you ever leash your fits of pique, Severus?"

Though their relationship frequently revolved around good-natured yet brusque ribbing, Severus couldn't help be rankled by the comment. After twenty years as a spy, he'd more than perfected masking his emotions. Not that he could say as much to Martine.

"You'd be surprised," he said coolly before turning back towards his father.

With a lazy flick of his wand, his father was hoisted none-too-gently into the air and set back on his feet. The Marquis coughed indelicately and rubbed at his throat, glaring daggers at his son. Severus ignored the obvious enmity and lowered his face the few inches required to become uncomfortably close to the Marquis.

"If you ever again even contemplate any action that insults me or causes Miss Granger to so much as sniffle, I'll personally disembowel you. Slowly. Without magic."

Taking the hand that Martine had extended to him, Severus escorted her from the room.

"What must the students think of you, Severus? I suspect you're not the favorite, are you?"

Severus snorted derisively and gave her a half-grin. "My potential popularity with a ravening pack of calamitous dunderheads is hardly my greatest concern."

"Which, I'm sure, is painfully apparent in your demeanor and teaching style," Martine said with a slight smile.

With a harsh exhalation, Severus dropped her hand from his arm. "What is the point of this, Martine? Your criticisms have been particularly persistent this evening, and quite frankly, if I wanted to be abused, I could have stayed in the music room with Father. What are you trying to get at?"

One slim eyebrow rose as Martine watched Severus's cheeks color in anger. "My, aren't you touchy this evening?"

When a growl escaped Severus and he started off down the hall, she jogged to catch up, laying a gentle hand on his upper arm.

"Forgive me, dear, I didn't mean to antagonize you. Truly, I didn't. I'm merely ... curious about the Severus Snape that other people know. I can see that you are not the man your father sketches you to be, Severus, but I wonder what the rest of the world sees."

Severus stared forward as they made their way down the hall, a scowl pulling his heavy brows together. "People see only who and what they want to, Martine. You know this."

After a pregnant pause, Martine ventured carefully, "Shall I ask Miss Granger what she sees?"

Unable to check the motion, Severus whipped his head around to study Martine's serene and questioning expression before facing forward again. His scowl deepened as he struggled with equal urges to tell the truth and conceal it. He decided for middle ground.

"Only if you care for a faltering attempt at a tactful description of admiration which is achingly naïve and transparent."

Martine quietly digested this for a moment. "You do not believe she cares for you, then?"

Severus snorted again. "Do not feign ignorance, Martine; it doesn't suit you. Affection is not the motivation behind our marriage and you know it."

Lady Snape sighed delicately and placed a hand on his arm. "There must be something she sees in you, cousin. I don't doubt that most of the people you know only see what their eyes present to them and I must admit, you do seem to revel in playing the villain but there must be some sort prospect for better things. Miss Granger doesn't strike me as the type to marry blindly where there is no respect or hope."

"Miss Granger does what she is told to do," Severus snapped. Getting a tighter grasp on his emotions, Severus schooled his voice into calmness. "And as for what she 'sees in me'," he said the phrase with no little amount of scorn, "she is as woefully blind as everyone else."

Martine's grip on his arm tightened as she sighed. "One must wonder why she is marrying you, if the picture is as bleak as you make it out to be."

Again, Severus considered the relative merits and flaws of telling the truth. "Because she is a Gryffindor," he said at length.

"She is?"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Did you have any doubt?"

Martine sighed and fought the smile lurking at the corners of her mouth. "Then good luck to you, Severus, my dear. If your estimation of Miss Granger is correct, then you're both cornered good and proper. And I've rarely seen a lioness back down, regardless of how unfavorable the odds. She'll drag you into respectability by her teeth if that's what it takes."

Strangely, Severus found himself chuckling. "Respectability? Lord, I hope not."

Hermione had never been so glad to be on the verge of leaving somewhere in her life. Only breakfast to get through and then they'd be Apparating to Hogwarts. Carefully spreading a napkin across her lap to protect her pale yellow robes from any errant drips, Hermione accepted the cup of tea that a house elf left beside her plate and took a cautious sip to test its temperature. Finding it acceptable for drinking, Hermione took a long, slow drink from her tea cup, much longer she was sure than was entirely polite. Talk was rare this morning, and the atmosphere of the table seemed even more charged than the previous evening. Because of her nocturnal ruminations, Hermione couldn't quite bring herself to look at her sullen fiancé, who seemed to be consistently glaring at his father, who was flicking his eyes nervously between Severus and Martine, who happened to be studying Hermione with a keen and assessing eye. Hermione, on the other hand, confined her gaze to her breakfast plate and tea cup. She would be profoundly relieved when she returned to Hogwarts and an absence of perpetual scrutiny. A small chuckle escaped from Hermione's lips into her tea cup when she realized that she now thought of the place where she was Head Girl and best friend of the Boy Who Lived as a *break* from scrutiny. Over her cup, Hermione noticed that Lady Snape's expression had changed from appraisal to amusement, so she returned a small grin. Still, no one spoke. The meal felt interminable. Eventually, she breathed a sigh of relief when Severus broke the silence abruptly.

"We must be on our way shortly," he said, dropping his napkin to the side of the plate and standing.

Thankful for the diversion and escape, Hermione followed suit. As she made to rise from her chair, Hermione felt Martine's cool, slim fingers alight on her forearm.

"It's been such a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Granger," Martine said, a smile settling on her lips. "I do hope I'll get to see you again sometime."

She slewed her eyes towards her fiancé, who'd already begun to leave, and hesitated only a moment before responding. "Lady Snape..."

"Martine," the older woman reminded gently.

"Martine," Hermione repeated. "I don't suppose you'd like to come to the wedding, would you? It would be nice if someone came to represent Severus's family."

Hermione didn't turn in that direction, but the rustle of robes and heat on the back of her neck told her that both Snape men were glaring at her. Not that she could blame them, really: she'd clearly left the Marquis out of the request and had offered the invitation to Martine without Severus's permission. Of course, she'd done both things intentionally, knowing that Severus would object to any of his family being present, especially his father. But something about Lady Snape appealed to Hermione, in her robust and genial nature as well as her thoughtful glances and realistic appraisal of her cousin. Hermione didn't miss that Lady Snape glanced at both men before replying.

"Someone ought to represent the Snape family, I suppose," Martine said, tapping a finger against her lips in mock consideration. "And I'm certainly happy to be the one to do it. Saturday next, you said?"

Hermione nodded.

"Don't be ridiculous, Miss Granger," Snape said in a quick, clipped voice. "Martine is a very busy woman; I'm sure she can't just jaunt off to England for a wedding with less than a week's notice."

Before Martine could deliver the response that she opened her mouth to give, Hermione had crossed her arms over her chest and straightened her spine as she replied. "She 'jaunted off' to France on a moment's notice for an entire weekend. A cousin's wedding is sufficiently important for one day's journey, isn't it?"

Martine obviously sensed danger brewing as Severus narrowed his eyes at his fiancée because she too rose from the table, but she moved over and took up Severus's hand in her own. Patting it gently, she said, "I'd love to come. It'll be good to see you settled at last, Severus."

Snape *hmmphed* indignantly but managed to restrain himself from saying anything further. In a few quick strides, he had moved to take Hermione's arm and led her across the room decisively. Just before they crossed the threshold, Hermione turned back to regard Tobias.

"Marquis Snape, it was ... an experience," she said after a marked pause. "Your home is lovely." After a moment, she added, "I hope we get it when you die," sotto voce.

Not 'sotto' enough, it seemed, because Hermione heard a snort of laughter from above her.

"You're too kind," Tobias responded, rising from the table and crossing to them. "Of course, it was such a pleasure meeting you. It is not often that someone of your ... ilk is seen here."

Hermione gave him a tight smile. Though she couldn't exactly put her finger on what was different in the Marquis's demeanor, she was quite certain that something had transpired last evening after she parted company with him. Despite the biting tone and veiled insults, something wary, almost ... frightened, lie behind the Marquis's mahogany gaze. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him momentarily before he shifted his glance upwards to Severus.

"Such a lovely visit, Severus. Perhaps you'll return for Christmas?"

Snape's face never changed expression but for a single raised eyebrow. The Marquis flinched.

"Perhaps," Severus said dryly, and steered Hermione out of the room. The instant they had cleared the Marquis's earshot, he added, "when the Black Lake turns to treacle."

Surprised, Hermione stopped dead in the vestibule. After a moment, Snape realized that he had lost her.

"What?"

"You made a joke!"

Snape rolled his eyes. "I do possess the requisite amount of wit to do so, as well as a sense of humor, believe it or not."

"I'll go with 'not'," Hermione said.

Apparently ignoring the comment, Snape shouldered the messenger bag in which Hermione had packed her belongings and jerked his head in the direction of the front door. Without hesitation, Hermione followed him out of the house into the warm afternoon sun. The pair of them had walked not even a hundred yards before Snape moved close to her. Her head was suddenly flooded with potent memories from the previous evening: his face looming over hers, his lips on her mouth, his hands at her back. Hermione stumbled a few steps backward, grabbing a firm hold on his forearm rather than stepping into the open embrace that he obviously intended for their journey. She vaguely registered a single raised eyebrow before she felt the crushing squeeze of Apparition.

Hermione barely hobbled three steps away from him before she lurched into the bushes outside Hogwarts' main gate and vomited. She heaved indelicately a few times, then crouched for more than a moment, breathing deeply and allowing her stomach to right itself before she stood and rinsed out her mouth with a quick charm. Unable to look at Snape, whom she knew was still only a few yards away, Hermione straightened her spine and started off to the school at the quickest pace she could manage without jogging. After a moment or two, she heard the soft rustle of robes that told her that Snape had caught up to her with his long, ground-eating strides.

"The long ones always make me ill," she said by way of an explanation. She still couldn't bring herself to look at him, especially not with her cheeks heating in such a horrible manner.

"The short ones as well," he said. "It would have been easier on you if you had allowed me to steady you."

"I can manage just fine on my own, thank you," she said huffily.

Snape sneered. "All evidence to the contrary. People who suffer from Muggle motion sickness are instructed to fix their vision on a single stationary object to cure the queasiness that occurs from items rushing through the vision. The principle is similar with Apparition: people who suffer from balance issues and queasiness should remain stationary and..."

"...anchor herself and her gaze to the Apparator. I know." It bothered her to no end that not only was Snape correct, but he had spat out an answer that was in the Ministry-issued Guide to Apparition. "Must you be such a know-it-all?" Her voice sounded petulant even to her own ears, which only served to annoy her further. She sped up her pace.

"Isn't *that* the cauldron calling the kettle black?"

"Oh, shut up," Hermione snapped.

Teeth gnashing in annoyance, Hermione snatched her bag from his arm as soon as her feet hit the bottom steps of the castle. Wordlessly, Snape followed her up the stairs then made a large show of bowing as he opened the main door for her. Hermione felt herself rooted to the spot once she stepped into the entrance hall; something kept her standing there, watching as Snape caught her up and then swiftly strode towards the stairs descending to the dungeons. She fidgeted with the strap of her bag, inexplicably incapable of moving from the spot; she felt as if she ought to wait for something, something from him. As if her indecisive thoughts had been a Klaxon wail in his head, Snape spun around and pinned her with a glare.

"What are you waiting for, Granger? A biscuit for performing a trick? Get back to your common room or I'll take off points for loitering!"

Hermione heaved a sigh and hitched her bag further up her shoulder. Well, what had she expected really? Now that they were back at Hogwarts and out of France, had she really expected him to be any different? He was back to being Professor Snape, Potions Master and generally unpleasant pain in the bum, and she was back to being Hermione Granger, Head Girl and best friend of Harry Potter.

And then, like a shot, it hit her...

"Harry!" she squeaked and took off up the marble staircase like a rogue Snitch.

She'd nearly made it to the Fat Lady when she careened around a corner and into Ginny. After picking herself up off the floor, she realized that Harry was there, too, leaning against the statue of Vlad the Impaler and looking slightly surprised.

"Easy there," Ginny said as she helped Hermione dust herself off. "No need to rush. We knew that Snape would take the mickey out of you if we waited downstairs, so we came here after lunch. How was Snape the Elder?"

"Absolutely wretched," Hermione said but found herself smiling into Ginny's warm expression and Harry's inquisitive one. "Beastly man. Worse than his son, in a way, because at least Professor Snape will tell you he thinks you're a stupid prat instead of buttering you up and then stinging you like a Portuguese Man of War."

Harry and Ginny both laughed.

"Never thought I'd hear someone say they *preferred* Snape's way of dealing with people," Harry said.

"Me either, but there you have it," Hermione said, smiling.

Her expression turned serious, however, when her mind circled back round to the reason she'd been in such a hurry.

"So, about this person you've got to petition for Harry," she said breathlessly. "I tried like the devil to work it out Professor Snape, wouldn't tell me and I've just been dying to know who..."

"Professor Snape?" Ginny interrupted.

"What's he to do with it?" Harry said, grimacing. "Bloody interfering git ..."

Hermione waved Harry's grumbling away dismissively. "Oh, he was just there when I opened the note and was taunting me because I couldn't figure it out. Don't keep me in suspense, who is it?"

Ginny adopted a rather smug look and Harry crossed his arms over his chest.

"Rather brilliant, I must admit," said Harry. "Ginny came up with it and the last minute on Friday night and I..."

"Never mind the back story, just tell me who!"

Ginny opened her mouth to answer, but smiled as she looked over Hermione's shoulder.

"Hello there," said a dreamy voice from behind Hermione's back. "Don't you look lovely in yellow. You sent for me, Ginny?"

Hermione whipped around as she recognized the voice and couldn't help but gape. It all made sense suddenly, the clues all falling neatly into place: *Raven ... Lovebird ...*

"It's Luna!" Hermione exclaimed.

The subject of Hermione's utterance seemed only mildly bemused by the goings-on, choosing to focus on the bag of sweets clutched in front of her. Luna's eyebrows raised slightly over her protuberant eyes, but she just smiled gently as Ginny motioned towards the Room of Requirement with an offer to explain everything. Hermione had no choice but to follow, laughing lightly at Harry's knowing smile. As they headed towards their destination, Hermione nudged Harry gently.

"What do you think of all this, then?" she said, nodding her head towards Luna. "Ginny didn't bully you into it, did she? You didn't just say yes because of the time deadline?"

Harry sighed lightly and shrugged. "Time was obviously a factor, but no, Ginny didn't bully me." After a moment, Harry added thoughtfully, "Actually, it's rather brilliant if you think about it. I'm sure Ginny will sell you on the details, but honestly, I can only think of one possible down side."

"That you'll spend the foreseeable future with someone who's absolutely barking mad?" Hermione offered with a mock-helpful smile.

Harry chuckled. "She's not so bad, really. Always good for a laugh, at least, which is more than I can say for your fiancé."

Hermione scoffed and rolled her eyes. "You can say that again."

Something of the strain of the weekend must have showed in her eyes because Harry grasped her arm, holding her back as Ginny and Luna forged ahead into the Room of Requirement.

"What is it?" Harry asked, his green eyes troubled. "Did Snape do something to upset you this weekend?"

For a moment, Hermione wanted to spill out the whole sordid story of her confusion about Snape's quicksilver changes in demeanor and the strange heated moments of his lips on hers but she couldn't bring herself to do it, not when Harry looked relatively happy and calm. So she mustered up a somewhat wobbly smile and shook her head.

"No more than usual," she said lightly. "I'll tell you about it later. Let's go and let Ginny explain the method behind her madness."

Harry chuckled again and stood back as Hermione preceded him into the room. Reclining into a squashy armchair, Hermione blew out a deep breath and let her mind drift away from the man pacing his dungeon chambers eight floors below them.

The European Death Knot

Chapter 22 of 23

"You don't exactly hand in your resignation to You-Know-Who, Hermione. Didn't Sirius say that about his brother? And if Snape is still going to their little soirees, and hanging out with Malfoy, and—" Ginny's voice broke, "—and helping to torture innocent people, he's still a Death Eater. He just happens to also be in the Order. I think that opening yourself up to whatever he has inside him that makes him capable of doing what he does is foolish."

A/N - So I'm back. At last. It's been a rollercoaster in real life in the time I'm away. I could go over all the things that have happened - bought a house (Yay!), found out that I'm losing my job (boo!), forced to work for the boss that is firing me until I either find a new job or my contract expires in July (BOOOO!), bouts of some serious depression (ugh) - but really, it all just consolidates into a big jumble of noise that kept me from doing anything but just surviving. And as far as you, my dear readers, are concerned, it just means that you've gone a horrid amount of time without an update, probably thinking that I had abandoned the story and all my work here. I really do hate to keep doing this to you, but life hasn't been very kind to me lately.

So, I can't promise how often my coming updates will be. But I CAN promise you a couple of things -

1. I've vowed that now that I have nothing to lose with my job, I will no longer allow it to eat my life. Hopefully this will give me more time to write.
2. I'm already about 1/4 of the way done with chapter 23, and I'm trying to keep momentum going, so I don't get stuck.
3. Your reviews have meant EVERYTHING to me. Even if you think I'm not reading them, keep sending them. They are the only thing(s) that have given me any hope that anyone would even care if the story was updated. They are shining lights to me, so please, keep writing. I will try the best that I can to keep living up to them.
4. I'm NEARLY done with the first full chapter of Baby Mine, the sequel to Bundle of Joy, in case you read my other work.

I'm endlessly grateful for those of you who continue to stick with me, and for those of you who are new to the game, I hope that the story is worth the gaps between updates. As a side note, given that I wanted to get this out to you as soon as possible, this chapter is un-beta-ed, so please forgive any mistakes you may encounter.

I hope you enjoy this humble offering.

~~ ** Lady Tuesday ** ~~

Chapter Twenty-Two The European Death Knot (One-Sided Overhand Bend)

The European Death Knot (One-Sided Overhand Bend) *"The one-sided overhand bends* a knot used to join two ropes together. The overhand bend is formed by holding two rope ends next to each other and tying an overhand knot in them as if they were a single line. ...Easily formed in most line, the overhand bend can be difficult or impossible to untie once tightened. ... this bend is not practical to use as a binding knot when tied by hand. ... It is prone to failure by capsizing under high loads. Due to this behavior, American climbers often refer to it as the European Death Knot or EDK. But these initial failures can reform the knot tighter, if the ends are long enough to avoid passing into the knot."

~ Wikipedia's List of Knots

"Actually," Ginny said, leaning back and dangling one long leg across the arm of her wingback, "it's fairly ingenious, if I do say so myself."

Though Ginny's self-satisfied smirk caused Hermione's lips to quirk up in amusement, she couldn't help but be just the slightest bit troubled by the decision.

"Are you sure about this?"

Hermione looked from Ginny and her smug smile to Harry, who gave her a bemused shrug, to Luna. As ever, Luna bore an expression of polite interest, as if she'd just

been asked to tea by a new acquaintance and nothing more stressful or unusual than that. A furrow in her brow, Hermione turned back to Harry.

"Truly, Harry, is this all right with you? No offense meant, of course, to you, Luna," she added hastily. The other girl just nodded. "I just want to make sure it's the best thing for everyone involved. Come to that, how did you petition for Harry at all? You're not even of age!"

"Daddy is," Luna said simply. Her face melted into a satisfied smile, as if her statement had explained everything.

Ginny nodded as well, but Hermione could only scowl a little further.

"Well, what does that matter?"

"For a smart girl, you forget the details easily, don't you?"

Harry smirked despite the frosty glare that Hermione had turned on him. Holding up his hands in mock surrender, Harry chuckled lightly and motioned for Luna to explain.

Smiling, Luna directed her gaze back to Hermione. "Ginny approached me on Saturday morning obviously, this was after you left with Professor Snape..." Hermione tensed, but Luna gave no sign that she noticed, "...and she explained that she needed my help. She told me that she and Harry had been scanning the outline of the law for loopholes, trying to see if Harry could get out of the law entirely. A bit pointless, as I told them, because everyone knows that the Minister has operatives inside the Office of..."

"I noticed, in the letter about the law," Ginny said, gently cutting into another of Luna's description of wild Ministry conspiracies, "that even if a witch or wizard wasn't of age..."

"...the patriarch of a pureblood family may submit a petition on behalf of his child, with or without the child's consent," Luna recited.

"So Harry and I wracked our brains as to who we knew that was a pureblood witch and would be a suitable match for Harry," Ginny finished.

"And is enough of a nutter not to mind being engaged to a marked man who'd potentially make her and everyone she loves a target," Harry said with a grimace.

Hermione frowned in Harry's direction, but Luna continued before she could respond.

"Daddy was thrilled, of course, to petition for Harry. He's always been very nice to me, and we were happy to help. The real genius of the plan, naturally, is that even though Daddy petitioned for Harry, I can't get married until I'm of age. If the law gets repealed before then, we mightn't even have to get married at all."

"And you're not worried about your father's safety?" Hermione asked.

"Of course I am," Luna said. "That's why he's gone into hiding. Even I don't know exactly where he's gone."

"So where will you go once school is over?"

"Order Headquarters, most likely," Harry answered for her. "Seeing as she's my fiancée, it seems the safest place, not to mention that it's my house now."

Hermione nodded, but she still found herself troubled. "So you don't mind, then? Being engaged to someone you're not in love with?"

Luna gave Harry a kind but assessing look before shrugging her shoulders. "Harry is a lovely person a good friend so I suppose we will get along fairly well as a couple, should we have to get married in the end. And if he found someone he loved, I wouldn't mind if he had a relationship with that person; he just couldn't get marry her. Or him. Whichever suits his fancy. I suppose I should have asked if you're gay, Harry? It would make the reproduction clause of the law stickier if you were, but I'm sure we could find a way around it."

At this last pronouncement, Harry's jaw dropped in shock. It was a moment before he remembered himself and closed his mouth with a snap, another moment or two before he formulated an answer.

"No," he said weakly, and then more confidently, "no, I'm definitely not gay. Very, erm, very straight."

"Excellent," Luna said with a satisfied smile.

Luna gave him another measured gaze, this time thoroughly enough to cause him to blush to his hairline. Hermione had to place a hand over her mouth to keep from snickering.

"Yes, I think we'll do just fine," she said serenely.

"Well," Ginny said, a tad startled but clearly trying to marshal her thoughts. "There you have it."

Hermione watched nervously as Ginny's eyes scanned the roll of parchment in front of her. Every now and then, Ginny would stare at a fixed spot on the parchment, sigh, and then begin reading again. Anxiety driving her to distraction, Hermione had long ago given up on trying to write her achievement goals and course of study for her independent Transfiguration lessons with Professor McGonagall, and instead had taken to watching Ginny as she read to gauge the success of the material by Ginny's facial expressions.

About fifteen minutes into the process, Ginny pinched her eyes shut and growled, "If you don't stop bloody staring at me, I'm going to heave this damn thing into the fireplace right now!"

Hermione squeaked in distress and reapplied herself to her course planning. At nearly half-past eight, Ginny raised her eyes and sighed.

"Well," she said, "I've finished."

Hermione's quill skittered across the parchment, leaving a long streak of ink through her schedule for the Christmas holidays. "What do you think?" she asked tensely.

One side of Ginny's lips quirked up in a little half-smile. "It's good, that," she said. "It really is. Bits of it were ... interesting, but you've done a nice job."

"What do you mean, 'interesting'? It sounds like you meant 'bits of it were complete crap.' What needs fixing?"

Ginny scrubbed her hands across her eyes. "I knew that you were going to be like this," she said, and sighed again. "I meant that bits of it were interesting, not crap. And it doesn't need fixing, per se, I just wondered why you'd done certain things."

"It's not supposed to be interesting; it's supposed to be a wedding!" When Ginny laughed, Hermione sighed and lowered her voice. "You know what I mean. What were you wondering about?"

"Well, to start with, you've completely evicted the concept of love from the ceremony."

"It isn't exactly a love match, is it?" Hermione said ruefully. "Besides, I can't imagine Professor Snape spouting platitudes, can you? Furthermore, I'm not sure I'd want him

to do. It would be too ... weird. This weekend was quite enough play-acting at affection for me, thanks very much. Anyhow, I do say the word love a few times, just not a lot. What else were you curious about?"

"The end bit."

Hermione nodded and gulped. She knew that this part of the ceremony would be a unique and potentially perilous choice, but she firmly believed it to be a good one. "The wand binding, you mean?"

"Those old rituals are dangerous things to muck about in, love," Ginny said, her heart-shaped face pinched with worry. "Don't you know what can happen with a wand binding?"

"Of course I do," Hermione said indignantly. "I did my research! It's a magical tie between spouses that strengthens the emotional bond and links their magical capabilities..."

"...and can cause some pairs to share powers," Ginny said. "Leaving aside the rather large problem that I doubt Snape will be happy that you'd be forcibly binding the two of you together for life, is that something you really want to delve into, Hermione? I know Snape's technically in the Order, but..."

"There's no 'technically' about it, Ginny; he's in the Order," Hermione replied huffily.

"He's also a Death Eater. Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater," Ginny said. To stem the start of an argument from her friend, Ginny raised a hand, then continued, "That doesn't mean I believe him to be evil incarnate or anything, Hermione, but the fact is that the man is a Death Eater. Do you really want to share that?"

"Former Death Eater."

"Is that right? So he's not going to any of their little get-togethers anymore, then?"

Hermione started to retort, but snapped her mouth shut. The memory of a memory floated to the top of her vision, a hazy image of her sullen fiancé with a white mask dangling from his fingers as he pointed his wand at the crumpled form of her lost friend ...

"You don't exactly hand in your resignation to You-Know-Who, Hermione. Didn't Sirius say that about his brother? And if Snape is still going to their little soirees, and hanging out with Malfoy, and..." Ginny's voice broke, "...and helping to torture innocent people, he's still a Death Eater. He just happens to also be in the Order. I think that opening yourself up to whatever he has inside him that makes him capable of doing what he does is foolish."

Hermione grimaced, but took a long, steadying breath. "I trust him. Binding my magical powers to his will show that to the world."

"Or it will show them that you're blind enough to believe the best in everyone, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary."

Ginny's comment landed like a slap to Hermione's face, and for a moment, she sat stunned. Not a hair's breadth of a second later, it was all she could do not to pull out her wand and hex her friend. Instead, fighting down the fury that had risen in her throat with astonishing speed, Hermione shoved back her chair and stood. For a moment, she considered walking away, but the urge to retort was too great. Her palms slapped down on the table with a noise like a whip crack, causing Ginny to flinch.

"Now you listen to me, Ginevra Weasley," Hermione spat out in a controlled hiss. "What is 'in him that makes him do what he does' is courage and dedication and a rather phenomenal amount of bravery, and whether you like it or not, what he does saves our bloody necks. A lot. He may not be the kindest or sweetest of men, but Severus Snape is still my fiancé, and when you insult him, you insult me. Keep that in mind for the future because you only get one free shot at him."

Hermione took a few swift steps away from the table before remembering the script for the wedding ceremony still lay in front of Ginny. Within two strides, Hermione leaned back over the table and snatched the scroll out from under her friend's folded hands. Hermione didn't look back before heaving herself through the portrait hole and stomping off towards the Owlery, more determined than ever to send the ceremony transcript off to the Ministry with the wand binding as the capstone to her wedding.

Just over an hour later, Hermione reemerged into the Common Room after a long, brisk walk back from the Owlery and an extended session in the Room of Requirement, venting her anger against some plush dummies that strikingly resembled both Ginny and Snape. Following her half hour of vengeful spell casting, she'd taken a good long time to contemplate what Ginny had said and the implications of what forever with Severus Snape would mean. She was more than a little ashamed that she kept coming back to one particular subject, but the more she thought about it, the more she knew what she had to do.

Hermione took a deep breath; she was calm and resolved now. She'd come to a strange but logical decision. Now, she just had to convince the 'interested parties' that it was a good idea. Pressing her cold fingers to warm cheeks, Hermione noticed the glint of lamp light off bright red hair at the table in front of the north windows.

Ah. Ginny. First victim.

A slight burble of nervousness in her stomach, Hermione made her way over to where Ginny worked away on some bit of homework as she smiled absently at the cool night breeze drifting in from the open window. Watching as her friend brushed a long ginger lock away from her eyes and behind her ears, Hermione thanked providence for the nearly empty room as she sat herself across from her friend. Ginny looked up and smiled tentatively at Hermione before finishing off a sentence.

"So ... sent the paperwork off to the Ministry, then?" Ginny asked as she blew gently on the ink drying on her Arithmancy chart.

"Yes," Hermione said with forced nonchalance, but didn't elaborate or give in to the temptation to fill the silence with babble, as was her usual habit when anxious.

Letting the silence stretch out, Hermione figured that it was best if Ginny was a tad off kilter for what she was about to propose; if she surprised her friend with the question, Ginny may be less likely to be upset (at least, right away). Hermione wasn't disappointed when the lengthening quiet made Ginny fidget with her quill, looking to and from her friend with increasingly edgy facial expressions.

Another deep breath and Hermione was ready to ask the crucial question. "Ginny, I need to ask you a favor."

"Sure," Ginny said, relief heavy in her voice as she bent over to pull another textbook from her bag. "Anything; you know that."

Deep breath in. Deep breath out. "I'd like your permission to have sex with Harry."

A dull whack accompanied Ginny's textbook dropping to the floor. The girl stared up at her, nonplussed, halfway bent over beside the table.

"I'm sorry, I think I just hallucinated for a second," Ginny said after a long pause. "I could have sworn you just asked *my* permission to *shag Harry*. Which is ... what did you really say?"

A tiny sigh escaped Hermione. "That's what I really said. I want your permission to sleep with Harry." When the girl just stared at her, blinking rapidly, she added an awkward, "please."

"Hermione, I" Ginny floundered wordlessly for a moment. "Are you mad?"

Before Hermione could respond, the redhead continued.

"I mean, even if you were going to do such a ridiculous thing, why the hell would you be asking my permission and not, oh, say, Harry's? I mean, it's just preposterous!"

Hermione waited for her friend to stop gaping at her before she motioned the redhead to lower her voice, then leaned in to explain.

"You see, after we talked about the Wand Binding, I got thinking. This Marriage Law might be forever, if the law makers in place now have their way; and if we do a Binding, my marriage is *definitely* forever. And, well, that got me thinking about what sacrifices people make when they join themselves in marriage, and I couldn't help thinking about what my mother refers to as 'the ultimate sacrifice' for a bride."

Ginny snickered a bit as Hermione allowed her lips to quirk up a bit.

"What I mean is, I got a good long look this weekend at what passes for intimacy with Severus Snape. I'm not sure there is a 'real' with him; everything is appearances and interpretations, and it's all so mixed up and confusing and ... well, after what I saw of him this weekend, I don't want that kind of experience for my first You see, I've never... and I don't know as if he would really appreciate "

Her voice trailed off as she sniffed back tears. Ginny reached over and held Hermione's hand in hers as the older girl marshaled her thoughts.

"So, you see, I wanted to be able to have choice for my first time, to whom I choose to give that gift. Someone who'll be kind and gentle and understand and appreciate what he is being given. I know that Harry would."

"I don't doubt it," Ginny said in a soft but tight voice. "So why are you asking *my* permission?"

Hermione swiped a sleeve across her leaking eyes and sniffly nose. "Because the last time anything like this happened, I almost lost you, and that was only snogging. I wanted you to understand why I was going to ask Harry for this; I wanted you to understand, so that you would try to be okay with it, and so I wouldn't risk losing you again."

The younger girl sighed and sat back in her chair, gazing out the window as she did so. "I appreciate the thought, Hermione, and I understand why you want this, but the permission isn't mine to give. *Harry* isn't mine to give; he never was, really, even though I wished...but he isn't. I can't give you permission for something that I don't have, Hermione."

"But if he says yes, I don't want you to be hurt."

Ginny sighed, then looked at her friend, giving Hermione a small smile. "It will hurt for a bit, but it hurts less and less every day."

Hermione chewed her lip in silence, wavering on whether to go ahead with her plan. She did believe that taking this step would be best with Harry, but not if it risked her friendship with Ginny. She couldn't go through that again.

"Ginny, I..."

"Go ask him, Hermione," Ginny said, before she lost her nerve.

Hermione noted that Ginny didn't wait to see the other girl's response, simply reapplied herself to her homework and surreptitiously dabbed at her eyes.

They sat across from each other, Hermione on the chair near the window and Harry on the bed, looking anywhere but in the other person's direction. Given the cramped space of Harry's section of the dormitory, their knees nearly touched, Harry's legs so close she could feel the heat of his body warming the fabric of her tights, but they both seemed to be going out of their way not to bridge the scant distance between. She hadn't counted on it being this bloody awkward; a ridiculous mistake, in retrospect, but at the time, Hermione had been so certain that once he'd given his consent, everything would flow naturally. After all, they'd had a few snogs, hadn't they, and Harry had even admitted to loving her just a few months ago. Now, however, the pressure of what they'd agreed to seemed to be smothering them. Hermione opened her mouth to speak a few times but couldn't force out any words. Thankfully, Harry broke the silence.

"Are you sure about this, Hermione?"

She nodded, wringing her hands in her lap. "Yes, yes. I know that I want this experience to be special, with someone I care about."

After a long moment, he asked, "You sure that you don't just want someone that isn't him?"

He didn't use Snape's name, she noted, but it hung there in the air between them nevertheless, as if her fiancé was a silent observer of the act they had agreed to participate in. She shuddered at the thought and wrenched her mind back to Harry's question.

"Yes, of course," she said, but something stuck at the back of her throat when she said it.

A quick succession of memories flashed across her mind the feel of Snape's arms around her on the dance floor; the warmth of his hands on her back as he pulled her into his embrace in the courtyard; the smooth slip of his lips on hers; the heat of his breath on her face as they stood in front of her bedroom door; the sear of his gaze as it slid up and down her form, stopping, lingering at her breasts and Hermione felt wobbly with a sudden flare and retreat of giddiness and fear.

No, she told herself firmly, she *did not* want her first time to be like *that*. Something in the back of her mind thought that perhaps the lady did protest too much.

No, she told herself again.

And the truth was, when she looked at Harry, she felt a warm certainty that her virginity would be well lost with him. Harry would give her the sort of first time that every girl should have. She looked up into his eyes, clear and warm and familiar, and didn't have to force a smile.

"I want you, Harry," she said, but it came out a tad more stiffly than she would have liked.

Harry leaned in as if to kiss her, but stopped halfway there when Hermione took in breath sharply and clenched her hands in her skirt. After a moment, Harry rocketed up from the bed and walked around to the other side where his school books were stacked on his nightstand.

"Should we go over tomorrow's Defense Against the Dark Arts work, do you think?" he said, gawkily gesturing to the assignment they'd done on Shield Charms.

When Hermione's shoulders slumped, Harry came back essay clutched in an unsteady fist and patted her hand gently.

"We'll get there, Hermione," he said quietly. "When it's right."

She nodded morosely, hoping that 'when it's right' would come sometime in the fortnight before she irrevocably bonded herself to her brooding fiancé.

The next morning's breakfast table saw an odd mix of emotions. Ginny ate rapidly and in silence, warily eyeing Hermione and alternating between awkward throat clearing and heavy sighing. Hermione, on the other hand, had her eyes buried in her Transfiguration text, busily sketching out the independent study plan she was due to discuss with Professor McGonagall today; though she maintained an air of calm disconnect, Hermione reined in her anxiety. Harry never raised his eyes off his plate. Neville

watched the entire scene or strange lack thereof with bewilderment.

Hermione didn't bother to drag her attention from her study plans when the post owls came swooping into the Great Hall in a flurry of wings and hoots and screeching, as everyone she'd corresponded with by post was either here at school, had already responded to the wedding invitations or, in the case of her parents, wasn't speaking to her at all. So it was with a shriek of surprise that Hermione brushed the splattered cereal milk off of her school robes and parchment before fishing a tightly furled parchment out of her discarded bowl. A confused furrow in her brow, she unrolled the parchment and felt her nerves jump when she noticed the spiky writing.

"Oh, Merlin, what have I done now?" she muttered to herself as she noted that the slashing script had clearly been written in haste.

Granger,

You will meet me in my classroom immediately after first lesson.

S:

The fact that he had addressed her by her last name and only bothered to write his first initial as a signature did not bode well. Not at all well. She risked a glance up to the head table where she noticed that the originator of the missive was scowling into his coffee and clearly trying not to roll his eyes as Tonks prattled away happily to both Flitwick on her left and Snape on her right. Hermione felt her pulse jump as she watched him, the cogs in her mind whizzing into gear trying to discern why he could be annoyed with her, when she saw Severus's shoulder hitch upward jerkily, as if to dispel a bothersome insect, before transferring his gaze immediately and unerringly to hers. His dark eyes narrowed, and his face was a thundercloud.

"Good Lord," Hermione said, turning back to pack away her Transfiguration work.

"What's the matter, Hermione?" Ginny asked in a cautious voice. "Not bad news, I hope?"

When she directed a level gaze at the redhead, the carefully-masked sorrow in Ginny's countenance faded away, leaving only worry for her friend. Hermione decided to have pity on her.

"Well, seeing as how it's from Snape, and he wants to see me right after his first class," Hermione said, gesturing with the parchment, "I can only assume I've fouled something else up. God only knows what though. With him, it could be anything from last year's Potions work to the color of the napkins at the reception."

Harry's face turned stormy but Ginny snorted in amusement.

"Don't let him push you around then," she said with a smirk.

Hermione gave her a lopsided smile in return. "No, I don't think I will."

Hermione waded through a crowd of tetchy first-years, buffeted along as they did their best to exit the dungeon classroom as quickly as possible. Judging by their haste and the terrified expressions on more than one face, there was no doubt that Snape was in a towering temper and spoiling for a fight. Hermione straightened her robes, straightened her spine, and marched into the Potions dungeon as soon as the doorway emptied. She tried neither to hurry nor to linger as she walked up to where he had his back to her, flicking his wand in irritated jabs as he wiped the blackboard free of instructions and tidied up his workspace.

"You wanted to see me?" she asked, her voice only a tiny bit wobbly.

Snape whirled on the spot, his wand still thrust outward; Hermione couldn't help it: she flinched and nearly raised her wand to cast a Shield Charm.

His heavy brows drawing tight over the deep black eyes, now nearly crackling with fury, Snape prodded his desk drawer, which flew open and relinquished a thick parchment envelope bearing a suspiciously familiar seal. Another jab of his wand sent the envelope careening across the desk at her.

"What in blazes is the meaning of this?" he bellowed. "Explain yourself this instant!"

Only mildly ruffled at his bluster, Hermione made a show of bending over to pick up the envelope and examining the contents.

"It appears to be a copy of our marriage ceremony, sir."

"A ceremony which you sent in without my consultation and certainly without my consent!"

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him which only caused him to further redden in large splotchy patches across his pallid face and calmly replied, "I wasn't aware that your consent was required, sir."

Snape crossed his arms over his chest and glowered down at her. "Of course my permission was required," he said, sneering. "You didn't think I was simply going to let you witter away on your own without reining you in, did you?"

Recalling what Snape had tried to impart to her at his father's estate, Hermione crossed her arms in a mirror gesture to his own and rested a hip against the first student work table, adding a forced casualness in response to his angry blustering.

"On the contrary, Professor, you agreed to let me do whatever I want with the ceremony as long as I adhered to your guidelines."

To her quickly-stifled amusement, Snape looked genuinely gobsmacked by that. After a second to regroup, he managed, "I would never in my right mind agree to such terms."

"You didn't just agree to them, Professor, you presented them,—" she said. Before he had a chance to retort, she continued. "In fact, your exact words were, let me see ... 'I will not pretend that this is not a marriage of convenience. I will not participate in anything overly saccharine or sentimental. I will not play the part of anything but a surly forty-one year old, and I will certainly not be overly social at any type of reception. Aside from that, I will allow you to plan the ceremony as you will.'"

Snape glowered at her as she recited his own words back to him.

"Did I not follow your guidelines?" she asked in an overly-sweet voice. Hermione reached forward and sifted through the copied pages of the ceremony that the Ministry had sent Snape.

"Nowhere did I state that this was a love match in fact, I only used the word 'love' thirteen times in the entire ceremony..."

"Not superstitious then, it would seem," Snape sneered, but Hermione ignored him.

"...nor did I require you to spout anything that I thought you would consider overly-sentimental. I did not write in anything that would contradict your admittedly surly behavior..." Snape scowled even more fiercely, "...and though the reception is not included on this document, I assure you that I have nothing more social planned for you than one single dance as man and wife. Barring that, you can be as unpleasant and reclusive as you like. So you can see, Professor, since I've met the only terms you saw fit to set out, I had your permission to plan the ceremony to my heart's content."

Severus's mouth dropped open just a tad, and while he was still thoroughly annoyed with the impudent little chit, somewhere in the back of his mind, Severus had to admit grudging respect that Granger had out-Slytherined him. She had somehow managed to beat him. *Fairly*. It was humiliating. Snapping his teeth together with an audible click, it took Severus only a moment to regroup.

"And what exactly is this all about?" he said, jabbing a finger towards two large blank spaces on a page late in the ceremony.

Hermione nodded. "The vows. There is a section for the best man to offer on your behalf, then you add your vows, then Ginny will speak on my behalf, and then my vows. I thought it would be nice if we each offered something we wrote ourselves rather than me trying to put words in your mouth."

"I told you that I would be offering no sap or poetry."

"I don't *expect* sap or poetry," Hermione said through gritted teeth, nearly at the end of her tether. At this point, she had a feeling he was being contrary solely for the vicious pleasure of raising her hackles.

"As you can see from what I wrote here, the ceremony and, I hope, our marriage will be based on truth, honesty, and trust. I only expect you to offer what you are truly and honestly willing to give me. Nothing more; nothing less."

Severus grumbled for a moment and then fell silent. For a long while, Hermione thought she might actually have won. A small smile of triumph on her lips, Hermione bent to shuffle the pages back in order and place them back in the envelope. That was, until Severus bent over her and hissed in her ear, his voice sharp and thick with seething anger.

"And the end of the ceremony, Miss Granger? Is *that* what you call a marriage 'based on truth, honesty, and trust'?" He spat the last few words as if they were acid, intended to burn her.

Bewildered at the sudden, genuine loathing in his voice, Hermione snapped her head up to search his eyes. They burned with anger, but far beneath the vitriol, there was something more vulnerable. Had Hermione not believed it to be nearly absurd, she would have said that it was betrayal. As if she had hurt him. As if she had wounded him to the core.

"Wha...the wand binding, you mean?" Hermione asked, the age-old ceremony being the only thing she could conceive of which he might have an objection.

"The wand binding," he said acerbically. "Do you have any idea just what you are broadcasting to the world by including a Binding Charm, Granger? Do you even know what they mean?"

"I...they...they join a couple together through the core of their magic," she said, tripping over the definition she'd located in a book of wizarding marriage traditions.

"And?"

Hermione searched her mind, desperate to discover what offended him so. "And ... couples who have been bound through their wands can share powers sometimes, and ... and it deepens the emotional bond between the couple."

And there it was, Hermione realized, she'd come to the root of it. He didn't want to be forced to be emotionally tied to her. Tears welled in her eyes as she realized just how powerfully he must hate her.

"Spare me your theatrics, Granger," he hissed. "It isn't about emotional bonding, and you know it!"

"What, then?" she said, sniffing.

Snape's long, slim palms slapped against the surface of the desk between them, causing her to jump.

"Violence, Granger! The Charm forcibly restricts the couple's wands from doing each other harm! What you're telling the world is that you believe that the only way I would refrain from attacking you is to be rendered magically incapable of doing so! Is that what you call a marriage based on honesty and trust?!"

Snape roared at her, tiny flecks of spit streaking through the air and she twitched in response to his anger. As he finished his diatribe, however, she felt her own throat flood with fury.

"What I'm telling the world is that I trust you enough to bind myself to you for life! That I trust you enough to share everything I am with you and to share everything you are in return!"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, don't be so naïve," he spat. "The wizarding world will not see a marriage between Harry Potter's best friend and a former Death Eater and assume that the Wand Binding is a mark of *trust*." He ejaculated the word as if intending to skewer her with it.

"Why do you always assume the worse?" she shouted back. "Why must you always presume that everyone in the world is trying to cheat, insult, or hate you?"

"Experience! That is the way the world works, Granger, and anyone who says differently is an idiot or trying to sell you something."

Hermione seethed in quiet fury. "You are horrible."

Snape leaned back and raised an eyebrow at her, leering down from his considerable height. "A master of the obvious as always."

Hermione felt her fingers tighten around her wand until she actually feared she might snap it in half. In the interest of preserving her dignity and avoiding a possible jail sentence for murder, Hermione bent to arrange the wedding ceremony back into the proper order and then thrust it forward at him. Scowling, she said, "Have your vows prepared before the wedding, and make sure that your best man has written a few lines in the proper place."

"No doubt Dumbledore will share your flowery interpretation of the Wand Binding..." he began, but before she could even consider the interesting notion that Dumbledore was his best man (and that he may agree with her on the subject of the Wand Binding), Hermione hollered, "Just do it!" before turning on her heel and striding out of the dungeon, leaving the double doors slapping against each other with brutal force in her wake.

Hermione practically flew up the flights of stairs between the dungeons and Gryffindor Tower; the formidable facial expression and angry tears warded off any straggling students in the Common Room. Once she had barricaded herself in the seventh-year girls' dormitory, she cast several good Silencing Charms. Without thinking, Hermione clasped her hands around the first breakable objects she could find in this case, the box of miniature snow globes that her father and mother had collected for her over the last decade at various conferences throughout Europe and hurled them against every flat, hard surface within throwing distance, screaming herself hoarse and ragged before collapsing onto her four-poster in a fit of rage-filled sobbing. For one mad moment, she considered flinging herself bodily out the window to her doom, just to escape the fate in front of her. The thought of a distraught and broken Harry standing over a grave twin to Ron's kept her from doing something drastic.

Equally as potent an argument for life, a graphic suicide seemed too much to Hermione like it would be letting Snape win.

As soon as Hermione had cleared up the splotchy patches on her face with a few well-placed charms, she shucked her school robes and donned a set of clothing pieces

that she had chosen very carefully the previous day. That done, she rushed down into the Common Room and heaved a grateful sigh that the target of her intentions was easily accessible. She grabbed Harry's wrist and, without explanation, dragged him up out of his chair and towards the portrait hole. Thankfully, he followed her without complaint.

He didn't speak the entire time she hurried along to the far end of the seventh floor corridor; he didn't need to ask her destination as she paced back and forth in front of the wall across from Barnabas the Barmy. As soon as the door to the Room of Requirement showed itself, Hermione launched herself at Harry, molding her lips against his to silence any questions that he may have wanted to ask. She set to work peeling off his robes before the door had even closed behind the two of them.

A/N - If there is anyone out there who would be willing to beta for me in the future (double points if you can Brit-pick) and wouldn't mind my gaps in updating (triple points if you can be a cheerleader), it would be MUCH appreciated. When I started this fic, my RL friends were my betas, but given the span of time that has gone by, they all have different lives and very few of them still have time to beta fan fic. So if anyone out there would like to help me out, it would be very welcome.

The Common Whipping Knot

Chapter 23 of 23

Feeling an abrupt squeeze of hot jealousy, Severus was forced to admit it: they reeked of a physical familiarity that was far more intimate than 'best mates.' Hermione reached out a hand to cradle Potter's cheek and Severus felt that squeeze of jealousy turn into a sharp jab.

A/N - So. My new betas - magicalpresence, Gattina, and Adrienne, whose net handle I can't find right now (FAIL ON ME) - probably think I'm dead with the amount of time that has gone by since I contacted them to beta these chapters. I'm not, ladies, I swear! You were great, and I hope to have more for you to look at soon! Please feel free to give my new betas a round of applause because, despite my tardiness, they were FANTASTIC - prompt, enthusiastic, but critical in the best possible way. Thanks a ton, ladies. Hope you stick with me even when I take forever.

I won't waste everyone's time blah-blah-blahing about the craptasticness that is being unemployed/full-time-job-searcher and just say that I feel like I'm starting to get out of that funk where I want to do nothing but sit on my couch and wallow in misery, so let's hope that this wave of creativity is the first of many. As ever, thanks for sticking with me.

Enjoy.

~~ ** Lady Tuesday ** ~~

Chapter 23 The Common Whipping Knot

Common Whipping *The Common Whipping Knot* is the simplest type of whipping knot, a series of knots intended to stop a rope from unraveling. ... The benefit of a Common Whipping is that no tools are necessary and the rope does not need to be unlayed." From Wikipedia's List of Knots

For the first few moments after she woke up, Hermione was annoyed and baffled by the nagging ache between her thighs. She had just finished her monthly, so the fact that she felt as if she had stinging bruises in places she thought impossible to bruise alarmed her ... until she remembered.

Hermione sat up with a gasp and dropped her head into her upturned hands as snatches of memories dashed in front of her eyes. Snippets of the previous evening raced through her brain like a film strip on too high a speed *Harry's lips against hers, his mouth at her neck, her hands yanking his shirt tails free from his trousers* she shook her head to stop the images. Hermione took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and tried to summon a deep well of calm; remembering what she'd read about Occlumency back in their fifth year, back when she thought she might be able to help Harry learn, she breathed deeply and pictured an endless, vast lake under a starry sky. The Black Lake opened before her in her mind's eye, deep and still, with a sky full of winking points of light, and the warm glow of golden triangles of lamp light from Hogwarts' windows reflected in its surface. Calm and numbness came after a moment. It was the only thing that allowed her to rise, don a dressing gown over her rumpled skirt and blouse, and pick up her sponge bag to head to the prefects' bathroom.

As the water sluiced over Hermione's curls, plastering them to her face, her hard-won calm seemed to lift away with the steam. Her hands running over her body felt alien as she remembered that less than twelve hours ago, they had been replaced by someone else's.

Harry's hands, she remembered, were not much bigger than her own. Small but strong, his fingers had clasped at her tightly, excitedly, once his brain caught up with her intention and he realized where it was all taking them. Not five steps inside the door of the Room of Requirement, Hermione had torn her mouth away from Harry's to yelp in pain as she barked the back of her calf against one of the running boards of a large four-poster that dominated the small room. Harry took the opportunity to grip her beneath her buttocks and lift Hermione onto the bed. Despite her whirring thoughts, a helpless laugh escaped her at the mischievous look on Harry's face; it bubbled up into heady chuckles when he pulled back a step or two before "winding up" theatrically and diving on top of her. Their knees crashed together, feet still dangling off the side of the bed, as he levered himself up on his elbows to look down at her. Their smiles faded a bit, Harry's eyebrows pulling together.

"Are you sure about this, Hermione?" he had asked.

"Yes," she said quickly, leaning up to try to kiss him.

He turned his head so that her lips grazed his jaw instead. "Are you sure you want this with me?"

A little hiccup of surprise squeaked out of his throat as Hermione's lips had traveled from his jaw to a tender spot behind his ear lobe; the squeak turned to a groan as she clamped her lips over the spot and sucked his skin into her mouth. He hesitated for another moment, so Hermione brought up her right leg and used her knee and the length of her shin to gently chafe along the front of Harry's trousers. When she felt the concentrated heat and weight of his erection on the top of her instep, she flexed her foot, hooking in behind the rise of his testicles and pulling him forward into the triangle of her thighs. After that, they hadn't spoken again.

Hermione scrubbed at her face more harshly than her cleanser really called for as she remembered. Flashes of skin, mumbled words of encouragement, the stinging sensation of being opened and stretched when Harry thrust into her body for the first time. She heard in her head the hiccupping gasps of surprised pleasure in his voice, warm and moist on her ear as he hovered over her body. Her hands clutching at his shoulders as she tried not to let the pain show on her face. But he'd seen it; she'd been foolish to think he wouldn't.

Her cheeks heated in embarrassment as she lathered soap onto her skin, her hands running across her breasts and body as if trying to recreate Harry's gentle, determined motions when he pleaded for her to show him "how to make it better". Unable to stop herself from glancing around and then chiding herself mentally; had she really believed her shower had onlookers?! Hermione slowly slid her damp hands between her thighs, her fingers taking the same path that she'd shown Harry. She gasped a bit as her middle finger grazed her clitoris, remembering how it had felt to have someone else's touch on that sensitive place. Now, her face warmed for an entirely different reason.

She stroked gently, then faster, remembering the hitching gasps of Harry's breaths as he began to thrust in and out of her. The tingling began again, just as it had last night. She'd been overwhelmed by the heady surge of excitement at the idea of her thin, meager body giving someone else so much pleasure. His thrusts within her had gone erratic as his climaxed thundered down upon him. Her arousal had been chased away a bit in the stinging slaps of his lack of control, but Hermione remembered that she had smiled when he had lost himself within her. She'd taken proper precautions against pregnancy, she knew, so there was no need to worry on that score, and the whispered professions of love and satisfaction that had tumbled from Harry's lips, turned up in a small smile as she'd rolled to her side and pushed the sweaty tendrils of dark hair from his pale forehead, had convinced her in that moment that she'd done the right thing.

But as she stood in the shower, stroking between her thighs and biting her bottom lip to keep in a gasp of bliss, it wasn't Harry's round face and green eyes that she pictured above her in her mind. She shouted aloud in shock as much as completion when her mind had taken an unplanned diversion to show her thin, long-limbed fiancé plunging into her body with reckless abandon, his hair an ebony curtain than brushed her throat as it wavered from the force of his thrusts. Hermione had dived across the shower cubicle, tremors of her climax still causing her hands to shake as she glared at them, as if they were the ones who had betrayed her.

And that was when she knew how thoughtless, how unforgivably thoughtless, she'd been to think that sleeping with Harry was a good idea.

She had skipped dinner Monday night and breakfast that morning, holing herself up in her office and burying herself in more texts about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in an effort to chase away her memories and, if she were to be completely honest, to avoid Harry. Shame filled her throat every time she thought about it, and while Hermione knew that she'd have to have a talk with him about 'the incident' and *soon* she just couldn't bring herself to want to do it over lamb chops. Or, for that matter, oatmeal and chipolatas. But time was going to run out soon. She had just finished up her appointment with Neville and that meant she'd be seeing Harry in Defense Against the Dark Arts soon.

Hermione sighed heavily and looked at the brass and enamel clock on her mantel. *Almost time for class*, she thought. How in the world was she going to break this to him? It was going to be ghastly; she had no doubts about that.

When she knew that she could delay no more, Hermione snapped shut her research book, stowed her wand in an inner pocket of her robes, and swung her school bag over a shoulder. *Once more, into the breach*, she thought as her office door clicked shut behind her.

This was going to be even more difficult than she thought. Harry had taken the desk next to her in Defense Against the Dark Arts, just as he always had, but it seemed suddenly and unfortunately clear how close together the desks were when Harry brushed a hand over hers every time Tonks turned her back to the class. Trying not to be rude or throw up any unnecessary red flags, Hermione would allow the contact for a moment before gently pulling away. When he lifted a brow at her, Hermione was temporarily saved as she noticed that Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson were both attempting to appear as if they weren't watching everything Hermione and Harry were doing. She gave her best eyebrow semaphore to convey that they were being watched and tried to push her desk away from his as inconspicuously as possible.

"What's the matter with you?" Harry said under his breath as they packed up their bags and headed out the doors with the rest of the class.

Hermione cast her eyes in every direction she could without raising too much suspicion. "We have to be more careful, you know. There are..."

"Eyes everywhere?" Harry finished with a cheeky grin. "Taking a leaf out of Mad Eye's book, are we?"

"Well, yes, a bit!" Hermione said, a bit more stridently than she'd intended. She lowered her voice to a low mutter. "Pansy and Draco weren't the only ones watching us, you know. Lavender nudged Neville when you pushed my hair off my face. Even Tonks seemed to be inspecting us as we left!"

"So?" he rejoined, his frustration beginning to show in his voice. He attempted to take Hermione's hand with his and scowled at her when she shook him off. "What does it matter if they were looking at us? People look at me all the time!"

"Because Ron's just died!" she practically shouted.

Hermione dodged a few students, wending her way through crowds of students congregating around the top of the main staircase. Again, she dropped her voice to a hush.

"What conclusions do you think people will come to if they think we're shacking up just weeks after our best friend's death?!"

Harry's mouth dropped open in a moue of surprise; clearly, he had not even considered that particular interpretation. Hermione's throat nearly closed on her, so great was her shame. She'd barely considered it either. The excuse, such as it was, had just leapt into her mind that moment, and it made her even more mortified of her actions.

Hitching up her bag as they descended the last staircase into the main entrance hall, Hermione sniffed a bit haughtily and said, "I'm going down to the dungeons. I have to talk to Professor Snape about my Independent Study in Potions."

She had planned to do nothing of the sort, but she needed an escape. They were inching nearer and nearer to the talking to that she would have to give him, and she just didn't think she had the strength right now. Turning away from Harry, Hermione started down the staircase that led to the Potions dungeon and her fiancé's office.

"I'll come with you."

Hermione started to bite off a refusal, but the determined look on Harry's face stopped her. *Well*, she thought to herself, *at least if we have 'the talk' down in the dungeons, there will be less people to see the scene*. She sighed heavily and nodded as he caught up to her.

A long sigh left Severus's mouth as he navigated the back set of stairs down to the dungeons. The Dark Lord had 'requested' as much as a burning tattoo on the arm can be called a 'request' a most unusual daylight meeting and he had just finished relaying the contents to Dumbledore. He pinched the bridge of his nose as his feet traveled the well-known path, trying to relieve the tension headache he could already feel blooming behind his eyes.

The meeting, however, had been much more innocuous than he had planned. The Dark Lord had grilled him for thirty or forty minutes about the 'truth' behind his betrothal to Miss Granger, but had seemed satisfied with Severus's answers. You-Know-Who had certainly not cared for the information that Severus was to be subjected to a wand-binding a permanent bond to a Mudblood being unthinkable in his eyes but Severus had felt that the tidbit of the wedding ceremony that would garner his anger was much better (and safer) shared by Severus than being heard second-hand from another Death Eater. If the Dark Lord thought that Severus had concealed the detail purposefully, he would have been made to suffer. Greatly. Well, more than he already had.

As if triggered by the thought, a twinge in the muscles of Severus's shoulder blades made him stop and bite down over a groan. The Cruciatus never really became easier to bear, but at least he had a large pot of the muscle relaxant ointment in constant supply in both his office and his chambers. He would need to make time to rub some of it in before his next class or the never-ending onslaught of teenagers would be unbearable by the end of the day. Thinking of unbearable teenagers cast his thoughts inevitably towards his young fiancée, bringing an even heavier scowl to his face. That little chit had no idea the things he'd gone through just for her little fit of pique and

insistence on the damned Binding Charm, and yet, she still saw fit to berate him for his interpretation. The self-righteous little harpy.

As Severus neared his office, his footsteps slowed to a halt. He heard curiously familiar voices speaking in harsh, obviously agitated whispers in the seldom-used, dead-end hallway off to his left side. His interest piqued, Severus slipped into the shadowed corner of the crossing hallway and, from his secluded vantage point, sneered as he listened to the bickering.

"...don't see why you're making such a big deal about this, Hermione..."

"Because it *is* a big deal, Harry," he heard his fiancée say, her voice strained and weary. "It *should* be, anyhow."

"Yeah, and we've already done it once before, and you didn't have any objections then. In fact, you're the one who *insisted* on it. You..." Potter's voice broke and betrayed his insecurity. "You seemed to like it. Really like it."

Severus raised an eyebrow and leaned out from the shadows. They *couldn't* be referring to what seemed the obvious interpretation of that remark, and yet.... He had to see her face to confirm it.

He pushed away from the wall and crept towards the corner, just far enough to see their profiles; he immediately regretted it. Granger had her back to the cold stones, standing within the loose circle of Potter's arms around her waist. Despite the slight stiffness of her posture that spoke of her emotional state, there was a new and different timbre to their touch on one another that Severus had seen a thousand times. Feeling an abrupt squeeze of hot jealousy, Severus was forced to admit it: they reeked of a physical familiarity that was far more intimate than 'best mates.' Hermione reached out a hand to cradle Potter's cheek and Severus felt that squeeze of jealousy turn into a sharp jab.

"I *did* enjoy it, Harry," she said gently, "but I did it for all the wrong reasons. I did it because I was lonely and confused and upset and angry at Sev...Snape. And that's not fair to you, me, or Snape. You most of all."

"Fair to Snape?" Harry said incredulously. "With all he's put you through, you're worried about being fair to *Snape*?!"

"Yes," Hermione insisted. "Regardless of how he's treated me, he's still my future husband. I cheated on him once; I can't let it happen again."

"And you actually think he'll care?"

"That's not the point."

Hermione pushed away and paced the small hallway, oblivious to the fact that her fiancé lingered in the shadows, seething and resisting the urge to shout that he did care. It was hypocritical of him, he knew, because of the previous path of his thoughts. Despite all his better judgment, he cared very much; the stab of jealousy turned very quickly into livid anger. Once again, he'd been beaten to what was rightfully his by a damned Potter. Severus ground his teeth trying to keep his silence and listened on as Hermione worked herself into frustration.

"The only way this marriage will work between Snape and me is if we treat it with the same respect that anyone else would do when getting married. I can't control him, but I can control me. When you agree to marry someone, you promise them fidelity, among other things. I won't take that promise lightly any longer. More than that, Harry, it's incredibly unfair to you. Losing your virginity should be full of joy and tenderness..."

"It was..." Harry interjected, reaching for her. She skirted around him and paced on.

"But both parties should be doing it for the right reasons, and I wasn't. I never meant this to be a standing offer, Harry. It wasn't meant to... carry on," she finished lamely, looking at him with sorrowful, pleading eyes. "I decided that I wanted some control over who I gave this to, so I acted without considering how it would affect you."

"But I wanted to..."

"I know. And I abused that knowledge because I knew that it meant you wouldn't refuse me." Hermione pulled at her hair until her eyes watered, stung with her own disappointment and guilt. "For such a clever girl, I don't seem to understand my own actions until I'm faced with the consequences, do I? And that's why I can't let it happen again. Because in eleven days, I am going to be Mrs. Severus Snape. I can't continue to bash around pretending like that doesn't matter because it does. In so many different ways, it does."

Harry stared silently at the floor for a few long moments as he digested her words. Eventually, he moved away from the wall, his body rigid as his green eyes blazed with rage and pain.

"So what you're saying is that being allowed to make love with the girl I love is wrong because she's *sort of*, *almost* married to a man who will never like her, let alone respect or Meriin forbid love her."

"Harry, if I were engaged to any other person but him, you wouldn't even be questioning the need for fidelity. We wouldn't even be having this conv..."

"And even though we could be seizing these few short moments we have to be together in the time we have left," Harry steamrolled on as if he hadn't heard, "you can only sleep with me once, just long enough to scratch an itch, and then realize in hindsight that it was a bad idea. Maybe Ginny was right about you bouncing between me and Ron and Snape."

Hermione recoiled as if he'd slapped her face.

"Because you didn't really love Ron either, did you? Not romantically, anyhow, and I know you said you didn't know how you felt about me. But you would have told yourself it was marginally more acceptable to whore yourself out to Ron than Snape because Ron would have made up for it by loving i, even if you didn't love him back; so you would have told yourself it was okay to marry him, wouldn't you?"

Hermione bit her lip until it bled and tried to sniff back the flood of tears poised against her lashes. She knew that he was just angry and hurt he had every right to be so and that she deserved most of this backlash, but it didn't stop the words from stinging. Harry was her best mate and she loved him dearly; he didn't deserve the treatment she'd given him. Then again, she didn't deserve her situation either, but that didn't change it. Never *would* change it. So despite her instinct to rail against the accusations, she simply sniffled and swiped at her nose.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she managed eventually, her voice breaking with sobs. "I really am. I never meant to hurt you. I hope that you believe that, when you've had time to think about it."

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but seemed to think better of it. His jaw shut with an audible click before he spun on his heels and marched away from her. Severus thanked providence that Potter had chosen to leave the opposite direction, as there would have been no opportunity to hide, and he was certain that having his presence known to Potter would only have aggravated the situation. Scoffing to himself, Severus wasn't quite sure why he should care, but suspected it might have something to do with the miserable sniffing just ahead in the hallway.

Further confusing him, something in his throat constricted at the site that met his eye as he rounded the corner towards his office. Hermione slumped against the junction between the wall and the floor, huddled around her knees and sobbing as if the very last piece of her heart was irrevocably broken. By all accounts, Severus knew that he should be furious. Jealous and furious. Unleashing a tower of temper upon this pitiful creature who had the nerve to weep over a situation that she, herself, created.

He couldn't make himself do it.

Perhaps it was weakness, but he couldn't bring himself to point out that she had done it to herself. His pride and something else he loathed to examine still smarted at being so handily disregarded when her sentiment could rationalize away the ring he had put on her finger, but he was surprised as he felt his anger towards her dissipate. Severus had been struck by the fact that, despite her spectacularly foolish mental pyrotechnics that had led to her decision to shag Potter, she had immediately leapt to his defense and to the defense of a marriage that she neither wanted nor looked forward to in the slightest. She had defended his, *Snape's*, honor (such as it was) to her best friend and had been willing to risk the only major friendship she had left to set things right. Severus found himself struck dumb (and most unusually kind) by her gesture. So he decided not to whip her with the stupidity of her folly. Unfortunately, that left him completely adrift as to how to deal with the current situation.

He had come several steps into the hallway, so it was quite literally too late to turn back now. But as he picked his way closer to his weeping fiancée, he knew that he had no idea what to say to her. Years of being a reclusive and acerbic bastard had not equipped him for dealing with a hysterically sobbing female. Even a decade of being Head of Slytherin House left him a bit bereft on that score, as the younger ones that came to him in tears had problems that were far less awkward to discuss and much easier to solve, and the older ones had long since learned that Slytherins didn't weep over their problems but swallowed them until they found a way to turn the situation to their advantage. So the handful of steps he took towards her left him with no greater knowledge of what to say; being socially graceless had always seemed like an inconsequential detail before.

Still unsure that even approaching her would be a good idea, Severus felt that he may as well simply act on instinct than try to plan some flowery speech. She was a Gryffindor, after all; he would leave the effusive nonsense to her and her ilk. He opened his mouth, praying that whatever came out would be the right thing to say.

"Been diddling Mr. Potter then, have we? Unsurprising that it ended in tears."

Her head rocketed up from her knees and she glared daggers at him.

... *Perhaps not, then*, Severus thought to himself with a wince. He tried again.

"How fickle is woman."

Really not any better, old man.

"Don't," she hissed. "*Don't*. I really can't stomach your particular brand of bollocks right now, so if you can't say anything nice, then just turn around, stalk away like the great ugly bat you are, and leave me to be a broken whore in peace."

The word "ugly" skewered him; hers were the last set of lips that he'd ever expected to hear it from. But he took a deep breath, tamped down his inherent anger, and listened to the rest of the sentence. Then sighed and lowered himself to the ground next to her. A long moment passed as he leaned his back against the cold stones and her sobs trailed off to intermittent sniffing.

"You are not a whore," he said quietly.

"'Course I am," she said, drawing the back of her sleeve across her nose, snorting loudly enough to make Severus cringe. "Didn't you hear him? And he's right: I've thrown myself at every man I thought could make my situation better and never thought of anyone's welfare but my own. And now, sleeping with Harry was just the last str..."

"You are *not* a whore," he said again, this time forcefully enough to still her tongue and have her gazing at him in wonder.

The sight of the pale, heart-shaped face splotched with red and cut with tear tracks squeezed at him so much that he looked away from her. He found himself almost nauseous with it, an emotion that made him feel inexcusably weak. But he indulged it, indulged her, for a moment. Because she needed it so desperately.

"You are a very good person who has made a series of admittedly very poor choices." She huffed indignantly, which made him smile. "But you are not a whore. While I cannot say that what you did was right, or that anyone else would do the same as you have, you did the best you could with a situation that offered you not a single positive outcome. Some of your choices were poorer than others this most recent being a stunning example..."

Severus felt his own smile appear as the corner of her lips turned up in a rueful grin.

"...but that does not negate the fact that you are still a very good person." He waited a bit, smiled at the wall across from them. "Even for a Gryffindor."

She chuckled this time, outright, blinking harder against the still-leaking tears. After another long stretch of silence, she said, "You said I was a good person. 'A very good person.' That's what you said."

He turned back to regard her, an eyebrow raised practically to his hairline. "Have I been misinformed?"

She gazed down at her knees for a moment, picking at the stitches on her robes, then shook her head. "No, but ... well, that could almost sound like a compliment, sir."

"Imagine that," he answered.

He barely noticed when she scooted her bottom across the floor, closing the distance between them.

Granger's face turned back towards him and, in a raspy and hushed voice, asked, "Why are you being so nice to me?"

His lips quirked up again. "Well, you know. Shouldn't even kick a whore when she's down. It's not sporting."

She couldn't help it. She laughed. Loudly. Hermione knew that she probably should have been miffed at being called a whore so soon after his insistence to the contrary, but the tone of impish mischief in his voice and the lopsided quirk of his grin had her laughing out loud and leaning in to roughly bump her shoulder against his. With a few deep rumbles of laughter in his chest, he looped an arm around her shoulders, patting her arm with a long-fingered hand.

"You'll get through it all right," he said eventually.

"I hope so."

"And frankly," he said, with a tone of someone not quite considering what they were saying, "I wouldn't have wanted you to waste that on me anyway."

Hermione sat up very straight and watched him fixedly. "What do you mean? Wasted what on you?"

Severus stiffened. He hadn't meant to blurt that out; certainly, the thought had occurred inside his head, but he'd never had any intention of releasing it, and most definitely not to someone he still doubted he could trust.

"Wasted what on you, Severus?" she persisted.

It was the unprompted use of his given name that had him looking towards and then away from her, confessing his thoughts.

"Your virginity, of course."

Her intent gaze fixed on him convinced him that the short explanation would not do, so he clenched his jaw and forced out the words.

"I'm sure you can imagine how females must have responded to me in my youth," he started in a harsh, stilted voice. She nodded sadly but said nothing, so he continued. "Being that I've always had a resentful nature, you can also imagine my reaction, I'm sure. When I was a tad older, freshly out of school, and..." he stopped short, trying to think how to word the situation, "my loyalties were different than they are now..."

He looked at her briefly, watching as her brows furrowed and she nodded her comprehension. Severus couldn't help the discomfort that crept into his voice, being forced to admit this, one of his guiltiest secrets, to his soon-to-be wife.

"...I was suddenly flooded with rank and power, something I'd never enjoyed before. And enjoy it, I did. Unfortunately," he stopped again to clear his throat, "unfortunately, I used or more rightly, misused those first few months of heady power against those young girls who were now young women. I used the fact that I was now powerful and fearsome and vengeful to ram their snide comments right back down their throats. Often literally, and with more than just my fist or wand."

He couldn't look at her now, wouldn't admit to himself that he was afraid. He couldn't admit that he feared seeing a look of disgust on the face he could see just out of the corner of his eye, melting into surprise at his declaration.

"I..." he stumbled. "I ... forcibly separated more than one young woman from something which I can never give back. I would not have you fall into the same trap," he spat harshly. "No more women will unwillingly lose their innocence to me."

The silence in the hallway seemed complete, despite the bangs and shuffles and rumble of life in the main part of the school, several floors above their heads. Listening to her deep, even breaths was enough; he couldn't watch her expression slowly slide into disgust and hatred.

"How many?" she said in time. "How many women?"

Of course she would want to know. The Gryffindor needed to vindicate the abused.

"Twenty-two," he admitted stonily. Then, "The novelty of brutality and vengeance became hollow quite quickly, and I soon came to have a renowned distaste for it. But I can't..."

His voice broke, and he swore under his breath. When he regained himself, he stated, "I cannot have my wife occupy the same category as a year of teenaged, hated-filled revenge crusade."

She just nodded. *How could she sit through that declaration and just fucking nod?* his mind screamed.

Eventually, she spoke again. "Have you ever had sex with someone that you cared about? Or even ... I mean ... someone that didn't...wasn't..."

"Someone who consented, you mean?" he sneered.

"Someone you cared about," she repeated.

He stared at the wall across from them. "Once."

Another nod. Another long pause. "Then I guess we're even."

His training in Occlumency was all that allowed him to cover his shock at that statement with a single raised eyebrow. Even? He could spend the rest of his life as a saint, sacrificing himself every day to save idiots like Potter, and they would still never be *even*. The girl had probably never done a genuinely unpleasant thing in her life, and likely never would. And yet, she had just wiped away the second greatest failing of his life with a single swoop and declared them "even". She was either the most benevolent person he'd ever met or the simplest.

He just scoffed.

"Well," she said at length, but made no move to finish the sentence.

With a jolt, Severus realized that he had his arm around her. Not just looped in a casual gesture around her shoulders anymore, but somewhere between their bantered jokes and the confession of his sin, he had somehow managed to drape it across her back and underneath her right arm, his hand spread out over the robes at her stomach. If she leaned a few inches to her left, her head could have rested in the crook of his shoulder. It felt too ... familiar, all of a sudden. Too comfortable.

Jerkily, he removed the offending appendage and levered himself up from the floor. Severus started to extend a hand to help her off the floor as well, but felt a stroke of something strange lance through him when she reached up to take the proffered fingers, so he made to pull his hand back. Her cinnamon eyes fixed on his dark ones, Hermione clasped the hand just starting to disappear back into the folds of his robe and pulled herself up. She was standing close to him now. Too close.

Walk away, Severus. Walk away now.

He bent his face down to hover only mere inches from hers. He watched as her pupils dilated and her breathing sped up. Her lips dropped open.

"Your indiscretion is forgiven, Granger," he said smoothly, "but understand one thing: I am neither a generous man nor a particularly altruistic one."

She looked surprised, then disappointed, then raised an eyebrow in question. He leaned so close to her that he could feel her exhaled breath on his lips.

"If Potter ever again touches you on any part of your body between your knees and your armpits I don't care if it's covered by seven layers of wool and steel understand that he will lose the offending body part that touched you. And to you, I won't be *half* so kind. I. Do not. Share."

Feeling finally righted, Severus spun on his heel and begun to walk back to his office, his face settling into familiar lines as his heartbeat returned to normal. Just before he turned the corner, he heard her answer him.

"Jealous, are we?"

"Greedy," he called back with a smirk, then shut his office door with a decisive snap.

A/N - Okay, so I know that my choice Harry/Hermione sex probably wasn't super popular and that she seems to have "gotten off easy" where Sev is concerned, but have faith. It's not the last you'll see of that issue. Also, did anyone else "snerk" when they read the knot description about being "unlaid"? I totally did. And some of you probably are now that I've mentioned it. ^_^

As always, thanks for following along.