

# Marriage by Numbers

*by sunny33*

Hermione is back at Hogwarts for her seventh year. Voldemort is dead, and life should be good. That is, until the results of her special Arithmancy Project provide some unwelcome realisations for the Potions master.

## Prologue

*Chapter 1 of 23*

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### PROLOGUE

"Allpress, Jennifer!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the Sorting Hat. The Hufflepuff table cheered and applauded as they welcomed their new housemate.

"Bachop, Lucy!"

"RAVENCLAW!" The nervous girl likewise joined her table.

"Billings, Henry... Brocklehurst, Rachel... Cameron, Amy... Crabbe, Emily... Cuthbert, Steven..." The list went on as the Sorting Ceremony proceeded with an unsurprisingly even division of names amongst the four houses. Hermione Granger sat at the Gryffindor table, seemingly transfixed by the ceremony, which by now was as familiar as the beam on Pomona Sprout's face as she watched her newest charges relaxing at their table.

The reluctantly famous teenager had returned to Hogwarts with the rest of the Golden Trio, the Defence Against the Dark Arts N.E.W.T. alone having been granted by the Ministry in recognition of their hard-won skills during the war. All the other subjects required for their career paths would have to be earned in the usual manner. The new Headmistress, Minerva McGonagall, had created a unique 'adult' class for the Trio and any others whose final year had been impaired by the war. Draco Malfoy, whose family had been closely examined and grudgingly exonerated by the Wizengamot after their actions in the final battle; Neville Longbottom, whose grandmother had insisted he repeat his 'ruined' seventh year; and a much wiser and more serious Lavender Brown were among the small group of battle-hardened young people determined to make the most of their year.

Hermione had taken out a piece of parchment and quill and was furiously taking notes as the Sorting Ceremony concluded and the headmistress gave her first welcoming speech. Rolling their eyes, Ron Weasley and Harry Potter turned their attention to the food which had appeared on their table.

"Brilliant!" exclaimed Ron. "The house-elves have really outdone themselves this year!" The boys fell to their food with the enthusiasm of teenage boys everywhere. Months of hardship in the tent had given them a renewed appreciation of the bounty before them.

Once the meal was over, the staffing changes were announced, and the usual start-of-term notices dealt with. The boys turned to Hermione, who had packed up her gear and was hurriedly grabbing some food before the tables were magically cleared. "Oi, Hermione. What was so important that you nearly missed eating dinner?" Ron asked.

"Just planning my Arithmancy project," she replied vaguely. "Had to get a few ideas down while they were fresh in my mind. Now, what was that about the staff? Who is teaching Potions this year?"

The indefatigable heroes of the war groaned simultaneously. "Snape. Not only did he manage to survive after all and avoid Azkaban, thanks to Harry's testimony, he is back as Potions master. Rumour has it, even he has had quite enough of the Dark Arts. Not that I blame him. But, although he was shown to be on our side all along, he was *still* the meanest git of a teacher we ever had, and I don't suppose any number of Orders of Merlin will change that," Ron complained.

"It's Professor Snape, Ronald. He may not be the nicest teacher around, but he is still a teacher, and as a supposedly *adult* student, I suggest you show some respect," Hermione responded tartly. "So, who is taking Defence?"

"Some new guy I've never heard of. His name was... now, what was it? That's it, Weasley. William, I think it was..." Harry grinned as his friend whacked his arm.

"Bill? Our Bill? Or at least Ron's Bill? But I didn't see him at the staff table. And why didn't you say anything, Ron?"

"That's because he doesn't arrive until tomorrow, and it was a surprise. He made me promise not to tell." Ron laughed at her expression. "Just as well we don't have to take Defence. Wouldn't want anyone accusing him of favouritism. He is also the new Head of Gryffindor house, now that Professor McGonagall is headmistress." He shook his head. "If you had been paying attention, Hermione, you would have heard all that."

The three made their way to the new quarters in the West Tower they shared with the other adult students. The headmistress had decided they needed to be housed together so as not to disrupt the younger students. They had been given a lot more freedom in deference to their age, with no curfew, free access to Hogsmeade as long as they advised their staff mentor, and freedom to drink alcohol in the privacy of their own quarters. Headmistress McGonagall had told them in no uncertain terms that the privileges would be immediately rescinded if they were caught intoxicated, providing alcohol to younger students, or otherwise disrupting the discipline of the school.

"So, has anyone heard who our staff mentor is supposed to be?" Ron asked as they gave their password to the ancient wizard who inhabited their entrance portrait.

"Professor Snape, I believe," replied Hermione. "I overheard Professor McGonagall talking to him about it in the Great Hall shortly after we arrived. Sounds like with the reduced numbers in Slytherin this year, especially in the sixth and seventh years, he has been given us to look after as well. He did *not* sound particularly impressed."

"Good. With any luck, he will leave us to our own devices," muttered Harry.

"Only if we keep our heads down and don't cause trouble," Hermione said with a pointed look at her two companions.

"Don't look at us; we have had enough excitement over the last few years to keep us going. I can truthfully say I am looking forward to studying this year. Maybe I can set up a study group or something... What?" Ron's attempt to look serious and mature failed miserably in the face of his friends' disbelief.

"I know. We can have a special lesson from Hermione on how to organise our quills and ink... just so!" Harry suggested as he meticulously placed imaginary quills on an invisible desk.

"Or a tutorial on how to find something in the library that isn't about Quidditch. I heard a rumour that there *are* other books in there... somewhere." Ron doubled over in laughter as Hermione sighed and shook her head.

"Boys!" Abandoning any attempt at understanding the male psyche, she turned to examine their quarters. The common room was spacious, with comfortable armchairs and couches placed before a wide hearth, and two large study tables across the room. They each had their own, albeit small, bedchamber, with two bathrooms to share. The girls claimed the larger bathroom immediately, citing a greater need for space for their personal grooming. The boys wisely did not argue.

And thus started another year at Hogwarts. Uneventfully, or so it seemed.

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Prompt: 1. Something Old. The Marriage Law Challenge.

## Chapter One: Time to Face the Facts

*Chapter 2 of 23*

Hermione is back at Hogwarts for her seventh year. Voldemort is dead, and life should be good. That is, until the results of her special Arithmancy Project provide some unwelcome realisations for the Potions master.

### Chapter One: Time to Face the Facts

"Professor McGonagall, may I see you after dinner, please?" Careful timing had ensured she met the headmistress on the way into the Great Hall.

"Certainly, Miss Granger. I will expect you at six-thirty," the older witch replied, curiosity flaring at her student's request.

"Thank you. That'll be perfect." As she joined her classmates, Hermione patted her bag, ensuring the carefully penned roll of parchment was safe. Reassured, she lost herself in the spirited conversation about post-war summer activities that was taking place.

Despite the horrors of the final battle, the relief and long sought after peace of mind found after Tom Riddle's demise had enabled most of the young participants to move on, albeit with a few disturbed nights along the way. Hermione had spent hours at the Burrow and Grimmauld Place with Harry and the Weasleys until their shared tears had washed away the worst of the pain. Once everyone had begun to pick up the threads of lives put on hold, she had Portkeyed to Australia to undertake the difficult task of returning her parents' memories. Ron and Harry had offered to accompany her, but she had felt her responsibility keenly and had known it was her penance alone.

Fortunately, after the initial shock, they had come to realise she had had no other choice and had acted out of love. Forgiveness had been accompanied by many hugs and tears, this time of happiness. She had spent the remainder of the summer reacquainting herself with her family and crossing off a few items on her 'Things I Have Not Done Yet' list.

"So, Hermione, what *did* you do in Australia?" asked Ron as he buttered his third roll.

"I told you. Sat around in the sun, drank rum and coke, and met the locals. I went water-skiing, snorkelling, saw all sorts of strange animals and fish, and Dad treated me to

a bungee-jump when we visited Cairns. It was amazing!"

"What is a bungee-jump?" Neville's pure-blood background held no concept of adventure sports.

"You climb up a tall tower, have a long elastic cord tied to your ankles, and jump off. The cord is designed to stop you hitting the ground or water below so you bounce up just before you hit. It's a real buzz. I did it three times!" She grinned at the appalled look on her friends' faces.

"But you hate heights. You won't even fly a broom unless you absolutely have to," said a bemused Harry.

"I hate flying on brooms. Horrid, unstable things. Buckbeak and the thestrals were not much better. But I'm not afraid of heights as such. Bungee-jumping is straight up and down, and I knew it would be safe because I watched everyone else do it first," she explained.

"Didn't you have enough of dangerous activities last year?" Ginny shook her head in awe.

"But this time I chose to do it just for fun," Hermione replied.

"I don't think I will ever understand you, Hermione Granger," muttered Ron.

"And that's why we will never be more than friends." She gently patted his hand.

"Just as well," added Harry. "He would never cope with your idea of fun. Whatever happened to the old, careful, 'books are my friends,' Mione?"

"She grew up and decided life was meant to be lived. After all, didn't we spend years fighting for the right to live how we choose?" she retorted spiritedly. Hermione was still a dreadful swot, but she was determined to be a dreadful swot who knew fun when it hit her in the face.

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Hermione stood before the gargoyle at the base of the stairs to the headmistress's office and spoke the password. "Robbie Burns!" No one had ever suspected that Minerva McGonagall was a poetry buff.

"Ah. Come in, Hermione. Would you care for a cup of tea?" The headmistress was happy to relax formalities in the privacy of her office for her favourite student.

"That would be lovely, thanks."

"Now, what can I do for you?" the older woman asked once they had seated themselves comfortably, delicate china cups gently steaming in their hands.

"I wonder if I may have access to the school's current and prospective enrolment records for my independent Arithmancy research project. Professor Vector has approved of my study hypothesis as long as you are happy to authorise my access to the data I will require. I am willing to take a Wand Oath to maintain confidentiality of the information, of course," she explained earnestly.

"Just what is this research you have planned, my dear?"

"Well..."

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Hermione's steps were light as she made her way back to her room some time later. After a full explanation of her project had satisfied Minerva McGonagall as to its value, she had been granted open access to any records she needed. They were not to be removed from the headmistress's office, and she was only allowed to work on them in Professor McGonagall's presence, but neither condition bothered her. Having the older woman there to field any questions was a bonus she hadn't expected. They had set up regular times for her research, which was to commence the following week.

Otherwise, the first few weeks of term had been predictable. Charms was unenlightening, mostly covering skills she had taught herself the previous year. Transfiguration with the new professor from France was a little different, but hardly provided a challenge except in understanding Professor le Blanc's accent. Herbology was a pleasant change of pace, and Ancient Runes remained fascinating. Potions was... Potions. Snape was mostly his usual surly, caustic self, only now he took points off all four houses with so little discrimination that even Ron was heard to mutter, "It's just not right. He should allow his own house a little leeway. What's the point of having a Head of House if he doesn't cut you some slack?"

At least Potions was interesting, and she had had no opportunity to practice her Potions skills whilst camping out in the tent. Snape even spent a little time discussing the various applications of the day's potion now and how it could be modified to enhance the efficacy. He almost seemed to enjoy teaching in the rare times he forgot to be miserable and allowed the man who had written the side notes in the Half-blood Prince's book to surface. She studied him at times and wondered what he would have been like as a teacher if his life had taken a different turn. *Probably still a right grumpy bastard* she decided.

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Three months later

### **Independent Arithmancy Research Project Hermione Granger**

**TOPIC:** *The declining ratio of wizards to witches in the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry intake.*

**INTRODUCTION:** *It has become apparent to this student that each year the number of wizards relative to witches in the first year intake has decreased. My intention was to determine if this is a true trend and to extrapolate this to future years, using current and prospective enrolment records. With this information gathered, I plan to demonstrate Arithmatically my proposed solution to the imbalance...*

Minerva McGonagall read on for some time and then looked up at the young witch before her. "Merlin. You were correct. Down to twenty-five percent wizards this year, and no-one else had noticed. Ten percent in five years, according to the list we have so far. What on earth is happening?"

"As you can see, Professor, my investigations show a distinct trend. I looked at parental ages and found that wizards under forty-five years of age are three times more likely to produce male offspring, but as they age they father more female children. During Voldemort's first reign of power in the 1970s, the young men of that generation suffered a lot of losses on both sides during the raids, and more decided to put off starting families until later. It fell to the older men, who were less involved in the fighting, to continue with their family lives, as can be shown by the ages of the fathers of the new entrants over the last decade or so. The year I started was the last year when there were equal numbers of witches and wizards in first year. You can see the average age of first-years' fathers has gradually increased along with the proportion of witches in each year." She pointed out an Arithmatically derived curve showing the correlation of the two trends. A further projection, which was the key to her project, demonstrated the figures for her alarming conclusion.

*My calculations and projections have shown that, unless the current cohort of twenty to forty-five-year-old wizards do not start families within the next few years, there is every likelihood the numbers of male children born will drop below the critical figure needed to continue the existence of the magical population. We need to strongly encourage wizards between twenty-five and forty-five years of age to marry immediately, and those between eighteen and twenty-five to marry within three years and start families to have any chance to redeem the situation.*

"Oh, my. Are you sure of these figures, Hermione?" The headmistress removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes as if to erase the damning facts.

"I have run the numbers against every sort of Arithmantic calculation I can find. There is no doubt; unless these younger wizards get a move on, we may be looking at

extinction of our kind in Britain within decades. I have made some preliminary inquiries, and it appears there is a similar pattern appearing in Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. Hopefully, America has not been so affected, but I suspect that will not help us here."

"This is extremely important work you have done, my dear. It needs to be brought to the attention of the authorities as soon as possible. May I send a copy of your conclusions to the Minister of Magic once Professor Vector has graded it?"

"Of course, Professor."

Little did either woman know, their naïve faith in the current Ministry's wisdom was about to be shattered. Despite the repercussions of ignoring the evidence of Voldemort's return, the Ministry remained an unwieldy, arrogant institution, which remained out of touch with the community it served. Kingsley Shacklebolt, whilst a man of integrity, was finding the reins of power unwieldy and delegated far more than was wise. The simple matter of a worrying report done by a Hogwarts student was passed onto the Department of Magical Population, which for once acted promptly. Hermione's conclusions were passed as law within one month of the report being sent to the Ministry.

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*The Daily Prophet: 5th January 1999*

### **HEROINE OF THE FINAL BATTLE SAVES WIZARDING COMMUNITY ONCE AGAIN**

*Miss Hermione Granger, Order of Merlin, Second Class, has once again proven her value to the Wizarding community. Her work on Hogwarts enrolment statistics has demonstrated a significant risk to the world as we know it. The new Marriage Law, passed today by the Department of Magical Population and detailed on page seven, is a direct result of Miss Granger's research. Furthermore...*

Hermione quickly flipped the pages to find the information on the new law, which had been passed without objection by the suddenly efficient Ministry. She suspected that few people had been aware of the full implications of the law as it was rushed into being.

### **MARRIAGE LAW PASSED BY MINISTRY**

*As of midnight tonight, all unmarried wizards aged twenty-five to forty-five must make themselves available for petitioning for marriage by any witch in sound reproductive health between the ages of eighteen and fifty. The wizard will have a period of one month to decide which petition to accept and show evidence of marriage, or, in the event of no petitions being received, the Ministry will allocate a suitable witch from a pool of volunteers. Wizards between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five will have three years to accept a petition.*

*In all cases, it is expected that every effort be made to produce offspring within the first year of marriage; this latter requirement will be enforced by means of monitoring to ensure regular sexual congress and no use of contraceptive measures.*

*There will be no exceptions to this law; the future of the Wizarding world is at risk*

"Holy Merlin. What have I done?" Hermione looked up at the sudden silence in the Great Hall to find all eyes on her. As the momentary lull burst into a cacophony of noise, her eyes found the enraged face of her Potions professor. *Oh, fuck. Snape is thirty-eight. I'm so dead.*

"Hermione? Hermione! What the hell were you thinking?"

She turned to meet the astounded faces of her housemates.

"What makes you think we want to get married and have bloody kids before we are twenty-two?" shouted Ron. Nods of agreement from most of the other older Gryffindor males confirmed their opinion of the new law. The girls were not particularly impressed either; after all, it affected them as well. Harry alone was undisturbed. Everyone knew he and Ginny were planning to marry as soon as they finished school. Knowing Harry's desire for his own family, children would be following soon afterwards.

"I... I..." She did not know what to say. It was her fault, even though she had not personally been responsible for the draconian new law. "I simply discovered the trend. The Ministry acted upon it." She knew her fellow students would not understand. Once a know-it-all, always a know-it-all. Her propensity for excessive swotting had not endeared her to any but her closest friends, and even they were unhappy with the result of her endeavours. Deep inside, she knew her findings were as important as the *Daily Prophet* had claimed, and something had to be done. The fact that her recommendations had been reborn as legislation was unfortunate, but would provide the solution. She just hoped the wizards affected would eventually understand their vital role in saving their community and embrace it as enthusiastically as they had fought the late, unlamented Tom Riddle.

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Prompt: 1. Something Old. The Marriage Law Challenge. Many thanks to karelia for the beta.

## **Chapter Two: A Nudge in the Right Direction**

*Chapter 3 of 23*

Hermione is back at Hogwarts for her seventh year. Voldemort is dead, and life should be good. That is, until the results of her special Arithmancy Project provide some unwelcome realisations for the Potions master.

### **Chapter Two: A Nudge in the Right Direction**

Hermione spent the next week avoiding the glares of her fellow students. Even Ron and Neville had been aloof. Ginny and Harry alone offered support, their unique position allowing them to understand the disaster which would have unfolded had she not acted upon her suspicions at the beginning of the school year. She kept her head down in class and only answered questions when she was called upon for fear of drawing her classmates' attention. The Potions master had been particularly vitriolic, and for once no-one bristled with indignation as she was berated time after time.

"Miss Granger, with your supposed brilliance with numbers, I would have thought you could measure those black beetle eyes more accurately. The instructions call for eight and a half eyes, not nine. Nine points from Gryffindor for carelessness," he snarled as he Vanished her potion, recording a fail once again for the class.

She knew the instructions had read eight and a half to nine eyes, but conveniently the latter part had disappeared from the blackboard. Sighing, she packed up her Potions

kit and sat quietly awaiting the end of the class. Snape had returned to his desk and started marking the essays they had turned in earlier. Looking up, he met her eyes and scowled as he scrawled an obvious D on some poor student's essay. *Probably mine*, she thought. She studied his face once he returned his attention to the parchment on his desk. *He looks more drawn than usual tired and stressed. Not that he ever looks relaxed.*

Her mind turned to more pleasant thoughts. One thing she hadn't mentioned to her friends about her summer in Australia was a heated, month-long fling with a sun-kissed Muggle surfer, which had given her some much-needed stress relief and finally delivered her of her burdensome virginity, one of the items on her list. The things she had learned under his skilled hands...

"Miss Granger, unless you wish to stay here for a detention I suggest you wipe that ridiculous expression off your face and leave this classroom." Her reverie was interrupted by Snape, jolting her back into her unwelcome present.

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In the absence of friendly conversation directed her way, Hermione spent her time during dinner thinking about her Potions master's behaviour. She had not spent years fighting Death Eaters, hunting Horcruxes, and finally helping defeat an evil megalomaniac, to let one sour ex-spy get to her. It was time to face the serpent in his nest. Resolutely, she strode down to the dungeons half an hour after dinner and knocked on Severus Snape's office door.

"Enter!" His brusque command was accompanied by the door opening. The dark wizard looked up with his trademark sneer. "Miss Granger. Just what I needed. What have you brought to plague me with this time? An inquisition into my wardrobe?"

The days of scathing comments from the man in front of her and pointed remarks from her peers finally coalesced with this jibe into a rarely displayed red-hot temper. Throwing caution to the winds, she looked him in the eye and replied, "Just what *is* your problem, Professor? Is it the fact that I dared to question the declining number of wizards arriving at Hogwarts, or that you personally are expected to assist in saving the Wizarding world from extinction? Would you prefer I had ignored the statistics and went on my way, naively hoping something miraculous would occur, rather than disturb your self-imposed, miserable existence? I don't understand why you are so irritated by this. Presumably you would have met someone sooner or later. This just gives you a nudge in the right direction."

"A nudge?" His expression was dire. "You call *these*, a nudge?" Throwing down a handful of parchments, he slumped into his chair and gazed broodingly at the fire as she opened them.

"Sybill Trelawney, Dolores Umbridge... Millicent *Bulstrode*? Surely you have received some more suitable offers?" she gasped.

"From whom? It may have escaped your notice, but most of the witches in this country under the age of thirty-five have been my students. Who would desire marriage with me after having been in my classes? And to top that, my Death Eater past is not exactly enticing." He sighed, body sagging in resignation. "Miss Granger, just for once, could you *not* have shared your knowledge with all and sundry? I was quite content leading a solitary life."

"Merlin knows I am sorry you have been put in this situation, Professor. But I stand by my findings. Something does need to be done. As usual, the Ministry of Magic has taken a mere suggestion and turned it into a senseless, draconian law, and I realise now that was to be expected. Idiots, all of them! However, it does not change the fact that the law now exists, and *you* need to find a wife."

"What? Volunteering, are you?" he asked sardonically.

Hermione stared at him as his words sunk in. Of course. Not only had she been directly responsible for his invidious position, but she genuinely believed that she, of all people, should take her part in averting the crisis. She had always wanted a career, but she could see now with the extended life span of witches and wizards, childrearing could come first, leaving plenty of time to pursue a career after, if not during, the process.

"You are *brilliant!*" she exclaimed as she grabbed a piece of parchment and began scribbling. Handing it over to the astonished wizard, she grinned.

"Don't mock me, Miss Granger," Snape growled dangerously as he read her petition for his hand in marriage.

"No. I am serious. Why not? I have no other interests, and, quite frankly, the boys my age are so immature. Besides, if it doesn't work out we can quietly divorce and get on with lives once the law is repealed, as it is sure to be."

Snape stood suddenly and stalked over, backing her into the wall. "Be careful what you wish for, Miss Granger. Have you forgotten the intent of the law? Procreation. Sexual congress. I have no desire to take the innocence of anyone, least of all one of my students," he spat.

"That is all very noble, Professor, but have *you* forgotten the alternatives? Besides, I am no innocent, so you needn't be concerned about that."

"You *wish* to be touched intimately by one of your professors?"

"I *wish* you would stop worrying about that side of things. It's only sex. It is 1999, not 1899, for goodness sake. Anyone would think YOU were the virgin..." Hermione stopped prodding his chest as she realised his cheeks were a little flushed. Incredulously, she murmured, "You are, aren't you? And you are bloody terrified. Oh, Professor, it is nothing to be ashamed of and certainly nothing to fear." She stared after him sadly as he turned on his heel without a word and escaped through the door to his quarters. *No wonder you expect no-one decent will offer for you. No-one ever has.*

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Upon arriving back at her room, Hermione threw her robes onto the bed and sighed. She had really created a mess. What on earth had possessed her to petition for her professor's hand? What would she do if he accepted?

"So. Just what did you say to him?"

Hermione jumped. Turning, she found Ginny Weasley sitting on the chair behind the door.

"What are you doing in here, Gin?" she asked.

"Waiting for you. I saw you take off after dinner towards the dungeons, and Harry told me how badly Snape has been treating you since last week. Now, spill. What happened?" The redhead was just as formidable as her mother when it came to getting answers, and she was not about to leave without them.

The older girl crumpled. Sitting on the bed, she lowered her head to her hands and wailed. "Oh, Ginny, you don't know what I've just done!"

"What? What did you do? Call him out for harassing you?"

"Worse." She swallowed. It would come out soon, anyway. "I... I... petitioned for him."

"You did WHAT? Why?" Ginny narrowed her eyes. "You haven't been harbouring a crush on him?"

"No. Nothing like that. I knew he was furious about the new Marriage Law and blamed me, so I went there to try and explain. But then he showed me..." She shook her head as she tried to find the words.

"What? What did he show you?"

"His petitions. From Trelawney, Umbridge, and Millicent Bulstrode."

Ginny gasped. "Oh, Merlin, the poor man. Even I wouldn't like to see him stuck with any of those three."

"I know. Let's face it, who else is going to petition for him? He's not exactly popular, despite being proven to be on the side of the light during the war. I couldn't see any other solution. It's my fault he's in this situation, after all."

"But, Hermione. Marrying him? Children... that would mean... ewww!" Ginny paled.

"That was his objection. He was horrified at the thought of being forced to have sex with a student. I told him it was no big deal nowadays, but he..."

"Hermione! Think about it. The man is a probably a bloody virgin. Of course he would be horrified," Ginny chided.

"But... How do you know that?"

"Like I said, think about it. He was the unpopular, greasy kid at school, and early on he fixated on Harry's mum. Remember the memories he gave Harry. He was in love with Lily for twenty years. He didn't have any other relationships. And as a spy, do you really think he would frequent those places in Knockturn Alley and risk blowing his cover?" Ginny explained matter-of-factly.

"He still could have had someone at school before he became obsessed with Lily."

"No. I overheard Hestia Jones talking to Bill about it at home once a few years ago. They were speculating about his experience don't ask me *why* and she said she was at school with him. It was well known he was the only seventh-year who 'didn't get laid' before he left. Bill started Hogwarts the year Snape started teaching, and he didn't remember any women ever being seen with him."

"That doesn't mean anything. He could have slipped out to see someone, or over the summer..." Hermione persisted, but deep down she knew Ginny was correct. The look on Snape's face earlier had confirmed it.

"Either way, he is certainly not very experienced. Imagine how he feels, knowing he will have to perform for some witch whether he likes it or not within a few weeks?" Ginny giggled. "Do you think he even knows what to do?"

"Don't be daft. He's a male." Hermione gave in and imagined Professor Severus Snape faced with something he did not know. "If all else fails, he could read a book." Her face dropped. "Oh gods, Gin. What have I done?"

Her friend threw her arms around her and hugged her tightly. "He may not accept your petition. You may be a little too scary!"

"Compared with the other options, I suspect I may be the least scary. Ginny, what shall I do?"

"Buy a damned good sex book?"

Hermione couldn't help it. She succumbed to fits of laughter. It was either laugh or cry.

"Do you think he would be good, once he figured out the basics?" Ginny asked later as they shared some ice cream smuggled in from the kitchens.

"Hmm. Well, he has those long, skilled fingers," Hermione mused.

"And that silky voice," Ginny added

"Mmm. That could be a definite asset used on something other than deducting house points."

"Madam Snape. Ten points off Gryffindor for improper use of my wand."

"Ginny! That's... that's..." Hermione spluttered.

"Ahhh! Mmmm! Yesss! Two hundred points to Gryffindor!" Ginny continued.

"Oh my god! Stop it! You're killing me!" Hermione collapsed onto the bed incapable of any further coherent conversation.

After a few minutes, the two turned to each other. "You know what they say about..." Ginny started.

"... noses," Hermione completed.

"Oh yes!" they said together.

"Hey, that's my potential fiancé's bits you are imagining. Cut it out!" Hermione scolded.

"He's no-one's fiancé yet," Ginny retorted. "Perhaps I should...?"

"Sure. Give Harry another reason to hate him. He's only just getting over the fact that Snape loved his mother."

"No. You are right. I shouldn't even joke about it," Ginny sobered. "You are OK, aren't you, Hermione? It is Snape, after all. Marriage is a big step."

"I know. Crazy though it seems, I'm not too worried. He may be a surly, sarcastic bastard, but he has had good reason to be since we have known him. He is intelligent, powerful, and actually quite witty sometimes. I just need to find a way to direct that sarcasm elsewhere. He has shown himself to be loyal, brave, and capable of great love. I know, I know." She waved Ginny's warnings aside. "I don't expect it would be a marriage of love, but many marriages of convenience work in their own peculiar way. I'm just saying it may not be as awful as it sounds, once we get past the initial... twenty years or so."

"That's providing you don't hex each other first." Ginny smiled. "I still think you are being terribly brave, offering to rescue him from those awful witches."

"It's no more than he has done for us over the last few years," Hermione replied thoughtfully.

"True."

"Just don't tell the boys yet. Let's wait until he decides one way or the other."

"Er. I'm not telling them anything. That's your job! Imagine what they will say when they find out you will be having sex with Professor Snape."

"I don't know why everyone makes such a big deal about sex, anyway. It is fun and feels good. You all have fun and feel good when you play Quidditch, don't you?"

"Yes. But, Hermione, sex is so... intimate. You have to get naked and *touch* each other and stuff. You would have to do that with *Snape*," Ginny reminded her, screwing up her face.

"True. I didn't have any trouble doing it with Jason, though, and he was almost a complete stranger. Merlin, that sounds so slutty. I was just ready, I suppose. I think if you are in the mood, and you are physically attracted, it doesn't matter if it's not some grand romantic gesture. You know I'm no romantic, anyway, Gin."

"But wouldn't it be so much better if it was with the man you loved." Ginny closed her eyes and smiled dreamily.

"Don't be such a sap, Ginny," Hermione teased, then said seriously, "Of course, it would be better with all that deeper feeling involved. I'm just saying it is not essential to be in love to enjoy sex."

"But Snape isn't all that attractive, despite the hands and the voice, and not exactly a pleasant personality. How will you get past *that* and enjoy yourself? You know, the teeth, the hair, the snark..." Ginny shuddered.

"I agree that superficially he is no pin-up boy. The hair... well, if I complained about that it would be case of the pot calling the kettle black, wouldn't it, with this bush on *my* head? He can't help oily hair any more than I can help dry, frizzy hair. Mind you, he is a Potions master, maybe with a little encouragement... And his teeth look awful, but as far as I can tell his breath is not offensive, and he has been looming over me often enough lately to tell. Once again, my teeth weren't much better when I was younger; they only improved because I cheated when Madam Pomfrey fixed them after that hex from Malfoy. As far as his body goes, it doesn't look too bad, what little I have glimpsed under his robes."

"So, it's just his obnoxious personality you have to deal with. Good luck with that!" Ginny giggled.

"Perhaps I should just use a Silencing charm in bed. That'll fix him," Hermione countered. "I'm more concerned about actually having to live with him. If he is as surly and difficult in private as he is in class, I think I would be spending most of my time back here. Which is all very well until the end of the year, but then what?"

"By then, you will have tamed him, I'm sure. Just keep him happy in bed and throw him a book or two you'll be fine," Ginny teased. "But, Hermione, what happens if you meet someone else later and fall desperately in love? What happens if *he* meets someone else?"

"I know divorce is frowned upon, but it is not impossible. And by then, hopefully the Ministry will have revised the law. I see this as a marriage of convenience, but if it works out, so much the better. If it doesn't, well, we can cross that bridge when we come to it," Hermione replied.

"And if you have children by then?"

Hermione's face fell. "I know. I'm hoping we can avoid that until we have decided whether we can make a marriage work. We are supposed to start *trying* immediately, and they will monitor whether we are using any Potions or Charms, but I have these." She took out a packet of Muggle contraceptive pills from her drawer. "I doubt they can track them, as they are totally non-magical."

Ginny smirked. "You really should have been in Slytherin, Hermione. That's just devious!"

Hermione grinned. "But what Slytherin would resort to Muggle medicine?"

"I still think you must have been a little crazy to even offer like that," Ginny remarked.

"You think... I *know!* It just sort of happened before I even thought about it. That man just drives me to distraction sometimes."

The younger witch studied her friend thoughtfully. "You know, this may just work out."

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Prompt: 1. Something Old. The Marriage Law Challenge. Many thanks to karelia for the beta.

## Chapter Three: A Rock and a Hard Place

Chapter 4 of 23

Hermione is back at Hogwarts for her seventh year. Voldemort is dead, and life should be good. That is, until the results of her special Arithmancy Project provide some unwelcome realisations for the Potions master.

### Chapter Three: A Rock and a Hard Place.

Hermione entered the Potions classroom the next day with trepidation. Unsure how the Potions master would react after their conversation the evening before, she busied herself at her desk and avoided eye contact with the man. Once her potion was under way, she surreptitiously glanced up at the front desk to find Snape watching her. His mocking eyebrow sent a blush racing to her cheeks and her hands reaching for the next ingredient. It became obvious as the class proceeded that he was avoiding her as he prowled around the classroom, much to her chagrin. With no way to tell whether he was considering her offer or highly offended at her presumptuousness, her faith in the soundness of her impulsive petition was eroding minute by minute.

Handing in her completed potion, Hermione was startled when Snape briefly touched her hand and murmured, "My office, this evening, eight o'clock."

She nodded briefly and left, unsure of what to think. Was he planning to accept her petition or cast it aside and take his chances with the others? She snorted at the thought of Snape walking arm-in-arm with Dolores Umbridge. If nothing else, she had a duty to prevent the travesty of having *that* woman back at Hogwarts.

"So, what happened in Potions?" Ginny whispered as she seated herself beside Hermione at lunch.

Hermione explained what had happened. They both discreetly checked out the staff table where Snape was involved in a discussion with Professor Flitwick, back obviously turned away from Sybill Trelawney who had, for once, made an appearance.

"Looks like she is trying to stake a claim," giggled Ginny.

"And not getting very far," replied Hermione. Looking over at the Slytherin table, she saw Millicent Bulstrode eyeing up the Divination professor with a scowl. "Just as well Bulstrode doesn't know I am competition as well; I wouldn't like to run into her in a dark corridor."

"Oh, tosh! You can out-hex that hippo with your eyes closed and your hands tied behind your back," Ginny declared. "I can't see how he can choose anyone but you,

Hermione. I think you have really done it now."

"Unless he gets a better offer," her friend answered.

That afternoon in her free period, Hermione used all she knew about the Potions master to run some Arithmantic calculations on the likelihood of a successful marriage. To her surprise, she and Snape were rather well matched, far more so than when she tried Harry, Ron, and Neville's names for comparison. That was, of course, unless he had some weird kink she was unaware of or strange, mad relatives tucked away somewhere, or... She shook her head. Best not to think about it too hard.

At least Ron had started talking to her again. He had suddenly realised he was getting all sorts of attention from girls that he had not had before, and, to him, three years was an eternity. He was planning to enjoy the benefits of the new Marriage Law and worry about the down side in three years time. Boys. They were so fickle.

Hermione spent the rest of the day immersed in her classes, having pushed all thoughts of Snape and marriage firmly to the back of her mind with an admonition to stay put and not cause any distraction. It was only marginally successful.

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Two minutes to eight came and found Hermione poised outside Snape's office door, ready to knock.

"Enter!"

She opened the door with a quizzical look on her face. Snape smirked a little as he looked up. "You are so predictable, Miss Granger."

Disgruntled, she briefly scowled in his direction and baldly stated, "You wanted to see me *sir*?"

Several minutes passed as he finished marking the essay in front of him. Placing the quill carefully on the desk, he met her gaze and simply said, "Yes."

"Yes? Yes, what?" She was confused.

"Surely, Miss Granger, you have not forgotten already? Yes. Much against my better judgement, but in view of the unconscionable alternatives, yes, I will accept your offer. But with certain provisos."

She sighed with a relief that surprised her in its intensity and then frowned as she caught the last of his sentence. "Provisos?"

"Yes, Miss Granger. Provisos. Conditions. Small print, as it were." He steepled his fingers together as he gazed at her seriously.

"What are they?"

"Firstly, you will continue to live in your current room. I will not have a teenage witch's belongings cluttering up my living quarters. Secondly, marital relations," he said this last with disdain, "will only occur when absolutely necessary to fulfil the obligations foisted upon us by the Ministry. Thirdly, there will be no fancy wedding. This is an unfortunate necessity, not a celebration. Fourthly, I will not treat you any differently and expect you to address me as Professor Snape in class. It would not do to have discipline suffer." He stood and began to gather up the pile of essays from his desk as if to dismiss her.

Hermione bristled, her pride offended. "Just one moment, Severus Snape. Unless you wish to discover the delights of Dolores Umbridge's body, I suggest you think again. Firstly, if we marry, I *will* live with my husband and share his bed. I will not be subject to the gossip living apart would create. Secondly, sex *will* occur, and you *will* enjoy it. Get over it; it is likely to happen often. There has to be some advantage in this arrangement, even if it is only physical pleasure." She smirked at his shocked expression. "Thirdly, well, actually, I quite agree about the wedding; I always thought they were overrated. Lastly, I *will* address my husband by his first name, or any other name I choose, in class or out of it. The other students will just have to get used to it, Sevvie, *dear*."

They stood and glared at each other for long moments. Hermione thought at first she had pushed the stressed wizard too far, but Snape finally lowered his gaze and ground out, "Fine. Have it your way. I was trying to make it easier for both of us."

"Trying to make the marriage work would be easier for both of us," she replied gently, almost flinching at the stunned look on his face as he looked up at her words. "It doesn't have to be a bad thing, you know."

"Well. That will no doubt become clear one way or the other in due course. Now, we have to inform the headmistress," he replied.

"Oh, fuck," she muttered as he swept past her.

"Language, Miss Granger."

"That's Hermione to you," she retorted tartly. She could have sworn she heard a muffled snort from the man walking in front of her. *Perhaps he has a sense of humour after all. It just may take a little excavating to find it.*

Trailing the Potions master by several yards, Hermione contemplated his reaction to her show of temper. It was the first time she had ever seen him back down in a confrontation. Filing that piece of information away in the *Ways to Manage Snape* compartment newly installed in her brain, she hurried to catch up.

As they entered the headmistress's office, Snape murmured, "Let me do the talking."

Hermione was more than happy to let her new fiancé take the lead in that particular conversation.

"Good evening, Severus, and... Hermione?" The headmistress looked a little startled. "What can I do for you?" she asked as she waved them into the comfortable chairs beside the fireplace and seated herself.

Snape cleared his throat and began. "Minerva, as you are aware, Miss Granger here has managed to create chaos once again with her latest project." He ignored the filthy look his bride-to-be threw his way. "Chaos in which I have found myself embroiled."

"Yes. The new Marriage Law. I am aware that it affects you, Severus, and rather more immediately than any of the students here. However, Miss Granger is not to be held accountable," she warned in her most formidable tone. "She merely brought the problem to the notice of the Ministry. Their reaction was entirely their own decision."

He brushed her explanations aside with a wave of his hand. "Be that as it may, the fact remains I now have four petitions for marriage, of which three are totally unacceptable. I have come here this evening to advise you of my choice."

"I appreciate you wishing to keep me informed, Severus. But what has this to do with Miss Granger?" Minerva asked.

"Firstly, you need to know the names of the other petitioners. Millicent Bulstrode."

Minerva frowned. "That would be highly unsuitable, Severus."

"Indeed. Sybill Trelawney."

"Poor Sybill, she has rather fancied you for years. But, no, I can see why you do not wish to entertain her for a bride."



"Umbridge," he spat.

"Never! That woman is not getting her claws into you, Severus, even if I have to marry you myself!" The headmistress's lips drew into a fine line of disapproval. "So, who is the fourth? Surely, someone more acceptable?" She looked at Snape and then at Hermione, eyes widening as she finally realised the implication of the latter's presence.

"Unfortunately, Minerva, you are a little outside of the Ministry's preferred age range. However, to my great *relief*, Miss Granger has seen fit to put herself forward as a potential bride." He steadied Minerva as she swayed a little.

"Oh, my goodness gracious. Hermione? What have you done, girl?"

Hermione looked her Head of House in the eye. "Only what you yourself offered just a moment ago, Professor. I could no more condemn Severus to marriage with any of the other three than you could."

"Severus?"

"Yes, Severus. He is my fiancé now. I hardly think it would be appropriate to be referring to him as Professor Snape." The girl stood tall and straight, unwilling to back down now the decision had been made.

"Well. Appropriateness has certainly flown out the window. Hermione, you realise you will have to consummate this marriage?" The older woman's concern was genuine.

"Yes, of course. I have no problem with that," she reassured.

"I, however, do," added the man in question. "You must realise, Minerva, the idea of bedding a student is something I would normally never consider. The thought is repugnant."

Minerva smiled faintly at her colleague. "Yes, I am well aware of your high moral standards, Severus, but she will be your wife, and as this whole affair has been brought about to comply with the Ministry's own law, they can hardly have any issue regarding your relative statuses at this school. I would suggest, however, that Hermione's work is graded by an external expert, to avoid any complaints of favouritism."

Hermione snorted. "I doubt that would ever be an issue, but I can see some people may not agree." She noticed the headmistress's worried look in Snape's direction. "Don't worry, Professor. I'll be gentle with him. I have had some experience."

"I don't imagine a few fumbings in dark corners with Weasley would count for much," Snape sneered when Minerva was distracted by the arrival of a house-elf to clear the tea things.

"Ron? I admit, we tried to have a relationship, but it was just uncomfortable. He is too much like a brother to me."

"Potter, then?" Snape's curiosity overcame his desire to avoid the subject. Just where had the girl obtained her experience?

"Harry is Ginny's. She would kill me if I went near him. No, it was a Muggle boy I met in Australia over the summer. Just a summer fling. I learned a lot." She smiled mischievously at Snape as an idea blossomed. "I'm sure with a little practice, you could keep up." Leaning across him, she whispered a few suggestions in his ear.

His cheeks stained red as she then ran her hand deliberately down his chest and abdomen under cover of her own robes and brushed the promising bulge she discovered in his pants.

"Best you learn how to use that," she murmured, sitting back in her own seat as Minerva turned back to the conversation.

Snape stared at her, disbelief sweeping across his face at her impertinence. The witch had *touched* him. Voluntarily.

The headmistress appeared satisfied. "Well, Severus, it appears you may have met your match"

"Quite," he replied, adjusting his trousers discreetly.

"Now, we need to organise the date of your wedding. Or will it be a full Wizarding binding?" She bustled about her desk, gathering parchment and quills.

"A binding is more permanent, isn't it?" Hermione asked, the siren replaced by the irrepressible know-it-all.

"Yes. A binding is a magical procedure which is irreversible. The witch and wizard are joined for life." Minerva smiled at the thought.

"I don't think that is appropriate," Snape interrupted. "A basic exchange of vows will suffice."

"I agree," added Hermione. "Let's keep this as simple as possible. Now, you have until the fifth of February to get married." She delved into her bag and found her schedule. "Does the thirtieth of January suit you, Severus?"

He frowned and shook his head. "That is the date for the Slytherin versus Gryffindor Quidditch match. I would need to be available to watch my house that evening."

"Then it will have to be the twenty-third," she announced briskly. "Who do we need to ask to perform the ceremony?"

"We do not have any choice," her fiancé snarled. "A Ministry official has to preside, presumably to cast the monitoring charms to ensure we are performing as required." The last words dripped with disdain; the invasion of their privacy an anathema to the reserved wizard.

"Well, I suggest we give them plenty to think about." She grinned wickedly. "They will soon get bored if we are shagging like bunnies all the time."

Snape groaned, his mortification at Hermione's words evident once again in his flushed face. Minerva covered hers with her hands, trying hard not to laugh at her Potions master's discomfort. He really did need a good witch to sort him out, and it looked like he was about to get one.

"I shall inform the Ministry," said Minerva once she had regained her composure. "I presume this office will be suitable for the ceremony?"

"It will be adequate," Snape replied.

"I suggest you two take the opportunity over the intervening time to meet and become better acquainted. In less than two weeks, you will be living together. Perhaps a discussion or two on expectations would be in order," Minerva recommended. "Will Severus's current quarters fulfil your needs, Hermione?"

Hermione was tempted, but refrained from rolling her eyes. "As I have not yet seen his private rooms, I cannot possibly comment, Professor."

"Then, Severus should take you there now, and while you are there, perhaps you can set up a time to meet again."

"Certainly, Headmistress," Snape replied sardonically. "Come, Miss Granger, it appears we have *adate* to arrange."

# Chapter Four: Homework

*Chapter 5 of 23*

Hermione is back at Hogwarts for her seventh year. Voldemort is dead, and life should be good. That is, until the results of her special Arithmancy Project provide some unwelcome realisations for the Potions master.

## Chapter Four: Homework

Hermione scowled as Snape stalked off down the halls several yards ahead of her once again. Surely, showing her his private rooms was not that great an imposition? She was going to be living there in less than two weeks. Perhaps she had gone a little too far, teasing him in front of the headmistress, but he had been such a prude she had not been able to resist.

Eventually, they arrived back at his office. He passed his hand over the wall behind his desk to reveal another door, which opened into a generously sized sitting room. Unsurprisingly, the room was dominated by many bookshelves with a comfortable sofa and two armchairs by the fireplace providing the necessary seating. Hermione stifled a giggle as she realised why he had been so put out when Minerva had ordered him to show her his rooms. The upholstery on the furniture was red. Pure, Gryffindor red. The rest of the room was decorated in soft greens with a little red also seen in the rugs.

"Go on. Say it. I know you are thinking it," he growled.

She couldn't help herself. "Red? The Slytherin Head of House has red furniture?" She collapsed onto the sofa unable to stop laughing.

"I'm pleased I have provided some amusement. I like red. The colour. I don't like Gryffindors. Especially those who roll all over my furniture with unseemly displays of mirth at my expense. And if this ever gets out..."

"Oh, I'm not breathing a word about this to anyone. Besides, I like red too, and if I told anyone you would no doubt change it immediately after hexing me into tiny little pieces."

"You had better believe it, woman! Now, if you can contain yourself for long enough, I will show you the rest."

"Is there any more red? Because if there is, I might need a moment."

He turned on his heel and opened the nearest door. Within, she found his bedroom. Their bedroom soon. Swallowing hard at the reality she confronted, Hermione inspected the bed. Large, soft, and no red. Pity, it looked quite inviting otherwise. The thick, sage green quilt and matching bed curtains looked warm and cosy. A fire burned merrily in the grate, and woollen rugs covered the stone floor. Two wardrobes and more bookshelves graced the walls, full of enough books to make her inner bookworm drool. There was another door leading to a large bathroom, complete with bathtub, shower, toilet, and a hand basin. All in all, the facilities were more than adequate.

"These rooms are lovely, Severus." She turned and caught him watching her with a peculiar expression. Awareness. She flushed a little as she realised they were in the bedroom. The room where she and the man before her would consummate their marriage. Well, there and anywhere else that took their fancy, depending on how adventurous they became. Shaking her head to clear the sudden influx of curiously appealing images, Hermione returned to the sitting room and made herself comfortable on the sofa.

"Severus? Have I done the right thing?" she asked softly.

"You have done the Gryffindor thing, Miss Granger. Whether it is the right thing, I do not know." He sighed as he sat beside her. "Despite my resentment of the whole Marriage Law fiasco, I do appreciate your sacrifice. I realise marriage to someone like me was hardly something that was on your, no doubt well-organised, to-do list. I hope we can salvage some sort of life for you out of this whole mess. There are sure to be difficult times, and I expect there will be arguments, but know this I will never harm you."

"I have always known you would never harm any of us physically. But what about emotionally?" she asked, compassionate brown eyes fixing on strained black.

"That, I cannot answer," he replied.

Together, they sat and watched the flames in the hearth dance lower, contemplating their shared future until it was time for him to escort her back to her room.

Late that night, Severus Snape found the oblivion of sleep had cruelly abandoned him. His mind refused to settle; the iniquitous situation in which he had found himself plaguing his conscience while at the same time arousing his long-buried libido. Who was this intriguing girl no, woman to whom he was now betrothed? No longer the irritating know-it-all with bushy hair and prominent teeth of her early school years, this young woman was attractive, intelligent, assertive, and had shown him the compassion he had been denied for years.

She was apparently no longer afraid of him and insisted on talking about sex as if it were no more significant than learning how to fly a broom. A student still, and yet she blithely brushed aside his protests at the impropriety of being intimate with him, a professor. Moreover, she did not seem physically repelled by him. How could that be?

After unexpectedly surviving the snakebite, he had reluctantly returned to Hogwarts for the comforting sameness of teaching Potions to the uninspired and ungrateful. It had required no planning, no vision for the future, no self-assessment. Finding some small pleasure in teaching now he did not have to constantly watch his back was a bonus he had barely admitted to himself, let alone to others. Just as life had appeared to be settling into a relatively peaceful existence, Miss Granger had turned it all upside-down.

Snape sighed, sure of one thing alone Hermione Granger was no longer a mere student.

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The next morning, Hermione awoke to a loud banging in her door. Ginny bounced in as she opened it, eager to find out what had occurred the night before.

"Well?" The redhead could barely contain her curiosity. "Yes or no?"

Hermione grinned despite herself. "Ginevra Weasley, meet the future Mrs Severus Snape!"

Both girls squealed and danced around the room. Hermione slumped onto the bed after a few minutes and asked her friend, "Why are we so excited?"

Ginny laughed. "I have no idea. It's still Snape, after all, but an engagement is an engagement. You shouldn't be cheated of your moment of excitement just because of the circumstances. I'm assuming the wedding will be fairly quiet."

Hermione took the opportunity to fill Ginny in on most of the previous evening's events, including their visit to the headmistress. If she was taking on Severus Snape as a husband, she was damned if she was going to do it without a confidante. She refrained from mentioning the red furnishings, however. She was not that foolish.

"You realise, Ginny, I will have to swear you to secrecy. Anything I tell you about Severus must not be repeated, even to Harry," she said earnestly.

"Severus?" Ginny squealed again. "I can't believe you just called him that."

"Well, like I said, he wasn't too happy about it at first, but he seems to be getting used to it. He still insists on calling me 'Miss Granger'." She sighed. "I just wish he would get rid of that enormous stick he has up his arse about sex. I can't seem to stop myself from teasing him about it."

"You go, girl. Don't let him throw his weight around. So, when are you going to tell the rest of the school?"

"Oh, not until after the wedding. I can just imagine the gossip now. I'd rather be married and have the wedding night over before anyone else knows."

"The wedding night. What are you going to do about that?" Ginny asked.

"What? His lack of experience?"

Ginny nodded.

"I think I know just what to do..."

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The large, brown owl squawked indignantly as it dropped a brown paper parcel beside Hermione's breakfast plate two days later. Ginny grinned conspiratorially as she tucked the package, unopened, into her bag.

"Oi, Hermione! What's in the package then?" asked Ron.

"Just a book," she replied.

"Oh. Typical." He continued his breakfast and conversation with Lavender, no longer interested.

She noticed Snape's suspicious stare and smiled disarmingly in his direction. He would find out soon enough.

Potions that day was an interesting experience. Busily dicing flobberworms for the day's assignment, Hermione jumped and almost cut herself as a smooth voice murmured in her ear, "Make sure they are perfect cubes, Miss Granger."

Scowling, she leaned back and whispered. "I know how to handle soft, moist things, Severus. Do you?"

A soft snort confirmed she had scored. However, Harry's puzzled look pulled her up short. She shook her head slightly and replaced her triumphant smile with a look of exasperation. Her friend smiled sympathetically and carried on with his work.

Later that evening, she gathered up her new book, with several chapters carefully marked, and made her way down to Snape's dungeon office for their scheduled meeting. Using the password he had provided, she entered with a soft knock to advise him of her presence.

Intrigued, she looked around the empty office. It was unlike him to leave his office unattended, although she was a little early. She approached the door behind his desk which was slightly ajar and debated inviting herself in. The knowledge that she would be living there within weeks took her through the door, to find her fiancé just emerging from the bedroom, hair damp from the shower and clad only in a small towel slung low around his waist.

"Oh. The door was open. I just thought..." Her words failed as she took in the sight of Snape's near-naked body. Blushing, she turned away.

"Whatever is the matter, Miss Granger? I would have thought a woman of your much-vaunted experience would barely bat an eyelid at the sight of a man's body. Don't tell me you have suddenly turned shy," he sneered, the taunt belied by his equally red cheeks.

She turned and deliberately cast her appreciative gaze over his exposed skin. Lean, but well defined musculature; pale, smooth skin with a light scattering of black hair on his chest; an enticing line trailing down from his navel to disappear beneath the towel; strong thighs, and narrow, nicely shaped feet. As I expected, not too bad. "I was just a little surprised. I'm sure I will see it all, and more, soon enough."

"Well, I hope you can contain yourself until then, my dear bride-to-be, because I am going to get dressed. I presume you know how to order tea from the kitchens?"

She did not fail to notice the slight tremor of his hand as he returned to the bedroom. The Potions master was not as comfortable with his bare body as he had seemed. Smirking, she ordered the tea and made herself at home in one of the armchairs by the fire with one of his many books. Living here may have definite advantages.

Snape lifted an eyebrow when he returned, fully clad and composure regained, to find her ensconced in his chair. "Staking out your territory already, Miss Granger?" he asked as he poured the tea.

"It seemed... necessary," she replied.

"Indeed."

After a few minutes stilted small talk about mutual interests, of which there were surprisingly many, and a consensual rant about the idiocy of the Ministry, Snape finally asked, "The book. Why?"

She handed it over. "I presume I was correct about your... lack of experience?"

He nodded, cheeks stained red again as he read the title. The Joy of Sex. "What exactly is this for?" he growled.

"Homework. Yours," she announced.

"You assume too much, Miss Granger." He stood abruptly and stalked over to the drinks cabinet, pouring himself a good measure of Firewhisky.

"I assume you need education in this subject. You are to read the book, paying particular attention to the marked chapters. I expect three feet of parchment on foreplay and the female sexual response before the wedding." She lifted her chin as he stared at her incredulously. "And you will be graded."

"Are you serious, Miss Granger? You want me to research sex?" he expostulated as he returned to his seat.

"Why not? Sex is like any other skill. The basics can be learned in theory, and then you put them into practice. I fully intend to enjoy the fruits of your research." Her eyes lit up mischievously as she reached forward and ran a finger along his jaw. "And I also look forward to learning more with you."

Snape swallowed hard and leapt to his feet again. Hermione chuckled at his discomfort. She had decided the key to success in her marriage was to keep her wizard off-balance. It was working admirably so far.

"Yes. Well, perhaps the idea is not lacking in merit. I may consider reading the book." He carefully placed it on a nearby table. "Is there anything else you wish to inflict upon me?" His icy tone advised her to phrase her next request with tact.

"Um. I wondered if... perhaps..." She faltered, unsure how he would react.

"What?" he asked impatiently.

"Could we? I mean, it would be nice if..." She stood and moved closer to him.

"Spit it out, woman."

She leaned forward and reached around to draw his head towards hers. A fleeting widening of his eyes was swiftly hidden by his lids as her lips met his in a brief, chaste kiss.

"What did you do that for?" he asked as he drew back, clearly shaken.

"I just wanted to see what it was like to kiss you," she answered. "Can we try again?"

Disbelief faded as he realised she really did want to kiss him again. Their lips met awkwardly at first, as if their mouths did not know what was expected. Relaxing into the feel of warm, soft, willing lips on his, Snape opened his mouth a little, allowing his fiancée's questing tongue entrance. The shocking intimacy of her actions unleashed a breathtakingly urgent response from his body. Pushing her away before she could once again feel the shameful evidence of his errant libido, he lowered his head to hide behind his hair.

"Why stop? It was just getting interesting," she complained.

"Too interesting," he muttered almost inaudibly. "I am not a new toy to be experimented with. It is time you returned to your room, Miss Granger."

"Chicken!"

Swinging her hips as she left the room, she turned and blew a kiss over her shoulder. Snape flicked his wand and looked innocent as she clapped her hand over a suddenly stinging backside. Sexually inexperienced perhaps, but he still knew a few tricks.

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Prompt: 1. Something Old. The Marriage Law Challenge. Many thanks to karelia for the beta.

## Chapter Five: Confrontation

Chapter 6 of 23

Hermione is back at Hogwarts for her seventh year. Voldemort is dead, and life should be good. That is, until the results of her special Arithmancy Project provide some unwelcome realisations for the Potions master.

### Chapter Five: Confrontation

Exactly three days later, Hermione received her Potions homework assignment back complete with an extra five feet of parchment covered with Snape's distinctive script. *Bloody over-achieving, know-it-all smart-arse.* Carefully stowing the roll of parchment in her bag before anyone else noticed its thickness, she pointedly ignored the smug, black eyes and irritating eyebrow directed her way and went about her brewing. As she handed in her usual, perfect potion at the end of the lesson, Snape's slight smile inexplicably left her breathless.

"What's wrong with Snape?" Harry asked as soon as they had left the classroom. "I'm sure I saw him *smile* at you. Was your homework only as long as requested for once?"

"No idea. Perhaps he has wind," she replied vaguely and headed off up the stairs.

"Wind?" Harry shook his head. Girls were so... weird.

Hermione warded her door when she reached her room and took out her fiancé's homework. Before her, beautifully itemised and with *diagrams*, was a lengthy and detailed dissertation on foreplay and the female sexual response. There was no doubt he had read the material and understood the theory. The question was could he put it into practice? Smirking to herself, she found some red ink and scratched an 'E' at the top of the parchment along with a scathing comment on long-windedness. Her need for revenge fulfilled, she stretched out on her bed and found herself imagining Severus Snape practising that which he had so eloquently written. Her breath quickened as her mind took her places it had no right to stray, visions of a naked and increasingly alluring dark wizard with competent hands and mouth leaving her flushed and panting.

Returning to her senses, the young witch realised her previously set goal of a tolerable, compatible marriage had been completely upended. No, she wanted more. Much more. Suddenly, she realised she might just find it in the long-fingered hands and sensual voice of her irritable, sarcastic fiancé.

A knock on the door had her leaping off the bed, frantically looking for a hiding place. The Potions professor's handwriting was particularly memorable to any student who had suffered his red-inked scorn. It would not do to have anyone recognising the author of the highly detailed essay on sex she held in her hand. Finally shoving the parchment under her mattress, she opened the door to find Ginny waiting impatiently outside.

"Any news? How was Potions today?" she asked, eyes darting around the room.

"Oh, stop pretending and just ask outright, Gin. Yes, he has done his homework." Hermione sighed. Trying to put Ginevra Weasley off the hunt would be like trying to put her brother off food. "Here." She pulled the roll of parchment out and gave it to her friend.

Ginny made herself comfortable on the bed and studied the essay. "Hermione! You *graded* it? And..." She read the comments and giggled. "That is so fitting. He always

complains about your essays being too long."

"That's why he wrote so much. Payback." Hermione grinned. At least he had some sense of humour, warped as it was.

Ginny's eyes widened as she read through the essay. "Oh, my... Oh, my! I didn't know *that!* Oh, goodness, do people really...?"

"Yes, Ginny. They do," Hermione assured the redhead.

"So, you and Snape are going to...?" Ginny had to ask.

"Probably. Why not?" The older witch shrugged.

"With your mouths? There? I mean, sex is one thing, but licking Snape's..." She shuddered.

"Oh, come off it. He will be my *husband*. Married couples do it all the time. Non-married couples do it. Casual acquaintances do it. As I said to him, it is 1999, not 1899! Besides, I've tried it. With Jason. It was very... er... stimulating, seeing his reaction. I'm sure it will be the same with Severus."

"Oh, dear. I'm pleased you lot have a separate class. I will never be able to look him in the eye in the Potions classroom again!" Ginny blushed.

"You will *not* be imagining my husband that way in class. Or out of class. Or anywhere else, for that matter, Ginevra Weasley," Hermione scolded.

"Perhaps, I will have to start imagining Harry instead," Ginny mused, lying back on the bed with a smile.

"Ginny, have you and Harry never...?"

"Merlin, no! He has a bigger stick up his arse about sex than Snape! He's quite happy to snog all night, but if my hand so much as strays near his thigh, he suddenly finds an excuse to go for a walk. I'm sure he thinks I haven't noticed the bulge in his pants and is worried I might feel something I shouldn't! I haven't even seen him naked. And, Hermione, I *really* want to see him naked!"

Hermione smiled in sympathy, pleased to find she wasn't the only girl with a repressed male to cope with. "He is probably worried your mother will find out. She is pretty scary, you know."

"Tell me about it. She's the best form of contraception a girl can have. But we are both of age now, so why shouldn't we have sex if we both want to? We are planning to marry eventually anyway," Ginny complained.

"Perhaps she is just old-fashioned?"

"Rubbish. I know for a fact she and Dad were having sex before they got married. Bill was born in November. They were married in May the same year! She simply doesn't want me to *make the same mistake* she did. Just because she didn't use contraceptive charms... What's so funny?" she asked as her friend suddenly giggled uncontrollably.

"Harry is scared of your mother. He offed Voldemort, but he is scared of your mother. You realise if we had set your mum on Voldemort, we could have saved ourselves all that trouble!" Tears of laughter ran down their cheeks as they imagined a fierce Molly Weasley facing off against Mr Evil Incarnate.

"Oh, my. That would have been a sight. You're right. It's no wonder Harry is so nervous. Won't stop me trying, though. One day, he will get carried away and give in to my womanly wiles. I might have to read that book of yours when your fiancé has finished with it to get some tips."

"Just don't tell Ron you have been getting ideas from me!" Both girls collapsed in fits of laughter, imagining the expression on Ron's face if he ever found out his sister had been having lewd thoughts about his best friend. Not that Ron didn't know how Ginny felt about Harry, he just didn't want to know any details. Hermione had no illusions as to his reaction when he found out she was married to Severus Snape. It would not be pretty.

"So, do you think an 'E' was a fair grade?"

"Well, he seems to have covered the material thoroughly, and those diagrams are fairly comprehensive. I'm surprised you didn't give him an 'O'."

"He will have to demonstrate outstanding *practical* application of his knowledge to obtain that grade."

Once again, the two girls were overcome.

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"Where have you two been?" Harry asked as Hermione and Ginny sat down for dinner some time later.

"Oh, just going over homework," Hermione replied. The girls' eyes met, and they dissolved into laughter yet again. The puzzled stares of their companions only added fuel to the fire of their mirth.

"What is so funny about homework? My homework is never funny. Confusing... impossible... frustrating... but never *funny!*" whined Ron.

"I guess you had to be there." Ginny nudged her friend under the table and tipped her head towards the staff table where Snape was glaring in their direction.

Hermione turned to her fiancé, smiled, and winked. The satisfying blush as he turned away was worth the risk.

"Hermione!" Ginny whispered reprovingly.

"Worked, didn't it?" she answered with a grin.

"Just because those boys are usually totally oblivious to what goes on around them while they are eating doesn't mean you can go winking at Snape. Someone will notice. Or worse, Bill will think you are winking at him!" She indicated her brother, who was sitting next to Snape and staring in Hermione's direction with a bemused smile.

"OK, OK. No more winking. Let's eat." Hermione giggled and filled her plate. The rest of the meal passed uneventfully as food took precedence over teasing the man she was to marry.

The group of chattering Gryffindors made their way back to their common room after dinner, Ginny and Harry arm-in-arm, Ron enthusiastically entertaining Lavender and Parvati with tales of his latest Quidditch escapades, and the rest in twos or threes, leaving Hermione trailing behind.

Suddenly, she felt a strong hand reach around her waist and pull her into a darkened classroom. The faint yet distinctive scent of the Potions classroom alerted her mind to her assailant's identity, and the lean, hard body behind her reminded her senses of his masculinity. Letting herself relax into his arms briefly, she sighed as he abruptly released her and moved away.

"Oh. That's a shame. I thought you had suddenly taken the initiative," she teased.

"Very amusing, Miss Granger. I am not generally inclined to abduct students in the corridors and take them into dark corners to have my wicked way with them," her fiancé

responded, lips almost betraying him with a slight smile.

"Pity. You could do with the practice," she retorted with a cheeky grin.

His hands raked his frustration through his hair. "The only witch I will be practising with can wait until she is married," he growled; his ability to hide his turbulent emotions behind a cloak of indifference seemingly void in the presence of the wild-haired vixen before him.

"Spoilsport. I could think of all sorts of *practice* exercises for you to do." She smiled sweetly at the Potions master. Seeing the dour man standing before her, unusually bereft of his emotional armour, she took pity upon him. "So why *did* you drag me in here?"

With a shake, he resumed his professorial persona. "What exactly were you and the Weasley chit up to at dinner?" he demanded.

"Just having a little fun," she replied, innocence personified.

"That little bit of fun had better not be at my expense. I will not tolerate disrespect from you or anyone else!"

Hermione moved towards him until they were separated by mere inches of thick, heated air. "Homework is always fun, don't you think, *sir*?" She swiftly reached up and kissed him on the cheek and, before he could react, turned and ran out of the room.

Severus Snape, lost for words, sank down onto a nearby desk. His hand strayed to his cheek as he murmured softly, "Indeed, Miss Granger."

---

Potions on Thursday began uneventfully. Snape burst through the door with his characteristic swirl of robes, and with a flick of his wand, the instructions for the day were on the board. The class set to work, and soon the only sounds were of gentle stirring, rhythmic chopping, and the soft simmering of the various cauldrons in the room. The professor loomed over students' shoulders and glared at their brews, which, for him, was perfectly normal behaviour.

Suddenly, a startled yelp caught his attention as Ron Weasley found his potion about to boil over. Whipping out his wand, Snape prevented disaster, or at least a large mess, by *Evanescō*'ing the lurid, purple mixture.

"Just what did you think you were doing, Mr Weasley? Do you think you are so skilled at potion making that you no longer need to follow the instructions? What was the last ingredient you added, boy?"

Ron paled before the older wizard's wrath. "Mayfly wings, sir."

"And do you see mayfly *wings* anywhere on the list of ingredients, Mr Weasley?" Snape demanded.

The redhead studied the blackboard intently. "Er... No, sir. I must have misread the instructions. See, where you wrote mayfly eggs, the loop there looks a little like..."

"ENOUGH! Your pitiful excuses are wasting my time. Twenty points from Gryffindor for inattention to detail." Snape turned as a voice intruded on his bad temper.

"Excuse me, sir, but your writing is a little hard to read there."

The class fell silent as Snape rounded on the speaker. "Miss Granger. Exactly when did I ask for your opinion? Five points from Gryffindor for interference."

"But, you are not being fair, *sir*! Anyone could have made that mistake." The stubborn witch persisted.

"In my classroom, *I* decide what is fair." Snape's curled lip was inches from her face.

Hermione refused to be intimidated. "Then *you* need to re-evaluate your definition of fairness, Professor." She prodded his chest with her finger, evoking gasps from her classmates.

Harry tugged on Hermione's arm, trying to quell her death wish. Ron was staring wide-eyed at the pair, unable to reconcile their usually respectful companion with the virago before them.

"OUT! Everyone out! Class is dismissed!" Snape bellowed. They needed no further encouragement. Within two minutes, the room was cleared, only Ron and Harry remaining near the door to witness the confrontation between the fuming Potions professor and their suddenly volatile friend.

"Detention, Miss Granger. Tonight. 9 o'clock," he spat, once again nose to nose with his wife-to-be.

"No."

"*No?*"

The two stood and glared at each other, hands on hips, chins jutted out in eerily similar stances.

"He's going to hex her," Ron whispered, curiously calm.

"Or snog her senseless," Harry suggested, only partly in jest. The sparks flying between the witch and wizard before them were almost visible.

"Eww. Harry! How could you even think that?"

"Just look at them. Can't you feel it? There's more going on here than we know. Since when has Hermione ever defied a teacher? She is not the least bit afraid of him."

Ron studied the pair, who had gradually moved closer, totally oblivious of their audience. "Er... I think we should go," he muttered, dragging Harry out of the door and closing it behind them.

"You forget yourself, Miss Granger." Snape's tone froze her anger as he turned to his desk.

"You forget you will be my husband in a few days," she retorted.

"That is irrelevant. You cannot undermine my authority in my own classroom! This damned marriage is going to cause enough scandal, without my position as a professor in this school being compromised. Did your summer *adventure* cause you to lose your common sense as well as your virginity?" he sneered.

"This damned marriage is for *your* benefit, and I appear to have lost any common sense I had the moment I petitioned to save your bloody hide from Dolores Umbridge and friends. More fool me for thinking you would appreciate it!" Tears sprung unbidden as she saw the hard-won gains in his trust crumbling before her eyes.

Snape's rage dissolved at the sight of his fiancée in tears. "Merlin, woman, stop snivelling." He reached into his robes and produced a handkerchief. Shame for his burst of temper prodded him to continue. "I told you I appreciated your courage. I thought you, of all people, would realise the need for discretion. If you start behaving differently in class, your classmates will notice."

"And what if they do? I am not ashamed of whom I am marrying. Are you?" Eyes puffy, she watched his face closely, wondering if she had imagined the flicker of hope that had escaped his control.

"No. Not ashamed." He did not elaborate further, simply taking the handkerchief she had balled up into a sodden mess and leaving her more thoroughly confused than before.

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"The man is impossible!" Hermione raged as she paced the floor of her room. "One minute he appears to be prepared to make the effort to make this marriage work, and the next he goes off at the deep end. I don't know whether I want to slap him or kiss him!"

Ginny watched her friend rant. "If nothing else, he stimulates feelings of passion. That must be better than indifference, Hermione. You can hardly blame him for objecting to being challenged in front of the whole class. Although, I would have loved to have been there."

"Well, I suppose I did overstep the mark a little. But Ron was right, the instructions were easily misinterpreted."

"And since when have you seen fit to argue with him over something my idiot brother has done?" Ginny asked.

"OK. Point taken. He is still infuriating. I wish he would just stop fighting the inevitable and make up his mind to be happy, you know?" Hermione stopped pacing and turned to her friend. "What can I do?"

"I imagine he feels his whole life is out of his control at the moment. Just like it was for years while he was spying. And with the whole sex thing to add to it..." Ginny smiled.

"Out of control. He and I both. I'll be glad when Saturday is over," Hermione grumbled.

"Now, that's no way for a woman to be viewing her wedding... and wedding night."

"Tell my beloved fiancé that!"

Ginny grinned. They were just hopeless.

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Prompt: 1. Something Old. The Marriage Law Challenge. Many thanks to karelia for the beta.

## Chapter Six: Going Public

*Chapter 7 of 23*

Hermione is back at Hogwarts for her seventh year. Voldemort is dead, and life should be good. That is, until the results of her special Arithmancy Project provide some unwelcome realisations for the Potions master.

### Chapter Six: Going Public

Hermione was woken very early on Wednesday morning by an insistent pounding on her door. Leaping out of bed, she threw the door open, ready to give her unwelcome visitor a piece of her mind.

"What the...?" Her complaint died in her throat as she was pushed back into the room and the door closed and locked with a Silencing charm applied.

Snape stood before her, eyes wide, taking in her appearance. Her favourite nightwear was not at all glamorous, but the low-slung, purple pyjama pants and the thin, old T-shirt left an expanse of bare skin at her waist and did nothing to conceal the effect of the chilly morning air on her nipples. He swallowed hard as he turned his back. "Perhaps... you should put some more clothes on." His voice was unusually husky.

"Turn around," she ordered.

As he complied she stood, hands on hips, and regarded her fiancé. "Does my attire displease you, Severus? What did you expect me to be wearing at this time of the morning? Severus... my face is up here."

His cheeks stained pink as he tore his gaze from her breasts and met her eyes. "We need to talk, and, as attractive as your... er... attributes may be, your attire is scarcely appropriate for entertaining your professor in your bedroom."

She grinned as she threw on her robes, noting his barely concealed sigh of relief. The professor was human after all. "My fiancé, who invited *himself* into my bedroom. What is so urgent you need to wake me at this ungodly hour anyway?" she complained.

"This." He scowled and tossed her the paper he had brought with him. "Front page. Again."

"How did you get the *Daily Prophet* so early?" she asked, absently patting the bed beside her in invitation.

He sat, keeping a respectable distance away from her. "Never mind why I have it so early; just be thankful we have time to prepare."

Unrolling the paper, her jaw dropped as she found large pictures of herself and Snape gracing the front page.

### *WAR HEROINE MAKES THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE FOR HER COMMUNITY*

*Hermione Granger has again astounded the Wizarding world with her dedication to its future. Courageously offering herself as a bride to the infamous Severus Snape, ex-Death Eater turned spy for the Order of the Phoenix, she has once more shown her mettle. Life with the antisocial Snape will no doubt prove challenging, but the witch who was the brain behind the Marriage Law has put her heart where her mouth is and proven that she stands behind the Law one hundred percent.*

*Other couples recently betrothed under the new Law include the captain of the Chudley Cannons, Oliver Wood, and Andrina Bell; Stanley Shunpike and Maisie Higginbottom...*

"Just great! Once again, the *Daily Prophet* has to ruin my life!" Hermione flopped back on the bed and wailed, "Why can't they just mind their own fucking business?" In her frustration, she failed to see the cloak of rejection settle over the man beside her.

"Our business *is* their business, Miss Granger. Unfortunately, we will have the entire school discussing it within half an hour. I suggest you put that prodigious brain to deciding exactly how you are going to explain the fact of your impending marriage to your classmates. I have little faith they will use their brains before they engage their mouths in disapproval."

His body was turned from hers, and the cold, dispassionate tone in which he spoke was unsettling. Suddenly, she realised how he must have interpreted her outburst. Reaching out to take his hand, she pulled him down to lie beside her across the bed. Tenderness met stoic denial as her fingers caressed his shuttered face.

"Severus. Look at me. I was angry at the reporters from the *Prophet* thinking they had the right to announce our betrothal before we did. Petitioning for you may have been an impulsive decision, but I do not regret it. I don't expect marriage to you will be easy, but good things never come without hard work, and I am prepared to make the effort. Are you?"

He stared at her intently as if to ascertain the truth behind her words. Finally, he relaxed and nodded. "Yes. I may be an ill-tempered bastard, but I am prepared to try and meet your expectations."

"My only expectation is that you allow yourself to explore the potential of our relationship, Severus. Tell me when I say or do something that hurts or irritates you. I barely know the man behind Professor Snape, as you barely know the woman behind the student's robes. I don't know if we can live together in harmony, but I know communication is important."

"I am not skilled at interpersonal relationships. You may have noticed."

Hermione snorted. "I would never have known. Still, there's a first time for *everything*."

Her reminder of his other area of inexperience brought another flush to his cheeks. "So. How would you like to handle breakfast?"

"Avoid it altogether?" she suggested hopefully. "OK. I know that would just make things worse. I propose we enter the Great Hall together and act as if there is no great secret. The less they have to speculate over, the sooner they will move on to other, juicier items of gossip."

"Once again, you impress me, witch. I agree. Give them nothing." His rarely seen smile was a brief reminder of the man beneath the shell of surliness.

"So, I impressed you before. When was that?" She moved a little closer.

"Stop fishing for compliments. Your night attire was certainly impressive." Snape's smirk and raised eyebrow sent shivers down her spine as he closed the gap and for the first time initiated a kiss. His lips were firm but supple and as his curious tongue sought entrance to her mouth she ran her fingers through his fine, black hair, revelling in the feel of it. Not greasy at all, just limp and lacking body, but the intimacy of the action overcame aesthetic concerns. He was likewise tangling his hands in her profusion of curls as if fulfilling a long held fantasy.

Hermione brought her hands to his throat and began the task of unfastening the buttons she found there. The smooth skin she finally discovered felt like silk, and the crisp hairs that grew more thickly on his lower abdomen were promise of further delights. Hands slipped under her robes to explore the soft curves hidden only by the thin cotton of her T-shirt. Fingers found nipples that hardened under their ministrations to tight, aching peaks matched by the promising bulge pressing against her inner thigh. Seconds stretched to minutes, punctuated only by soft moans and heavy breathing. Finally, as one of her hands cupped his length through his pants, he gasped and pulled away.

"No. We should not be doing this." He sat up and started buttoning his shirt and robes.

"Why not? We will be married in a few days anyway."

"Exactly. We can wait that long. It does not seem right to pre-empt the formalities when they are so close, especially when you are still my student."

"Oh, Severus. Sometimes, you are positively Victorian. I will *still* be your student after we are married, even though you will no longer be marking my work."

"You don't need to remind me. The thought of you sitting there in the classroom in your school uniform after we have... I've *never* entertained those sorts of thoughts about a student. It's inappropriate and unprofessional and..."

"Necessary. At least we know there is something in which we are likely to be compatible. Do you really care what people think, Severus? Those who know you will understand you had no choice. As I am to blame for the problem coming to the notice of the Ministry, I suspect a lot of people will see our marriage as poetic justice. Let's prove them all wrong!" She smiled and kissed him once more. "Give me a few minutes to dress, and then we can head to breakfast." Gathering up her clothes for the day, she slipped out of the door to the bathroom.

Snape paced to and fro across her bedroom while he waited, subconsciously noting the profusion of books and parchment on every surface. They were alike in so many ways, and yet their differences loomed as an insurmountable barrier. Regret for his recent loss of control ate at his conscience and stiffened his resolve to behave appropriately, despite the temptation of a young, attractive, and apparently willing fiancée. Reluctantly, he admitted to himself his developing desire to make the forced marriage work.

"Ready?" she asked as she re-entered the room.

"As ready as I ever will be," he muttered, then fell to silence as his lips were claimed once again. After several moments of blissfully avoiding reality, he drew back to catch the brief wink and nod of her head in the direction of the common room beyond the open door. There stood Neville Longbottom and Lavender Brown, eyes popping and mouths agape.

"Oh, do close your mouths, you will attract flies," drawled Hermione as she took Snape by the hand and led him towards the door.

All the professor could manage was a hastily applied sneer and a raised eyebrow, which seemed sufficient, as the two Gryffindors disappeared into their respective rooms with the alacrity of doxies avoiding a broom.

"See. No secret. Worked like a charm," Hermione told him with a smug grin.

"Scared them senseless, you mean. I hope you do not intend to repeat that performance before the entire school?" he snarled, face paling at the possibility.

"Don't be daft. That would be overkill. Lavender will make sure everyone knows by the end of the day. Trust me. We just need to arrive together and appear civil. You can manage civil, I presume?"

"Contrary to popular belief, I can behave appropriately when it is necessary. However, if you do anything to undermine my authority again, Gryffindor's house points will no doubt suffer," he threatened.

"Oh, tosh. I'm not scared of you. I know your weak spot," Hermione replied as they walked down the corridor side-by-side followed by curious glances.

"And what would that be, Miss Granger?"



She leaned closer and whispered, "Nipples." A satisfying flush stole onto his cheeks as she smirked.

As they approached the doors of the Great Hall, the din from within was evident.

"Sounds like the post has arrived. Miss Granger?" Severus held out his arm for his fiancée.

She nodded politely as she placed her hand on his forearm. "Time to meet our public."

The wave of silence rolled back into the Hall as they entered, with several inattentive students suffering bruised limbs from the warnings of their peers. All eyes stared at the oddly matched couple walking slowly across the room to the Gryffindor table.

"Miss Granger," Snape repeated as he raised her hand to his lips for a chaste salutation.

"*Severus*," she replied with a twinkle rivalling the late headmaster's in her eye.

The Potions professor rolled his eyes as he straightened to face the student population. "As you are all no doubt aware, Miss Granger and I are now betrothed." He glared at the multitude of faces around him, some pale and sickened, some red-cheeked, some grinning. "I will expect you all to treat my fiancée with the respect she deserves, or you will have me to answer to. That is all." He stalked off to the staff table, not noticing the proud smile that followed his progress.

"Hermione! How could you? That greasy git!" demanded Ron as soon as the excited hubbub resumed.

"That greasy git will be my husband in a few days, Ronald. I suggest you watch your tone. As to how could I? It had to be done, and I don't regret it. Other than that, it is none of your business." She softened at the bewilderment in his blue eyes. "Come on, Ron. I couldn't leave him to the sort of witches that had petitioned for him, and believe it or not, he is growing on me. Be a good sport and wish us well."

"Well, I think Hermione is bloody marvellous," chimed in Ginny. "Just think of the benefits of Snape... you know... getting lucky on a regular basis. Surely it will improve his mood."

Hermione slapped her friend's arm. "Thanks for that vote of confidence, Gin. I'm sure someone here needed to hear that." She grinned at the green look on Harry's face.

"No. I did not need that mental image. Someone pinch me and tell me it's all a very scary dream," he pleaded. Somehow his casual observation two days earlier had proven to be true, and it was rather disconcerting.

"I'm sure I wasn't dreaming when I saw those two snogging as they came out of her bedroom this morning," added Lavender with unwarranted glee.

"Oi! Now that is just uncalled for, Lav," scolded Ron.

"I'm afraid I saw it too, Ron." Neville still looked rather pale. "I'm sorry, Hermione, but you *were* kissing him right in front of us."

"So I was. I guess I'd better marry him and make an honest wizard out of him, then."

"Women!" Ron gave up and attacked his breakfast. Food was always good, despite the circumstances.

"So, what was it like?" whispered Ginny once the boys had retired into the haven of a Hogwarts cooked breakfast.

"What was what like?"

"Snogging Snape. Was he any good?"

"All I can say is he's a fast learner."

"That good, huh?"

"Bloody fantastic!" Hermione's smile told the redhead all she needed.

"He was in your bedroom. Did you...?" she murmured.

"No. More's the pity. Oh, he showed a definite interest, but turned all noble and self-sacrificing at the last moment."

"Interest?"

"A *large* amount of interest." Hermione giggled at Ginny's wide-eyed glance at the top table.

"You lucky witch!"

---

Later that evening, Snape was a model of propriety as they shared tea and conversation in an attempt to get to know one another.

"So, Miss Granger. Your parents did not return from Australia. Is that likely to be a problem with regard to our marriage?" he asked, all cool civility and good intentions.

"No. I don't need their consent to marry, and in the circumstances I think it would be better to visit them in person later, after it has become a *fait accompli*. There is not enough time to visit them and explain the situation before Saturday. They may not approve initially, but they are good people, and I'm sure they will understand eventually," she replied after a little thought. "Do you have any family to consider?"

"Only some distant aunts on my mother's side. My parents died many years ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that." She smiled her sympathy.

"Don't be. I wasn't." Snape's brusque tone contrasted with the unnatural politeness he had shown since she had arrived.

Hermione shelved the topic of his parents carefully, unwilling to break the fragile *détente* they were sharing. "We will need witnesses at the ceremony. I would like to ask Ginny Weasley, if that is all right with you. She has been very supportive over the last few weeks."

"Miss Weasley would be acceptable. An improvement on her reckless brother and boyfriend. I shall ask Filius to stand as my witness."

"Not Lucius Malfoy? I thought you two were friends."

"Lucius and I have little in common these days. He spends most of his time with his business interests, recouping his losses from his Death Eater days. Even Narcissa complains he is rarely home."

Hermione toyed with her tea as the realisation of how few friends Snape really had hit home. Placing her cup on the side table, she curled her legs up onto the sofa they shared and leaned her head against the quiet man beside her. One arm managed to find its way behind his back, and the other lay across his thighs.

"Miss Granger. What exactly are you doing?" he hissed as his body tensed.

"Shh. I'm snuggling. Engaged couples do that, you know. Just relax. I promise your virtue is safe tonight," she murmured into his side.

"Snuggling, indeed," he growled, but little by little the tension drained from his body until his arm was draped around her shoulders and his eyes half closed.

Looking up, Hermione felt a surge of protectiveness beating at her chest for the man she was to marry. Someone needed to care. Someone needed to teach this hard-to-reach, emotionally insecure man to expect more.

*Baby steps, Hermione. Baby steps.*

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Prompt: 1. Something Old. The Marriage Law Challenge. Many thanks to karelia for the beta.

## Chapter Seven: Up Close and Personal

*Chapter 8 of 23*

Hermione is back at Hogwarts for her seventh year. Voldemort is dead, and life should be good. That is, until the results of her special Arithmancy Project provide some unwelcome realisations for the Potions master.

### Chapter Seven: Up Close and Personal

"You *snuggled*?"

"Yes."

"With Professor Snape?"

"Yes."

"The tall, dark, evil-tempered, bat of the dungeons Snape?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure it wasn't someone else using Polyjuice?"

At that, Hermione slapped Ginny's arm and laughed. "Yes. It was the real Severus Snape. I told you he wasn't all that bad when he forgets the sour act. It took a while for him to relax, but he got there in the end." She sobered as she remembered the expression on his face. "I don't think anyone has just wanted to give him a hug before. It's so sad, seeing someone so ready to believe they are not worthy of any affection. I'm sure underneath all those protective layers is a really sensitive man. I just have to hunt him down and bring him to the surface."

"Are you sure it's not a case of wishful thinking, Hermione?" asked Ginny, concerned about her friend's emotional investment in the grim man.

"I would prefer to go into this marriage believing that than otherwise," Hermione replied. "And I have seen glimpses of a different side to him this week."

"Like when you were snogging, perhaps?" Ginny teased.

"That too."

"Hermione, do you think you have fallen in love with him?"

Hermione sat for long moments and contemplated the question. Had she fallen for the taciturn Potions professor? Only a matter of weeks ago she had barely acknowledged he was a man, let alone a romantic prospect. She snorted softly at the thought of Severus Snape and romance coupled in one sentence.

"No, Ginny. I don't think I have fallen in love with him. Yet. I've discovered I like him when he lets down his guard. I even find myself liking his snarky sense of humour. Yes, a sense of humour. It's there under all the sarcasm. I definitely fancy him physically, far more than I thought I would. I feel I want to protect him, comfort him, give him the affection he deserves, but I don't know whether that is really love. But I do know I *want* to love him. I hope that's enough." She turned to Ginny, eyes shining. "Is it enough, Gin?"

"I think it's enough for a start. I just hope he is prepared to offer you the same," Ginny replied with a warm hug.

Later, when she was tucked up in her bed, Hermione thought long and hard about love and passion. She remembered the wonder in Snape's eyes on the few occasions she had kissed him. *What will he look like when he is in the throes of orgasm? Will he look fierce and determined like the hero in that silly romance I read or a little relieved, like Jason?* The possibilities bewitched her until she drifted off to sleep, visions of a dark-eyed lover in various stages of ecstasy haunting her dreams.

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With no Potions class for the day, Hermione found she missed seeing the dark wizard whom she now regarded as hers. Class work occupied her mind for the most part, but nagging from a corner of her awareness was the daring and personal idea she planned to suggest that evening. She had not been remiss in her own research regarding sex; one brief affair over summer, although enlightening, had hardly encompassed the full gamut of sexual experience. He would no doubt be embarrassed and either hex her or argue, but that possibility had not stopped her over the previous week or two. She was a woman on a mission.

"Hey, Hermione. Want to play Exploding Snap this evening? After we have done our homework, of course," Ron added as she opened her mouth to remind him to study.

"Actually, I have to see Professor Snape again this evening to discuss... er... arrangements. Perhaps I'll join you afterwards." She noted Ginny's quizzical look and shook her head slightly.

"You seem to be spending a lot of time with him," grumbled Harry. "But at least you won't have to live there after you marry him." He was not particularly happy with the

idea of his friend marrying the professor, but he knew better than to try and dissuade her once she had decided upon a course of action. Besides, thoughts of Dolores Umbridge living anywhere near Hogwarts or Millicent Bulstrode throwing her considerable weight around as Snape's wife were enough to ensure his reluctant support.

"Why on earth would you think I wouldn't live with him?" Hermione was surprised at her best friend's lack of insight.

"Well, I thought you were only marrying Snape to help him out, not because you wanted to, so I assumed you would continue to stay in your own room and just, you know, visit from time to time when you had to..." Harry's explanation tailed off at the fierce glint in her eyes.

"What is it with you men? Of course I will live with him. He will be my husband! Does it not occur to you I might actually *enjoy* spending time with him?" She stood, exasperated, and left the table in a huff of robes.

"What'd I say?" whined Harry, still having trouble processing the thought that anyone might *like* Snape, despite the knowledge his own mother had done so.

"Sometimes, Harry Potter, you can be a right insensitive clod!" Ginny stood and hurried away to catch up with her friend, leaving the boys shaking their heads.

Harry and Ron looked at each other, shrugged their total lack of comprehension, and went on with their meal. It was not their place to understand the vagaries of women. The Quidditch match coming up the following weekend was really a far more important topic of discussion.

"Hermione! Wait up!" Ginny called as she ran down the corridor. "Much as I love him, Harry can be a real prat at times. Don't pay any attention to him; he will figure it out eventually," she soothed.

"It's not so much that, Gin. It's the way everyone just assumes Severus will be an awful husband. No-one ever gives him a chance." She turned tear-streaked eyes to the redhead. "I feel like I am fighting an uphill battle sometimes."

"Oh, Hermione, love. It will work out. The boys will realise he's not so bad. We'll just have to keep knocking their heads together until they do."

"What would I do without you?" The girls hugged briefly and made their way arm in arm back to Hermione's room.

From deep within a nearby niche, a dark man stared thoughtfully after the two students. Emotions roiling, he strode off to the dungeons where he considered his future with the young woman who had staked a claim on his reluctant heart in a few short weeks.

Did she really care for him, or was it simply pity?

---

Standing before Snape's office door, Hermione paused to consider the wisdom of her actions. Contrary to popular belief, she was not without self-doubt. She had almost decided to abandon her mission when the door swung open, and a mocking voice drawled, "Are you planning to stay out there all evening staring at the door, or did you intend to join me some time?"

"How did you...?"

"Wards, my dear. Now, get inside before you make a spectacle of us both."

"Er... sorry. Thanks," she added as he ushered her through into his sitting room.

"So, to what do I owe the pleasure this evening?" He handed her a glass of wine, smirking as she inspected the contents. "It's just wine. If you are adult enough to marry, I'm sure you can manage a small glass of wine."

"I was just looking at the colour and clarity," she retorted as she swirled the wine in the glass and took a deep, appreciative sniff. Sipping a little, she held it in her mouth for a moment and then swallowed. "Not bad. Could do with a little more cellaring," she declared.

Snape shook his head in disbelief. "Not only a know-it-all about sex, she's a wine expert as well."

"Not an expert, but my father is quite the wine connoisseur and has taught me a thing or two over the last few years," she explained with a smile. "Talking about sex..."

"What? Don't tell me you have more *homework*? Did I not perform adequately with the last assignment?" he growled.

"Oh, I think you did very well, although the practical application remains unattempted. However, I have another, somewhat personal, question for you."

Snape rolled his eyes and took a large swallow of his wine. "I hate to think. Go on. You are going to ask anyway."

Gathering her courage, Hermione looked him in the eye and asked, "How often do you... er... masturbate?"

"I beg your pardon? Did you just ask me how often I..."

"Masturbated. Wanked. Took matters into hand, so to speak. How often?" The blush which suffused her cheeks belied her confident words.

"I do not..."

"Oh, come on. There's a well-known Muggle saying, 'Ninety-five percent of men masturbate the other five percent lie about it.' Which is it to be?" she insisted.

"I was about to say, I do not think it is any business of *yours* how often I relieve myself." Snape started pacing the room as the intimate topic of conversation stirred unwanted interest in his trousers.

"Oh, so you do then. Good," she stated matter-of-factly.

His lips thinned at her audacity. "Do you think it is good that I have had to stand in the shower every night and every morning over the last two weeks, cupping my aching balls in one hand and stroking my *cock* until I explode against the tiles shouting your name, *Hermione*?" Red-faced with the realisation of how much he had inadvertently revealed in his moment of fury, he turned and strode from the room to gather his shattered composure.

"Oh, my," she whispered as she watched him leave.

A few moments later Snape returned to find his fiancée sitting in the armchair by the fire staring into space.

"What? Too much information? Changed your mind now you know what a perverted old bastard you are about to marry?" He sneered.

She turned her face to him, face flushed and pupils dilated with arousal. "On the contrary, Severus. I think you have just fuelled my fantasy life for weeks. The thought of you naked in the shower, touching yourself like that... I just needed a moment to cool down."

"Oh." He sat heavily on the sofa and stared at his feet. "So, why exactly did you want to know? Although, I'm not sure I want to know the answer."

"I was reading..."

"Surprise, surprise."

"Hush. I was reading, and it seems that often on the first occasion a man has intercourse, he has trouble... you know... lasting the distance. I thought if you made a point of bringing yourself to a climax a couple of times before the wedding, you would last longer. OK, OK, I know it was a bad idea, but I just want our first time to be perfect," she explained, head in her hands.

He lifted his eyes and studied her for long moments, once again wondering why the gods had chosen him. "You really mean that, don't you?"

"Yes. I do."

The sincerity in her gaze made the decision easy. "In that case, I will personally take matters in hand on Saturday morning. Happy?"

The warmth of her smile was all the repayment he required. "Now, I think you should leave. I have a certain urgent... problem to attend to." He looked ruefully down at his straining pants.

"I could help," she offered tentatively.

"Oh, no you won't, Miss. Go. Now!"

"I'll be thinking of you later," she promised and winked as his eyelids fluttered shut, and he groaned despite himself. Breath stolen by the sight, Hermione left the room before she lost all control.

---

Ginny Weasley took one look at her friend's flushed cheeks and glazed eyes upon her return to the adult students' common room and hustled her into her room. Pouring the tea she had prepared earlier and placed under a warming charm, she thrust a cup into Hermione's slightly tremulous hand. "Here. Drink up. Then tell me what on earth happened down there."

Gratefully, the older girl drained the cup and held it out for more. After two cups of hot, sweet tea and a few biscuits, she was able to speak.

"I... I..."

"You what? Hexed him? Snogged him? Jumped him? What, Hermione? Do I have to drag it out of you word by word, because, by Merlin, I will if I have to!" Ginny glared at the witch before her.

Hermione took a deep breath and drew her scattered wits together. "Alright, keep your knickers on. We had a little chat about... er... masturbation. He told me something, unintentionally, that just made me want him so much. I don't know if I can wait another two days!" she wailed.

"Whoa! Back up a bit. You were talking to Professor Snape about *masturbation*? What, did you just come out and ask him how many times he did it?" Ginny's flippancy transformed into horrified realisation when her friend simply nodded. "Do you have some sort of death wish? Why on earth did you need to know that?"

Hermione retrieved the book she had been reading about first time sex and showed the relevant passages to Ginny. "You see, if he deals with it earlier in the day, he should..."

"Don't really want to know the details, Hermione. I get the gist. But I can't believe you just went and ordered him to masturbate for you. That's so... kinky! Er... is he going to do it?" she added, curiosity getting the better of her.

"Well, yes. That's the problem. The thought of him..." She gazed off into the distance, eyes glazing over again.

"Oi! Hermione! Stop imagining the professor doing *that* in front of me. It's just not right! Now, come and play Exploding Snap nicely with the boys, then you can indulge yourself in all the fantasies you like later in the privacy of your own room. Alone." Ginny gave her a gentle shove towards the door.

"Alone. Pity," the frustrated witch muttered.

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Prompt: 1. Something Old. The Marriage Law Challenge. Many thanks to karelia for the beta.

## Chapter Eight: The Tables are Turned

*Chapter 9 of 23*

Hermione is back at Hogwarts for her seventh year. Voldemort is dead, and life should be good. That is, until the results of her special Arithmancy Project provide some unwelcome realisations for the Potions master.

### Chapter Eight: The Tables are Turned

"Ah, Miss Weasley. A moment of your time, if you will."

Ginny startled to find Severus Snape awaiting her as she left the Transfiguration classroom. Hermione was still inside, discussing some esoteric research she had found with Professor le Blanc. "Er... sure, sir," she replied.

"In here will do," he said as he indicated an empty classroom across the corridor. Ginny found herself ushered courteously through the door by the Potions master.

Once the door was closed and locked, he leaned against it with arms folded. Speaking calmly without his usual intimidation to the now curious seventh year, he said, "You will be wondering why I have detained you, Miss Weasley."

"Well, yes, I am actually, sir."

"It has come to my attention that you and my fiancée are rather close. I suspect you know rather more about my personal life than I would prefer." Waving her attempted protest aside, he continued. "I am well aware Miss Granger is still only nineteen and as such needs a female confidante. I only ask that anything she shares with you goes

no further. It is bad enough knowing two teenage witches in this castle are aware of my personal issues without them becoming fodder for gossip."

Ginny knew exactly which personal issue concerned the professor. "Sir. As far as your, er... that... is concerned, Hermione did not tell me. I'd already suspected it," she reassured.

"You did? How?" he hissed, composed façade almost slipping.

"Just from things I'd overheard at home. Don't worry; your secret is safe with me. It's not that it will be the case for much longer, anyway," she said blithely. "And anything else Hermione feels the need to talk about remains between us. I would never betray that sort of confidence, sir." Ginny was essentially her mother's daughter and decided a little 'Weasley intervention' was required. "May I ask one personal question, sir?"

He sighed. "As I have little doubt there is anything you don't already know, go ahead."

"Do you care for her?" Ginny asked. At his stunned look, she added, "It's just that I love Hermione like a sister, and I don't want her to be hurt. I know this marriage was originally arranged for other reasons, but she has become very attached to you. I would like to know if there is any chance you reciprocate her feelings." As hope lifted years from his face, and his eyes closed in relief, Ginny knew her friend's heart would be safe.

"Thank you," he whispered.

At that moment, Ginny saw the man her friend knew. Her fierce, Weasley protective instincts vowed to support this wizard and his wife-to-be in the bumpy ride of their new relationship, come what may. Placing a small hand on his arm, she offered, "If there is ever anything I can do, you only have to ask, Professor."

"I think you have already done more than I could have ever hoped for, Ginevra. Friends like you are rare in my experience. Once again, I thank you for supporting my fiancée, and I hope you will continue to visit her... us... once she has joined me in the dungeons." He met her gaze with an open sincerity that reassured her more than any number of words.

"Oh, I will. Someone has to keep an eye on you two," Ginny dared to tease.

"Indeed."

The odd pair in the classroom shared a brief smile as they forged the tentative beginnings of a new alliance.

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Lunch was only slightly rowdier than usual for a Friday. The reaction to the previous morning's announcement had diminished more rapidly than Hermione had expected. As far as many of her fellow students were concerned, she was still the peculiarly swotty friend of Harry Potter who had been involved in helping him despatch Voldemort. Marrying Snape was simply another of her many vagaries. After all, if a girl could Polyjuice herself into a cat, be chased by a werewolf, spend weeks recovering from being cursed by a Death Eater, and then run off on a hunt for Horcruxes as if it were a camping expedition, marrying the ex-Death Eater, ex-spy, greasy Potions professor was hardly out of character. They had quickly realised the potentially more contented Severus Snape Ginny Weasley had been heard to mention the previous day would benefit them all.

However, the Slytherins' opinions were divided. Millicent's cronies were bristling with indignation over her petition's failure. The girl herself had found her suddenly increased popularity over the previous few weeks waning again, much to her dismay. Being slighted by her Head of House was something her limited mind could not understand, and being discarded in favour of a Gryffindor, no less, was madness. Obviously, Snape had been affected by the war; she sincerely believed she had been spared a fate worse than death. But this didn't stop her throwing poisonous looks towards the other side of the Great Hall whenever she glimpsed her bushy-haired nemesis.

Those of Snape's house who had a little more *savoir-faire* kept their opinions to themselves and awaited developments. The implications of a bond between their house and the vastly more popular, and populous, Gryffindors were something the average ambitious, forward-thinking Slytherin could not ignore.

Predictably enough, it was the hotheaded, outspoken Gryffindors who had the most to say on the matter. Despite the relatively rapid acceptance of the affair by the adult students amongst them, no doubt aided by the brief explanation they had been given the night before of the circumstances under which the engagement arose, many of the younger members of Hermione's house saw it as a betrayal. Marrying any Slytherin would be cause for disapproval, but marrying the horrible Potions professor, who had always made their lives miserable, was simply unacceptable.

"Don't worry about it, Hermione. They'll come around," reassured Ginny as they gazed down the table at those who had chosen to sit apart from their group.

"I don't really care what they think of me, Gin. Most of them are acting through ignorance and ingrained prejudice, exactly the behaviour we attribute to the Slytherins. Did you know several seventh-year Slytherins came over and wished me good luck this morning? It's a sad day when Slytherins behave more reasonably than my own housemates."

"Except Bulstrode. She keeps giving you the evil eye. Do you think I should Bat-Bogey her?" Ginny offered with a twinkle.

"No. She's not worth the detention you would get, probably with Severus," Hermione replied as she nabbed a bun before the boys scoffed them all.

"Oh, I don't know. Detention with him would probably be OK." Ginny grinned at her friend's puzzled frown. "We had a little *chat* today. Let's just say we understand each other."

"Ginevra Weasley! Exactly *what* have you been saying to my fiancé?"

"Oh, nothing much. He'd figured out you tell me *everything* and wanted to warn me not to blab. As if I would. We had a brief conversation, he thanked me for supporting you, and then he told me I was welcome to visit you in his quarters." Ginny was smart enough to leave out the part of the discussion involving Hermione's feelings for the man. That was for the two of them to work out, but hopefully Snape would be a little more forthcoming with his intended after their talk. "He even called me Ginevra!"

"Good grief! He still calls *me* Miss Granger, most of the time." Hermione blushed as she recalled one of the few times he had addressed her by her first name. Her use of that particular memory had made for a wonderful sleep the night before.

"I'll bet that will have changed by this time on Sunday." Ginny grinned.

"Sure. By then, it will be Mrs Snape! I swear that man will come to bed tomorrow night fully dressed and with the lights out," Hermione grumbled.

"And I swear you'll have him naked and totally compliant within five minutes." The redhead smirked as Harry and Ron looked up, obviously wondering what the girls were discussing so quietly.

"Ginny! Shh. You don't want to put the boys off their lunch, do you?" Hermione giggled at their suspicious expressions and poked her tongue out at them.

"Very mature for a woman about to get married, Hermione. Do you really think *anything* would put those two off their food?" she asked.

"At least some things never change. I wonder if Severus will allow them to visit too?" the older girl mused.

Ginny chuckled at the thought of her boyfriend and her brother sitting uncomfortably in the Snapes' sitting room taking tea. "Put it this way, I wouldn't hold my breath. How

about you get him over the whole sex business first and calling you by your first name, *then* worry about inflicting the boys on him!"

It was Hermione's turn to giggle as she reached for the pumpkin juice. "I'm not entirely sure who I feel sorrier for, the boys or Severus!"

Watching the males under discussion industriously making obscene sculptures with their food and then blushing furiously when they noticed the two young women observing, Hermione and Ginny turned to each other and said as one, "Severus!"

The younger witch blushed. "Oops! You are a bad influence, Hermione Granger. If I get detention for calling your husband by his first name by mistake, I will expect *you* to sweet talk him out of it."

Hermione grinned as her gaze suddenly lifted to a point behind Ginny's head.

Her friend's face dropped into her hands. "Tell me he is not right behind me," she pleaded.

"He is not right behind you," Hermione replied obediently.

"Unfortunately, my intended has a loose affinity with the truth," a smooth, masculine voice drawled near Ginny's ear. "Now, were you inquiring about a detention, Miss Weasley? I'm sure I could oblige."

Ginny's cheeks flamed as she turned and met the mocking gaze of the Potions master. "Er... No, sir. I don't think that will be necessary."

"Severus. Be nice. And what do you mean, 'a loose affinity with the truth'?" Hermione demanded.

"Troll hunting? Stolen boomslang skin? Sneaking around under Invisibility Cloaks? That wasn't you then, my dear fiancée?" His smirk was infuriating.

"You know damn well there were good reasons for..." She broke off as she realised he was actually *teasing* her. "Oh... you... you..."

"Hey! Break it up, you two. You're gathering an audience," Ginny hissed urgently.

With a final, triumphant lift of an eyebrow, Snape spun on his heel, glared the onlookers into finding other, more fascinating topics of conversation, and left. Hermione rolled her eyes at his back as he left and turned back to her friend, who was resting her head on her arms and shaking slightly.

"It's OK, Gin. He's gone. Don't worry; he didn't really mean it." She laid a comforting hand on the redhead's shoulder, only to be met with a huge grin and twinkling eyes as she lifted her head.

"Sorry, Hermione. I lost it for a minute there. The idea of Professor Snape flirting with you like that..." She burst forth in another uncontrollable bout of laughter.

"Ginny! He was *not* flirting!"

"Trust me, my friend. The man was flirting. Sure, he has a weird way of doing it, but he *is* Severus Snape, you know. You can't expect him to do anything the normal way."

Hermione stared dumbfounded at the younger witch for a long moment, then turned to study the man she was to marry. Blushing as he met her gaze and lifted his glass in a mocking salute, she nibbled on a roll as she wondered, not for the first time, whether she had bitten off more than she could chew. Despite her recent experience with sex and more relaxed attitude towards physical intimacy, her fiancé often left her feeling like a novice blundering around the minefield of intention and emotion.

"Hermione! Pay attention!" Ginny's voice nudged her out of her brown study, and she indicated the boys, who had been trying to get her attention.

"It's your last night as a free woman, Mione. We need to have a party! Please?" begged Ron.

"Yeah. We'll get Winky to smuggle us some food and drink. Just let us know who you want to come," Harry added.

"What? You boys want to come to my hen party? Isn't that against the rules?" she teased.

"Well, it's not like Snape is going to throw a stag party, is it?" Ron retorted.

"We could insist they dress up in frilly skirts if they want to come," suggested Ginny with an evil grin.

Hermione giggled. "And then we could ask Lavender to make them up, so they look like real girls."

Hearing her name, Lavender moved closer. "Make who up?" she asked. "Whoever it is, I'm in."

"The boys want to crash Hermione's hen party," Ginny explained. "We think they should only be allowed to come if they dress as girls and allow us to pretty them up."

"Oi, little sister. If you don't show a little respect, I'm telling Bill. He'll sort you out!" Ron threatened.

"He doesn't scare me. He tried to pick on me in Defence class yesterday until I Bat-Bogeyed him in front of the whole class. That'll teach him for using his position as a professor to get round Mum's rules about being nice to his sister," she gloated.

"You didn't!" Hermione was astounded at Ginny's cheek.

"I certainly did. He was supposed to be teaching us nonverbal spells and *thought* he had the drop on me, but he forgot who taught me how to recognise the signs of someone casting nonverbally," she replied with a smirk.

"Who?" Hermione asked, curious.

"He did it himself, the great idiot. Last summer! Brothers. Absolutely hopeless, the lot of 'em!"

"Oi! I take exception to that!" Ron expostulated. "Some of us are extremely handsome, intelligent individuals." He couldn't understand why all three girls were incapable of coherent speech for quite some time after that announcement.

---

Walking to Potions class that afternoon, Hermione smiled to herself at the antics of the two boys walking ahead of her. Party planning obviously required a great deal of vigorous gesticulation and discussion. She pulled up short as once again a hand grasped her robes and pulled her into a dark classroom. Before she had a chance to protest, a firm mouth claimed her lips, and a familiar tongue worked its way between.

He tasted of coffee and spice, and two minutes later swept away without a word, leaving her breathless and bemused.

Arriving in the dungeons a minute late for class, she realised the Potions professor had managed to arrive before her. A subtle twitch of his lips revealed he was enjoying her discomfiture far too much.

"Late, Miss Granger? Ten points from Gryffindor."

Her glare left her fiancé unmoved. He turned and resumed class as if nothing unusual had occurred. For the next hour, Hermione pondered his actions as she made notes on the day's assignment. Realising she needed some powdered moonstone for her Draught of Peace, she headed for the potions store room. As she reached up to the third shelf on the right, the door closed with a definitive click. A hand reached around and pulled her into a lean body, hard in all the right places, while another reached under her shirt and trailed across her sensitive skin.

"Bloody hell, Severus, someone will come in. Have you been drinking?" she admonished in a whisper as, despite herself, she melted into the warmth of the hand now wandering closer to her breasts.

His only reply was a long finger placed to her lips. As his lips nibbled at the tender spot behind her left ear and his ministrations created pinpoints of fire across her breasts, culminating in a fierce tug of pleasure when he tweaked her nipple, Hermione gave up wondering why he had so radically changed his behaviour. She was reaching to grasp the urgent need she felt pressing into her from behind when he abruptly released her and returned to the classroom.

Flustered, aroused, and frustrated beyond belief, the young witch gathered her wits and the moonstone and stalked back to her cauldron. Several sets of curious eyes flicked from her flushed face to their professor's smug expression as she commenced brewing.

Hermione noticed Harry clearly suppressing mirth. "What?" she snapped.

"Nothing..."

"Well, get on with your brewing then and stop looking at me!"

"Yes, miss." He grinned as he resumed working.

"Miss Granger. You appear to be having trouble concentrating on your work. Perhaps a detention this evening at seven will encourage you to... pay attention to the matter at hand." His eyebrow lifted fractionally as he turned to the unfortunate students who had been winking and nudging behind his back.

"Twenty points from Ravenclaw for speculating on your professor's sex life!" he snarled.

Hermione could only stare at the man. What in Merlin's name had she unleashed?

Despite the distraction of the wizard to whom she was to be wed looming over her cauldron, brushing his robes past hers at all too regular intervals, and black eyes studying her from across the room, she managed to brew her usual, perfect result. As she handed the vial to Severus, his fingers grasped hers briefly.

"Seven. Don't forget," he murmured.

"As if I would, Severus, dear," she replied with a sweet, coquettish smile. *Two can play at this game*, she thought as she leaned in and brushed his cheek with her lips, much to the amusement of the remaining students in the room.

The faint, pink stain on his cheeks improved her mood considerably as she joined Harry in the corridor.

"What the hell is going on with you and Snape, Hermione? Why don't you just jump each other in front of the whole class and get it over with?"

"I have no idea. The man seems to have suddenly found his libido. Not that I'm complaining, but there is a time and a place..."

"Perhaps you'd better have a talk to him at detention. That is, if it really *is* going to be a detention?" Harry snorted at her affronted expression.

"One can only hope... not." Hermione grinned, looking forward to detention for the first time in her scholastic career.

"I still don't get it. Snape?" he asked.

"Harry, let's just say I have discovered a more appealing side to the man, OK? You don't really need to know details."

He shuddered. "Believe me, I don't *want* details!"

Chuckling, they entered their quarters to find preparations for the party already well underway.

"Bloody hell, the party!" Harry exclaimed. "And you have *detention*?"

"Don't worry, Harry. It's early. I'll be back by eight-thirty when the party starts."

"Oh, I'm not worried. I'm sure we can start without you if you get a better offer. Ouch!" He rubbed his arm where she had whacked him.

"Hey, Mione! Why are you assaulting my boyfriend?" asked Ginny with a grin as she joined them.

"Because he is making lewd suggestions about my fiancé," Hermione explained, pulling a face at her black-haired friend.

"That's only because you and Snape were snogging in the potions store room," countered Harry.

"We were not!" Although strictly true, her blush belied the words.

"Hermione! I thought you said he wouldn't..."

"Ginny! Not here!" Hermione dragged her friend into her room, much to Harry's amusement.

"I don't want to know, anyway!" he called after them.

"OK. Give. What's going on?" Ginny demanded once the door was firmly closed.

"I don't know. Severus is acting really oddly..." Hermione went on to explain his unusual behaviour during the afternoon.

"Well, that is strange. Although you *did* say you wanted him to make the first move sometimes."

"I know, but... just what did you say to him this morning, Gin?"

Ginny simply smiled.

# Chapter Nine: Nearly There

Chapter 10 of 23

Hermione is back at Hogwarts for her seventh year. Voldemort is dead, and life should be good. That is, until the results of her special Arithmancy Project provide some unwelcome realisations for the Potions master.

## Chapter Nine: Nearly There

Shortly before she was due to leave for the dungeons, Ginny caught Hermione's arm and whispered in her ear. The latter flushed and turned to her friend.

"Do you really think that's a good idea?" she asked, eyes wide.

"Why not? Either it will help or he won't notice, so you can't lose anything by trying." Ginny grinned and winked.

"But it's so... *brazen!*" Hermione was not sure she could bring herself to follow Ginny's suggestion.

"You started it, Hermione. Now, follow through!" The red-head shoved her gently towards her room. "Go on!"

"OK, OK, I'm going."

At seven o'clock Hermione arrived at the Potions classroom, unsure whether to expect the grim Potions professor or her suddenly flirtatious husband-to-be. She glanced down at the simple Muggle blouse and skirt she was wearing under her robes, hoping she had chosen correctly.

Unaccountably nervous, she entered the room and glanced around to find it empty. Removing her robes as Ginny had instructed, Hermione stood at her usual desk and closed her eyes briefly as she recovered her composure. In the room redolent with the familiar smells of old wood, aromatic potions ingredients, and the acrid top note of the cauldron cleanser, the chill of the stone walls and floor permeating the air, and the odd, echoing silence, she felt her anxiety leaching away, replaced with a more pleasurable tension.

Her spine tingled as she sensed another presence in the room. She opened her eyes and turned to face him as he studied her from across the room, seemingly transfixed by the suddenly hardened nipples and gentle sway of her unconfined breasts clearly evident beneath the fine fabric of her blouse. Hermione was certain she heard a soft moan as he turned to close and ward the door.

Snape had obviously discarded his teaching robes earlier in the evening, wearing only a white shirt and black wool trousers. Apart from the towel incident, she had never seen him out of his robes. He looked different without their protective armour hiding his lean, graceful body. Younger. Less severe. Approachable.

The unique scent of Severus Snape, enhanced by his usual environment, grew stronger and more intoxicating as he stalked in a circle around her... once... twice... gradually drawing closer. Time stood still until he finally reached out with one finger and slowly caressed one taut, aching peak. It was her turn to moan as the fire of his touch shot directly to her rapidly moistening centre.

"Severus... please."

"Please, what?" he asked, lips brushing her left ear. "What is it you want, my dear?" Both breasts were now under siege as he moved closer, pinning her against the desk with one strong leg between hers, his arousal straining against her belly.

"More."

"More?" An eyebrow quirked. "More of what?" He lowered his hips and thrust against her, slowly rubbing his impressive bulge almost, but not quite, where she needed it to be.

"You. Me. This. Dammit, man, you know what I mean!" she growled.

His hands slid from her breasts to her waist, then further down until he gripped the sides of her knee-length skirt. Easing it slowly upwards, Snape continued to grind himself against her and with a final tug the fabric was removed.

"Oh!" she exclaimed as she felt the cool air and rough wool of his trousers against her nakedness. Her bra was not the only undergarment Ginny had suggested she leave in her room.

As his fingers slid unerringly to her moist heat and discovered no further barrier to his touch, he murmured, "Well, well. What have we here? Has someone been anticipating something?" His voice was hoarse with desire.

Fingers explored slippery surfaces and found that spot that sweet, needy spot then proceeded to stroke and flick and grind until she could stand no more without reciprocating. Reaching down for the buttons restraining his passion, she undid them one by one. Before he had a chance to once again deny them their need, she had grasped him in her hand and started a rhythm of her own.

Lips met and tongues tangled as they each fulfilled a long-held fantasy until with a cry and a groan both came undone by one another's hand, almost fully-dressed, there in the Potions classroom.

As her heart slowed and breathing returned to normal, Hermione opened her eyes to find Snape's gaze fixed on her face and an incredulous expression on his.

"I didn't intend for that to happen," he started as he re-buttoned his trousers, "but..."

"Don't you dare say you regretted it, Severus Snape!" Hermione's eyes flashed with anger as she straightened her own clothes.

"I was about to say I didn't intend for that to happen, but it was... you were... amazing!" Without warning, his lips met hers with a passion so intense all previous kisses paled by comparison.

As the heat of arousal once again flared, Snape put his fiancée aside with obvious reluctance.

"No. Not tonight, my wanton witch. I had only planned to torment you a little further, as you have done to me. Besides, I believe you have a party to attend if my sources are accurate." He smiled as he saw disappointment cloud her features. "Tomorrow night will come soon enough, and then you can do with me as you wish," he promised.



"You may just regret that offer," Hermione growled. She picked up her bag and prepared to return to her quarters, then turned back and added, "I have one question though. Where did you learn how to do what you did today? You had me so turned on all afternoon I could hardly think straight. I thought you were... er... inexperienced." She flushed a little as Snape smirked.

"You, my dear, are not the only incurable swot around here. And consider it fair retribution for all those cold showers I have been taking lately."

Hermione couldn't help herself. She shook her head and laughed out loud. "You... you... found a book that taught you *seduction*? Were you hoping to score extra credit or something?"

"Well, I believe there was some mention of *practical application* made earlier. I was just proving I understood the material."

"Oh, you certainly have grasped the subject well, Severus. But I'm sure I can still teach you a few tricks." She reached up to kiss his cheek and was surprised to find herself enveloped in his arms once more.

"Tomorrow," he whispered into her hair, then turned and left the room.

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Hermione collapsed onto her bed just after midnight, having finally chased two very merry, gaudily made-up boys into their rooms. All the adult students, even Draco Malfoy, had joined in the festivities, although of the males present, only Ron and Harry had succumbed to Lavender's make-up brush. Luna was sharing Lavender's room for the night, and Ginny was presently flat on her back on a transfigured cot beside her, too weary to get up and undress. The headmistress had given special permission for the two seventh-years to join in the festivities, as long as they stayed in the adult students quarters and were not caught roaming the castle after the party.

"Tell me why we had to play all those silly games again, Hermione?" she asked.

"It's tradition. The boys insisted I had a hen party, so they had to play the games."

"But daring them to let Lavender loose on their faces!" Ginny giggled, remembering the looks on their faces when they had realised Hermione was serious.

"That'll teach them. They started the 'How Well Do You Know the Bride' game. Then told all my secrets. Although, I have *no* idea how Harry even knew that game existed! And they asked me about the first time I kissed Severus when I asked for a Truth."

"Did you see the look on Ron's face?"

"I know. Why do you think I went into so much detail?" Hermione grinned at the shocked look on her friend's face.

"He went quiet for a whole *two minutes* after that!" Ginny closed her eyes for a few minutes as they relaxed, then suddenly sat bolt upright and gasped, "Hermione! What on earth are you going to wear tomorrow?"

"Nothing," Hermione replied.

Ginny snorted. "I didn't mean tomorrow *night*. I meant at the wedding ceremony."

"Nothing *special*. I'll just wear something appropriate. I suppose school uniform might be a little off-putting if I want Severus to get in the right mood," the bride-to-be mused.

"Not unless he is hiding some decided kinks under those billowing robes of his," Ginny retorted.

"I doubt it. He is too straight-laced to have any kinks, although he is definitely showing signs of loosening up." Her body warmed again with the memory of his attentions earlier in the evening.

"Loosening up? I think you have somehow misplaced the original Snape and created a new one, Hermione. I can't believe our plan worked so well!" Ginny had been given a very condensed version of events just before the party had started. "Hermione, what was it like, doing that to him?" she asked.

"Him, as in Snape the professor, or him, as in Severus the man?"

"The man. Having so much power over him, you know?"

Hermione was silent for a few moments as she considered Ginny's question. It had been incredibly intense, knowing she could make Severus Snape lose control. "It was... I don't know... unbelievable, brilliant, touching. But he did the same to me. I felt so close to him afterwards. It was as if we had shared something really meaningful made ourselves vulnerable. I really think we can make a go of this marriage, Ginny. I really do."

"I have no doubt about it," Ginny replied. "But you still need to decide what to wear."

"Jeans and T-shirt may be a little too casual. I don't want him to think I am not taking this seriously." Hermione sighed. "I suppose I could use the red dress Mum gave me last summer."

"You can't wear red," Ginny decided. "Too Gryffindor. We'll have to transfigure it into a different colour."

Hermione didn't like to tell her Severus actually liked red. "What about deep purple? I've always wanted a dress that colour."

"That will be perfect. No House affiliations at all."

With that decided, the two girls gradually settled into sleep, both dreaming of their dark-haired wizards.

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Hermione woke on Saturday morning to the soft snoring of her red-headed friend. For a moment, she puzzled over finding Ginny in her bedroom, but her fuzzy head and morning-after-the-night-before breath refreshed her memory. Although she had not imbibed enough alcohol the previous evening to develop the full-blown hangover the boys were sure to be suffering, her movements were somewhat tentative as she made her way to the bathroom. After showering and cleaning her teeth, she felt decidedly more human, returning to the bedroom to nudge Ginny awake.

With a groan, her friend sluggishly opened one eye. "No. It's not morning yet. Go away!" She rolled over and pulled the blanket over her head.

"Wake up, Gin. It's Saturday!"

Ginny sat up abruptly and stared at Hermione. "It's Saturday!"

"I said that already."

"Your wedding day!"

The bride-to-be flopped onto her bed and covered her eyes with the pillow. "Oh, fuck! Can I change my mind? I don't think I'm ready, after all." The significance of the afternoon's ceremony suddenly terrified her, and the reality of the night to follow loomed as threateningly as Snape over cauldrons in the Potions classroom.

"I thought you couldn't wait to get him into your bed? You seemed to be looking forward to it, especially after last night." Ginny was confused at her friend's change of attitude.

"I do... I am... I'm just..."

"Worried it won't work?" Ginny laid a comforting hand on Hermione's arm.

"Terrified, actually. I've been so busy trying to get him over his anxiety about sex, I haven't stopped to think about mine!" she wailed.

"What anxiety? I thought you didn't have any?"

"Neither did I until now," Hermione replied, hands twisting in the pillow she held.

"Tell me. What is bothering you?" Ginny asked gently, taking Hermione's hand in hers.

"Just everything. What if he hates me for pushing him into this? What if he doesn't like my body? What if he really is lousy at sex? What if...?"

"A man who can write an essay as detailed as he did, kiss as well as you said he does, and torment you so deliciously yesterday, *isn't* going to be lousy at sex. It may take a little practice, but that's a good thing, right? And from what you told me about his response to you last night, I doubt he has any complaints about your body."

Hermione giggled, but unbidden anxiety welled up again despite Ginny's reassuring words. "Even if the sex is great, he may still resent being forced to marry. He is so damned complicated. Does he even know how to be happy?"

"Oh, Hermione, I don't think you have anything to worry about. I'm sure he wants this to work as much as you do," she soothed.

"How do you know, Ginny? What *did* he say to you yesterday morning?" Hermione regarded her closest girlfriend as the faint stirrings of hope began lifting her clouds of despair.

"He cares, Hermione, he truly does. Oh, he didn't say in so many words, but trust me, he does. It may not be love yet, but he wants this marriage to work as much as you do. Just give him a chance," she pleaded.

Hermione didn't reply, mind lost in possibilities for long moments as the warmth of Ginny's reassurance dissipated her fears.

"You're right, Gin. He has told me as much himself. I'm sorry for being stupid about it all." She grinned weakly.

"Don't worry. Every bride is allowed an attack of nerves on her wedding day. At least I now know you are human, after all! Come one, let's go and see if the boys feel human this morning."

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Down in the dungeons, the Potions master awoke with a smile on his face and an urgent need distorting his pants. Sliding down the waistband of his boxers, Severus Snape proceeded to follow his fiancée's instructions to the letter, his strokes rapidly becoming urgent and erratic as he cried out her name. Recently awakened libido temporarily sated, he showered and dressed, preparing for his last few hours of bachelorhood. To his surprise, he felt no regret weighing on his mind, only the unfamiliar sense that something good had finally found him. Catching himself about to leave his quarters with a daft grin on his face, he carefully reapplied his scowl and stalked off to breakfast, reassured the Potions professor was still in residence.

The various unhappily nauseated expressions on the faces of Hogwarts' adult students led Snape rapidly to the correct conclusion. In a fit of magnanimity, never to be repeated, he summoned a house-elf and bade him to deliver several vials of hangover potion to the afflicted. He added strict instructions not to reveal the source. Only the two young women currently seated at the Gryffindor table appeared to realise from whence the life-saving elixir originated, and each raised her glass to salute the donor. He smirked and lifted his glass in turn.

"See, I told you he could be decent," Hermione declared, watching the relieved faces around her.

"Preaching to the converted, sister." Ginny grinned. "Pity he didn't wait a while, though. I was rather enjoying watching their discomfort. Why do boys always overdo it? They are such idiots!"

"I heard that," complained Harry, who had been the last to partake of the hangover potion. He held the vial up to inspect the label. "Looks like Snape's writing. Wonder who was smart enough to think of pilfering some of his supplies?"

"Like I said. Idiots." Ginny rolled her eyes. "Who do you think supplied it?"

Harry looked around at his peers. Certainly, none of them had been in a fit state to perform any pilfering. Realisation slowly dawned as he noticed the smirk on Snape's face. "You don't mean...?"

"Yes, Harry, dear. Professor Snape took pity on you. I'm not sure why none of you deserved it."

"Aw, Gin. Don't be like that. It was such a good party. Men will be men, you know that." Harry grovelling was not a pretty sight.

"And boys will be foolish," she retorted. "I just hope you all grow up one day. Hopefully, *before* we get married, Harry Potter!"

"Yes, miss." His sloppy salute and rueful grin were Ginny's undoing. Bestowing a quick peck on his cheek, she stood and turned to Hermione. "Time to take the bride off to prepare. Come along, dear, your bridegroom will be expecting perfection later, and perfection takes time."

"Good grief, Gin. The ceremony isn't until four this afternoon. What on earth will take that long?" Hermione asked, horrified at the thought of a whole day spent primping when there was study to be done.

"Trust me," Ginny replied, taking her arm. "Let's go."

As they left the Great Hall, Hermione turned and shot an apologetic glance at her intended. She had hoped to spend a little time with him that morning, but with Ginny in full 'Molly mode,' it wasn't to be.

Ginny spotted the direction of her gaze. "No communing with the bridegroom before the wedding," she ordered.

"But what exactly are we going to do?" Hermione whined.

"We are going out to partake of some fresh air and clear our heads."

"Ginny Weasley. It's freezing out there. Do you really want me to turn up this afternoon in shades of blue?"

"Don't be such a baby. We'll wrap up warmly and just take a short walk. Then we'll spend some time relaxing with a book or two. No, Hermione, *not* a textbook. Something light and fluffy that will put you in the right mood for later. Some tea and cakes would be nice. Then, after lunch, you make yourself beautiful for your new husband." Ginny firmly steered her friend back to her room to collect her cloak, hat, and gloves and prepare for her wedding.

## Chapter Ten: The Toad Returns

*Chapter 11 of 23*

Hermione is back at Hogwarts for her seventh year. Voldemort is dead, and life should be good. That is, until the results of her special Arithmancy Project provide some unwelcome realisations for the Potions master.

### Chapter Ten: The Toad Returns

Hermione twirled before the mirror in her room. Her delight at the image before her overcame her earlier protests when Ginny's short walk had led into Hogsmeade, where a visit to Gladrags had provided a more suitable dress than 'that old, red thing.' The light reading had consisted of witches' magazines from which a suitable hairstyle had been sought. Ginny had once again set her inner Molly free, and in the process Hermione's initial reluctance had vanished along with her anxiety.

The dress they had chosen was a construction of pure magic. The fabric was impossibly sheer, yet the surface iridescence maintained Hermione's modesty with a constantly moving shimmer of mother-of-pearl. Shoestring straps held up the closely fitted bodice, which was cut low enough to reveal only the first swell of her breasts, and then the dress nipped in at her waist to hug her curves before flaring decadently to knee length.

"I feel as if I am nearly naked." Hermione giggled as she spun around yet again, admiring the effect of the moving fabric. "And those flimsy scraps you call underwear don't help!"

"I know. It's amazing what they can do with a little magic and imagination. You look perfectly decent, but feel as if you are wearing nothing but a breath of air. It's supposed to do wonders for the libido, not that yours needs any encouragement!" Ginny laughed as Hermione flushed. "Come on, sit down and let me finish your hair."

Ginny swept the top of the bride's hair up into a soft knot studded with pearl hairpins and left the rest to hang in soft ringlets down her back.

"That's amazing, Gin. It looks far less bushy styled this way. I love it!" Hermione grinned as she studied the beautiful bride in the mirror. "I can't believe it's me!"

"All part of the Weasley service. Now, do you have any suitable jewellery?" The redhead suddenly turned and stared at Hermione. "Bloody hell! What about wedding rings?"

Hermione's elation evaporated as she realised she had given no thought to the matter. "I have no idea. The subject never came up. What shall I do?"

Ginny thought rapidly. "This is a Ministry ceremony, right?"

"Yes. It has to be performed by an authorised Ministry official to comply with the Marriage Law."

"Then don't worry. You won't need wedding rings, as they are unnecessary in purely Ministry performed unions. If you wish to buy rings later, you are perfectly entitled to, but you won't need them today. They usually use some sort of magical bond or vow in their ceremonies."

"I suppose wedding rings really are a fairly recent Muggle invention anyway," mused Hermione, reassured by Ginny's words. "But it would have been nice to have them. I guess I should talk to Severus about finding some later. Now, it's time you dressed as well, Miss Weasley!"

Once Ginny had donned her own finery, a dress in a similar style to Hermione's but in soft, green satin, the girls were ready to go. Hoots and cheers followed them as they passed through the group of well-wishers in the common room, once again explaining why the ceremony was only to be attended by a select few.

"We'll see you all at the celebratory feast later," Hermione called when they finally reached the door.

"Whew! I thought we'd never get away from that lot!" Ginny grinned, then stopped in her tracks as she rounded the corner into the main corridor. "Wow! That's some wizard you are marrying, Hermione!"

Hermione followed her friend's gaze, smile widening in appreciation.

"Do you think it's his hair?" whispered Ginny. "Tied back like that it makes him look quite striking."

"Or it could be those gorgeous robes. They have to be silk. Still black, but the detailing is magnificent. And the cut shows off his body much better than his usual style." Hermione openly ogled her husband-to-be.

The two young women trailed behind the seemingly oblivious wizard until they reached the corridor which led to the headmistress's staircase.

"So, do I pass?" Snape turned and asked with a roguish grin.

Hermione slowly ran her eyes over his body from elegantly coiffed hair to highly polished boots. "Mmm. Definitely," she replied.

"Impressive," Ginny added.

"I'm pleased you approve, and may I say, you ladies are both looking delightful." He spoke with gentlemanly courtesy to both witches, but the hot desire in his eyes was only directed at one.

Moments later, the three stood at the base of stairs leading to Snape and Hermione's future.

"Are you ready for this?" he murmured in her ear.

"I'm ready." She reached for his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. The brief upturn of the corners of his mouth was his only response.

Ginny turned and wrapped her arms around Hermione, surprising her with a fierce hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"He's a good man. Take care of him," she told her best friend.

Snape's startled expression at her words transformed into warmth as Ginny embraced him in turn.

"I know you'll look after her, sir. And remember, if she gets a little bossy, just tell her so she usually backs off." After kissing his cheek as well, she grinned. "Well, come on then, let's get you married. The sooner you get this over with, the sooner you will get to the wedding night!"

Hermione's whack on her arm and Snape's flush only served to make the irrepressible redhead's grin wider.

"You two are *so* easy to bait!" she crowed.

"Remind me again why this crazy young woman is your best friend, my dear?" Snape enquired, his best scowl applied to his face.

"Because she's crazy enough to like my fiancé," Hermione replied with a wry grin.

"I suppose that is an acceptable reason for putting up with her."

"It could be worse. We could be standing here with Ron... or Harry... or..."

"No! Stop! I give in. Ginny Weasley, you are my soon-to-be-bride's best friend. I would consider it an honour to be considered a friend as well." Snape extended his hand formally, which was ignored as Ginny enthusiastically hugged him once more.

"OK! OK! That's enough! He's *mine*, remember!" Hermione chuckled.

"You do realise, between the pair of you my reputation as a sour, old git is going to be completely ruined?" Snape smiled ruefully at the two young witches before him.

"We certainly hope so," retorted Ginny. "Now, get upstairs!"

And to Snape's astonishment, and secret delight, she slapped him on the rear to get him moving.

"Merlin, save me from Weasley women!" Snape pleaded as they ascended the stairs.

Hermione simply stared at the younger girl. Once Ginny Weasley accepted someone as a friend, she held *nothing* back.

Upon entering the headmistress's office, Hermione was entranced by the profusion of flowers and soft, pastel colours, which had replaced the heavy plaids and dark wood the current incumbent favoured.

A twinkle in Filius Flitwick's eye revealed the wand responsible for the changes. She watched with interest as Snape's expression morphed smoothly from his initial horror to serene acceptance. Wondering briefly if her fiancé had had a few fortifying drinks before leaving his rooms, she decided to simply enjoy his apparent mild humour.

Minerva McGonagall stepped forward. "Severus, Hermione, and Ginevra. You all look splendid. Please come and sit down while we attend to the legal necessities."

A short, thickset wizard wearing ill-fitting robes coughed delicately as the headmistress spoke.

"Oh, yes. Allow me to introduce Horatio Flume, the senior Marriage Law official from the Ministry. He will perform the ceremony and the appropriate Ministry-required charm work." Her lips thinned in disapproval as she spoke.

"*What* Ministry-required charm work?" demanded Hermione, a split second before Snape opened his mouth.

"Er... The spell that monitors the couple's compliance with the... ahem... procreation intent of the law." The Ministry man looked suitably embarrassed.

"Oh. You mean the spell that tells the perverts in your office exactly how often we are shagging? Tell me, Mr Flume, does kissing register? Manual stimulation? What about oral sex? If I give Severus here a blow job, does that show up on some sort of score sheet?" Hermione was deliberately blunt, much to the amusement of all in the room except Flume and her mortified fiancé, who had discovered a sudden fascination with the pattern on the rug. "I hope you people don't have a heavy workload, because we intend to keep you extremely busy!"

"Don't take that tone with me, young lady. I am no more in favour of this whole process than you are, but I have a family to feed and a Head of Department who does not take kindly to her orders being disobeyed."

Hermione sighed but said no more as she and Snape were handed the standard marriage documentation and the special Marriage Law papers.

"Severus, this says we have to have sex at least once a week without contraception, and if I haven't conceived after twelve months we have to present ourselves to the Ministry healers for examination. They also retain the right to randomly check for the use of contraceptive charms or potions." Hermione pointed out the relevant paragraphs.

"And you expected otherwise? How else will they enforce *your* recommendations?" he countered.

She had the grace to flush. "True. Well, we did expect it, didn't we? How many little Snapes did you say you wanted?" she asked with a cheeky grin, knowing full well the scans used by the healers would not reveal her Muggle contraceptive methods. She had discreetly checked that fact with Poppy Pomfrey the previous week.

Snape rolled his eyes. "Just sign the damned paperwork, Granger!"

Hermione signed her name with a flourish. "Why do we have to do this before the ceremony?" she asked.

"Your signature gives your consent to the spells used in the ceremony. Such charms cannot be used against a witch's or wizard's will," Flitwick explained as they all stood to begin the final part of the proceedings.

"Ahem," began Flume. "Do we have two witnesses of legal age and good standing present for the marriage of Severus Tobias Snape to Hermione Jean Granger?"

"I, Ginevra Molly Weasley, bear witness for the bride," stated Ginny.

"I, Filius Flitwick, bear witness for the groom."

"Then we may begin. Please face each other and join hands."

Snape and Hermione complied, standing before the bespectacled wizard.

"Hem, hem."

The interruption from the doorway called a halt to the proceedings. Standing just inside the office was Dolores Umbridge, resplendent in a pink tweed suit and matching bow, accompanied by a slightly twitchy Sybill Trelawney and a wide-eyed Millicent Bulstrode.

"Oh, Merlin, it's the Unholy Alliance," murmured Snape into Hermione's ear. "There should be a law against those three consorting together."

"I suppose it was a little too much to expect them to give up such a prize without a fight," she teased, sotto voce. "Should I take my wand out and prepare to defend your honour?"

He nodded at the headmistress, whose expression left no doubt as to her opinion of the intruders. "I think Minerva can handle the likes of Umbridge. I think we should just sit back and watch the show."

"Ms Umbridge, Professor Trelawney, Miss Bulstrode, to what do we owe the pleasure?" The cold steel in the headmistress's tone belied her polite inquiry.

"We are here to prevent a travesty. The very thought of a professor at this institution marrying a student is disgraceful!" Dolores Umbridge puffed herself up into full toad-like officiousness as she spoke. "The ceremony must be stopped. I will not permit it to proceed." She folded her hands complacently over her handbag and stood, smug and secure in her own righteousness.

"Is that so?" Minerva McGonagall replied, giving the odious woman no quarter. "I believe the Ministry would view it in an altogether different light, given the new Marriage Law, which actively encourages *any* woman over eighteen to petition for eligible wizards. There appears to be no stipulation as to the ages or occupations of the couple. The paperwork for this union has been completed before a duly authorised Ministry official, who could find no irregularities.

"Furthermore, Ms Umbridge, I demand to know what business it is of yours, and why you are in my office uninvited." In full tirade, she turned to the cowering Divination professor and student. "Sybill, did *you* bring this woman past the gargoyle? What could you hope to gain by allying yourself with such a b...witch? And Miss Bulstrode, while I am aware you might have been led astray by those supposedly older and wiser than yourself, unless you remove yourself from this office immediately there *will* be consequences." The headmistress's glare melted the Divination professor's feeble resistance, and she scuttled out of the room, dragging the young Slytherin witch with her.

Hermione mouthed silently to Snape and Ginny, "Two down, one to go." They watched with amusement as Dolores Umbridge ignored the headmistress's admonition and stormed over to the flustered Ministry man.

"Mr Flume. What is the meaning of this? You of all people should know how hard I worked and how many favours I had to call in to get this law slipped through as quickly as possible." Her composure cast aside, Dolores allowed her temper to take over. "How dare you give Ministry approval to this match. You know he is *mine!*" she screeched, heedless of her suddenly interested audience.

"Yes, Ms Umbridge. No, Ms Umbridge. Sorry, Ms Umbridge. P-please don't fire me, I have..."

"*She* is your superior?" Hermione could not restrain herself as her brain put a few things together and rapidly reached the correct conclusion.

The man stopped grovelling briefly and nodded.

"So, she used *my* analysis to further her own underhanded desire to get her hands on Severus Snape? You evil, misbegotten, manipulative..." Hermione no longer felt any obligation to conceal her feelings for the nasty piece of work before her.

"Now, Hermione, dear, perhaps we should let the appropriate authorities deal with her?" Minerva McGonagall suggested as Ginny and Snape confiscated Hermione's wand and restrained her more violent impulses. Meanwhile, the Charms master had the forethought to disarm and immobilise the raving, incoherent Umbridge before she took flight.

A quick Floo call summoned Kingsley Shacklebolt, who rapidly took everyone's statements. Flume happily detailed the extent of Umbridge's many breaches of protocol, ethics, and Wizarding Law. An hour later, Umbridge had been removed to the Ministry for further questioning, and a beaming Flume had begun to gather up his papers.

"What are you doing?" asked Hermione, a suspicious cloud gathering on her brow.

"Leaving. I assume you will not need me any longer," he replied.

"But you haven't performed the ceremony yet."

"You heard Minister Shacklebolt. There is to be a full enquiry into the whole Marriage Law. You do not have to marry now. It's all been cancelled."

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Prompt: 1. Something Old. The Marriage Law Challenge. Many thanks to karelia for the beta.

## Chapter Eleven: Conflagration

*Chapter 12 of 23*

Hermione is back at Hogwarts for her seventh year. Voldemort is dead, and life should be good. That is, until the results of her special Arithmancy Project provide some unwelcome realisations for the Potions master.

### Chapter Eleven: Conflagration

"You heard Minister Shacklebolt. There is to be a full enquiry into the whole Marriage Law. You do not have to marry now. It's all been cancelled," Horatio Flume declared.

Hermione gazed at those surrounding her. Minerva McGonagall looked relieved as she straightened her desk. Filius Flitwick was dismantling the decorations. Ginny was smiling; a knowing look in her eyes, and Snape was staring at her in disbelief.

"Like bloody hell it's been cancelled!" All eyes turned to the enraged young witch. "Severus bloody Snape, if you think you are getting out of this that easily, you are mistaken! Get your butt over here... NOW! And you..." She pointed to Flume. "Get your wand out and start the vows!"

"Are you sure, Hermione?" asked Snape, an unreadable expression on his face.

"Have you changed your mind, Severus?" Rich, brown eyes met deepest black. Hermione watched Snape's face as she deliberately met his gaze and offered her mind to him. His eyes widened as he realised her intent and nodded.

He remained silent for several long moments, then slowly the corners of his mouth turned up until Severus Snape, Potions professor and official snarky git, was grinning from ear to ear. Suddenly, he lowered one knee to the floor. Taking Hermione's hand in his, he touched his lips to her skin.

"Miss Granger. Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?" he asked, gaze once again locked with hers.

She smiled and pulled him to his feet. Flinging her arms around his neck, her lips met his as she replied, "I do believe I will."

Long moments and a brief discussion with Flume later, Severus and Hermione once more joined hands before their witnesses.

"Do you, Severus Tobias Snape, take this witch, Hermione Jean Granger, to be your wife, willingly and unconditionally?"

"I do."

"Do you, Hermione Jean Granger, take this wizard, Severus Tobias Snape, to be your husband, willingly and unconditionally?"

"I do."

The official waved his wand, and a line of cold fire encircled their wrists.

"Do you, Severus, promise to forever protect Hermione from harm, care for her, and respect her?"

"I do." Snape squeezed Hermione's hands.

"Do you, Hermione, promise to forever protect Severus from harm, care for him, and respect him?"

"I do," she replied, smiling.

Another wave and another binding of fire.

Flume hesitated, but at a nod from the young witch before him, continued to speak.

"Do you, Severus, promise to offer Hermione the fruits of your body, so she may conceive your children?"

"I do," he stated firmly, eyes locked with hers.

"Do you, Hermione, promise to nurture and love the children produced by your union?"

"I do," she whispered as she sank into his gaze, knowing she meant every word.

The final bond settled over their wrists, flared briefly, then disappeared as the modified Unbreakable Vow activated.

"I now pronounce you wizard and witch, bound by your vows and your duty to your fellow wizards. You may now k..." Flume spluttered to a halt as Snape pre-empted his words and swept his bride into a deep, passionate kiss, which lasted somewhat too long for the presence of mind of all those in the room except a smirking Ginny Weasley.

Breaking apart, the newlyweds surfaced with matching heavy-eyed expressions to receive congratulations and well wishes from those present. For once, Severus Snape's expression was devoid of a sneer.

A perplexed redhead pulled Hermione aside and whispered urgently, "But why the full Vow with the promise to bear children and all? You could have used the standard ceremony. What was Flume thinking?"

"He offered us the standard ceremony. We chose to take the Ministry Vow. The only difference was he didn't use the surveillance spell work."

"But why?"

"Because, despite Umbridge and her foul plans, my analysis on wizarding birth rates is still sound. We all need to play our part in restoring the balance of witches and wizards." Hermione turned to join her new husband as her friend simply shook her head in wonder.

Hand in hand, the two made their way to the Great Hall where the assembled students and staff had been restlessly wondering why there had been such a delay. As Severus and Hermione Snape appeared at the top table, a cheer broke out from the crowd. Smiling happily, they both waved and acknowledged the welcome, and then, to the delight and amazement of all, the groom took his bride in his arms and kissed her soundly.

Hermione blushed and pulled away. "Whatever happened to maintaining decorum?" she asked as she tidied her mussed hair.

"The moment just seemed to call for it," he replied with a smirk. "Just don't expect it to be repeated too often."

"I've given up knowing what to expect from you, Severus," his wife muttered as he pulled out her chair.

"Excellent. I would hate to be predictable."

Ginny's arrival interrupted a deep and meaningful discussion about Quidditch plays between the boys. She grinned as she noticed Ron nudge her boyfriend, who blurted out a typical mangled compliment and reddened.

"It's all right, Harry. You can tell me what you think of my dress later... in private," she told him, laughing at Ron's expression. Watching the Snapes, she mused, "They look happy, don't they?"

Harry turned and studied the couple at the head table. A surprised smile curved his lips. "Yes. They do."

The house-elves had surpassed all expectations with a feast to delight even the most demanding palates. As the desserts appeared, Severus felt a determined hand gliding up his thigh.

"What do you think you are doing, wife?" he growled under cover of lifting his glass to his lips.

She grinned wickedly and winked as her hand crept closer to her goal. Using her other hand, she spooned some decadent chocolate mousse into her mouth. Licking her lips slowly, she watched his pupils dilate as she lightly grasped the rising evidence of his response. The next spoonful was offered to his lips as she reached lower and cupped him in her hand. The involuntary parting of his thighs as he swallowed the rich dessert signified his capitulation to her advances.

"You realise, my dear, there are any number of your peers who would love to be in your position at the moment," he breathed in her ear.

"What? Married? Sitting at the head table?" Her brow knotted in confusion.

Severus's expression was innocence personified. "You have the evil Potions professor by the balls in front of the entire school. I suspect there are those out there who would pay for the opportunity to have me at their mercy," he whispered as he shifted slightly in his chair, grinding against her hand.

"They'd better not even *think* about it. They're *my* playthings." Her gentle squeeze affirmed her possessiveness as she continued sharing her mousse with him as if nothing untoward was occurring under the tablecloth.

Meanwhile, his free hand had manoeuvred under her skirt and was brushing against the flimsy fabric covering her own arousal. "That may be the case, Mrs Snape, but I believe I should have equal rights." Her answering soft moan confirmed his claim.

Down at the Gryffindor table, an unusually observant Ron noted, "I suspect there is more going on up there than we can see. Do you realise they both have a hand under the table and look like they are about ready to pounce on each other?"

Harry groaned and hid his face in his hands. "Did you have to point that out? I was quite happy not thinking about what they will be doing this evening."

"Well, I noticed and thought the least I could do was share the horror." Ron grinned.

Ginny thumped them both. "Don't be so immature, you boys. I think it's sweet the way they are looking at each other. And hot."

"She really *does* want to have sex with him?" Harry was still having trouble getting his head around the concept of anyone wanting to shag the Potions professor.

"Contrary to popular belief, we *women* actually want to have sex with our men." She sent a pointed glance at her boyfriend, who had the grace to blush.

"Harry, are you holding out on my sister?" Ron asked. "Because if you are, I suggest you reconsider. You really don't want to upset her, you know. I've seen her when she can't get something she wants, and the temper tantrums are really scary." He shook his head at his friend's foolishness.

"You want me to have sex with your sister?"

"In the interest of a peaceful life, I want you to shag her senseless, then she'll quit the frustrated sighs and pining looks she has been throwing at you all term. Or have you not noticed?"

"Ron! I have not!" Ginny cried.

"Have so!"

"Have not!"

"Have so!"

No-one noticed the couple stealing away from the top table to begin their wedding night.

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"Put me down someone will see!" Hermione protested as Severus strode down the corridors towards the dungeons carrying her over his shoulder.

"They're all in the Great Hall." The hand caressing her wriggling bottom reinforced his lack of concern.

"Severus! Behave yourself!" She struggled in vain.

"No. I'm your husband now, and I shall do as I please." His teasing stopped as he felt two hands sliding down his back to investigate his own buttocks. "Hermione..."

"What? I'm just checking out my *husband's* assets. And very nice assets he has too," she replied cheekily as she kneaded the assets under discussion.

Severus suddenly set her down and pulled her into his arms. His lips met hers as the fever that had been building all day reached its peak, burning away any inhibitions or thoughts of propriety. Backing her against the cold, stone wall, his hands wound through her hair as hers replied in kind.

Hermione felt the surge of power emanating from the dark wizard as he reached for her hands and held them above her head. Grinding his rock-hard erection against her, he breathed into her ear, "Feel what you do to me, woman. I am completely at *your* mercy."

Releasing her, he slumped back against the wall beside her. "Forgive me, Hermione. I..."

Taking his hand, she drew him close. "No, forgive me. It was unfair to tease you so. Let's go and find a more appropriate venue."

His eyes glinted in the dim light of the corridor as he resolutely gathered his self-control and followed his wife down the stairs to their new home.

Upon entering their sitting room, Severus turned to his new bride. "Would you like a drink? Wine? Tea? Before we..."

Hermione smiled at his sudden change of pace. His forcefulness of a few minutes earlier had ceded to his usual reticence. She shook her head.

"Severus, it is time. Come." She led the way into the bedroom, turning to face him as he entered and doused all the candles bar one with a muttered *Nox*.

Aware of his attempt to avoid her eyes, she relit the room with a flick of her wand.

"No. I want to see you."

"Why?" He bowed his head, hiding behind his now loose hair.

Hermione reached up to push a strand behind his ear and forced him to look at her. "You are my husband now, Severus. I want to see your face. I want to see your body. All of it. I want to see your expression when I give you pleasure."

His eyes were for once completely unguarded. Boundless desire, hope, and something else, something new and tender, lay within. She could have drowned in the emotion she found there, but the heat in her body reminded her of other, more pressing matters. Tearing her gaze away, Hermione set about the task of relieving her husband of his virginity.

Fingers unbuttoned his robes and coat and tossed them aside, then started on his shirt as Severus abandoned thought and gave in to the overwhelming desire his witch had inflamed. When her hands met the skin of his chest, bared without his realising, he heard a groan and discovered it had issued from his own lips. He pulled away, desperate to recover some sense of control, to find his wife openly studying his now partly bare upper body.

"Hmm, not bad. A little thin, but nicely formed and firm." Before he could stop her, she had pulled his shirt from his trousers and unfastened the buttons. As she reached for the waistband of his boxers, he stepped back and promptly tripped over the shoes he had kicked off earlier. Landing inelegantly on the bed, he looked up at her pleadingly as she advanced on him, a wicked grin on her face.

Slowly lifting the hem of her diaphanous dress, Hermione removed it in a seductive strip-tease and let it slip to the ground. Running her hands up her sides and across her breasts evoked a whimper from the man on the bed, who was watching her every move as if mesmerised. She reached behind to unhook her bra, allowing the straps to gradually slip down and expose her flesh to his hungry gaze.

Hermione had never imagined her new husband looking so sexy. Sprawled across the bed, hair tousled, cheeks slightly flushed, eyes dark with arousal, his shirt was unbuttoned and pushed aside, revealing the lean body she had seen briefly before. His loosened trousers sat so low on his hips, the nest of dark hair cradling his arousal was evident. Bare feet seemed more intimate in his half-undressed state than they had when he was clad only in a towel. Her gaze fixed on his face as she removed her remaining garment.

As she slid her knickers down her legs, he looked for the first time upon her naked body. By Merlin, she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She was the only naked woman he had seen in his bedroom, which probably counted for a lot, but she was undeniably a very attractive, sensual woman. And she was reaching for his boxers again. This time he allowed her to draw them down his body, caught in her heated gaze as she revealed his most intimate anatomy.

His most intimate, extremely hard anatomy.

"Not bad at all," she breathed as she reached forward and ran a finger along his length.

He let out his breath as his body jolted from her touch, wanting more.

"Mmm. Want something, husband?" she crooned, grasping him in her hand as she once again found his lips with her hot, wanton mouth.

"I... want... you..." he growled as she slowly, teasingly stroked him from base to tip.

"All in good time. Have patience." Her lips moved down his body lighting fires at his neck, his nipples, and then his navel as her tongue swirled in the depression. Further down she travelled as she sank to her knees before him, hand still melting his thought processes with sure, rhythmic motion.

As her mouth finally enclosed him, he shook his head. "No... No... It's too much... too much... I can't..." Her skilful lips and tongue were wrenching his hard wrought control from his grasp. Words of protest died as the tip of her finger trailed a line of fire down, down, down, between his buttocks to the sensitive areas beyond.

An unrelenting tightness and fullness heralded his incipient orgasm, and he gasped as his body betrayed him in the presence of such exquisite torture. "Oh, Merlin! It's too much! Hermiiiiioonnneee!"

Slumping back onto the bed, he slowly returned to his senses and sat up to find a smug Hermione licking her lips. "What did you do that for? I mean, it was amazing, but now..." He looked down at his deflating arousal, still damp from her attentions.

"Oh, the moment just seemed to call for it. Don't worry, you'll be up to another round quite soon." She grinned as he stared at her, eyes wide.

"Are you trying to wear me out, woman? First, you insist I bring myself to climax *twice* earlier today, then..." He closed his eyes and laid back on the pillows in defeat. "I'm an old man, you know. You'll be the death of me!"

"Don't be so daft, Severus. I'm sure a few more orgasms won't do you in."

"A few more?"

Hermione smiled patiently and ran her hand down his chest, trailing kisses along his cheek to finally meet his lips. Her tongue teased them apart until he relented and tasted himself on her lips, groaning as her investigating fingers found his re-awakening arousal.

Suddenly, he pulled her hand away from his groin and gripped it firmly in his. "I think it is time, young lady, that I have a turn." Taking her other hand, he extended her arms above her head and with a whispered word had them bound in silken tethers. "Now, let's see who is teasing whom, hmm?"

Hermione squirmed as his mouth explored her lips, her neck, and down to the aching peaks of her breasts. Finally, hot warmth enveloped them, sending fire to her centre and anticipation to her imagination. Parting her thighs as he moved between them, her breath caught as hands, ceaseless in their travels over her heated skin, moved down, closer and closer to her point of need. Then stopped as he sat back and studied her.

"Severus? What are you doing?" She wriggled under his gaze.

"Shh, woman. Keep still. I'm just looking."

"At *what*, exactly?" She pouted in embarrassment and frustration.

Hair damp with sweat, face flushed, eyes suspiciously bright, Severus Snape looked younger than she had ever seen him. "I'm looking at something incredible, something I have never seen before. Just give me a moment, will you?" he replied, voice roughened. "You are so beautiful, so soft and pink and wet. Wet for me. I can't believe it."

"Please, Severus," she entreated.

"Please, what, my dear?" His hands brushed the soft inner skin of her thighs.

"Please, touch me!"

"Hmm. Here?" He grazed across the skin of her lower abdomen.

She shook her head, mute in her desire.

"Here, then?" Fingertips slowly drawing along the crease between hip and thigh.

"No," she whispered.

"Maybe here," he murmured, gently tugging her curls.

"Severus, if you don't *touch* me right now, I'm going to hex somewhere sensitive!" she growled.

He smirked. "But then you would regret it, wouldn't you?" He continued to caress her, ever closer, but not close enough.

"Please?"

"I suppose, as you asked nicely."

Hermione came apart as her husband finally caressed her most intimate place.

With his tongue.

"Severusssss!" The suddenness and intensity of her orgasm took them both by surprise.

After licking and suckling until she had ceased shuddering, he grinned as he raised his head. "Pass, did I?"



His wife weakly slapped his arm. "Outstanding, you teasing git. Now, I am worn out. Do you think we could continue this after a little nap?" she suggested.

"I don't think so, madam. I believe you are responsible for this." He drew her hand down and wrapped her fingers around his once again impressive erection.

"If you put it that way, I suppose we do have some unfinished business..."

As he slid into a woman's body for the very first time, Severus Snape finally conceded defeat. His last defence shattered, he gave in with good grace and proceeded to learn as much as he could about pleasing this woman, who had given herself to him so completely and unconditionally.

"I knew it," she murmured much later as they lay together in a tangle of sweaty, tired limbs.

"Knew what?" he asked, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

"I knew you would be beautiful at the moment of climax. You are, you know," she stated matter-of-factly.

"You must be mad, woman," he replied sleepily. "Now, go to sleep, you have indeed worn me out."

She smiled and kissed him gently. "You're not so bad for a grumpy old professor, you know."

The grumpy old professor just smiled and went to sleep.

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Prompt: 1. Something Old. The Marriage Law Challenge. Many thanks to karelia for the beta.

## Chapter Twelve: The Morning After the Night Before

*Chapter 13 of 23*

Hermione is back at Hogwarts for her seventh year. Voldemort is dead, and life should be good. That is, until the results of her special Arithmancy Project provide some unwelcome realisations for the Potions master.

### Chapter Twelve: The Morning After the Night Before

Hermione smiled to herself sleepily as she opened her eyes the next morning and discovered a pleasant ache in muscles she had not used for some time. Turning towards the other side of the bed, she was disappointed to find it empty. She pouted briefly as she scanned the room until she discovered the partly open bathroom door and the sounds of water running within.

Slipping out from the tangled sheets, Hermione tiptoed across the floor to peek into the bathroom. Sure enough, Severus was under the shower, water cascading down his finely toned back and buttocks as he washed his hair. Not wanting to disrupt what was proving to be a fine display of naked male, Hermione leaned against the cool wall to watch her man.

As he rinsed his hair clean, oblivious to his increasingly aroused audience of one, Severus reached for the soap, turning slightly to one side and revealing an impressive morning erection. Hermione felt her insides turning to liquid heat as she watched him methodically lather his arms and legs and rinse off. As he ran his hands down his chest, skimming lightly over taut nipples, she gasped, and when he continued to progress down his body she knew she was lost.

Reaching his rigid flesh, Severus ran a practised hand down the shaft, gripping with just the right amount of force to send all his nerve-endings spiralling into overdrive. Two leisurely strokes, then he ran his thumb over the already moistened tip, imagining his bride's hand doing the same. Pumping faster, he startled to feel naked breasts pressed to his back, and a much smaller hand joining his on his cock.

"I think that's *my* job now." A sultry whisper tingled against his ear as she took over the task he had started. The impassioned wizard groaned and braced himself against the tiles of the shower wall as he gazed down at the hands of the witch who had given him, and was still giving, so much pleasure.

"That's right, just relax and let it happen, Severus," Hermione crooned as she reached with her other hand between his parted thighs to cup and caress him. Her own arousal grew as her movements became faster, and soon her breathing became as erratic as his. Having this man literally in the palm of her hand was proving as stimulating as his hands and mouth had been the night before.

All too soon, his release came in spurts against the wall as she shuddered her own climax behind him, too far gone to await his attention.

After his breathing had settled, and his legs had lost that jelly-like feeling, Severus turned to his wife. "Did you? From that? With no...?"

"Yes. I did." She grinned and kissed his astonishment away.

"But how?" He was not going to be distracted.

"Apparently, having the evil Potions professor by the balls is a real turn on. Who'd have thought?"

"Hermione Snape, you are one wicked wench." Severus smiled, shaking his head in disbelief at his outrageous witch.

"Say that again," she murmured, wrapping her arms around his waist and resting her cheek against his chest where his heart still pounded the rhythm of his recent climax.

"You are one wicked wench?"

"No, say my name."

"*Hermione Snape*. Why are you crying? What's wrong?" He pulled away, alarmed.

"Nothing's wrong, you daft man. I'm crying because I'm happy. Girls do that sort of thing!"

"Well, do you think you can warn me next time?" he huffed. "I thought I'd done something wrong."

"No, my dear husband. So far, you have done everything perfectly. Now, go and dry off and order us some breakfast while I finish showering."

"Yes, madam. Anything else?"

"Yes. Don't you dare put any clothes on. I'm not finished with you yet." Hermione smirked as Severus rolled his eyes and left the room.

Several minutes later, the delicious aroma of freshly brewed tea and hot toast wafted into the bathroom. Rapidly completing her ablutions, Hermione wandered naked out to the sitting room.

"I thought I told you to stay undressed?" she asked, frowning at his black silk robe.

"I did not wish to offend the house-elves, my dear. You wouldn't want them to start refusing to serve you again?"

"You *know* about that?"

"You almost caused the biggest house-elf rebellion in the history of Hogwarts. It would have been hard to miss," he replied while pouring the tea.

"Oh. Well, I was young and foolish then. I thought they needed help," she explained, helping herself to scrambled eggs and bacon.

"Just like you thought *I* needed help?" he asked with a wry grimace.

"Oh, no. I knew *you* needed help. The thought of Dolores Umbridge getting her claws into you still makes me nauseated. Although, perhaps I should send her a polite thank you note. After all, if it wasn't for her..."

"You would be free to pursue the man of your dreams." Severus scowled into his teacup.

"Don't be such an idiot. If I wanted any other man in my dreams, I would have let Flume pack up and go yesterday. However, it's you I want. Preferably several times between now and lunchtime, when I suppose we ought to make an appearance in the Great Hall before the students and staff think I've done something nefarious to their beloved Potions master." She giggled as he nearly choked on his toast.

"That may be true, but sex alone does not make a relationship, Hermione," he countered once he could breathe again.

"Oh, Severus, do you *really* think I'm only interested in you for that?" She reached across the table to take his hand. "You saw into my thoughts yesterday. You know how I feel about you."

"You like me, although I have no idea why. You respect me. You want me to be happy and safe. You desire me and enjoy spending time with me. But..."

"Hush. Don't say it. It's been less than two weeks since I petitioned for you. I know the physical side of our relationship has taken precedence, but through that I've learned a lot about you. And the more I learn, the more I believe we can be happy together. Give us time, Severus. I think it will be worth it." She stood and pulled him to his feet. "Come, let's just sit on the couch and talk for a bit."

Her husband cast his eyes over her still naked form, casting his doubts aside for the day. "Oh, I don't think so. I believe you have more to learn about me. Shall we?" He gestured toward the bedroom.

One scorching kiss later, the Snapes retired to their bedroom for more thorough research into each other's most intimate secrets.

"Ginny, have you seen Hermione this morning?" Harry asked his girlfriend as they reclined on the sofa in the adult students' quarters.

"Why on earth do you think I would have seen her?" she replied, shaking her head at his complete lack of insight.

"Well, she wasn't at breakfast and neither was Snape... Oh. They're still..."

"What, Harry?" She couldn't resist teasing him as he slowly put two and two together.

"All this time? Surely not? With *Snape*?"

"With her *husband*, Harry. They are newly-weds. You didn't really expect them to turn up at breakfast as if everything was still the same, did you?"

"Oi! Where's Mione?" called Ron as he burst through the door in a flurry of red hair and long limbs. "I've looked all over the place!"

"Harry? Would you like to enlighten my idiot brother?"

"She... er... that is, she and Snape... um..." Harry couldn't do it.

"Are you trying to say they're still at it down there? The lucky bastard! Wonder if they'll show their faces at lunch?"

"*Ron!*"

"What? At least I'm not looking green like Mr Prude here. Come on, Harry. What would you be doing if it was you and Ginny the morning after your wedding? I bet you wouldn't be seen for a few hours." Ron clapped his friend on his back as he choked a little and blushed.

"A few hours? It had better be a few bloody days, or he can find another bride. Preferably someone who's taken a vow of chastity," Ginny grumbled.

Harry smiled weakly and attempted to change the subject. "Did you see the Holyhead Harpies have taken on a new Seeker?"

Brother and sister raised identical red eyebrows and grinned.

"Oh, really, Harry?" they replied as one.

"You realise they're all going to know exactly what we've been doing all morning?" Severus asked as they neared the Great Hall where lunch was about to be served.

"I certainly hope so. I wouldn't want them to think we'd spent the morning having dry discussions about Potions. I know I'm the school swot, but I'd be very disappointed if they assumed I couldn't keep my husband interested beyond yesterday evening."

"Well, then. Perhaps I need to do this." With that, he gathered her close and met her parted lips with his own, allowing his tongue to caress hers as his hands ran through her recently tidied hair. He stepped back and surveyed the result. "That will do. Now you look thoroughly taken!"

His snort of mirth when she slapped his arm echoed into the silence as they entered the Great Hall. All eyes trained upon them as he escorted her to the Gryffindor table.

"Why are we stopping here, Severus?" she whispered.

"I assume your friends will wish to ensure you have survived the night. Ginevra looks beside herself with curiosity. However, I suggest you have *that* discussion in your old room in private."

"*Severus!* You don't think I would share details of last night, do you?" Hermione turned to him, indignant at his assumption.

"You may not intend to, but I've had experience of a Ginny Weasley interrogation. You'll give in. But I'd better not hear anything about our bedroom activities from anyone else."

"I almost think you *want* me to tell her what a fine lover you are, Severus Snape." The crimson in his cheeks confirmed her suspicion. "Men! You're all the same!"

His grin as he walked up to the staff table scared several Hufflepuff first years, who were blissfully ignorant of just what Professor Snape and his wife had been doing for the last sixteen hours.

"So? How was last night?" Ginny whispered as her newlywed friend joined her.

"Last night? The weather was clear; dinner was delicious as usual... Oh, you mean *last night*?" Hermione giggled as Ginny huffed in exasperation at her teasing.

"Yes. I mean *last night*. How was he?"

"He was fantastic last night, several times... and before breakfast... and after breakfast... and..."

"*Hermione!*"

"What?" she asked, all innocence.

"You did not just tell me you shagged Snape that many times since last night."

"I certainly did."

"You'll kill him! He's not a teenager, you know," Ginny declared.

"Funny, that's what he said. But there he is, living proof."

"Living proof of what, Hermione?" asked Harry, leaning over from Ginny's other side.

"That shagging like a Niffler does a man no harm," she replied, winking at Ginny.

"Er... What *is* it with you women? Can't you just talk about homework, or house-elf rights, or Arithmancy like any other normal person?" Harry threw up his hands in dismay as if to fend off unwanted thoughts of his Potions professor and his best friend *doing* it.

"What's she on about, Harry? Homework again? You'd think with just getting married, she'd have better things to talk about," added Ron, who as usual had come in halfway through a conversation and taken it completely out of context.

"Come on, Hermione, let's get out of here, so you can tell *me* all the details," said Ginny as she loaded some sandwiches on a plate and tugged at her friend's arm. "I'm sure he can last an hour or so without you. Poor man could probably do with a lie down, anyway."

Hermione stood and wriggled her fingers in farewell to her husband, who had a knowing smirk on his face. She rolled her eyes as he lifted his glass in a silent salute to Weasley persistence.

---

"Well?" Ginny asked as they warded the door to Hermione's old room, which still contained the bed and some of the clothes and books she didn't need.

"All right. He said you wouldn't rest until you knew everything."

"He did?" Ginny grinned.

"He has you all figured out, Miss Weasley. Anyway. We went off after dinner last night..."

"After shenanigans under the table, you mean." Ginny interjected.

"That, too. When we got to his... I mean, our... that sounds so odd... rooms, he was hesitant at first, as if he didn't know what to do."

"Which he didn't."

"I suppose not. So, I took the lead and undressed him."

"Nice body?" the redhead asked.

"Oh, yes. Just perfect."

"And?" she prompted.

"And what?"

"You know. How big was...?"

"Ginny! I can't tell you that!" Hermione blushed, remembering just how impressive her husband's anatomy was.

"That big, huh?"

"Gods, yes." Both young women giggled at Hermione's sigh of contentment.

"Then what happened?"

"Then I stripped for him. You know, Ginny, I had the impression he'd not only never had sex, but he'd never seen a willing, naked woman before. You'd think he might have at least, you know..."

"Gone part of the way?"

"Yeah. But anyway, then I... well... did what we talked about that day."

"You mean?"

"Yes. That."

"But why? Didn't you want to have sex properly?"

"That was just to take the edge off. It didn't take long before he was ready again. Especially after he repaid the favour." Hermione's sensual smile left Ginny in no doubt as to how rewarding that particular activity had been.

"And then you...?"

"Yes, twice. And I *helped* him in the shower this morning."

"So what have you been doing since then... oh...*really*?"

"Really. He's a quick learner. And proud of it."

"I'll bet he's sweating now, wondering what you're telling me." Ginny chuckled.

"The bloody man as good as told me to tell you. I think he wants someone else to know what a great lover he is!" Hermione complained half-heartedly.

"From prude to proud, in two short weeks. You should congratulate yourself, Hermione."

"I suppose I am rather pleased. To think I'd thought he'd be difficult and surly. Mind you, he might be surly if I spend too long talking to you, Gin. We're supposed to be on honeymoon, you know. We've only got today, then back to classes again tomorrow. Don't expect to see us again until then."

"What, are you going to tie him up down there to stop him doing rounds?" Ginny laughed at the thought.

"If necessary, Ginny, if necessary."

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Prompt: 1. Something Old. The Marriage Law Challenge. Many thanks to karelia for the beta.

## Chapter Thirteen: Reactions

*Chapter 14 of 23*

Hermione is back at Hogwarts for her seventh year. Voldemort is dead, and life should be good. That is, until the results of her special Arithmancy Project provide some unwelcome realisations for the Potions master.

### Chapter Thirteen: Reactions

Severus groaned inwardly at the prurient interest evident in most of his colleagues' expressions as he approached the staff table. Accepting his wife would discuss their personal life with a young woman he considered a friend was one thing, slaking the inevitable curiosity of the likes of Rolanda Hooch and Pomona Sprout was an entirely different matter.

"Hey, Snape! We missed you at breakfast. Did Madam Snape decide she liked riding broomsticks after all?" jeered Hooch in her usual crass manner.

Not for the first time did Severus appreciate the charms which kept the staff conversations private from the students.

"She does look rather animated, Rolanda. I think he must have *ploughed the field* effectively," added Sprout to the groans of her companions.

"I'll bet he made her see stars," the Astronomy professor chipped in with a lascivious grin.

Bill Weasley chortled at Sinistra's comment. "*Nothing like a bit of foolish wand waving, I always say!*"

"Do you think he's finally worked out one and one makes *Oh, Oh, OH!*" Septima Vector snorted at her own cleverness.

"I'm sure he *charmed* her knickers off." Flitwick giggled, then blushed at Severus's scowl.

"Et tu, Filius?" he snarled.

"Er... sorry. Couldn't help myself."

"Now, children! Leave poor Severus alone. I'm sure he's exhausted..."

"*Minerva!*"

"At least it wasn't a bad pun, dear. Now, everyone has had their fun; let's all settle down and enjoy our meal. Tea, Severus?" She patted his arm maternally as she murmured, "You really do look a little weary. I assume you and Hermione *did* complete the binding?"

"Yes, Minerva. The marriage has been consummated. Several times. Satisfied?" Severus sighed as he sipped his tea and attacked his lunch. "Although I'm not sure my wife is yet. What on earth have you been teaching the students in that house of yours?"

The headmistress chuckled, noticing the new sparkle in the Potions professor's eyes and his barely suppressed smile.

"I suspect my little lioness has learned a little about taking charge over the years," she replied, hiding a smile of her own.

"A little?" He shook his head. "I suggest you ensure the girl has plenty of homework over the next few weeks, or you might need to find yourself a new Potions master. This one will be quite worn out." The softening of his features as he regarded his bride across the Great Hall belied his words.

Minerva McGonagall continued her meal, content in the knowledge her favourite student had matters well in hand.

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Two hours later, Hermione returned to her new quarters to find Severus had indeed taken the opportunity to catch up on some sleep. Quietly undressing, she slipped into the bed beside him and lay on her side, head propped up on one hand as she studied his face. Relaxed in slumber, the frown lines on his forehead had eased, and his mouth had softened, taking years off his appearance.

Gently kissing his strangely adorable nose, she snuggled into her husband's side and contemplated her feelings for the dark, enigmatic man until she drifted off into sleep.

Severus awoke for the second time in his life to find a naked, tousle-haired beauty draped over his equally nude body, part of which was astonishingly ready for more attention. As she stirred and murmured his name in her sleep, the ex-Death Eater wondered at his ever-increasing attachment to the young woman he had married. It had indeed only been two weeks since her petition, but in that short time he had discovered an intellectual equal where a hand-waving know-it-all had been, an incredibly sensual woman instead of a gauche teenager, and a depth of compassion and caring he had never been afforded before. In short, Severus Snape was poised to take a blind leap of faith into the abyss of love, and he was terrified.

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The atmosphere in the Potions classroom was decidedly tense on Monday morning. In retrospect, Hermione realised entering the room with Severus from his office rather than joining her classmates in the corridor was not the best decision she had ever made. Having decided breakfast was a meal they would share in their quarters, away from the inquisitive gazes of their peers, not to mention the extra time it gave them in bed, she had not considered how their joint entrance would appear to her fellow students.

"Hope you shagged him into a good mood this morning, 'Mione," teased Ron, nudging Harry, whose blush appeared to have become a permanent fixture.

"I just hope you've done your homework, Ron, because nothing could put him in a bad mood faster than his students being unprepared," she retorted, winking at Harry as their friend's face fell.

"I did... honest, 'Mione, but without you around it was so hard!" he wailed.

"Oh, for goodness sake, Ronald Weasley, you only had two feet of parchment to write on Polyjuice. You've helped brew and used it yourself. How hard could it be to write something coherent about its properties? I thought you were intending to put some effort in this year?"

"Yes, but... Quidditch practice... Hogsmeade... your wedding feast..." he mumbled.

"Don't you blame me. You had all day yesterday to write that essay. I give in! Harry, please tell me you did yours."

Harry pulled a slightly tatty piece of parchment from his bag with a rueful grin. It was barely two feet at a stretch and full of cross-outs, but at least he had something to hand in.

"I suppose that will have to do." Hermione sighed as her understanding of her husband's attitude towards his students increased exponentially.

"So, exactly *when* did you have time to write yours then?" asked Ron, who had a fair idea of how his friend had spent the previous afternoon.

"I wrote it *last* Monday when it was assigned." She shook her head at their horrified expressions. After seven years, she still failed to comprehend their singular avoidance of time management and planning.

"Will you be ready for class any time soon, *Hermionedear*, or shall we start without you?" The glint in Severus's eye warned his wife not to try and take any advantage of the mind-blowing orgasm she had given him less than an hour earlier.

"Er... sorry, Severus. We were just discussing homework," she apologised, relieved to see the subtle relaxation in his stance.

"Well, perhaps you can inform the class of the important properties of Polyjuice Potion, Mr Weasley?" he demanded.

Hermione smothered a grin. The sneaky bastard must have overheard their conversation and was deliberately putting Ron on the spot. Not that he didn't deserve a little discomfort on this occasion. As her friend mumbled through a sketchy attempt at answering the question, she met her husband's eyes and nearly laughed out loud as he rolled his eyes and sighed. Potions class, when one was on the professor's side, was set to be far more entertaining.

As the class set to brewing the base for Polyjuice, Hermione felt a prickle of unpleasant awareness between her shoulder blades. Turning, she intercepted a glance of pure malice from Pansy Parkinson, who had remained loyal to Millicent and openly disapproved of her Head of House's choice of bride.

Shrugging off the Slytherin's opinion, Hermione concentrated on her brewing and at the end of the session had a perfect example of Polyjuice base to continue working with over the next month. As a sample had to be taken for grading before any further ingredients were added, she decanted a small portion into a vial and walked over to Severus's desk to hand it in.

Pansy, having just submitted her sample, sneered as she turned away. "I don't know why you bother handing it in, Granger. I'm sure your precious *husband* will give you a top grade, regardless of what is in that vial."

"I'm sure your *Head of House* would have given it a fair grade," replied the man himself, "but as *mywife's* sample will be sent to the Ministry Potions Office for grading, perhaps *you* would like to perform us the service of sealing her sample and placing it in stasis. Then, if any questions are asked about its validity, Miss Parkinson, you will be able to verify it has not been tampered with."

Pansy reluctantly complied, her scowl demonstrating her displeasure at aiding Hermione in any way.

"Thank you, Miss Parkinson. You may return to your seat. And two points for Slytherin for your assistance," Severus added with a gracious nod.

After the rest of the students had traipsed out of the classroom, Hermione turned to Severus. "Two points for accusing me of cheating and you of favouritism? Have you lost your mind?"

"You are thinking like a Gryffindor, my dear. Miss Parkinson is a Slytherin. A mere two points for the task she performed is effectively an insult, but as she was awarded points she cannot complain. And having her perform the seal invalidates any further grounds she has for future accusations."

"I'm beginning to like the way Slytherins think," Hermione had to admit. With a sly smile, she added, "Although I prefer the way they kiss."

"*They?* Who exactly are *they?*" Severus growled as he wrapped his arms around his witch.

"Don't get your wand in a knot. It was just Draco. He tried to persuade me Slytherins weren't all bad when he was drunk at a party just before Christmas. He wasn't too

shabby a kisser, considering the amount he had been drinking. Oh, for goodness sake, it was one drunken kiss, and it was ages ago! Now, are you going to prove Slytherins are the best kissers in the castle, or do I have to go and find more evidence?" She reached up to pull his head down to hers, but found her efforts unheeded as he swept her off her feet and lifted her onto the nearest desk.

"You're mine, Madam Snape. There will be *no* research done on any other wizards. Is that understood?" he ordered, grinding his pelvis between her obligingly parted thighs.

"Absolutely, husband. I wouldn't have it any other way," she agreed as the hunger in his gaze inflamed her ardour, and her heels dragged him even closer. His now blatant thrusts were creating an unbearable friction she had never thought possible while fully clothed. "Severus, I don't think... ahh... this is... oh... very wise... Merlin!"

"Why... mmm... ever... ahhh... not?" he gasped as his body took control of his brain.

"Because... *oh, my...* your... yes... next... yes... YESS!" Hermione's train of thought was derailed by her sudden orgasm.

"My... gods... next... oh, gods... what? Gods, yes! FUCK!" As he exploded into his trousers, Severus finally noticed the gaggle of third years waiting at the door to the classroom. Resting his head against his wife's forehead, he closed his eyes. "Tell me they are not there," he implored as Hermione discreetly performed a cleansing charm on the damp stain at his groin.

"They are there, and you are going to act as if nothing has happened. By the time you have finished berating them for an hour, they'll believe it was all a figment of their overactive imaginations. After all, Professor Snape indulging in something as commonplace as sex... and during the day? No-one would ever believe them!" She chuckled as he glared at the offending thirteen-year-olds, who had the uncommon sense to pretend they were discussing their previous class. They were Ravenclaws, after all. Boring swots they may be, but they were not generally known to be stupid or suffer from random attacks of bravado.

Severus groaned as he watched his self-possessed wife leave the classroom, nodding amiably at the younger students as she left the room.

"Well, what are you lot gaping at? Get to your desks and prepare to brew!"

---

Hermione hastened along the corridors to her History of Magic class, one of the few she shared with Ginny.

"Where have you been?" hissed the redhead as she slipped in the door five minutes after the lesson had begun.

"I was... er... delayed," Hermione replied with a revealing flush.

"You've just had Potions, haven't you? Don't tell me you stopped for a quick snog before you left?" Ginny asked, giggling.

"Something like that. I'll tell you more later, but right now Severus is likely to be taking vast amounts of points off Ravenclaw for being in the right place at the wrong time."

Ginny stared at the smirk on her friend's face as she took out some parchment and started making notes. "Unbelievable!" she muttered.

Immediately after class, Ginny tugged Hermione into an adjacent, empty classroom. Locking the door behind them, she turned and faced the other witch.

"OK. Spill! What happened?"

"Well, Pansy Parkinson decided to make an arse of herself, insinuating I was cheating by remaining in Severus's class. He made her verify the seal on my Potion before it was sent to the Ministry for grading, which was brilliant. Now, if she complains, she implicates herself."

"That *is* brilliant!" exclaimed Ginny. "I knew you married that man for a good reason."

"She wasn't at all happy." Hermione chuckled, remembering the expression on the Slytherin's face as she had performed the task.

"But then...?" Ginny was not to be sidetracked.

"We were talking about it after class, and somehow I ended up mentioning Draco kissing me at the pre-Christmas party. Severus was so jealous!"

"And...?"

"I'll just say we both remained fully clothed but were satisfied by the time we were finished."

"You wicked girl! Lucky, but wicked." Ginny sighed, remembering her own lack of satisfaction.

"That's not the worst of it. The third year Ravenclaws saw the last minute or two. You should have seen Severus's face when he realised they were standing in the doorway!"

"Oh, Merlin! He would have been mortified! What did he do?"

"I told him to act like nothing had happened. With any luck, after an hour of one of his classes, they would have more important things to worry about than seeing their Potions professor and his wife in an intimate moment."

"You wish. It'll be all over the school by now. Serena Boot is in that class, and she's a bigger gossip than Lavender," Ginny declared.

"Oh, fuck! I need to warn Severus!"

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Prompt: 1. Something Old. The Marriage Law Challenge. Many thanks to karelia for the beta.

## Chapter Fourteen: Bargaining

*Chapter 15 of 23*

Hermione is back at Hogwarts for her seventh year. Voldemort is dead, and life should be good. That is, until the results

of her special Arithmancy Project provide some unwelcome realisations for the Potions master.

## Chapter 14: Bargaining

Hermione's dash to the dungeons was forestalled by Harry and Ron, who met her as she was jogging past the staircase to the West Tower.

"Oi, Hermione! Wait up!" called Ron.

"What is it, boys? I'm in rather a hurry," she puffed.

"We heard a rumour," Harry began.

"You and Snape..." continued Ron.

"... In front of the third years."

"Tell us it's not true!"

"Surely, even you two have some sense of restraint?" Harry asked, unwilling to believe the snippet of information Padma Patil had told her twin.

"Clearly not," she replied abruptly. "Don't wait for me. I have to stop my husband killing a few overtalkative Ravenclaws! And stop talking like Fred and George used to. It's disrespectful!"

As they watched their friend heading down to the dungeons, Ron turned to the Boy Who Gawped. "You know, Harry, I'm not sure whether I should be disgusted they actually did that, embarrassed for Mione because they were caught, or just plain envious they are getting so much damn sex!"

Harry was still processing the facts. "She *did* it? It wasn't a rumour? She and Snape...?"

Ron took his friend by the elbow and guided him toward the Great Hall. "Don't think about it, Harry. Come and have some lunch; you'll feel better after you've eaten."

"*She did it...?*"

---

Arriving outside the classroom door, Hermione peeked in to find the room empty. Severus's office was likewise vacant, and a quick check of their quarters was unproductive.

"Damn the man. The one time I would rather he was running late for lunch, he has to find his appetite," she muttered to herself as she began the long trek back up to the Great Hall.

In an eerie replay of the previous Wednesday morning, the din that greeted her suddenly hushed as she opened the door into the Hall. Hundreds of pairs of eyes followed her as she walked casually over to seat herself at the Gryffindor table, having noted the absence of her partner in crime at the other end of the room. Where Severus had disappeared to she had no idea, but she was not about to give the watching masses any satisfaction by appearing embarrassed.

"Did you find him?" whispered Ginny.

"No. He's not in the classroom, his office, or our quarters. I assumed he would be here," Hermione replied, watching the staff table out of the corner of her eye.

"Are you looking for someone, Madam Snape?" The low murmur between the two girls startled them both.

"Would you mind *not* doing that, Professor!" admonished Ginny. "I nearly jumped two feet off the bloody bench."

"Where have you been? Do you realise the whole school knows about this morning?" Hermione hissed.

"Miss Boot, I presume?" His scowl at the Ravenclaw table caused more than one forkful of food to drop unnoticed from suddenly nerveless hands.

"You couldn't have put on a show for a more vocal student," Ginny teased.

"I know that... *now!* And there was no intent to put on any sort of show, Ginevra. We just..."

"Got carried away in the heat of the moment. Yeah, sure. I'll bet that excuse has been used thousands of times before. Well, you two need a good smack. Those kids are *thirteen!* They didn't need a demonstration of the sexual habits of their elders."

To the astonishment of the nearby Gryffindors, who had been eagerly listening to the exchange, Professor Severus Snape, instead of deducting untold amounts of points from Ginny Weasley, sheepishly hung his head. "I know. Sorry, miss. It won't happen again." He continued in a low voice, "Well, not without locking the door, anyway." Lifting his head, he smirked at Ginny, who was smiling. "May I take my wife now? I think I might need her protection while we eat."

"Feel free." Ginny gestured magnanimously. "Off you go, Hermione. His need is greater than ours."

Hermione rolled her eyes at her husband's and friend's antics and giggled as she noticed the dumbfounded stares of her other friends. Taking Severus by the hand, she declared, "Once more unto the breach, dear husband!"

"Have you no shame, woman?" he whispered as they crossed the Hall.

"Like I said last week, Severus. Give them *nothing!*"

"I'm beginning to wonder whether Umbridge would have been the safer option. Minerva's going to kill us," Severus muttered as the stern glare of the headmistress greeted them at the staff table.

"Trust me, Severus. She's my Head of House. I know how she thinks." In truth, a little anxiety fluttered inside her chest, but Hermione hoped the older witch's compassionate streak would prove dominant.

"Good afternoon, Professor McGonagall," she began. "I... we... It wasn't intentional..." Hermione broke off as she noted the glint of humour in the headmistress's eye.

"From what I just saw, I suspect Miss Weasley has said all that is necessary. Am I to believe neither of you were actually unclothed during the *incident?*" the older witch asked.

"Of course not, Minerva!" Severus's normally smooth expression faltered as he considered the fallout had they removed any clothing.

"And do I have your assurance this episode will *never* be repeated?"

"We promise, Professor McGonagall," Hermione replied.

"Good. Now, I suggest you two children ensure doors are locked and warded before you participate in any further amorous interludes. We do not want the students thinking that sort of behaviour is acceptable."

"Yes, Minerva. Point taken," agreed Severus.

"Have some pie, Hermione. It really is delicious." McGonagall's change of subject was gratefully welcomed by the chastised couple as they filled their plates and began replenishing some of the energy they had expended earlier.

---

Over the next two weeks Hermione found herself caught in a strange limbo between adolescence and adulthood. In Arithmancy, Septima Vector carefully addressed her as Madam Snape, appearing uncomfortable with her newly elevated status within the school. In Charms, however, Filius Flitwick still chatted to her amiably as always, referring to her as 'my dear child,' as if she was still a fresh-faced first year.

Professor Le Blanc alone appeared unmoved by her marriage to his colleague. The Frenchman had only ever known her as an adult student and war heroine, after all.

Nights were spent in the arms of her husband, their mutual passion, and imagination, seemingly boundless. The contrast of his occasional boyish diffidence warring with his almost overwhelming masculine power had bewitched her completely. The Professor Snape of her Potions classroom was a completely different wizard, or at least she endeavoured to think of him that way lest they had a repeat of their previous embarrassing incident.

A change which concerned her, however, was the realisation that, with the exception of the boys, Neville, Ginny, and Luna, her classmates had become a little standoffish.

"Ginny, why was it when I was merely engaged to Severus, I was a curiosity, but still *me*, and now we are married they are avoiding me?" she asked after dinner while they were lounging in a quiet corner of the adult students' common room.

"You are sleeping with their Potions professor, Hermione. It's going to take a while for them to realise you aren't sharing all their little secrets down there in the dungeons."

"Pssht. As if I didn't have anything better to do than talk about *their* private lives."

"I know that. You know that. Hell, even the boys know that. It just might take the others a while to realise they just aren't as interesting as a sexy, naked husband," Ginny explained.

"Hey! I told you *not* to think about my husband naked!" Hermione grinned as Ginny poked out her tongue.

"Talking about sexy, naked husbands, why are you up here talking to me so often in the evenings instead of pouncing on Severus?"

"Oh, I thought I would give him some space. He can't be that happy about sharing his quarters with a nineteen-year-old. Even if the sex is great. I like to give him a few hours each evening to himself."

"Do you think that's a good idea? He might think you don't *want* to spend time with him. Have you actually asked him whether he wants you to leave him alone?" Ginny remembered Severus's obvious insecurity before the ceremony. "You know, perhaps I should take up his invitation and visit you *both* tomorrow night?"

"I suppose the last few evenings he *has* been a little quiet when I've returned. Oh, gods, Ginny. What if I've hurt his feelings? That's the last thing I want to do. It's so hard to know how he feels about me. He's so attentive and tender in bed, and we certainly get on well out of it, but I really don't know what's going on in that secretive mind of his." Hermione slumped back onto the couch, anxiety eating away at her carefully contrived peace of mind.

"Hermione? Can I ask you something?" Ginny's soft question met with a nod from her best friend. "How do you feel about him now?"

"I... I... think I love him. I know it still seems too soon, but whenever I'm with him I just feel so complete. His face is ugly to some, but I find it just perfect. We can talk about anything, and he listens to my opinion even if he disagrees. His voice, his touch... Am I crazy to hope he will someday feel the same about me?"

"Too soon? Hermione, you've known each other for over seven years. I know you have always respected him, even when the rest of us were less than willing to do so. You've often said you admire his intelligence, loyalty, and dedication, and when we all thought he'd turned to the dark side, you were the only one who seemed surprised and upset. Upset because you couldn't believe that of him."

"You make it sound like I've had a crush on him for years, but I haven't," Hermione argued.

"No, I didn't mean that. Before the article about the Marriage Law came out in the *Prophet* a month ago, you were not strangers. You've had a lot of common experiences and share many values. It's just you'd never thought of him in that way before. It's really no wonder you have fallen for him with the added incentive of living together and having spectacular sex every night!" Ginny's smile was gentle as Hermione considered her words.

"You're right, Gin. I've never thought of it that way before. But how do I know how he feels? How do I find out what *he* wants?"

"Talk to him. Take a risk. Show him how you feel, even if you don't feel up to expressing it in words yet. Spend time with him." Ginny hugged her friend and sent her on her way. "Go. Have faith!"

---

"Hi."

"Good evening. I see you have seen fit to join me tonight." Severus's tone was sharper than he had intended. Hermione's seeming interest in only the physical side of their marriage had begun to erode at his newly-won confidence in his own appeal. Her barely-concealed flinch almost brought an apology to his lips. However, he softened and patted the couch beside him in invitation. "Come here, wife."

"I'm sorry, Severus. I know it must seem as if I've been avoiding your company during the evening, but I thought you would need some time without me underfoot." She relaxed a little as he drew her close to his side.

"Whatever made you think that, woman?"

"You did," she replied.

"I did?"

"When you first agreed to accept my petition. You wanted us to live separately and not to have 'a teenage witch's belongings cluttering up my living quarters,' if I remember correctly." Despite her resolution not to be a silly, emotional girl, tears threatened to spill onto her cheeks.

"And even after all that occurred over the next two weeks, you still thought I felt the same?"



"You never told me any different, Severus," she replied with asperity. "You make love to me with your body until I cry with the wonder of it all, but I have no idea how you really feel in here." Hermione placed a hand over the centre of his chest, feeling the rapid thud of his heartbeat beneath her fingertips.

He studied her upturned face for long moments and then kissed her tears away as his own eyes glinted suspiciously. "Perhaps we both need to express ourselves better. I admit I am guilty of holding my emotions in check, but I plead uncertainty. I know what I think I feel, but it would not be fair to you to make any declarations until I am completely sure. In turn, my dear wife, I am unsure as to your expectations and feelings towards me."

His deep, liquid voice resonated within Hermione's mind as she held him close and kissed his eyes dry in turn. "I care for you very much, Severus. I can't imagine being without you in my life, my bed, and my heart. If that is what love brings, then I am home. I've longed to spend evenings curled up by your side as we are now or simply working alongside each other or talking, but I was unsure of my role in your life."

"My silly, little know-it-all. Your place is right here with me. Whilst I'm sure in due course you will have times when you are tired of my ill-temper, and no doubt your need to ask questions will likewise pall occasionally, at the moment I'm quite enjoying having a beautiful, intelligent witch to keep me company."

"I don't suppose the occasional offering of fellatio would go amiss, either," Hermione suggested, trying to lighten the mood as she reached down to unbutton her husband's trousers. "Have you never heard of a zip?"

"Ah, but what would be the challenge in that?" he replied, leaning back to give her better access.

"None whatsoever," she murmured as she finally freed him from the confines of his underwear. "Mmm. Ready for action, I see."

"Always, with you around, my sweet. Uncomfortably so in your Potions class, I might add."

"Really?" she asked after taking a long taste from base to tip. "You stalk around the class with an erection?"

"I don't stalk. I glide."

"Glide. If you say so, dear. Mmm. I could get into the habit of this." Swirling her tongue over his most sensitive areas while stroking his inner thighs, Hermione grinned at the expression of abandon on her wizard's face. Returning to the topic of Potions class, she added, "It's no wonder you wear robes all the time. Minerva would have a fit if she knew what was going on beneath all those layers. Although I do have a request." She had stopped to watch his face while she spoke.

"Anything," he growled. "Just carry on with what you were doing!"

"Anything?" She finally took him into her mouth as he nodded. After several minutes of sucking, licking, and kissing him into near oblivion, she pulled back with a soft pop. "I want you to come to the next Potions class naked under your robes. I want to imagine your cock, hard as steel, rubbing against the fabric as you walk around the room. I want to feel it press up against my back as you inspect my potion, and I want to know when the last student has left the room I can take it into my mouth and make you come so hard you'll think your mind has imploded. After locking and warding the door, of course." With that, she reapplied her mouth to his eager body and in very short order had her husband shouting her name as he spilled his climax down her throat.

"You, my dear, drive a hard bargain," he growled, exchanging places and unzipping her jeans.

"At least I'm considerate enough to use zips," she retorted.

Drawing her knickers down with her jeans, Severus feasted his eyes on the sight of his wife's obvious arousal. "Wicked wench gets all hot and bothered having her way with me," he murmured as he took his first taste.

"I don't deny it. Ahh... nice... Giving you fellatio is an extremely erotic experience. Mmm... Why did you stop?" Hermione pouted as her husband sat back and smirked.

"A condition of my own. Next Potions class, *you* will wear no knickers. I want you to feel the cloth of your skirt brushing against your curls. I want to imagine how very wet you are becoming as you think of me. I want you to throb deep inside when I press my aching cock into your back. I want to know I can thrust into you after the classroom is empty and make you scream my name as you come undone. After the locking and warding, of course."

"Anything. Just get your damned Slytherin tongue back where it belongs. Now!"

He chuckled as his lioness issued her orders and concentrated on turning her into a quivering mass of jelly by use of said Slytherin tongue.

Much later, she whispered into his chest, "You do realise we can't fulfil any of those fantasies in the Potions classroom, don't you, Severus?"

"Mmm," he murmured, half asleep. "Minerva would give us *both* detentions."

"No. I meant it would be far too dangerous to be that distracted while the class is brewing complicated potions."

"Pity."

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Prompt: 1. Something Old. The Marriage Law Challenge. Many thanks to karelia for the beta.

## Chapter Fifteen: Fantasy and Reality

*Chapter 16 of 23*

Placed third in the Variety Challenge. Hermione and Severus learn a little about self-control.

Disclaimer: They aren't mine, unfortunately. But I will put them back unharmed and with smiles on their faces!

### Chapter Fifteen: Fantasy and Reality

"Quiet!" Severus Snape's voice boomed above the chatter of the few students who had foolishly remained unaware of his arrival. "Now that I have your attention, I suggest you start behaving like the near adults you are purported to be, instead of witless buffoons, and get on with the task on the blackboard."

"Whew. What's wrong with him today, Hermione? Have you got him on rations?" asked Ron with a wink.

"Not bloody likely; the man is insatiable."

"Are you okay, Hermione? He's not too... demanding, is he?" Harry frowned with consternation.

"Oh, no. I'm not complaining, Harry. Just pleasantly surprised."

"Er... good. Hey, that's Burn Paste. We did that in our first year. Why are we brewing it again today?"

"Good point, Harry. Shall I ask Severus?" Hermione offered.

"Rather you than me."

"Coward!"

"Just not stupid, Hermione. He's your husband. At least, if you offend him by questioning his assignment, you can kiss and make up later." Harry grinned at her rolled eyes.

"You could always try that approach, you know. Perhaps he might ditch Hermione and run away with you to a tropical island, far, far away," Ron suggested.

"Ron! That's so..." Harry shuddered, his vocabulary having failed him in the face of the visual images he was experiencing.

Ron just grinned, unrepentant, and headed for the store cupboard as Hermione raised her hand.

"Yes, dear?" The Potions master spoke without thinking, flushing a little as one or two titters escaped from the back of the room. A glare sent in the direction of the foolish few re-established his authority in seconds.

"I was just wondering why we were brewing a first-year potion." Hermione sent her own fierce glare at her classmates as her blush at the unwitting endearment faded.

"I'd expected you would ask that," he replied in a suspiciously mild tone. "The brewing of standard Burn Paste, as you all should know, is not difficult. Any idiot with a cauldron and a few ingredients can produce something usable. The preparation of ingredients, timing of additions, and number of stirs is flexible. However, today you will be brewing a top quality Burn Paste. This will require all your attention to each process *and* precise timing. Any result less than perfect will be discarded, and no marks will be awarded. Is that understood, Mr Weasley?"

The class collectively nodded their answer to his question, confident in their ability to gain top marks for the lesson. Hermione alone frowned, her suspicions on full alert at the slight glint of mischief in her husband's eye. Whilst it would require close attention to brew the quality of Burn Paste Severus was expecting, there was virtually no chance of disaster, even from significant errors. He was up to something.

As she gathered the few ingredients needed, Hermione watched Severus *gliding* around the classroom, robes parting with each step to reveal the black trousers beneath. A breath of disappointment ghosted from her lips as she met his eyes with a rueful smile. The twitch at the corner of his mouth revealed he had known exactly which direction her thoughts had taken her at the announcement of the day's assignment.

Hermione shook her head in silent disapproval of her own wayward imagination and began chopping and pulverising. Banishing thoughts of the lithe body beneath the daunting, black robes of the man she had married, she concentrated on her brewing.

Suddenly, he was behind her and leaning over her shoulder to inspect her work.

"You do realise I assign the seventh years this particular task every year, Madam Snape," he murmured in her ear. "Do try and concentrate on your task, dear."

Determined to prove she could produce a perfect potion, no matter what distraction her lascivious fantasies provided, Hermione bit her lip and continued to brew, trying to avoid meeting the eyes of the smirking wizard prowling the classroom.

"Are you okay, Hermione? You look all hot and bothered." Harry's rare flash of perspicacity was not particularly welcomed by his friend.

"No, no problem. Things were just running a little hot, is all. I've got them under control now."

"But this potion is brewed at a low temperature, Hermione. Even Ron knows that."

"Well, if you must know, I was imagining Severus naked. Any further questions?"

"Eww, wash your mind out! Whatever happened to the nice witch we used to know who never talked about sex?"

Hermione simply smiled. Sometimes the truth worked as well as fiction.

Her friend shook his head in confusion and retreated to his desk to tend to his own brew.

---

"Finally! I thought class was never going to end!" Hermione complained as she watched the last of the students file out of the room.

"I can't think why you were so impatient, vixen," the professor drawled as he ensured the door was both locked and warded.

"Oh, I think you have a fairly good idea, husband mine," she replied as she circled him slowly.

"Is that right? And I suppose you expect me to do something about it?" He teased her with a smile, leaning back against his desk as if merely discussing the weather.

"No. I don't believe so. I'm quite capable of dealing with the situation myself."

Severus noticed the predatory gleam in her eye just a little too late.

---

Lunch was well under way before the well-sated couple made their way past the Gryffindor table.

"Oh, for goodness sake. Show a little discretion, you two!" Ginny scolded as she surveyed their tousled hair, rumpled clothing, and smug grins. With a flick of her wand they were straightened and tidied to her satisfaction.

"Oh... thanks, Gin," whispered Hermione as she sat on the bench beside the redhead.

"Indeed. Thank you, Miss Weasley." Severus strode to the staff table, self-possession undisturbed by the sighs of the older girls he passed, who had just seen their Potions professor in an entirely new light - relaxed, smiling, and clearly well shagged.

"Do you think the novelty will wear off soon, Hermione?" Ginny enquired.

"Pardon?" Hermione's brain hadn't quite returned to full function after her recent activity.

"The need to have sex at every opportunity. It wouldn't be so bad if you weren't so damned obvious about it!" she complained.

"We were obvious?"

"Hermione, Snape does not make a habit of arriving at lunch all rumpled and cheerful. Even the little kids know what you were up to," Ron explained, using smallish words for easy assimilation.

"He's going to get another lecture from Professor McGonagall. S'all his own fault anyway; I told him not to do it," she muttered.

"Do what, Hermione?" asked Harry.

"Trust me, mate. I don't think we want to know," Ron interrupted.

Hermione's blush was all the confirmation they needed.

"Looks like he *is* in trouble," Ginny commented.

"But not for long," Hermione added as a roar of laughter from the staff table startled nearby students. "I wonder what on earth he told them. Not the truth, I'll bet."

"He probably told them you jumped him on the way out of the classroom," Ginny observed.

"Probably. I wouldn't put it past him. Although, it *is* partly true." Hermione smiled as she reached for some food.

---

"Severus Snape. I never thought I would see the day when I had to reprimand you for showing less than perfect decorum..."

"Oh, leave him alone, Minerva. The lad's a newlywed. Let him have his fun," Rolanda Hooch interrupted with a grin. "We're just all jealous because he's getting some action. Merlin knows I could do with a good shag. Anyone interested?" she asked, winking at the younger, male staff members.

"I see... I see... a *man*..." Sybill Trelawney trailed off, cheeks as red as the wine in her glass.

"I see Sybill is having one of her insightful moments again. Next, she will be predicting your death, Hooch. I'd check your broom next time you go for a joy ride with that Vibrating Charm." Severus lifted his glass to the gaping Flying instructor amidst the laughter of their colleagues.

"How did *you* know?" she squeaked.

"I *didn't*. But I do now."

"Bloody Slytherin bastard. I hope your cock falls off from overuse!"

"Rolanda! Language!" scolded the headmistress, between snorts.

Severus started eating, having satisfactorily displaced Minerva's disapproval onto Hooch. Life as a married man was not as intolerable as he had expected.

---

Ginny Weasley smiled as Severus approached her in the corridor after her Charms class.

"Good morning, Professor Snape."

"Good morning, Miss Weasley. May I speak with you for a moment?"

"Of course," she replied, following him into a nearby, empty classroom. "How can I help you?"

"Ginevra, I find myself in a quandary. I need some advice, and you are the only person who I believe can help." His voice was unusually quiet, and she had to strain to hear.

"That's what friends are for, sir. Please, tell me what I can do." She reached out and touched the hand resting on the desk beside her.

He glanced at her and smiled his gratitude. "As you are aware, Sunday is Valentine's Day. I have never previously had occasion to participate in the rather ludicrous behaviour I am surrounded with on that particular day, but now I have a wife... I don't know... Will she...? What should I...?" He trailed off, embarrassment stealing his coherence.

Ginny squeezed his hand. "You want to know how Hermione feels about Valentine's Day? What she would expect?"

His mute nod confirmed her words.

"I know previously Hermione has been, like you, somewhat disdainful of Valentine's Day and all that goes with it. However, I can't tell you what she would expect of you now. I know she would hate all the heart and flowers and what she calls soppy stuff, but some token of your feelings would not hurt. You have told her, haven't you, sir?"

Shaking his head, Severus looked away, reluctant to meet the penetrating gaze of the redheaded young woman before him.

"Oh, professor! Whyever not?"

"It's too soon. I need to know she feels the same. I didn't want to risk..."

"Rejection? Don't be daft. She had plenty of opportunities to change her mind about marrying you, and did she? No. Ever wonder why?"

Ginny smiled at the bemused expression on Severus's face. Even intelligent, powerful wizards like Snape needed things spelled out to them occasionally. "Now, get yourself off to Hogsmeade and find something your wife will treasure. It doesn't need to be expensive, just thoughtful."

"Thank you, Ginev... Ginny. You are a true friend."

"Oh, come here, you great lummo." Ginny wrapped her arms around Severus's waist and hugged him tight. "Now, go. Make me proud."

---

Several hours later, Severus gazed thoughtfully at the small, silver-wrapped package on his desk. Now, all he needed was a suitable opportunity to give it to the woman who was rapidly becoming all he needed and wanted. As he heard her enter the outer door to his office, he tucked the gift away into a drawer in his writing desk, reasonably sure she was unlikely to look there.

"Hi. Are you ready for dinner?" Hermione asked, then perched herself on her husband's knee and proceeded to kiss him senseless.

When he surfaced for air, he managed to gasp, "Are you sure you're hungry? Because I can think of something else I'd rather be doing than joining a few hundred noisy, hormonally-challenged adolescents for dinner."

"Mmmm. So can I, but if we don't show up, those hormonally-challenged adolescents will know exactly what we are doing."

"Let them. I find I don't care any more," he drawled as he dragged his lips over the soft skin above her collarbone.

"What? Let them confirm their suspicions that Severus Snape is actually human? I don't think so. Come on, husband, up you get." Hermione stood and pulled his hand.

"I'm already up, and it's your fault, witch. What are you going to do about it?" he growled.

"Nothing... yet. Just think of how much you will enjoy yourself later. Delayed gratification can be a good thing."

"Cruel-hearted wench. All right then. Dinner it is."

Hermione laughed as the dour Potions professor actually pouted. Kissing him once more, she led him away to the Great Hall.

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A/N: Thanks to ladyinthecloak, the best beta in the world!

## Chapter Sixteen: Miscommunication

*Chapter 17 of 23*

Valentine's Day arrives, causing problems for the newly-married couple.

Disclaimer: They aren't mine, unfortunately. But I will put them back unharmed and with smiles on their faces!

### Chapter Sixteen: Miscommunication

Hermione lay awake in the cool, pre-dawn light of Sunday morning, thinking about the day ahead. She knew her husband disdained Valentine's Day and all its usual accoutrements. Seeing his sneer every year at breakfast as he watched love-struck students receiving cards and gifts from the object of their latest infatuation had left no doubt as to his opinion. Her own experience of the day had been somewhat jaded by a lack of suitable partners to share it with, and it was likely marriage would bring no change. The depth of his passion was undisputed, but Severus Snape was no romantic.

As the soft sigh of resignation left her lips, she crept out of bed and gathered her clothes before entering the bathroom for a shower. Severus was still sound asleep when she returned to the bedroom, unsurprising after the pleasantly disturbed night before. Hermione was half-way through breakfast and deep into an article in the latest Potions journal by the time he surfaced.

"Good morning." He yawned as he rubbed sleep from his eyes. "I didn't hear you get up. You should have woken me."

"You looked so peaceful; I didn't have the heart to wake you. You obviously needed a little more rest. Would you like some tea?" she offered, smiling at the endearing picture he made. A barefoot, sleep-tousled Severus in what appeared to be his oldest pair of boxers would have barely made a Hufflepuff firstie flinch.

"No, thanks. I need a shower first. I'll join you in a few minutes. Unless, of course, you want to join *me*?"

His suggestive grin made Hermione giggle. "I've already showered, sleepyhead. You missed your opportunity. Oh, don't pout; you'll have plenty of other chances to have your way with me in the shower, you lech. You don't have to make up for the last twenty years in a few weeks; we have the rest of our lives."

"Promise?" he asked, an odd expression softening his features.

"Yes, I promise. Now, go and shower before I have to put another Warming Charm on the teapot."

Hermione smiled again. He might not be a romantic, but the occasional vulnerability he allowed her to witness was as endearing as any number of tender declarations.

After breakfast, Severus made his way to the staffroom for a Head of House meeting while Hermione made her excuses to Ginny and her other friends. In the absence of her husband, a trip to Hogsmeade seemed a little pointless. Besides, it was an excellent time to use the library in peace.

---

A breath of warm air on her neck startled Hermione, who had drifted off to sleep amongst the sprawl of books and parchment on the library table.

"Does my wife wish to join me for lunch today in Hogsmeade?" Severus smirked as she gazed at him in surprise.

"I thought... But you hate... All those snogging couples..." Hermione sat upright abruptly. "I'm *not* going to Madam Puddifoot's. They'll all be watching!"

"I wouldn't dream of it. There is a much more respectable restaurant further down the road. Besides, I'm sure a little snogging of our own would soon put them off."

"Any snogging can be done in the privacy of our own quarters from now on, Severus Snape. Now, I believe you promised me lunch?" Hermione threw the last of her quills into her bag and turned to face her husband.

"I did indeed. Madam?" He offered his arm, and together they left the library.

Lunch was uninterrupted by students' romantic liaisons the prices on the menu alone ensured their privacy. Nevertheless, the meal consisted entirely of food, drink, and intelligent conversation, with no sudden outbursts of poetry or spontaneous appearance of roses and chocolate. Hermione felt a little relieved; she was just getting used to the new, likeable Severus, and the thought of the man surrounded by hearts and flowers just wasn't right.

Hermione kept a bright smile on her face as they returned to Hogwarts. Determined not to be one of those high maintenance, dependent women who insisted on their beloved's full attention just because it was the fourteenth of February, she carefully kept the topic of discussion to Potions and other school related subjects. Severus's expression became more unreadable as they neared the main entrance door, and he rapidly excused himself to check his Slytherins.

Watching him stride away from her, Hermione wondered if he would ever express his feelings towards her. Physically, he was attentive, tender, and passionate, and he was relaxing in her company more each day, but still he held something in reserve. She knew what she hoped he felt, but he had never confirmed it.

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"Oh, good grief!" Hermione stormed into the sitting room in a fine temper, pink slime dripping off her hair.

Severus looked up from his desk and chuckled. "Peeves?" He reached into his desk drawer as she summoned a towel.

"Bloody Peeves and his bloody Valentine's 'Love Potion.' I swear it is melted marshmallows and cream. I'll never get it out of my hair. Gods, I wish it was tomorrow already! I hate Valentine's day!"

The towel over her head prevented her seeing the disappointment in her husband's eyes as he quietly closed the desk drawer again.

"Have you lost your wand as well as your temper, madam?" The acerbic tone she had not heard for some weeks in private caught her attention. Severus flicked his wand, vanishing the thick muck from her curls, and returned to his marking. The whiteness of his knuckles and set of his shoulders were the only indication of his distress.

"Thank you, Severus." Hermione paused as she passed to kiss the top of his head. "You look tense. Why don't you leave those for later and come to dinner?"

"Give me a few minutes, my dear. Go ahead, and I'll see you there. Are you planning to sit at the staff table?"

"Of course. I'll just stop for a chat with Ginny for a few minutes first. It wouldn't do for us to sit apart tonight. Millicent might get her hopes up."

"And we couldn't allow that to happen, could we?" Bitterness edged his words.

"Besides, I happen like sitting with my husband." She reached around to hug him awkwardly from behind. "Don't be too long, love."

His gaze followed her as she left, her last comment floating behind her as she closed the door.

---

Hermione arrived at dinner in time to grab a seat next to Ginny before Harry arrived.

"So, how did the trip to Hogsmeade go?"

Ginny scowled and rolled her eyes. "Would have been great if Harry hadn't spent all afternoon in the Quidditch supplies shop. Really, he has *no* idea."

"I know the feeling," Hermione agreed.

A puzzled frown crossed Ginny's face as she watched her friend's moue of disappointment.

Hermione watched her husband cross the Great Hall to the staff table and blew him a kiss, relishing the way his cheeks stained red at her audacity.

"Hermione! Don't embarrass the poor man. He's getting enough of a hard time from everyone as it is."

"Oh, he deserves it, Ginny. Besides, it doesn't hurt to remind Millicent Bulstrode every so often exactly whom he chose to marry. She still watches him, you know." Hermione nodded towards the Slytherin girl, who was staring at Severus intently as they spoke.

"She's probably just worried you are wearing out her Head of House. One never knows when one might need advice."

"Sure. She's concerned about his well-being. That's it."

"Yes, she wants to wipe his fevered brow. If he had a fevered brow..." Ginny giggled as the conversation grew more absurd.

"The only witch wiping that man's brow, or any other part of him, will be me. So, she's out of luck," Hermione declared.

"Are you sure you don't need any help?" Ginny offered as she watched Harry arrive with a scowl. "Mine is only interested in the next Quidditch match at the moment. As if Hufflepuff have any chance against Slytherin. They'll be eaten alive."

Hermione laughed at the frustration evident behind her friend's words. "I'll ask. You never know; he used to fancy redheads."

Ginny groaned. "Don't you dare. If you tell him I even suggested such a thing..."

"Yes. I know. You and the Bat-Bogey hex. My canaries will beat your bats any day, Weasley."

"Hey, you two! Are you thinking of facing off after dinner? Can we all watch?" Neville laughed as they turned matching glares in his direction.

"Shall we, Ginny?"

"Love to, Hermione."

"Er... now, don't be hasty, girls. Wouldn't want Professor Snape to catch you threatening a poor, defenceless boy."

"Yes, young ladies. It wouldn't do for Professor Snape to discover you are planning to use magic irresponsibly." The dulcet tones of the wizard under discussion intruded into their byplay.

"Would we do that, Gin?" asked Hermione, all innocence.

"Never!" Ginny replied as she winked at Severus, who surprised her with a wink of his own as he collected his wife and escorted her to the staff table.

As they rose to leave after dinner, Severus turned to the witch beside him. "I'm rostered on early rounds this evening, Hermione," he explained. "I'll see you in our quarters later."

"Okay. I'll probably be in the library most of the evening, anyway. *Someone* has set a rather nasty Potions essay this week." She stood and turned to her husband and, to his surprise, brushed his lips with her soft mouth. "But I might forgive him if he is particularly good later," she whispered.

"I'm sure that can be arranged." Severus nodded and swept away, leaving the Great Hall as Pansy Parkinson and her gang of Slytherin sixth and seventh years approached the Gryffindor table where Hermione had stopped to talk.

"Well, well. I can see how Miss Perfect, or should I say *Mrs* Perfect, manages to keep her husband under control. Tell me, Granger, have you had a ring put through his nose yet, or is that pleasure to come?"

"Oh, I'm sure there are a lot of pleasures to come, Pansy, but you won't be hearing about them. How about you and your little friends run off and play while the grown-ups chat?"

"You just think you're better than everyone now you are married to Snape. Well, we know you're just a jumped-up, know-it-all Mudblood, Granger, and..."

Pansy's mouth snapped shut as she realised her Head of House was standing behind her, having overheard her comments as he left the room. The fury in his expression left her in little doubt as to the foolhardiness of her actions.

"That's *Madam Snape* to you, Parkinson. Fifty points from Slytherin for appalling behaviour. No-one speaks to my wife in that manner! Now, get back to your common room. All of you!"

His voice rang out into the sudden silence as hundreds of students gazed open-mouthed at the tableau before them. A brief quirk of his lips and a nod and Severus once again strode away, this time to ensure Pansy Parkinson and her cronies had followed his order.

---

Draco Malfoy paused outside the Potions professor's office. His Head of House still presented a formidable authority figure to the blond, despite having known him since he was a baby. But he had to know, and the only way to find out was to ask. With that thought in mind, Draco raised his hand and knocked.

"Enter!" At your own risk, the brusque tone suggested.

"Good evening, sir." Draco hesitated.

"Yes, Draco. What is it?" Severus looked up briefly.

"I... er... wondered..."

"What, lad? I don't have all night to play guessing games." The older man's scowl would have sent a younger student scurrying back to their dorm, question unanswered.

"The Marriage Law, sir. It was repealed." Draco managed to get a few words out through suddenly dry lips.

"What of it?"

"I heard you knew it was to be investigated before you married Hermione." Baffled by Snape's apparent unconcern, Draco studied the Potions master.

"I did. We both did."

"So, why did you go through with it? Not that I don't like Hermione," he added in response to the flare of anger in Severus's eyes. "I've come to know her better this year, and she's all right."

"All right enough so you had to kiss her before Christmas?" Severus snarled.

"Oh, you know about that?"

"I do." Standing abruptly, Severus rounded the desk and circled the young man.

"It won't happen again. I like Hermione, but I like my dangly bits better." Draco's weak attempt to defuse the situation seemed to be effective. The older wizard withdrew and began pacing in front of the fireplace.

"Why do you want to know?" Severus had returned to Draco's original question.

"I'm not really sure. Just curious, I suppose. I've known you all my life, and it didn't seem like you to go through with an arranged marriage just because..." Draco stopped speaking as a sudden realisation hit him right between the eyes. "You love her, don't you? You went and fell in love with the bloody woman!"

Severus forced a smile. "Yes, Draco. Now you know my sordid little secret. I'm head over heels in love with my wife. Anything else you..." A soft gasp from the doorway and running footsteps had the two men sharing a look.

"Fuck!" growled Severus as he shouldered the boy aside in pursuit of his wife.

Draco stared after Severus as he disappeared down the corridor, urgency in every nuance of his stride.

"Well, I'll be damned. He really does love the witch!" He smiled and whistled to himself as he closed and locked the office door.

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A/N: Thanks to ladyinthecloak, the best beta in the world!

## Chapter Seventeen: Relationship Counselling

*Chapter 18 of 23*

Severus and Hermione finally say what they mean, and Ginny asks for advice.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to J. K. Rowling. The crazy plot is mine.

### Chapter Seventeen: Relationship Counselling

Hannah Abbott and Theodore Nott sprang apart as the Potions professor passed the usually quiet niche they had chosen for their tryst. Breathing joint sighs of relief, they resumed their exploratory activities when they realised Snape had other things on his mind. Presumably, the bushy-haired Gryffindor who had run past a moment or two earlier.

Severus finally caught up with his surprisingly fleet-footed wife after she had burst out of a side door into a secluded courtyard. He watched, bemused, as she spun in circles and threw her hands in the air. Waiting until she was facing away from him, he moved closer and captured his witch in his arms.

"Stop! We need to talk, Hermione. I'm sorry... I didn't intend you to hear that. Please, forgive me. I don't want to pressure you... I don't want to be a burden..." he pleaded.

"Whatever are you talking about, Severus?" She smiled as she turned and forced him to meet her gaze.

"You ran away horrified at the thought of my love. I'm sorry..."

"You thought I was horrified? Oh, Severus!" She reached up to touch his face and caress away his frown. "Why would I be horrified at my dreams coming true?"

The barrier he had erected to protect his heart crumbled into dust at her words. He stared at the truth evident in her eyes. "You mean...?"

"I love you, too, you silly man. I didn't want *you* to feel under any pressure."

"Why did you run away? I thought..."

"I'm sorry. It was just so overwhelming hearing you say that, and Draco was there, and I wanted to run around and dance like a crazy person." She grinned, then sobered as she realised how badly she had hurt the man she loved. "I didn't realise you had noticed me outside your office. I had returned from the library and was about to ask you if you wanted a cup of tea. Oh, Severus." She punctuated her words with kisses as he led her to a bench in the corner out of view of the castle windows.

Several minutes and much intertwining of limbs and tongues later, Severus had the insight to suggest relocating to a warmer, more private spot. Preferably in their bed where he could demonstrate conclusively how bewitched he was by his wife.

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"Hermione?"

"Mmm?"

"Do you really hate Valentine's Day?" Severus propped his head up on his hand and studied Hermione's sleepy face in the moonlight as she turned and snuggled into his chest.

"No. Not really. I just hated not being able to share it properly with the man I love. You had never seemed to like Valentine's Day and all it stood for, and I didn't want to be an annoying, clingy wife. Well, no more annoying than usual, anyway."

Severus smiled. "You ceased to be annoying some time ago, my dear."

"Was that before or after I relieved you of your innocence, husband mine?" she asked as an exploring hand found a stirring of interest at his groin.

"Well before, madam. Now, before you scramble my thought processes with those delightful fingers, I have something for you." With that, Severus arose from the bed, oblivious to her admiration of his naked arousal preceding him from the room.

A moment later, he returned with the silver package he had retrieved from his desk drawer. He sat on the bed beside Hermione. "I wanted to give you this yesterday, but it never seemed to be the right time."

"You bought me a gift? For Valentine's Day?"

All at once, Severus had an armful of deliciously nude witch, kissing and hugging him as she sat astride his lap. Much as his straining body wanted to close the short distance between them and plunge into paradise, he retained enough presence of mind to hand her the parcel, but lost the battle when she bounced up and down in excitement as she unwrapped the fancy paper.

"Oh, gods, Hermione, now look what you've done!" he exclaimed, red-faced, as he wiped away the sticky remains of his loss of control.

She giggled. "Oops. Sorry, I got carried away." She removed the lid of the small box and gasped as she discovered the treasure within. Looking up, she saw a rare expression of tenderness on her husband's face.

"Is this what I think it is?" Taking the exquisitely crafted ring from its velvet nest, Hermione examined it closely. A delicate, raised infinity design in gold over a silver background was studded with tiny but perfect emeralds and rubies. Inscribed on the inner surface were the words, *My love, my life, my soul, my wife.* "Oh, Severus, it's beautiful!" She smiled through a watery haze as he took the ring and placed it on her finger, sealing it in place with a kiss.

"Not as beautiful as you, my wife. You have changed my life for the better, and I wanted you to have a real wedding ring, given from the heart."

"But I didn't..."

His finger to her lips denied her protest. "I understand. Your presence here in my bed wearing that ring is all the gift I desire. I love you, Hermione Snape."

Lips met and heated skin sought ever-closer contact as she declared her love with lips, tongue, and relentless hands.

Lying together as heartbeats slowed and breathing returned to a rate compatible with long-term existence, Severus once again spoke. "You are beautiful, you know."

"Flatterer," she replied with a laugh.

"Enchantress."

"Sex god."

"Sex god?"

"Oh, yes. You passed that course with flying colours."

"Must have been all that damned homework," he complained. "But still, there's always room for improvement. Perhaps some more research would be in order?"

Hermione yawned widely. "Sounds like a great idea, but not tonight. I think you've worn me out, Professor Sex God."

"I think I've worn myself out," he replied with a rueful glance at groin. "Actually, I think you've killed it."

"Nothing a good night's sleep won't cure," Hermione replied as she explored the novelty of her husband in a rare, unaroused state. "It's so soft and velvety like that."

Severus firmly removed her hand from his penis and extinguished the lights. "Sleep now, my love. Research later."

She wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her head on his chest. "Mmm. Lots of research. Love you."

A soft snore was his only reply.

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"Oh, Hermione, it's gorgeous!" Ginny cried as she inspected the ring. "So, I take it you two have finally *talked.*"

"Well, it helped that I overheard him confess his feelings to Draco Malfoy. If I'd waited for him to tell me he loved me it might have taken forever. He was convinced I didn't feel the same." Hermione slumped back on Ginny's bed. "At least he's good at other things."

"You look exhausted. Exceeding your expectations, is he?" Ginny grinned.

"Oh, yes." Hermione's self-satisfied smile told her friend all she needed.

"So... does he? You know, like in his essay?" Ginny blushed furiously, but had to know.

Hermione's cheeks matched the bed curtains as she replied, "Let's just say he has found better uses for his tongue than berating students."

Several moments passed before the two regained their composure. Ginny sobered first and asked, "So, what's it like?"

"What? Sex in general or oral sex?"

"Sex. What's it like being naked together and touching his bits and having him touch you. What's it like when he's... inside? Doesn't it feel weird?"

"Oh, Ginny. Being with someone you love is incredible. It was only ever a physical thing with Jason. With him, the nakedness did bother me at first. But with Severus, I just wanted to get as close to him as possible. The sex is amazing, but the *intimacy* makes me melt inside." She frowned as she noticed Ginny's resigned sigh. "Don't tell me Harry is still playing hard to get?"

"Yes. I've told him straight out I want to take our relationship a step further, but he's still avoiding the issue. What shall I do?" she pleaded.

"I don't know. I think if I talked to him about sex, he'd be too mortified to hear anything I had to say. Do you think you could talk to one of the other boys? They might be able to get through to Harry for you."

"Hermione, that's a *brilliant* idea. I know just the person to talk to!" Ginny squealed with delight as she hugged her best friend and confidante.

---

A soft knock roused Severus from his latest Potions journal. Opening the door, he was surprised to find Ginny Weasley fidgeting nervously in the corridor. "Come in, Ginny. It's about time you found your way down here to visit Hermione. But I'm afraid she isn't here. She's doing some research in the library this evening."

"It's not her I came to see, sir. Do you have a few minutes?"

Severus was intrigued. Ginny was obviously anxious about something, but why she would come to him was beyond his comprehension. "Please, sit down." He indicated the sofa. "Yes, I know it's red. Didn't my wife tell you my weakness?"

His mild manner calmed Ginny as she looked around the room. "Er... no. She's never mentioned it. Has there always been red in here, or was that her influence?"

"No, I plead guilty to choosing red furnishings by myself. As I said to Hermione, I like red; I don't like Gryffindors. Well, I suppose I do like *some* Gryffindors now. But don't tell anybody, will you? My Slytherins would revolt." He was openly smiling now at her stunned expression.

"Professor! You made a joke!"

"Severus. When you're here in these rooms. I owe you an enormous debt, Ginny. Your advice last week proved invaluable. Hermione and I..."

"I know. She told me. And I'm so happy for you both. I think everyone could see you two were crazy about each other but yourselves. Just think of it as self-preservation. You were both driving me insane!" She grinned. "I don't suppose you have any tea brewed?"

"Oh, I apologise, my manners are appalling. Give me a moment." Severus busied himself preparing the tea as Ginny wandered around the room admiring the décor.

"I can see why Hermione loves it here. All these books."

"I'd like to think there were other attractions here than my books," Severus replied with a smirk.

"Oh, yes. I do believe she finds a certain appeal in the owner of the books. Can't think why," Ginny dared to tease.

"Thanks very much. I'll remember that. Now, what was it you wanted to talk about?" Severus settled himself in the armchair and studied Ginny as her expression became serious again.

"I thought... You being a man and all... You would know..." Now the moment had arrived, she had no idea how to explain her visit.

"You're making no sense at all, girl. Try starting at the beginning so I can have some idea what I am supposed to know."

Surprised at his gentle tone, Ginny relaxed and started again.

"It's Harry. I love him."

"I suspect the entire castle knows that. Even Mr... Harry." Severus made a real effort.

"Yes, well, that's not an issue. I love him, and he loves me. We know that. Unlike certain people, we sorted *that* out ages ago."

Severus suppressed a chuckle at her reference to his own incompetence in the communication department. "Then I fail to see where you have a problem, Ginny."

"Harry is a prude. Well, maybe not a prude, but shy. I want to, but he doesn't, or he wants to but doesn't know how or is too scared of what Mum would say or..."

"Ginny. Calm down. What does he want or not want to do?"

"Sex. He won't. And I *want* to. I'm of age, and we're getting married eventually. Everyone else is doing it. Even the ones *you* don't catch, so don't look at me like that, Severus Snape!"

Severus laughed outright at the indignant look on the young witch's face. "You mean I'm not the most effective means of contraception in this castle? I must be slipping!"

"You're the second-best contraceptive here. Filch's damned cat is the best. But in your defence, you have been rather busy lately. Lucky bastard."

"Did you just swear at me, miss?" The glint of amusement in his eye reassured her as she realised what she had said.

"Oops. Sorry. I meant, 'Lucky you, Severus, dear.' That better?"

Severus shook his head and smiled. "I do believe I've created a monster. What exactly do you want me to do about this little problem of yours, Ginny?"

"I wondered if you would talk to Harry. Find out why he's so reluctant. I'm sure he's interested; certain parts of him are, anyway. Please, Severus?"



"You want me to talk to Pot... Harry? About sex? What on earth makes you think he will listen to me?"

"I don't know. Give him detention or something. I'm sure he'll do something sooner or later to deserve it. Then he'll have to listen," she suggested.

"I am *not* risking my wife's wrath by issuing a false detention to anyone. But, I suppose I could *politely* ask him to see me after class. If I must," he reluctantly conceded.

"Yes, you must. I'm dying of frustration here. It's the least you can do when you're getting sex regularly and I'm not!"

"Fucking bossy witches. What did I do to deserve them?"

"It's your innate charm, Sev. And you *swore!* I'm telling Hermione!" She poked him in the chest only to find her wrist quickly grasped and turned behind her back.

"You snitch, Weasley, and I won't talk to your boyfriend."

"You... you... you bat!"

"Bat? Is that the worst you can do?" he taunted, releasing her.

"Git, prat, pillock..." Ginny collapsed onto the sofa as she tried to think of better epithets.

Severus landed beside her as he replied, "Heard it, heard that one too, and that. You lose, girl!"

Hermione stared at the sight of Severus and Ginny exchanging insults in her living room. Putting as serious an expression on her face as she could muster, she gave her best Dolores impression. "Hem, hem."

Severus looked up. "Thank Merlin, it's you, love. I thought for one awful moment that Umbridge toad had magically appeared in our quarters. I was about to hide behind the redhead here."

"Oi, Sev, that's not very gentlemanly!" the redhead in question countered.

"Who are you two, and what have you done with my husband and best friend?" Hermione asked, still bewildered by their antics.

"I am Miss Weasley's relationship guidance counsellor," Severus stated formally, standing and bowing.

"And I am Professor Snape's personal... er... castigator?" Ginny advised.

"I think the world's gone crazy," Hermione muttered as her husband soundly kissed her.

"Never mind, dear. I'm not sure I understand myself," he reassured.

"It's easy, Sev," Ginny explained. "You seem to have acquired yourself a sister. Don't worry, I've had loads of practice at bossing, teasing, whining, and telling tales. Just ask Ron."

"Does that mean I can torment you? I'm sure I'd be good at that. I've had *plenty* of practice at that," Severus replied with a wink as he tugged Ginny's hair.

"Now, now, you two. I'm all in favour of you getting along, but I'm *not* acting as referee. If you don't behave yourselves, you're on your own." Hermione grinned as she rolled her eyes. Who would have thought Severus could let his guard down so completely?

"I'm sure we can behave ourselves, my dear," Severus replied.

"Most of the time, anyway," Ginny added with a wink.

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A/N: This story was voted third in the recent Variety Challenge. Many thanks to ladyinthecloak for the beta.

## Chapter Eighteen: A Little Chat

*Chapter 19 of 23*

Severus and Harry talk about women, which benefits them both.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to J. K. R. I only own the things I make them do.

### Chapter Eighteen: A Little Chat

"Do I have to?" Severus growled as he walked his wife to Potions class after lunch.

"Yes. You promised Ginny. Just ask Harry, *nicely*, to stay after class. I know he has nothing after Potions today, and you have a free hour. No excuses."

"And what makes either of you two believe Potter will be prepared to listen to advice on sex from a man who has only recently been enlightened himself? Would it not be better to come from someone he actually likes and respects?"

"Firstly, Harry has no idea I was your first. Just do your spy thing and act as if you are an expert. Secondly, he does respect you. Now, anyway. True, he still doesn't like you all that much, but we're not expecting you to become best friends, just have a short conversation. Is that so very difficult?"

"Yes, dear, it is. Talking about such personal matters with students is..."

"Something you do with your Slytherins all the time, from what Draco told me at Christmas. If it helps, just imagine Harry is wearing a nice Slytherin jumper and tie." Hermione turned and looked down the corridor. Seeing no-one about, she backed Severus against the wall and silenced any further protests with a scorching kiss. "And if

you do a good job, you might just get a special surprise later," she whispered before disappearing down the stairs.

A group of passing Hufflepuffs could not restrain their amusement at the sight of the Potions master leaning against the wall, robes and hair in disarray, with a befuddled expression on his face. They were smart enough to scurry down the corridor before he had an opportunity to deduct points, however, much to Severus's disappointment. Straightening his appearance, he stalked off to the dungeon to face his eighth year class and Harry Potter.

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"Mr Potter, see me after the lesson," Severus barked as the students were clearing their workbenches and putting away ingredients.

"Nicely," Hermione mouthed with a frown in her husband's direction. Rolling her eyes at the put-upon expression on his face, she smiled at Harry. "It's okay. He won't eat you."

"What have I done wrong this time?" Harry muttered as he made his way to the front of the classroom.

Hermione waved at the two wizards as she closed the door on her way out. She grinned upon hearing the soft click of the lock and the sudden dampening of sound as Severus ensured he would not be interrupted.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Harry asked politely.

"I have little desire to see you, Mr Potter, but unfortunately I have the need to speak with you for a few moments. Follow me." He turned on his heel and led Harry through to his office and, after a slight hesitation, into the sitting room.

Despite his growing anxiety, Harry could not restrain a soft snort at the décor.

"I heard that, Potter. Yes, it is red. Yes, it was red long before my wife moved in. Now, can we move on?"

"Er... yes, of course, sir." Harry watched Severus as he fidgeted with some quills on the desk.

"You might as well take a seat." The older wizard directed Harry to the couch and settled himself into one of the armchairs. "... That is, they... We... Dammit!" He ran his hands through his hair as if to pluck the right words from his scalp.

"Sir?" The odd behaviour of his professor was alarming Harry, used to the man's rigid control under any circumstances.

"There's no easy way to say this, Potter, so you will just have to bear with me. Ginny..."

"Ginny?"

"Yes, Ginny. The youngest Weasley. Red hair, plays Quidditch. I presume you know her?" Sarcasm was much easier.

"But you called her 'Ginny'."

"That is of no consequence. I have been tasked by my wife and her friend to enlighten you as to certain areas in which you have been apparently neglectful. In all their *many* years of wisdom, they have decided I need to talk to you about..."

Unwelcome realisation poked its head into Harry's brain. "Sex? They forced you to try and convince me to have sex with Ginny, didn't they? Bloody impossible women!"

"For once, Potter, I agree with you. However, that does not improve our situation. I am supposed to discover why you have refused to cooperate with Ginny's desire to... you know." For once, Severus's eloquence failed him. "I admit, I'm somewhat curious. She is not an unattractive witch. From all accounts you have declared your feelings towards each other, and she is over the age of consent. Whilst I approve personally of your wish to delay gratification until you are both more mature, I have been told in no uncertain terms that *everyone is doing it*, and from my own experience as a senior student here I am at a loss as to why you are denying yourself."

Harry shifted in his seat, embarrassment warring with relief at finding *someone* who might actually understand. "I thought you hadn't..."

Severus scowled. "They told me you didn't know that. Is there anyone in this damned school who doesn't know my sexual history?"

"Oh, they didn't tell me. I suppose I just assumed. With Mum and all. You obviously hadn't got together with her before she started going out with Dad. And after that, you did kind of hold a torch for her, didn't you? I figured you weren't the kind to have meaningless sex just for the sake of it. Besides, one virgin recognises another."

The professor stared at his student, astounded at his perspicacity and apparent approval. "... er, yes, Potter, thank you." His mind finally realised what else the younger wizard had let slip. "You haven't had any experience?"

"No. Never. And I'm way out of my depth." Harry replied with a rueful grin.

"You and me both, boy," Severus muttered.

"You see, sir, Ginny's mum. She terrifies me. If I so much as touch Ginny, she'll probably hex my balls off." Harry's previous antipathy towards the man before him dissipated with the opportunity to talk about his problem to a fellow wizard.

Severus shuddered. "She's a fearsome witch, your future mother-in-law. But in the interest of marital harmony mine now and yours in the future there's something you should know. Molly Prewett and Arthur Weasley have the distinction of still holding the record for the number of inventive places and positions they were discovered shagging in while at Hogwarts. Molly Weasley has absolutely no moral high ground here." He smirked at Harry's look of disbelief.

"That's... that's... bloody brilliant! And she lectures all of us about proper behaviour!" Harry succumbed to his mirth, and even Severus's lips quirked a little. "But that's not the only reason. You remember my Aunt Petunia, sir? Tall, thin, no sense of humour?"

"How could I forget *that* delightful woman?" Severus's expression left little doubt as to his opinion of Harry's aunt.

"Well, she caught me, you know, *at it*, once one summer. It was horrible. She yelled at me for hours. Every time I get *interested* now, all I can think of is her voice... yelling. Ruins the mood."

"But surely you must..." Severus swallowed hard and continued, "masturbate at times?"

"Nope. Not since then." Harry scowled. "How pathetic is that? No... don't answer. Besides, even if I did get over that problem, I still have no idea what to do. What if I'm hopeless?"

To his surprise, Severus did not scoff or sneer. Instead, he walked over to his desk and retrieved a large Muggle book. "Here. Read this. The chapters on masturbation and foreplay are rather enlightening. Just be thankful you don't have to write a damned essay on it."

"She didn't!"

"She bloody did. Three fucking feet." Severus smirked.

"Hope you gave her four." Harry was beginning to enjoy the more relaxed Snape before him.

"Five actually. With diagrams."

"Oh, Merlin. I would have loved to have seen her face when she got that." He watched through laughter-induced tears as Severus fossicked around in the lowest shelf of the bookcase and found two small paperbacks.

"Muggle romances? Those are rubbish," the young wizard scoffed.

"Very true, but witches love them. They idealise their men and want them to behave like the heroes in the books. Trust me, Harry, knowing your opponent is half the battle. Read those books, and you'll be halfway to victory." Severus had never enlightened Hermione as to exactly *where* he had done his extracurricular research.

Harry didn't take long to put two and two together. "The day before your wedding when you and Hermione were in the storeroom. She came out looking all hot and bothered and glared daggers at you for the rest of the lesson."

"Page one hundred and thirty-three in that one and fifty-two in the other. Worked like a charm." Severus's smug expression was all the confirmation his student needed. "However, I would be remiss if I did not advise you not to proceed unless you are sure you're ready to take the next step in your relationship. Unlike me, you have plenty of time." He reached for his wand and summoned a tray. "Now, Potter, would you care for some tea? I have a few questions to ask you about Ginny."

"Harry. You called me Harry before." The young man held out an olive branch. "Now you're married to my best friend, you can call me Harry, if you like."

Severus turned from the tea tray and studied the boy who had previously been the bane of his existence. Well, one of them, anyway. In all fairness, Potter really hadn't been as obnoxious as he'd expected after the war. He had avoided any publicity and kept out of trouble. Even his Potions-making had improved. Placing the tray on the small table in front of the couch, Severus sighed as he resigned himself to allowing yet another Gryffindor into his life. They seemed to be taking over.

"Harry, then. And given your relationship to those two young women who have decided to run my life, I suppose you may call me Severus. But only in these rooms." Severus scowled. "Merlin, I must be going soft," he muttered to himself.

Harry grinned and took his cup. "So, Severus, what did you want to know about Ginny?"

A positively evil smirk adorned the Potions master's face as he replied, "Anything I can use against the minx. For some insane reason she has decided she wishes to fill the role of my annoying little sister."

"You do realise she has had eighteen years of experience at tormenting older brothers, don't you? She has George completely at her mercy, and Ron only encourages her. You're going to need all the help you can get. But if you breathe one word of my involvement, the entire school will find out you've been reading Muggle romances."

"I think we understand each other." Severus leaned back in his chair and, probably for the first time in their relationship, simply listened to Harry speak.

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"So, how did it go?" Hermione was not reassured by the look of satisfaction on her husband's face. Had he hexed Harry?

"Surprisingly well, once he recovered from the shock. We have discussed the problem, and he has undertaken to improve the situation, and that's *all* I am going to tell you."

"But..."

"But nothing. Harry had valid reasons for his behaviour, and they have been addressed. You wanted me to talk to him, and I did. Now, I believe I was promised something earlier?" He reached for his wife and gathered her into his arms.

Somewhat later, as Severus lay spent and entangled in sweat-dampened sheets and supple young limbs, a thought suddenly crossed his mind. "Hermione?"

"Yes, love?"

"You and Ginny don't have any plots under way that require me talking to Weasley about sex, do you? Or, Merlin forbid, Longbottom?"

"Goodness me, no, Severus. Why would you think that?" She lifted her head to meet his frown.

"Thank the gods for that. I think the reward would kill me!"

"Oh, I don't know, I think you'd be up to the challenge," she teased as she reached down to stroke him back to life.

"Unhand me this instant, woman, or I will not be responsible for the conseq... ahhh... mmm." His protest ground to a halt as the magic of her touch wrought havoc with his senses.

"You were saying?" Hermione asked as she trailed kisses across his chest.

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

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A/N: Many thanks to ladyinthecloak for her beta skills. She's the best! And thanks to all the lovely readers who have left reviews. We are nearly at the end now, just a few loose ends to sort out.

## Chapter Nineteen: Payback

*Chapter 20 of 23*

Ginny reports in and learns something about payback.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings do not belong to me, only the plot shenanigans.

## Chapter Nineteen: Payback

A knock on the door intruded into the comfortable silence of the Snapes's living quarters. Hermione looked up from her textbooks and sighed. "Will you get that, or shall I?"

Severus lazily waved his hand, and the door opened, allowing a breathless Ginny Weasley entrance.

"How did you..."

"You wonderful, wonderful man!" The redhead ran across the room and threw herself at the bemused Potions master, hugging him breathless.

"Well, I know that; my wife knows that, but when did you come to that conclusion?" he drawled.

Ginny paused in her hugging to take Severus by the shoulders and place two loud kisses on his cheeks. "You, my dear friend, are brilliant. Harry and I have..."

"Merlin, don't you dare tell me anything about Harry Potter's sex life. I've learned far too much about it this week already," Severus complained.

"Don't interrupt, Sev; it's not polite. As I was saying, Harry and I have *talked*. He told me all about Petunia and how anxious he feels about sex, and we've agreed to take it slowly. All thanks to you." Ginny's smile included Hermione in her gratitude.

"But I thought you wanted to actually..." Hermione trailed off as Ginny shook her head.

"That too, but I mostly wanted him to stop avoiding the damned subject and pretending nothing was happening. Now it's out in the open, I'm happy to let him take his time." She turned to the other witch and squealed. "But I finally got to see him naked!"

Hermione chuckled at her husband's shocked expression. "So, did his *assets* meet your expectations?"

"Oh, they exceeded them. In fact, I would say his assets were Outstanding. By this much!" Ginny held her hands apart to indicate just how outstanding her boyfriend was.

"No, no, no! I did *not* witness that!" Severus covered his eyes in mock horror and retreated from the room. As he left, he scowled at his wife and added, "Just remember, the only *assets* you need to consider, witch, are those you tasted this morning!"

Ginny stared at the closed door to the bedroom and her friend's bright red cheeks. "I can't believe he just said that," she spluttered.

"I can't believe we're talking about the size of Harry's bits. He's my best friend, Gin. I don't need to be imagining that part of him! Although, to be fair, I always did wonder who was bigger, Harry or Ron."

Ginny sniggered as she considered the question. "Well, I saw Ron naked last year when he made an emergency dash for his clothes after *someone* had stolen them while he was in the shower. I'd say they were pretty evenly matched. After all, Ron must have something to keep all those girls hanging around. It's hardly his table manners or gentlemanly behaviour."

"I never thought of it that way, Gin. Still, I think I have the pick of the bunch. Intelligence, elegance, diligence, and twenty years of celibacy to make up for. I'd better go and release him from the bedroom."

"Any more than two minutes and I'm sending in a search party. Blindfolded, of course."

"Ginny Weasley! As if I'd do anything like that with you just out here!" Hermione blushed anew.

"Didn't stop you when those Ravenclaws arrived for their class, did it?"

"Don't remind me. Severus is still getting snide remarks from Madam Hooch about that."

Hermione entered the bedroom to find her husband sprawled on the bed reading a book. He looked up and nodded towards the door she had just closed.

"Is it safe yet? Have you two finished discussing *other* men's genitalia?" His eyes widened as she crawled onto the bed and deliberately cupped him through his trousers.

"*These* are the only male assets I'm interested in." Two or three gentle caresses brought a self-satisfied smirk to her face as his body responded to her touch.

"Unless you want your friend to walk in on a very educational scene, I suggest you refrain from your current activity, my dear, much as I desire you to continue," he groaned as she set about unfastening his buttons.

"Just give me a minute. I'm busy." His half-swallowed gasp when she freed him from the tight trousers only served to encourage her bravado.

"You *can't* do that while Ginny is out there. Hermione... love... Oh, fuck, why not?" Severus slumped back onto the bed as his wife's expert touch brought him to a shattering climax with a few well-timed strokes. He lifted his head off the pillow briefly and studied the result of his inability to deny the smug witch beside him. "Dammit, woman, you ambushed me!"

Hermione grinned as she heard a tentative knock on the door. A quick flick of her wand and any trace of the preceding few minutes was Vanished while Severus hurriedly buttoned up.

"Do I need to organise that search party?" called Ginny from the sitting room. "I might see if Neville can help. He's good at looking for people."

"Coming!" answered Hermione, then giggled as she saw the expression on her wizard's face. "Well, you were a moment or two ago," she added in a whisper as she left the room.

Severus watched her leave, then took himself to the bathroom to find some much needed cold water to cool his flaming cheeks.

"What were you doing in there, Hermione?" Ginny asked suspiciously.

Her friend tried unsuccessfully to hide her blush. "Er... nothing... much, just reassuring Severus. He'll be out in a minute."

"Hermione! You're hopeless at lying. Your face gives you away every time." She turned as Severus entered the room, hair freshly combed, face damp, and trying to look innocent. "And *you* might want to buckle up your belt and fix those buttons you've misaligned. For someone who spends as much time as you do trying to catch people indulging in intimate activities, you're not very bloody good at hiding the evidence. Honestly, I think I need to inspect you before every meal to make sure you're both respectable!"

"Talking about meals, it's dinner time. We'd better send this harridan up to the Great Hall before her boyfriend sends out the cavalry." When all else failed, changing the subject usually worked. Severus steered Ginny towards the door, promising to follow in a few minutes.

"No more shenanigans, you two. You can wait until after dinner!" the redhead ordered as she left.

"Is it me, or is she getting bossier?" mused Severus.

"She's getting bossier, dear. You should see the way she manages those brothers of hers. You don't stand a chance now she sees you as a friend rather than the big, scary Potions professor."

"I was afraid you'd say that. However, I have an idea." The upturn of his mouth promised trouble for Ginny.

"What are you planning, Severus? I don't like that evil smile. Well, I do actually, but nevertheless..."

"You'll find out. I'll just say that little sister Ginny is about to find out just how much I can torment her." He chuckled and offered his arm to his wife. "Shall we?"

"Let's. I'm starving."

"And there I was thinking we could live on the food of love."

"The food of love is all very well, but it's pork chops on the menu tonight. I love pork chops."

Severus smiled. He didn't mind a good pork chop himself.

---

"I think I'll sit at the Gryffindor table tonight. Do you want to join us, love?" Hermione asked, knowing full well Severus would decline.

He met Neville Longbottom's anxious gaze and smirked. "No, thank you. I think it would be better for all our appetites if I joined my colleagues. I'll see you after dinner."

Severus could not resist bestowing a quick but passionate kiss on his wife's surprised lips before leaving her to face her friends. Ginny's smack on his behind when he passed only enhanced Neville's impression of his familiar as his eyes nearly popped from his head.

"Mione! Do you *have* to do that at the dinner table? We're about to eat," Ron whined.

Neville regained the power of speech long enough to point at Ginny and stammer, "You... you...*smacked* Professor Snape. On his *arse!*"

"Well, he was being a prat. He deserved it," Ginny replied as she reached for a chop.

"I think Neville was trying to say, *you don't* go around smacking professors, Gin. It's usually not good for you. Or your house when he deducts untold points from Gryffindor," Ron explained with a shake of his head at his sister's folly.

"Oh, don't worry about Sev. He and I have an understanding."

"Don't look at me. Why he lets her call him that is beyond me," Hermione added.

"I think the world's gone crazy," Neville muttered, half to himself.

With that, more pork chops arrived on the serving platters, and the youngest Weasley's odd behaviour was temporarily forgotten.

Hermione glanced up at her black-clad husband as she ate to find his gaze concentrated on Ginny. Curious, she raised an eyebrow to receive a fleeting wink in return. He was up to something, and it did not take a master Arithmancer to figure out it involved his self-appointed behaviour monitor.

Ginny's sudden giggle had heads turning in her direction. Another giggle was accompanied by a shift in her seat.

"What's up, Gin?" Harry asked between mouthfuls of chop.

"Nothing... much." She moved suddenly again. "Dammit, Ron, if it's you..."

"Me? What'd I do?" Ron looked up from his plate.

"If it's not you, it's Harry." Ginny laughed out loud and nearly fell off the bench. "Come on, you lot, stop messing around!" She thrashed her legs about under the table and collapsed with her head on her arms, shaking with laughter.

Ron looked at Harry, bemused. "I have no idea what she's on about. Did someone put something in her pumpkin juice?"

Hermione watched Severus pick up his wine glass and drink while seemingly absorbed in his conversation with the Headmistress. However, the hand he kept under the table was no doubt occupied at another task. Turning to Ginny's boyfriend, she whispered, "He knows she's ticklish behind her knees, doesn't he, Harry?"

"*He's* doing it? How? Why?" he hissed.

"Payback. He's using a localised Tickling Charm. Bloody smartarse is casting it wordlessly while he talks to McGonagall, too. I must ask him to show me how to do that. You realise we could be stuck in the middle of a war here? They both seem to have reverted to childhood."

"I can see that. I know Ginny told me she was going to treat him as yet another older brother, but this is... oh, hell, I just realised something!" Harry groaned and let his head fall into his hands.

"What?"

"If Ginny considers Snape as a brother, I'll get him as my brother-in-law!"

Hermione grinned. "Don't let it get you down, Harry. At least it means I'll be your sister-in-law."

"You know, Hermione, I'm not sure I find that at all reassuring."

"It'll be okay. I promise," she told him, patting his shoulder.

"Make him stop! Make him stop!" Ginny had finally realised who was tormenting her. "Hermione, will you tell that bloody pillock to..."

"*Finite Incantatem.*" Hermione flicked her wand to dispel the Tickling Charm and set up a low-level shield around her friend. "That should do it." She met Severus's mouthed, 'Spoilsport,' with a grin and a shrug of apology.

"Thanks. Don't know why I didn't think of that." Ginny sighed with relief as the relentless stimulus behind her knees subsided. "I think I can face dessert now. What is it?"

"*Featherlight* Spongecake," Neville replied around a mouthful.

"Great. Just what I needed. I think I'll pass." She turned to her friend. "He wins this time, but I'll get him back when he least expects it."

"Are you sure you want to do this, Gin. He's older, more devious, and knows far more spells than you," Hermione warned.

"True. But I'm a girl, and I've been a little sister for seventeen years..."

Ron waved his bun in his sister's direction. "It's true. She has a nasty streak, that one. And she can be very inventive. I'd tell your husband to keep his eyes open if I were you, 'Mione."

"I'll be sure to warn him," she replied. "Although, I might just leave them to it. Could be fun consoling him after Gin's finished with him." She flashed them both a wicked grin and helped herself to dessert.

A few hours later, Hermione regretted her second helping of Featherlight Spongecake as nausea threatened to interfere with her Arithmancy calculations. Several homework-unrelated calculations later, and the answer was clear.

"Oh, bloody hell!"

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A/N: Thanks to karelia for her beta work. She's awesome!

## Chapter Twenty: Ginny's Revenge

*Chapter 21 of 23*

Ginny plots revenge, and Hermione dithers over how to tell Severus her news.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to JKR. Only the plot shenanigans are mine.

### Chapter Twenty: Ginny's Revenge

"Oh, bloody hell!" Hermione screwed up the parchment she had scribbled on and tossed it into the fire.

"Problem, my dear?" Severus looked up from his marking and watched his wife taking her agitation out on her curls.

"No. Nothing. Just an unexpected result." She stood and gathered her papers. "I... er... just have to go and check something in the library. I'll be back soon." Dropping a kiss onto his once again bowed head, Hermione left the room with as much calm as she could muster.

Five minutes later, she was at the entrance to the adult students' quarters, knowing a certain red-haired witch was likely to be found within. Knocking on Harry's door, she rolled her eyes as she heard a muffled whispering and rustling teaching Ginny some Privacy Charms had just moved to the top of her to-do list.

Harry poked his head around the door. "Oh, Hermione, it's you. What's up?" First years caught out after curfew were more convincing than his attempt at innocence.

"Oh, give over, Harry. Can I speak to Ginny, please?"

The door was pulled open further as the girl herself appeared.

"Hi, Hermione. Just ignore Mr Embarrassed here. We weren't doing anything... much."

Hermione grinned at Harry's red face. "Of course you weren't. Can you spare a few minutes? My old room?"

"Okay. Come on then." She turned to her boyfriend. "Be back in a few minutes, love just hold that thought." She winked at the hapless wizard as she closed the door and followed Hermione into the now empty bedroom.

"All right. What drags you out of your dungeon lair and your husband's arms at this time of the evening?"

Hermione suddenly found her hands fascinating. "Well... I don't know what to do. I was feeling sick after dinner and, after a few calculations, I realised..."

Ginny clapped her hands in delight. "Hermione, you're pregnant!"

"How did you know?"

"What other calculations would bring you up here so close to curfew? So, have you told him yet?"

Hermione face crumpled as she wailed, "No. I don't know how to. He didn't want to get married, and we've finally sorted out how we feel about each other, and how can I have a baby so young, and what if he doesn't want it, and..."

Ginny silenced her with a finger to the distressed witch's lips. "Hush. Breathe, Hermione. Slowly. There, now just sit down and relax. Better?"

Hermione nodded.

"Now, remember your wedding day?" asked Ginny, taking her friend's hand. "Remember how you decided to go through with the Ministry vows to have Severus's children, even though you knew it was no longer needed?"

"Yes. But that was when we knew I was planning to use Muggle contraception at first. We didn't intend to start right away."

"Maybe not, but the thought of having children with you wasn't a problem for him, was it?"

"No. I suppose not."

"And you both knew you had to start sooner rather than later to ensure you conceived boys rather than girls, didn't you?"

"Yes, I know... but, Ginny... I'm scared a baby will spoil everything. It was so perfect. We love each other; the sex is amazing; even the other students seem to have

recovered from the shock. Am I selfish to have wanted to have him to myself for longer?" Guilt creased her brow as tears trickled down her cheeks.

"Of course not, love. But remember, you have another eight months together before you're due, and after that I'm sure there'll be plenty of house-elves willing to help watch the baby. And before you protest about using house-elves, they adore babies and will probably fight over who gets the chance to be your nanny."

"Are you sure, Ginny?"

"Absolutely. Now, when are you going to tell the father-to-be?" She placed her hands on her hips and fixed her sternest expression on her face.

Hermione's watery smile was reassuring. "Not just yet. I'll have to see Poppy Pomfrey first to confirm my suspicions, and she's away for a few days looking after her sick sister. I promise, as soon as she returns I'll see her, and then I'll tell Severus."

"Good enough. Meanwhile, I had an idea about how to get him back for his trick at dinner, but I'll need your help..."

---

Severus was perplexed, although he hid it from his wife. Her behaviour had become erratic over the previous two days, at times even a little irritable. Of course, he wasn't about to complain about the way she made up for any short words with an apology, usually followed by a satisfying period of kissing and fondling, but he knew something was bothering her. He just did not know what.

In class, Hermione had been distracted, mind obviously not completely on her brewing. Caught between his need to prevent an embarrassing mishap and his concern, he remained silent but vigilant.

Studying her surreptitiously as he pretended to mark student essays, he could see the subtle signs of anxiety in the teeth chewing her lip, the fingers fiddling with her hair, and the slight crease of a frown on her usually smooth forehead. About to relinquish his pride and ask for an explanation, he stalled as a soft knock sounded on the door.

After letting Ginny in and inviting her to sit on the couch, Severus returned to his unfortunate students' essays, questions held in abeyance until later.

"Did you say anything to him?" Ginny whispered.

"No. Not yet. I told you; I'm waiting until Poppy gets back," Hermione hissed back.

"Okay, okay. I thought she might have been back by now."

Severus looked up from his pile of essays and lifted an elegant brow.

"If you two young ladies are going to whisper about me, I suggest you do not do it while I'm marking seventh-year essays. I might be tempted to find a particular essay and treat it accordingly."

"Oops!" Ginny giggled.

Hermione shook her head. "You wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I?"

"No, darling, because then you'd have both Ginny and me to answer to."

Severus threw up his hands in feigned terror. "Merlin save me!" He dipped his quill into his favourite inkpot and picked up another parchment. "Now, go away and conspire against me elsewhere."

Hermione seized the opportunity to drag Ginny into the bedroom before Severus thought to ask any awkward questions.

"Perfect!" Ginny grinned as she fingered Severus's teaching robes, slung carelessly across the bed beside a pile of freshly laundered shirts and socks.

"What are you up to, Gin? You told me you needed to get access to his robes... No, on second thoughts, I don't want to know."

"And you don't need to know. It would spoil the surprise. Go and find something to do in the bathroom for a minute or two, will you?"

"*Nun sacciu, nun vidi, nun ceru e si ceru durmiv*," quoted Hermione, closing the bathroom door firmly behind her as Ginny raised her wand.

"Okay, you can come out now!" Ginny called several minutes later.

Hermione peeked around the door, relieved to find her husband's robes had not turned into a lurid shade of pink. In fact, they looked perfectly normal. "What did you do?" she asked.

"You'll find out." Ginny flashed an evil grin. "Now, let's go and see if your beloved has made the tea yet."

Arm in arm, they returned to the sitting room to find the teapot hot and their cups set out ready to be filled.

"It's so lovely to see a well-trained man, Hermione. Do tell me your secret." The snooty voice and tipped-up nose were perfect.

"Oh, it's a simple matter of keeping him satisfied in the bedroom, my dear. Plenty of fellatio and the occasional helping hand in the shower keeps one's wizard in top form." Hermione giggled as a blushing Severus nearly snorted his tea through his significant facial appendage.

"Do you *mind*?" he pleaded. "It's bad enough knowing you share everything with this dreadful girl without the details being discussed as if they were the latest fashion trend." In truth, he was willing to sacrifice a little dignity to see the return of a relaxed smile to his witch's face.

"Don't worry, Sev. I'm sure you're in no danger of becoming trendy." Ginny finished her tea and passed behind Severus's desk to return her cup to the tray. Glancing at the parchment he was marking, she narrowed her eyes and poked him in the shoulder. "Oi! That was uncalled for. There's nothing wrong with my conclusion there, you old git!"

Severus smirked as he Vanished the scathing comment he had written on Ginny's essay. "I know, but I had you going for a minute there."

"Prat!"

"Brat!"

"That's enough! You really are like a pair of school children," Hermione scolded the grinning miscreants.

"Oh, you're no fun, Mrs Snape," Ginny complained. Leaning forward with one hand in her pocket, she ruffled Severus's hair. "Night, Sev. Oh, and remember, when you least expect it, expect it!"

"You don't scare me, girlie." Severus looked pointedly at the clock. "Hmm, five minutes until curfew. I might have to make a start on my rounds and see if I can catch any

Gryffindors out where they shouldn't be."

"Or you could stay here, and I could work on training you a little more," Hermione suggested with a lick of her lips.

Ginny escaped with a chuckle as Severus conceded to his wife's sterling idea. Tomorrow would be soon enough to find out what was afoot.

---

Severus's mood was deteriorating rapidly as he strode down the corridors towards lunch. Not only had Hermione disappeared to Merlin knows where before he awoke, but his robes seemed to be malfunctioning. Instead of billowing dramatically in his wake as usual, the hem intermittently floated up in a most inelegant manner. After the third student giggled as he went past, Severus's recently acquired tolerance dissolved in a fit of temper.

"Five points from Hufflepuff for lack of respect towards a teacher, Mr Withers!" he snapped.

An outbreak of laughter from behind had the Potions professor whipping around, wand drawn. Three Ravenclaw fifth years were doubled up behind him, clutching their stomachs.

"You find Hufflepuff losing points amusing? Perhaps five points each from Ravenclaw might put things into perspective," he sneered.

"Er... sorry, Professor Snape, sir," gasped one of the guilty trio.

"See it doesn't happen again." Severus stalked off towards the Great Hall, ignoring the snickering from the Fat Friar as he floated past.

He slumped into his chair and glared at Minerva, who had had the temerity to snort into her glass as he rounded the staff table. "Has everyone gone completely barking today, or have I missed something?" he asked of the table in general.

"Oh, I'm sure whatever it is will sock you in the face eventually," Rolanda Hooch replied.

When the entire staff table erupted into gales of laughter, Severus turned to meet Hermione's gaze from the Gryffindor table. Her shrug of equal incomprehension did nothing to alleviate his suspicion that somehow, somewhere, a redheaded fiend had been up to mischief. The fiend herself gaily waved at him and winked.

It was hardly reassuring.

---

Having suitably cowed any passing students by way of his favourite glare, Severus slammed the door as he entered the classroom where his eighth-year students were waiting.

All was quiet.

Glancing around the room with a suspicious frown, Severus walked up to his desk and began writing the day's assignment on the blackboard. Usually, he would use his wand for the task, but a nagging urge to tempt a student into an indiscretion had him leaving his back to the class.

Still nothing.

"Well, what are you waiting for? The potion won't brew itself," he snarled as he sat behind his desk.

Twenty minutes later, the familiar sound of knives chopping, liquids simmering, and rods stirring had lulled Severus into a false sense of security. Gliding around the room, he spotted Ron Weasley about to add black beetle eyes to his potion.

"Weasley! What are you doing?" he barked.

The redhead jumped and dropped the beetle eyes into his brew, then watched, fascinated, as his potion bubbled violently and thickened into a virulent green sludge. He shrugged. "Not black beetle eyes, then?"

Severus smothered the desire to use his tongue for its second most pleasurable activity. "No, Mr Weasley. Perhaps you should spend more time reading the instructions and less time planning your weekend activities."

Ron felt the chill of his professor's tone despite his temperate words. Not for the first time, he inwardly thanked Hermione for her presence in the class. "Sorry, sir," he mumbled.

"You should be apologising to your housemates for the ten points you have just lost Gryffindor." Severus turned on his heel and returned to his desk, but did not reach it before a sudden outburst of laughter erupted from around the room. Spinning back to face the class, he scowled at the loudest group. "And ten points each from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw!"

Renewed hilarity greeted his words as he heard a hiss from behind him.

"Stop taking off points!"

Severus leaned over Hermione's shoulder as she valiantly strived to hold in her mirth. "And why should I do that, Mrs Snape?" he murmured in her ear.

"Just... trust... me..." she forced out between unladylike snorts of suppressed amusement.

Sighing, the beleaguered professor turned to his class and shouted over the din. "Detention for the last person to finish their potion. With Mr Filch. I want this classroom empty in ten minutes!" He retreated to his desk and spent the rest of the lesson pondering untraceable poisons he could use on the ginger menace.

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A/N: *"Nun sacciu, nun vidi, nun ceru e si ceru durmiv."* This is a famous Mafia quote: "I know nothing, I saw nothing, I was not there, and if I was there, I was asleep." What can I say Hermione's a well-read witch.

Thanks to karelia, my wonderful beta.

## Chapter Twenty-one: Parenthood



Severus concedes defeat to Ginny, and Hermione comes clean.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to JKR. Only the plot shenanigans are mine.

### Chapter Twenty-one: Parenthood

Severus slammed the door of his living quarters and muttered to himself as he threw his robes over the couch. After pouring a glass of Firewhiskey and draining it in one long swallow, he lowered himself into his favourite chair and closed his eyes. Slowly, he felt the tension draining away as the alcohol worked its magic.

A soft giggle prompted him to lift one eyelid. Hermione was standing in the bedroom doorway studying his... *feet*?

"What?"

She walked over and sat on the arm of his chair. Kissing away his frown, she murmured in his ear, "Look at your socks, love."

Peering down at his feet for the first time since he had dressed that morning, Severus found enlightenment. Somehow, his trousers were three inches shorter than usual, revealing his socks. Socks that were usually plain black, not black with red and gold lettering scrolling around them declaring, *Harry Potter is My Hero*.

"Oh, fuck. You mean she not only charmed the hem of my robes to lift all the time, but she enchanted my socks as well? No wonder the little brats couldn't stop their infernal snickering," he griped.

"Er... that's not all. Go and look in the mirror."

He sighed and stood to face the mirror above the mantelpiece. "What am I supposed to be looking at?"

"Try taking a point off Gryffindor."

Severus turned and gaped at his wife.

"Take a point off Gryffindor. Or Ravenclaw. Or Hufflepuff."

"One point from Gryffindor!"

The moment the words issued from his mouth, red and gold streaks appeared in his hair, lasting a full minute before fading away.

Shaking his head, Severus turned back to his smiling witch. "And I suppose they are yellow for Hufflepuff and blue and bronze for Ravenclaw?"

Hermione nodded, mouth twitching from suppressed mirth. "I think Ravenclaw suits you best, really, dear."

"The little minx. She must have cast the spell last night. I wondered why she was touching my bloody hair. And she put a time-delayed spell on my socks and robes so I didn't notice it this morning when I dressed. Did you help her with this?"

"No. It was all her own work," Hermione replied. "I don't think I would ever have thought of the hair spell."

Grudging admiration began to replace irritation as Severus considered the skill required to out-Slytherin the Head of Slytherin himself. "Ten points to Gryffindor for resorting to sneaky, underhanded tactics," he declared out loud. Suddenly, a faint crackle emanated from his head as red, gold, yellow, blue, and bronze sparks showered out from his hair.

"I think you've just broken the enchantment." Hermione laughed. Pointing her wand at his feet, she ended the spell on his socks and trousers, restoring everything to its usual condition. "There, I think it's safe to go to dinner now."

"Excellent. But before we go, I have something I must do."

"No more pranks. It's time you two called a truce," she warned.

Severus grinned and gathered her into his arms. After several heated kisses, he released her and straightened his clothes. "I needed that. Shall we?" He offered an arm to his flustered wife.

"Tease!"

"Later, my love. Later."

Ginny's cheeky grin greeted them as they entered the Great Hall. She raised her glass in a silent toast as Severus and Hermione reached the Gryffindor table.

"I see you've figured it out," she said.

Severus nodded and gave a formal bow. "Indeed, and I concede defeat. You, Ginevra Weasley, really *are* the expert at tormenting poor, innocent creatures such as me. I find myself needing to compliment you on your utter deviousness and callous disregard for authority. If I had the power, I would bestow upon you an honorary membership to Slytherin House and..."

"All right, all right, I get the idea. No need to be sarcastic, Professor dear." Ginny smirked at her victory and seamlessly switched to a completely different topic. "So, what did you think of Hermione's news?"

Severus frowned and glanced at both witches in turn. "*What* news?"

"Er... I was going to tell you, but..." Hermione blushed and managed a weak smile.

"You haven't told him yet? Didn't you see Madam Pomfrey this morning?" Ginny sighed and turned to Severus. "I'm sorry; I should have kept my big mouth shut."

"This wouldn't be something to do with the way you've been so distracted lately, would it, dear?" Severus growled. "Tell me what everyone else in this castle appears to know already!" he ordered, unaware his frustration was finding a ready audience in the tables nearby.

"It would be better if we waited until after dinner. In our own quarters," Hermione pleaded.

"I've waited long enough. Shall I ask our redheaded friend here?"

"No! Just trust me; it's not something..."

"Tell. Me. Now!" He glared around at the nearby Gryffindors, who hastily averted their eyes. "Before every student in this damned room pokes their nose into our concerns!"

Three days of gut-wrenching anxiety combined with raging pregnancy hormones conspired against Hermione's carefully wrought self-control. She snapped.

"And if you hadn't poked yourself into every part of my body, there wouldn't be any concerns!" Her hands automatically fluttered down to her lower abdomen. Several nervous snickers were stifled as the culprits realised the risk.

Severus suddenly became silent and still, eyes transfixed by her currently flat stomach. All his previous resentment at the expectation he would produce children for the greater good faded into insignificance as his heart swelled with masculine pride.

"Really?"

"Really."

"I'm going to be a father?"

"Well, I'm sorry. I knew the Muggle pills had a failure rate, but..."

"I'm going to be a father! I'M GOING TO BE A FATHER!" He gazed at the woman he loved beyond reason and finally accepted he deserved the joy she had just bestowed upon him.

The whole school was struck silent by the sight of the Potions master swinging Hermione around and laughing delightedly. It appeared the old bastard had managed to get his wife up the duff!

---

Hermione suddenly sat up from her position on the couch snuggled into her husband's arms.

"Severus! What about Potions classes?"

His fingers automatically soothed as he replied, "What about them?"

"The ingredients. Can any of them harm the baby?" Wide, anxious eyes met his.

He laughed. "Hermione, for years I've taught mixed classes of hormone-ridden teenagers who all live together. Do you think yours is the first pregnancy to occur in a student?"

"Well, no. I did hear there was a seventh year a couple of years ago..."

"And several others you did not know about. The curriculum is especially designed to avoid the use of any ingredients that could potentially cause harm to an unborn child."

"But some of them are toxic!" she cried.

"Only if you eat them. Are you planning to eat potions ingredients, dear? I know pregnant women develop odd cravings, but you really should warn me so I can ward the supply room," he teased, cradling her in his arms once again.

For his efforts, he received a slap on the arm. "Prat! What about when we sample the finished product?"

"Have you ever seen me ask a N.E.W.T. level female student to sample a potion, Hermione?"

"No. I suppose I haven't," she replied after due consideration.

"Besides, I'm sure your dear friends would be more than willing to take your place in *any* dangerous experimentation."

Hermione grinned. "Just wait until Ron has done something particularly idiotic; then feel free! I'm sorry, Severus, I should have realised you had measures in place for this particular eventuality. After all, I've seen how my housemates behave when you professors aren't around."

Severus shuddered. "Please, I don't want to know. I have to brew enough Contraceptive and Morning-After Potion as it is! Now, talking about potions, I'll need to go to the lab shortly to brew you some pregnancy supplements." He scowled as her face dropped. "What?"

"It's just... I can imagine the taste. I've heard about your medicinal potions."

"All the better to dissuade students from feigning illness. However, for you, my love, I'm sure I can do something about the taste."

Hermione snorted. "You make them taste foul deliberately, don't you?"

His smirk was all the answer she needed.

---

Later that night, after a dose of pleasant-tasting strawberry flavoured Antenatal Potion, Hermione curled around her husband in bed.

"You really don't mind?"

"No. I really don't. I admit, I thought I would, but the idea of my child growing inside the woman I love... It's just..." His gentle caress completed the thought. "And you, Hermione? Do you mind? It is you who has to carry this child and give birth. It is you whose life will be most disrupted."

"I know. At first, I couldn't imagine how I could cope, but the exams will be over long before I become too uncomfortable. I realise I'm likely to be more tired for the first month or two, but I think I'm far enough ahead in my studying to manage. I've always assumed we would start a family sooner rather than later; after all, we don't have many years before you turn forty-five," she replied, stroking his face in reassurance when he winced.

"Do you have to remind me of how ancient I am," he complained.

"Oh, you poor old thing. Do you think I need to Transfigure your broom to a walking stick?"

"Very bloody funny. You won't be laughing when I'm turning grey and you're still young and beautiful."

She attempted to study his appearance in a solemn manner. And failed. Badly. Grinning, she told him, "I think you'd look rather handsome with silver streaks." Before he started to preen, she added, "And of course, a few green ones, just to keep up the Slytherin theme. Perhaps I should ask Ginny what that spell was she used..."

His only recourse was to silence her by the most effective way he knew with his lips and hands.

"I love you, Severus Snape," she murmured a little later as she ran her hand through his hair. "How did we get so lucky?"

Tenderness never seen by anyone else met her gaze. "I believe a certain know-it-all with a penchant for numbers was to blame. We really ought to thank her some time."

The time for words over, Severus gathered his witch into his arms and proceeded to demonstrate his gratitude.

Several times over.

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Habbutt Tobias Snape was born on the seventh of November, 1999. It took Severus eight weeks, several bunches of flowers, untold boxes of chocolate, many fumble-fingered nappy changes, and a good word from Ginny before his wife relented and allowed him the pleasure of her body again. And taught him the handy nappy-changing spell she'd secretly learned from Molly Weasley.

Habbutt was a true Snape in appearance: piercing black eyes, lank black hair, and unfortunate nose. Fortunately, the sweet-tempered nature he had inherited from neither of his parents stood him in good stead as he grew.

Eighteen months later, Habbutt's brother, Piers Brighton Snape made his appearance. This time, his father had the nappy changing down to a fine art, needing only five weeks of grovelling before he was back in favour. Piers was the spitting image of his brother, but even as a baby was far sneakier.

By December 2002, with four black-haired, dark-eyed, large-nosed little boys to care for, Hermione had decided enough was enough. Seth and Geneon's birth had been uneventful, even for twins, but despite the assistance of the house-elves she was tired all the time. Severus, whose nappy-changing expertise was put to excellent use, didn't even try to convince her to do anything other than sleep. If the truth was known, he was quite happy to see their bed at the end of the day himself.

However, as in all families, the sleep-deprived months finally passed. One Saturday, Hermione looked around the sitting room in wonder. It was quiet. The older boys had been stolen by Pomona Sprout for the afternoon, and the twins were fast asleep under the watchful eye of Nupsy. Meeting the gaze of her beloved, patient husband, she deliberately stretched and smiled.

"Severus?"

"Yes, love?"

"You don't suppose..." She raked her eyes slowly down his lean form, with a deliberate pause below his waist.

"Oh, Merlin, I thought you'd never ask," he gasped, unfastening buttons as quickly as his trembling fingers permitted.

"Bedroom!" she squeaked as he tossed his shirt over the chair and started on hers.

"Don't know if I can wait that long," he groaned, but valiantly steered his wife in the general direction of their bedchamber.

"Oh, gods, Severus. You have too many clothes on!" Tugging at his trousers, her hands brushed his erection, sending shivers of arousal through them both. Finally freeing him from confinement, she pushed the garment down to his ankles together with his boxers and stepped out of her own skirt and knickers. Passion paid no heed to the boots obstructing the removal of his trousers as she pushed him back onto the bed and straddled him urgently. Sinking down, taking him in, Hermione breathed a sigh of relief as she rediscovered paradise, Severus following her eagerly down the path to long-awaited release.

Nupsy discretely placed a special house-elf silencing spell on the twins' bedroom door and smiled. *Things was back to normal.*

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A/N: This was written for the Variety Challenge last year. Many thanks to karelia, who is a wonderful beta.

## Epilogue

*Chapter 23 of 23*

The twins are Sorted, much to their father's relief.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to JKR. Only the plot shenanigans and the kids with the funny names are mine.

### Epilogue

Hermione watched the first years file into the Great Hall. Most of them displayed appropriate awe and nervousness at their first sight of the enchanted ceiling and all the older students and staff. All except two slightly scruffy, dark-haired boys wandering in a moment or two behind the other children. After all, Seth and Geneon had grown up at Hogwarts. They had treated the Great Hall as their personal playground and all the students as friends. The teachers were their honorary aunts and uncles, and the most feared of all, the Potions professor, was simply 'Dad'.

Grinning up at their anxious parents, the two boys shuffled their feet as they watched yet another Sorting. They had giggled through Habbutt's three years earlier and teased him endlessly about being a Hufflepuff, although no-one had been the least bit surprised. Likewise, Piers' Sorting into Slytherin had been a foregone conclusion, much to his father's delight.

"Merlin, I hope they behave," muttered Hermione.

"Those two. Not bloody likely. I just hope they aren't sorted into Slytherin. Let someone else deal with their hijinks for once!" grumbled their beleaguered father.

His wife snorted. "Coward!"

"Can you imagine the trouble they would get into if they had Slytherins as housemates? They're bad enough as it is; they don't need any encouragement to be devious as well. Piers alone is bad enough."

Hermione sighed. "You're right, of course. What is it with twins? The Weasleys when I was at school, then the Barnaby twins I was pleased when they left last year. It's just as well twins aren't a common occurrence in wizarding families!"

"We still have George Weasley's pair to look forward to in two years. Oh, gods, what are they doing?" Severus glared at his youngest sons as they innocently slid their wands into their pockets.

"I have no idea. And I don't think I want to know. Listen, they must be up next."

"Geneon Snape," called Filius Fitwick, Deputy Headmaster.

Geneon sauntered up to the Sorting stool, hands in pockets, as if he had all the time in the world. The Sorting Hat was barely on his head ten seconds before a decision was made.

"GRYFFINDOR!"

Geneon high-fived the air in his twin's direction and skipped over to the Gryffindor table, his grin of delight flashing perfect, white teeth.

Five minutes later, Seth joined him and waved gaily up to their parents at the staff table.

"Oh, bloody hell," Severus groaned. "Just what I need, two more Gryffindors in the family." He barely flinched as the expected whack on the arm was delivered.

"Never mind, dear. They'll be Neville's responsibility now," Hermione crooned.

An evil smile crossed the Potion master's face, visions of the rubies in the Gryffindor hourglass dropping regularly to the bottom as his sons contributed in their own inimitable way to Slytherin's House Cup victory at the end of the year. "So they will. Poetic justice, I believe." On that happy thought, he reached for the meat platter and offered it to his wife.

"So, Severus, where *did* you come up with those boys' names?" Minerva asked once dinner was under way. "They are quite unusual, and you've never explained why you chose them."

Severus and Hermione shared a conspiratorial glance. "Shall we tell her, dear?"

"Why not?" Hermione replied. "She can't dock points off our houses now, can she?"

Minerva frowned and wondered whether another helping of roast beef might have been a better option. "Well?"

"Think about where we were nine months before the twins' birth," Severus suggested with a smirk.

"How should I know?" Minerva began, then the rogue Bludger of the truth hit her. "You were supervising that seventh-year trip to Stonehenge. S.T.O.N.E.H.E.N.G.E. SETH and GENEON. You conceived them there! You two miscreants were supposed to be supervising the students, not canoodling!" she scolded.

The guilty pair grinned, looking uncannily similar to the two boys entertaining the Gryffindor table with embarrassing tales about their parents.

Minerva continued her calculations. "Using that logic, Piers was obviously conceived on your holiday in Brighton. I don't know why I've never worked that out." Suddenly, she blushed. "*Piers?* Severus, you didn't!"

Severus waved away all responsibility. "It was my young wife. I warned her the beach was all rocky, but she had to try it anyway."

"But I still don't understand Habbutt. You didn't leave the castle between your wedding and his conception." The older witch frowned as she tried to make the connection.

It was Hermione's turn to smirk. "You know, love, I think we should leave that one for Minerva to work out for herself."

"Certainly, my dear. Shall we go and congratulate Professor Longbottom on the latest additions to his house?"

"Just don't be too smug, dear. We still have to live in the same castle as the Daring Duo."

"Is that what they call themselves now? I suppose they would never have been anything *but* Gryffindor. Please tell me there wasn't a bossy know-it-all little girl Sorted into Gryffindor with them. I swear by Merlin's balls, I'll retire right here and now if there was!"

Hermione laughed. "I'd be more worried if they found out their Uncle Harry has an Invisibility Cloak." She caught his arm and dragged him over to the Gryffindor table, where Seth and Geneon were hugging Uncle Nev, who didn't look the least perturbed at having them in his house.

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"Thank the gods that's over," sighed Severus as his boots joined his robes on the floor and he sank into the couch. The traditional Slytherin Sorting party had dragged on far longer than usual, no thanks to Piers' little trick with the clocks.

Hermione shook her head, picking up his discarded belongings and taking them to the bedroom. "You're becoming as bad as the boys, Severus. You used to be the neat member of this family," she chided with a fond smile.

"Perhaps they've rubbed off," he replied, reaching for her hand. "Now, come here, witch. I want to celebrate child-free quarters."

"Er... yes. About that. There's something I need to tell you, love." She bit her lip as she sat next to him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

Severus frowned and lifted her chin to meet her eyes. "What is it?"

"Well..."

"Well?"

"You know that night we celebrated the completion of my Potions mastery?"

"Oh, yes, I remember it well." His body heated with the memory of exactly *how* they had celebrated.

"We didn't use the Charm. I'm pregnant again."

"Oh, fuck. *Again?* What are we, competing with the Weasleys?" Still, he grinned like an eleven-year-old with his first wand.

"You pillock! You love the world knowing you're so bloody virile. *You* don't have to have your stomach all stretched out of shape and covered in stretch marks and your nipples chewed on for months," she grumbled half-heartedly.

"And *you* know I happen to adore every one of your stretch marks. And your nipples. Speaking of nipples..." He reached under her blouse to fondle the area under discussion. "Mmm. Yes, I believe they might be larger. I propose a more thorough investigation."

"Severus!" She slapped his hand away, but spoiled it with a giggle at his pout. "You do realise now you're the grand old age of fifty-four, this one is likely to be girl?"

"Hermione, my love, if this one is another boy, he can go straight back where he came from, anatomical impossibilities be damned."

His wife chuckled and kissed his cheek. "You're all bluster, Severus Snape. No matter what sex this baby is, you'll love it and spoil it just like you did the other four. It would be nice to have a girl though. What do you think we would name her? It doesn't seem quite right to use our usual method for a girl."

"I know exactly what name to use," Severus declared. "But I'm not telling you for at least half an hour."

"Half an hour?" Hermione stood, slowly unbuttoning her blouse as she wriggled out of her skirt. "I'm sure you can do better than half an hour, Professor Snape. After all, there are no children to interrupt tonight."

His appreciation rising, Severus watched his wife undress. Despite three pregnancies and the beginning of a fourth, she still looked as youthful to him as she had on their wedding night. Skin supple and satiny, breasts full yet still firm, and curves that made his body ache with desire. He could definitely do better than half an hour.

Much later, Severus whispered a name into Hermione's ear. Her snort of appreciation was taken as agreement.

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"Oh, I wish they would hurry up. I know she's been delivered already. Whatever can be keeping them?" Ginny Potter paced outside the delivery room at St Mungo's, impatient to meet her new goddaughter.

"Hush, love. I'm sure they're just enjoying a few quiet moments together," Harry soothed. "Severus'll be out in a moment or two, showing off his latest achievement."

Ginny chuckled. "That man sure is proud of himself when his wife gives birth. You'd think he did all the work!"

"Hey. We men do contribute, you know."

"Yes, dear. A few minutes huffing and puffing at conception. Big effort." Ginny grinned as the door opened and a tired Severus joined them, bearing a bundle of pink blankets like a pro.

"Let's see her then, Sev," the redhead ordered, reaching for the newest Snape progeny. "Oh, look, Harry. She's just like her brothers. I told you Sev's genes would win through. She's got your nose too, you old bat! Poor kid."

At that moment, the baby woke and stared at the woman holding her with large, dark eyes. Then she screwed up her face and howled.

"That'll teach you to insult her nose," Harry teased as he took the irate baby and expertly rocked her back to silence.

"She's got her father's temperament too," Ginny added as she wrapped her arms around Severus and hugged her congratulations. "You did great, Sev. Now, what have you named her?"

Severus smirked and with a bow, gestured towards his daughter. "Mr and Mrs Harry Potter, please meet Dolores Ginevra Snape."

"Dolores!" shrieked Ginny. "You can't pair my name with Umbridge's!" She narrowed her eyes. "*Why* did you pair my name with Dolores? Not that I'm unhappy you used *my* name."

"It's obvious, isn't it? If it wasn't for Dolores Umbridge and her machinations, Hermione would never have married me. For that, I owe her my most heartfelt thanks. And as for pairing her name with yours, just consider that payback for Albus Severus, young lady!"

"Oh, Sev! You *idiot!*"

The idiot ignored her. He had a tired wife and grumpy daughter to appease.

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The End

A/N: Written for the Variety Challenge. It's taken a year, but we got there in the end. Many thanks to karelia for all her beta work. She's amazing!

House points to anyone who works out the origin of Habbutt's name.

Thank you to all the readers who have stopped by and left reviews. Love you all! xx