

Traps & Arrows

by corianderpie

Summary: Minerva takes a break, Hermione takes a new post, Severus takes up the cudgels, Neville takes a risk, Filius takes his chances, and Rolanda takes bets on the outcome. Written as a gift for Magically25 in the 2010 SS/HG gift exchange. Prompt: "The competition. A setting of your choice, a competition of your choice. Plenty of plotting / counter-plotting, tit for tat and escalation of consequences."

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 6

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Disclaimer: Do I own any of this? Oh, honey. Don't be silly.

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Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps.

... *Much Ado About Nothing* 3.1

'Ibiza?'

'Yes. Ibiza.'

'But Ibiza is so, so...'

'Sunny? Spanish? Don't twist up your face like that, my dear; it's really quite unpleasant to look at.'

She had been about to say *Vulgar*; *Ibiza is so vulgar*. 'Um, *far*. It's so far. Ibiza is.' The teacup she hurries towards her mouth crashes into her teeth and spills half its contents down her shirt. 'Oh, hell!'

'*Tergeo*. That's the point, isn't it? For me to goaway during my sabbatical? I don't think it would work otherwise. Besides. Ibiza is where a friend of a friend has a villa where I may stay. It is an ideal arrangement.'

Hermione blushes. 'Yes...oh, yes, of course. I just... I do apologise; it just feels so sudden.'

Minerva snorts. 'I can assure you it is anything but sudden. I have been wanting to take this time for, well, for nearly thirty years. There was always some reason I couldn't.'

'Mostly some reason named Voldemort, I imagine.'

'Just so. Now that the war is safely in the past and the school is rebuilt and my staff is mostly stable, I propose to go.' She reaches for a biscuit and snaps it in half. 'Before someone, somewhere, somehow comes up with a reason why I can't.'

'Oh. Um.'

'Thirty years, Hermione. Thirty.'

'Yes.'

'Longer than you've drawn breath.'

She just nods. The dozen or so reasons why Headmistress Minerva McGonagall cannot, ought not, must not take a year-long leave of absence are clanging in Hermione Granger's throat. She drowns them with more tea.

'But that's not all I want to talk to you about. And this next subject should be a bit more congenial.' Minerva rises and walks to the fireplace. Pinching and flinging Floo power, she says, 'Kingsley Shacklebolt's Office.'

'Minerva. Miss Granger.' The Minister of Magic's Floo-face ripples and bulges in the fire.

'We're ready for you, Kingsley,' says Minerva, and steps back from the grate to let the man through.

* * *

'Why *her*?'

Minerva's expression evokes a dagger, or a pike...some fell and stabby thing.

Severus is nearly undaunted.

'That the reasons are obvious is a fact too obvious to state. But if you must be thick: she is to take up the Muggle Studies post this autumn. She has attended Hogwarts and a Muggle university, both with great success. She has the energy, intelligence, and organisational ability to pull it off. It is an inspired choice.'

'She is, in my experience, a crusading, prating, grating, superior, interfering know-it-all who will rub the rest of the staff raw before the year is half over. She'll cause a rebellion that you'll have to quell. She's trouble.'

'You'd prefer an outside Ministry appointment then?'

'I might prefer it to certain doom, yes.'

Minerva rolls her eyes. 'When, Severus, did you become such an old woman?*Certain doom*, indeed.' She leans forward over the desk. *Professor Granger* has Ministry backing in this. Furthermore, she is *my* chosen candidate.'

And she leans back in her chair, glass in hand. 'Is it the concept of interhouse comity you dislike so much? Or of coordination across subjects? I can assure you both have long been needed at Hogwarts.'

He cannot will his shoulders to unknot. 'I am accustomed to being in control in my own classroom.'

'I'm not asking you to give that up. By no means. And I don't plan on introducing any curriculum reforms for another two or three years. This year is for beginning to reconsider the lines we all draw between houses and academic subjects. And between students of different blood status. The next war will not be bred at Hogwarts, if I can help it.'

She swirls her whiskey and sips. 'You know, I never thought I'd learn to appreciate Irish whiskey. I've always been a single-malt girl, me. But this will do.'

Severus mutters under his breath something he might half want her to hear. It might be 'Umbridge.'

Minerva won't be drawn. 'Indeed, Severus, you'll find that this year's arrangements will represent *apromotion* in your authority. What I am asking...no, what I am demanding...is that you accept and support Hermione in this new role. It needn't be a trial. It could be... rather amusing. More?'

He holds out his glass and waits for her to start making sense.

'There is another...a related...topic I want to discuss with you today.' Her face softens along its smile lines.

'Have you ever been... to Ibiza?'

* * *

'Why *him*?'

'Nev, it's obvious. He's the Deputy Headmaster. With Minerva on sabbatical, it's only natural that he stand in. I mean...who else?'

'Pomona could do it.' Neville looks so young when he's in this mood.

'Darling. You know you love Pomona too much to want her to drop everything and come back to Hogwarts. She's ridiculously happy with her research and with... oh, what's his name?'

Neville frowns. 'Toshiro.' And he mutters something else.

Hermione shouts with laughter. 'Do you *really* think he's a gigolo, or do you just envy Pomona? He's *yummy*.'

'Yes, well, yummy boys don't much fancy me, do they?' From anyone else this might sound bitter. Neville's just stating the facts as he sees them.

'Oh, Nev.' She feels a surge of tenderness for him and tries to hold it back. He's easily embarrassed by displays of affection. 'I found mine, didn't I? You'll find yours, and he will be of the very yummiest.'

'Yeah, you found yours at a university with thousands of men. I, however, am a teacher at a school in rural Scotland. The circumstances and my character don't exactly lead to hot and cold running men in my rooms.' He smiles. 'Now I'm thinking of what that would look like. Hot men, and cold ones. Running in my rooms.'

Ah, the feint to absurdism. Time to change the subject. 'I have one more piece of this to tell you.*Guess* who is taking Transfiguration while Minerva is away?'

'No idea.'

'Someone we were at school with.'

'Umm. Penelope Clearwater?'

'No.'

'Let's see. Theo Nott?'

'Much closer!'

'Hermione, just tell me, please.'

She opens her eyes wide and pauses before rolling out the improbable words, 'Draco. Malfoy.'

* * *

'I still don't *understand*, Severus. The point is... what *is* the point again?'

'Unity. Cooperation. Reconciliation.' He makes the words sound like the load of horseshit they are.

'Huh. Those are not very pointy points. Those are some squishy, um, points. No wonder you're being such an blessh, um, blish, ermm, *blister*.' Draco's not holding his drink well.

He's nervous, of course. He'll be setting foot in Hogwarts for the first time since the day after the last battle...six years ago in June.

'Regretting your decision?'

'Yes!' groans Draco. 'What the *ffffuck* was I thinking? I was doing *fine* in Munich. Everything was just normal and fine.'

This is not how Narcissa tells it. The gambling and drinking were bad enough. But when those gave way to unrelenting black moods, social isolation, poor hygiene, and the Ignoring of Owls from One's Mother, Draco's mum, guided by her charlatan 'personal growth' guru, went into action. Hogwarts, the scene of Draco's injury, would be his cure.

Severus knows the scheme, because last year he was the victim. A flock of old colleagues had appeared at the door of Spinners End, politely ignoring the squalor and talking of gratitude and trust and new beginnings. A moment of weakness...a flash of not-yet-dead hope...and he'd agreed to return.

Now Draco, for his own reasons, has done the same. *More fool he*, he thinks, and sips his firewhisky.

'Bugger. Great bloody bollocksy bugging bugger.' Draco has gone white and is sliding, cursing, all the way down the settle so that his body is half under the table and only his wild eyes and tufting pale hair are visible.

Severus turns. Three people have just entered the Leaky Cauldron, two men and a woman. Longbottom. Some brown-haired Mugglish bloke. And Granger.

It's the first time Severus has seen her since the last day of his trial, four and a half years ago. She and Potter and Weasley (correction: Weasleys, the whole fucking tribe) had fought for and won his release and exoneration. It was, in his opinion, *their* success: balm to their self-image, another tick mark in their column entitled 'good triumphs over evil.'

He didn't give a monkey's. Went to Spinners End with his Ministry honorarium, fenced himself in with wards so thick they sent any mortal owl away choking, and began a discourse with his books, his music, and the contents of his tiny potions lab.

The Muggle-type pulls out a chair for Granger, then leans down and kisses the side of her neck. *So she's not with Weasley anymore*. The realisation gives his gut an odd twist, and he narrows his eyes.

There's a sort of glow around her he remembers from the months of pretrial preparation. And he's suddenly very angry that he still imagines it's there. *A halo of self-righteousness, is what it is*.

She may be coming in to Hogwarts with a Ministry mandate to spread peace, love, and understanding. But he's the Headmaster this year, and the bushy-haired know-it-all tyro isn't going to have things her way. Not by a long shot.

* * *

'No, really...it's for flying.'

'You're *joking*, aren't you? Next you'll tell me you all have animal familiars and wear pointy black hats and sit around stirring cauldrons.'

Hermione looks around to see if anyone's heard David. This is *not* going very well.

Neville says mildly, 'Well, it's interesting. They're not familiars in the old sense; it's more tradition than anything else, these days. The hats, too...they're part of formal or ceremonial dress. And we stand.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Sorry. Making potions...stirring the cauldrons. We stand, we don't sit. It's like, well, like cooking.'

Hermione squeezes David's hand. 'I know it all seems odd, sweetheart. But really, there are a lot of similarities. Um...'

Again she looks around. At the thick cobwebs draped artfully over the back bar. At the cloth polishing a glass in midair. At the neighbouring table and its occupants: an owl standing astride its own droppings, and a very hairy wizard with a tattooed pattern of stars spinning and winking on his forehead. At the paintings of pub rooms whose various occupants are brawling, singing, vomiting, sleeping. At the carved-wood booth in the shadows, one of whose occupants is half under the table while the other is...

It's *him!* Professor Snape...*Headmaster* Snape. He's looking right at her. And... is that *Malfoy* listing into the corner?

'Neville! Look. It's Professor Snape, and Malfoy. No, over there.' She smiles and waves, feeling like an idiot, but one must do *something* other than point.

Snape curls his lip. She turns hot and red and looks down at her hands. Like a godsend, their drinks arrive.

David's looking at the booth. 'Those are colleagues of yours?'

Hermione glances at Neville, who is staring devoutly at his glass. 'Yes. The dark one is Professor Snape. He's acting Headmaster this year. The other is Draco Malfoy. He was at school with us...with me and Neville...and he'll be teaching Transfiguration this year.'

Because he's about to ask, she says, 'It's the art of transforming objects into other objects. Like I showed you the other day, with the doily and the bag of crisps?'

'Ah. Right. Yes.' David takes a sip of his butterbeer and grimaces. 'And what does Professor...what's his name? The one who looks like he'd like to pick his teeth with our finger bones?'

'Snape.'

'Snape. What does he teach?'

'Potions, actually. Cauldron stirring and all that. Or...no, what am I thinking? He's DADA now...Defense Against the Dark Arts. It's just, when Neville and I started at Hogwarts, he was the Potions master. I suppose I'll always associate him with Potions.'

Neville shudders. 'Me too. Merlin, he was a bastard.'

'Was?'

'Was. Is. Ever will be. He more or less despises me, though now we're colleagues it comes out more like the very coldest indifference.'

'He's not so fond of me, either,' she says. 'I wish... but he's not. He's... ah, it's so complicated.' She spreads her hands. 'You must understand, he's absolutely brilliant.'

'Brave, too,' says Neville.

She nods fervently. 'So incredibly brave. It's... he's a famous war hero. He's like...' She searches for Muggle equivalents to offer David. 'He's like Count von Stauffenberg.'

David raises his eyebrows. 'Really? The bloke who tried to assassinate Hitler?'

'Yes, well, sort of like that. He took on someone that bad, and from the inside. But Professor Snape survived. He prevailed.' She looks towards the booth, where Snape is leaning across the table saying something to Malfoy. She lets her gaze rest on his beaky profile and lank, greasy hair. The sight makes her glad.

Out of the war's horrors and the muddle that 'normal life' has proven to be, she holds on to a few purely good things, and this is one: that Severus Snape is healed, free, and covered with honour.

* * *

She plops back down in her chair and buries her head in her folded arms on the table.

'That bad?'

She looks up at him. 'Well, you saw it. This is really *hard* for him. It's hard for both of us. I only told him a month ago, when I decided to accept the Hogwarts job. I've been trying to ease him into it since then. Two days ago I got Ministry clearance to bring him here. I don't know... maybe I should have chosen somewhere less... colourful.'

She leans her forehead on her fist. She's very tired, suddenly. 'It's so odd. On one hand, I'm so relieved that I've finally told him. I feel like he can really *see* me now. On the other hand, I *hate* how this has commandeered the entire relationship. It's all we talk about. Well, I mean, even when we're not talking about it, we're talking about it, if that makes any sense.'

Neville nods.

'I thought maybe I could take him into Diagon Alley today, show him Weasleys' and Flourish and Blotts and Fortescue's and every place that I love. But he was right to go home now, I think. That would have been too much.'

'Well, it was a start,' says Neville.

'Yes. And now maybe I can go and have a word with...wait, where did they go?'

He shrugs. 'I went to the loo and when I came back they were gone. Diagon Alley, I'm guessing. Or just straight to Hogwarts.'

Now she feels thoroughly deflated. She's ready to jump in and start building something new and hopeful at Hogwarts; she wants to share her plans with Professor Snape and start working out the details.

'Oh. Oh well. Maybe it's for the best. We couldn't really have talked business here, especially... well, Malfoy was clearly two sheets and rising. He looked *bad*, Neville.'

Neville is silent for a minute or two, staring at the shreds of his paper cocktail napkin. When he looks up, his hazel eyes, usually so soft, so quietly observing, are hard and glittering...on the edge of tears, or of a fight, or *something* dire.

'Yeah, no. He doesn't ever actually look bad. That's the problem, in a nutshell.'

She gapes at him. 'Neville? What...? *What?*'

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 6

Summary: Minerva takes a break, Hermione takes a new post, Severus takes up the cudgels, Neville takes a risk, Filius takes his chances, and Rolanda takes bets on the outcome. Written as a gift for Magically25 in the 2010 SS/HG gift exchange. Prompt:

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Disclaimer: All together now: JO OWNS IT!

Severus greets all her plans with flat rejection.

No multihouse Quidditch teams. No mentors from a different house, a different family background. No swapping around seating in the Great Hall. No 'school trips' to Muggle London. No bloody beginning-of-term camping trips for incoming students...seriously: *This?* From *her*?

No student newspaper. No officially sanctioned student wireless. No student 'talent show.' No 'subject of the month' presentations among staff. No cross-subject 'workshops' or 'seminars' in support of Minerva's future curriculum reforms.

Just no.

She's stunned, he can tell. For a minute, it looks like she might cry, but then her jaw sets, and the blush of upset and humiliation turns to the flush of anger.

'We'll see what Minerva has to say,' she says. 'And Kingsley, if it comes to it.'

As predicted. 'Mmm. I say no, so you're running to Mother? Tsk. Gliding in here on borrowed authority and throwing a tantrum when I don't clap my hands with glee and hand you the keys to the castle.'

'My authority isn't borrowed. It's quite real, and you know it.'

'I'm not so sure. You're not proving much by coming here and laying your childish plans at my feet for me to say yea or nay to.

'This whole enterprise is... rubbish. It's a foolish hope on Minerva's behalf...and obviously not terribly important to her, or she'd be sitting here talking to you instead of leaving it to me. As for Kingsley, his support is three-quarters political opportunism and one-quarter an attempt to get into Minerva's knickers.'

She blushes even deeper, clearly mortified. 'That's, that's... I don't know how you can say that.'

'Really, *Professor Granger*. The villa in Ibiza? Belongs to the Ministry. Kingsley's fancying a love nest.' He regards her with a smirk. 'Do you really want to tattle to Mother and Father? It might be a little more... complicated... than you think.'

She gazes at him, her expression wiped clean of any trace of her earlier enthusiasm. Her eyes are wary now.

That's right. I'm no longer a dying man you half-kill yourself to save, or a prisoner bound to cooperate with you. I'll make you look before you leap this time. And I OWE you nothing anymore.

'But I'm not going to force you to cry to the Ministry. Instead, I'll do you the favour of trying to get you to think for a moment.' He walks behind her and stands with his back to the window. She has to twist in her chair, squinting into the glare, in order to look at him.

He continues. 'So tell me. How does this sort of dealing...you and me, up in a tower, deciding between ourselves how things should be arranged...comport with your notions of cooperation, openness, and fairness?' He sketches a circle with his hand. 'Seems like the same old thing, to me. And it's not going so well for you, is it?'

He lowers his voice to a low, insinuating murmur. 'Where *is* your authority? Think.'

'*Obscuro*,' she says. The glass behind him darkens, neutralising his advantage.

'My authority lies, among other places, with the staff and students of Hogwarts.' She rises from her chair and pulls on her cardigan. 'Which reminds me. I've had a chat with nearly everyone on the staff...just informally, you know, over tea and biscuits, or Ogden's in a few cases. They've all agreed to be present at a meeting tomorrow morning after breakfast, in the room just behind the Great Hall. We'll be voting on which of these projects we would like, as a staff, to organise this year. Then we'll discuss who will be in charge of each, so we can have it sorted before the students arrive on Monday.'

She reaches for her bag. 'Oh, would you do me the favour of telling Professor Malfoy about the meeting, please? I haven't had a chance to visit him yet.'

At the door, she pauses, looking down at the floor. 'And I must confess I was surprised at your analysis of Kingsley's, ah*secondary motivation*.' She looks up at him, and there's more than a little light back in her eyes. 'Considering Minerva got into his pants months ago, he doesn't need to scheme at her knickers. I'm sure he already has several pairs around the place, should any need arise.

'Until tomorrow, then. *Headmaster*.'

For about two minutes after she leaves, he stares out the window, his eyes glinting.

Then he snorts softly and turns back to his...or rather, Minerva's...desk.

* * *

'You look chuffed.' Neville grins.

'I *am* chuffed. I think that went marvellously well.'

For the students, the staff have approved the mentoring scheme, trips for sixth- and seventh-years, seat swapping for House points, and newspaper and talent show participation ditto...all with rules and safeguards to curb cliques and bullying and promote actual interhouse friendships.

For themselves, the staff have decided there will be regular but informal meetings about the ways their subjects overlap or complement one another. Just to get them thinking and talking about these things before Minerva returns and begins her programme of reforms.

Hermione chuckles.

'What?'

'Just thinking about my Quidditch gambit.'

'Which was?'

'You know...the suggestion that we divide up the House Quidditch teams into four interhouse teams. A notion so horrifying and wrong that almost any other plan sounds like the whispering of the angels.'

'You did that on purpose!' Neville howls with laughter. 'Gods, Hermione, you are brilliant.'

'I am.'

'I thought Rolanda was going to clout you. And Snape looked like he'd eaten live grindylows for breakfast and they were dancing on his kidneys.'

Now she laughs out loud. 'He did. But then, really, he always does.'

'He shouldn't have underestimated you like that.'

'No.' She turns her face up to the interlacing branches of the trees that line their path. 'I'd bet he won't again.'*Wish he weren't my adversary. Wish he'd be my friend*

Neville picks up a long, thin stick from the ground and whips it through the air so it whistles.

'I'm so glad you're here,' he says. 'It will make my year.'

Neville doesn't say such things lightly. They walk in silence for a little while. She hates to break it, but she feels the subject looming.

'Nev, how was it? Being in the same room with him? Are you, um, are you okay?'

He uses his stick to behead a few dandelions before answering.

'I am, actually. Surprisingly so. It was... helpful... to have advance warning. And the sighting in the Leaky Cauldron last week took some of the shock out of today.'

He's silent for a moment. 'I think...I hope...that this will be a good thing, in the end. Seeing him every day...' He swallows hard. 'Seeing him every day, working with him, might allow me to finally... let go.'

She nods, mute. It's what she can manage. Inside her head, she worries about so many things. Is Neville really bearing up as well as he claims? And what is Draco thinking, coming back to Hogwarts to teach alongside Neville...even if only for the year? Is he just that insensitive? What if Draco's dating someone else? How would Neville deal with seeing the love of his life really, finally, out of reach?

Now that she knows what they had in their seventh year...a grand passion carried on in secret, and ending in the agony of Draco's weakness and betrayal...she's a little in awe of Neville. And of Draco, it must be said.

Though she'll kill him, of course, if he ever, *ever* hurts Neville again.

They walk on.

* * *

'You look hacked off.'

'Hardly. You'll recollect this is my usual expression.'

'If you say so. She did outmanoeuvre you, though, didn't she?' Draco grins. 'That was rather brilliant, that whole Quidditch thing. Granger always did like plotting and intrigue. She'd have made a good Slytherin.'

'No, she wouldn't.' Severus says. 'She'll resort to low tactics, certainly, but always in the service of *the greater good*.'

'Which *you* would never do, of course.'

'Shut it. And stop grinning. I have a job for you.' Severus strides to a side table and picks up a sheaf of parchments. 'You'll need to get started on this today...the owls need to be out by dinnertime.'

Draco shuffles through the sheets, baffled. 'What is all this?'

'The *Bezoar*. Hogwarts' new student-run newspaper. Congratulations; you are the staff advisor. Here,' Severus points, 'is your reporting staff. They need to be informed of their appointments before they get on the Hogwarts Express on Monday morning. So. Owls out this afternoon.'

'Here is your template: news, sport, announcements here; editorial here, including the Headmaster's Corner, which I will write. This' he pulls out a sheet 'is the inaugural column.'

Draco's as pale as wax. 'But... but at the meeting, Nev...Longbottom said he'd oversee the newspaper.'

Severus sneers. 'Do you really think I'm going to let Granger control the press by way of Longbottom? No. On Monday at the Welcoming Feast I'll announce all these delightful *innovations* and when I mention the *Bezoar*, you will stand up and introduce your staff. She'll see that two can play a game *ofait accompli*.'

'But... but... *Longbottom*...'

'You have until tomorrow to get him to cry off. If he won't, then you'll share the job. Close your mouth, Draco. You look like a guppy. Oh, bollocks, sit down before you fall down.' He shoves a chair under his sagging colleague and pushes his head down to the level of his knees. 'Breathe.'

They're both silent for a minute, until it's clear Draco will neither vomit nor faint.

'You did realise, did you not, Draco, that working with him would entail actually *working* with him? No, don't answer that. I don't want to hear it. What *I want* is for you to stop trembling like a first-year and go and send those owls.'

Draco mumbles something that sounds like 'fuck you and the broom you rode in on,' but Severus is already back behind his desk, quill in hand, giving Draco his chilliest why-are-you-still-here look.

As the door clicks behind Draco, a rich, warm chuckle sounds from behind the Headmaster's desk, and a familiar voice says, 'Well managed, Severus. I...'

Without looking up from his work, Severus points his wand over his shoulder and mutters *Silencio*.'

He has *got* to look into a permanent binding spell for Dumbledore's portrait. *Worst bloody thing about this stupid bloody job*

* * *

'You're not going to like it.'

She wants to laugh. 'Name one *likeable* thing Snape's done this year. Let's see. He rejected every one of my reforms out of hand. When that didn't work, he took over the *Bezoar* by coup. He stuck you working with Malfoy. He refuses to sign up for any of the staff round tables. He's throwing up every kind of red tape around the school trips. Nope, nothing likeable there. He's a contrary, obstructionist, sneering, dour, overbearing, underhanded bastard.'

Neville smiles. 'In other words, he's himself and, furthermore, he's used some of your own best tactics against you.'

She's silent for a moment.

'Well... well... just... okay, I suppose, if you put it that way.' She huffs and holds out her hand. 'Just give it to me.'

He hands her the paper and settles back in his chair.

She starts to read. After a paragraph, her mouth has fallen open. Two paragraphs in, and her face is red. Halfway through the column, she's making explosive little sounds. She finishes it and throws it, hard, at the wall.

'Greasy! Slimy! Destructive! *Git!*'

'I know,' says Neville. 'It's bad.'

She leaps to her feet and grabs the paper up off the floor. 'This!' She shouts, slapping it with the back of her hand. '"I wish to reassure all Hogwarts students that the many rumours swirling around this Ministry appointment are almost all unfounded." *Almost all unfounded!* Ugh!

"Professor Granger is in fact not authorised to dismantle the centuries-old, dearly cherished tradition of interhouse Quidditch competition." Sneaky, rotten bastard, using *that* against me and *starting* rumours when he pretends to be quashing them.

'And then! He just starts making things up: "As of this time, students may still date members of their own Houses." Well, good~~gods~~, that was *never* on the table.

"Students will not be penalised if they elect to sit at their own House tables or if they decline to travel to Muggle London in November or participate in the so-called *talent show*." *Of course they won't!* This scheme is not about penalising anyone, it's about *rewarding* behavioural changes that will benefit all of us!

'No need to shout, Hermione. I know all that.'

'Right here, Neville,' she wails, 'right next to my own article discussing the changes. His stupid column, undercutting them. *Why?* Why is he doing this? What does he have against me? Why can't he show a little, a little...'

'Gratitude?' he offers.

'No! No! Of course not *gratitude*. Maybe just something that's not pure, pigheaded, nonsensical hatefulness.'

'Because he owes you that much, at least?'

'Neville! Stop it! You *know* he *doesn't* owe me anything! All of us, everyone involved with his, his rescue and with the trial, forgave him his Life Debt to us without his even having to ask.'

'Putting him, in a way, even more in your debt.'

'You know Life Debts don't work that way...'

'Hermione, love. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about his own sense of justice, his pride. Technically, he's not in your debt, or Harry's, or Minerva's, or the Weasleys'. But in a sense, he always will be. It has to be galling to someone like him.'

'Someone hardly human? Too right! Depending on other people? Horrors! Ceding a little authority? Never! Admitting that I or anyone who's not him might have something of value to say? Perish the thought!' She's pacing as she rants, and the combination is making her feel energised and excited. She feels... rather great, actually.

Neville sighs. 'I don't think that's exactly it...'

She stops short and holds out her hand. 'Wait. Neville, can you accommodate an anonymous item?'

He thinks a minute. 'Well, sure, I suppose, as long as, um, either Draco or I know what the source is. And as long as it's not, well, you know, defamatory or any of that.' He looks worried. 'What, um, what are you thinking of?'

'You'll see. Deadline's Wednesday, right?' He nods. 'Wonderful.'

She thinks, *So this is how you want it, Mr Snape? Very well then. The game is on* And she smiles a hard little smile.

* * *

'Suborning the portraits now, Miss Granger? Who next? The ghosts? The squid? The Whomping Willow?'

Against her will, she shivers. She has to admit it...no one else could make sheer contempt sound quite *selectable*. That voice: it's like rich pastry. With a knife baked in.

'Professor Snape,' she says. 'As you and I are not on informal terms, I must ask you to call me Professor Granger. I'm no longer your student.'

'Small mercies.'

She widens her eyes theatrically. 'Oh, *I quite* agree. But please, what were you saying? Something about the portraits?'

She has rather lovely eyes...actually, very lovely eyes. Large and clear and warm. Well, warm in colour. Their expression, at the moment, is... not warm, exactly.

He tosses the latest edition of the *Bezoar* on his desk.

She makes as though she's just got his meaning. 'Oh. You mean that little anonymous item?'

'You admit you wrote it?'

She smiles, and there *is* warmth there. *She's enjoying this, too*. He feels an unaccountable burst of pleasure.

'I hardly think you'd call me in here to discuss it if you hadn't already ascertained that for yourself. Also, Neville told me you'd asked him.'

She looks pointedly at the portrait of a slumbering Dumbledore on the wall behind Snape, then returns her bright gaze to him.

'Well?'

'It's not anyone's business what I do with the portraits in my office.'

Hisses and gasps issue from the few unbound portraits left on the walls.

'That's not what the portraits think. Clearly. And I do think it's of interest to the greater community that you are cutting yourself off from the customary counsel of past Headmasters and Headmistresses. It's, mmmm, eccentric? Yes, that's the word.'

He shrugs. 'Unlike some people, I do not choose to do my job according to the dictates of a committee. Now. Who was your source?'

'Oh, Professor Snape. You're forgetting the whole *point* of an anonymous item. If the portrait I spoke to wanted to be identified, I would have quoted that portrait. Or portraits, really. I'm sorry, but I can't identify my source. Sources, I mean.'

'Very well. It seems I will have to start authorising the final layouts for the *Bezoar*. I can't allow frivolous or scurrilous reports to upset the students and the staff.'

'Well.' She raises her eyebrows. 'If you truly relish the extra work, by all means.' She sits and looks at him for a minute, letting a smile slowly take over her face.

She leans forward and murmurs, 'I'll just take the fight elsewhere. I'm quite indefatigable. And very, very resourceful. As you know.'

'Quite,' he says, and allows the silence to pool between them. 'You've changed since then.' *Why did I just say that?* He narrows his eyes and glares at her, because looking away would be too revealing.

'Well, you haven't,' she shoots back, because of course that's the best possible response. But she thinks, *What do you mean? What do you see when you look at me? Why am I an enemy?*

He smirks. 'No. I haven't.'

'That's good, then. I shall know exactly how to act. Ta.' And she saunters out of the door.

He shakes his head. Truly, he could happily stare at that arse forever.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 6

Summary: Minerva takes a break, Hermione takes a new post, Severus takes up the cudgels, Neville takes a risk, Filius takes his chances, and Rolanda takes bets on the outcome. Written as a gift for Magically25 in the 2010 SS/HG gift exchange. Prompt:

"The competition. A setting of your choice, a competition of your choice. Plenty of plotting / counter-plotting, tit for tat and escalation of consequences."

Disclaimer: For form's sake, I will patiently reiterate: all, all is JKR's. Though she would probably never do this sort of thing with it.

* * * * *

Hermione's in the Staff Room, talking to Neville at a window table, so Filius makes his approach as unobtrusively as possible. He sits beside Rolanda and opens a book, which he reads for a few minutes.

'What odds are you quoting?' he asks finally, in an undertone.

'On what?'

'What do you have?'

She consults a notebook. 'I have six bets going: he gets disciplined without being replaced, at 5 to 1; he gets replaced as Acting Headmaster, at 4 to 1; the Comity program gets shut down, at 2 to 1 on; she resigns, at 12 to 1; Minerva is forced to come back early, at even money; and the two of them shag each other and forget about being enemies, at 8 to 1.'

'Really? Who started that last one?'

'You know I can't tell you. Do you want in on it?'

'Are you offering a spread?'

'Fifteen days either side of Christmas.'

Filius puffs out his cheeks in thought. 'Fine,' he says at last. 'Ten on that. Five on Hufflepuff to win House Cup.' He shrugs. 'I know; I know. Ravenclaw will never give up. But I have to call it how I see it, and under these new rules Hufflepuff is unstoppable.'

'Oh. And five on Minerva coming back early. Any spread on that?'

'Nope.' She looks at him expectantly. He nods, and she makes a note.

'Thank you, Rolanda.'

'The pleasure's mine as always, Filius,' she says amicably, and they both go back to their books.

Over by the window, Hermione is trying to react appropriately to what Neville just said. 'So is it... um... *adate?*' she asks.

'No. No. I don't think so. I don't know. He says he wants to talk. So I'm thinking of it as an appointment to talk. I think...' he trails off. 'Well, it can't hurt. Maybe we can clear the air enough to work together more comfortably on the *Bez*. The current arrangements are pretty awkward.'

Awkward? she thinks, not without sarcasm. *Using students as go-betweens and communicating entirely by note? Oh, no. Perfectly normal* Out loud, she says, 'Yes.' Then, 'This is a big deal, Neville. I know it is. And I think it's the right thing to do.' She shuts her mouth before any stronger words come out.

After a moment, she says, 'So, when?'

'Saturday. Upstairs at the Three Broomsticks.'

'Oh, great! David's coming up this weekend, so I'll be around Hogsmeade if you need me.'

Neville smiles slightly. 'I'm not sure David will appreciate sharing you with a needy friend, if it comes to that.'

She suppresses the distress this observation causes her. 'Not at all,' she proclaims. 'You are always welcome in our midst. Well,' she blushes, 'maybe not ~~at~~ways... I mean... uh...'

Now he smiles more broadly. 'I knew what you meant. Goose.'

The door of the Staff Room flies open and ricochets with a boom.

It's Snape, looking like something's got up his enormous nose.

'Granger. My office. Five minutes.'

He slams out again.

Hermione grins wryly at Neville. 'I imagine he got the owl. See you later.'

As the door closes behind her, Filius leans over to Rolanda and murmurs, 'Bump my Minerva bet up from five to eight, will you?'

* * *

Saturday's weather is foul...rain sheeting down on already drowned streets...and the Three Broomsticks is crammed full.

When Hermione and David come through the door, Rosmerta ejects a gang of damp third-years from their table by the fire and waves the two of them over.

The hostess lets David get a good view of her spectacular bosom...a time-honoured part of the Three Broomsticks Experience...before taking up her station behind his chair and giving Hermione a gigantic wink and mouthing "Nice!" Out loud she says, 'Hello, loves, how about a bit of hot punch?'

'That sounds perfect. And how fresh are the cauldron cakes?'

Rosmerta huffs. 'Made this morning, o' course. As always...you know that, Professor.'

'Wonderful. Two of those, please? Thank you.'

'Well, hopefully they won't be too stale, anyway,' she murmurs to David as Rosmerta sashays towards the kitchen. 'They're a classic Wizarding treat, so you must try them.'

She reaches across the table to take both of his hands. 'I'm so glad you're here; thank you so much for making the trip. How did you find the Portkey?'

'Awful. Felt like being run over by a lorry whilst on an LSD trip. And then the lorry reversed.'

She knits her brows and strokes his hands with her thumbs. 'I'm so sorry, darling. I'll be able to Apparate you back tomorrow. It's, well, it's also pretty awful, but at least I'll be with you.'

His smile looks half-hearted, but at least it's a smile.

'I've missed you, Mims.' He's playing with one of her hands. 'I'm looking forward to tonight quite a lot.'

'Me too.' She feels vastly relieved. He's glad to see her. The weekend's going to be fine. Just fine.

She props her elbows on the table and leans forward. 'So tell me. How's the City? What financial worlds have you conquered lately?'

He runs his hand through his hair. 'Well...' But before he can say any more, the door opens. Snape and Malfoy, both looking rather splendid and quite dry, billow in.

Wait, did I just think they're looking splendid? She peers at them.

Draco's clothes are impeccably made, as usual, but today he's actually tidy, too. His gleaming hair is pulled back and tied behind his neck with a black ribbon, and his robes are pearly grey and utterly becoming. His pale face is a little flushed, his lips pink. He looks like he stepped out of a Fragonard. He's gorgeous.

Oh, he absolutely thinks this is a date Her jaw muscles tense. *He'd better behave well, or he is a dead, dead ferret*

Snape is in his usual inky black robes with white linen peeking out at collar and cuffs. She notices how beautifully his clothes fit him, and how well they suit him ~~he~~ *has such a style*, she thinks.

The two of them draw every eye in the room. Mostly because the room is full of students and the advent of the Headmaster and the Transfiguration teacher is something to notice. But also because they seem to command the room just by dint of being in it. Two striking men. Two *wizards*, radiating that particular power...

'...names again?'

She blinks and drags her eyes back to her companion. 'Sorry, what? Um, honey?'

'Those two. We saw them in London. Stauffenberg and the drunkard. What are their names again?'

She looks over at Snape and Malfoy; they're now at the bottom of the stairs, and Draco's saying something in Snape's ear. Snape nods. She knows Neville is already upstairs, waiting for Draco.

Please, please let it be okay, she prays.

Now Snape has seen them and he is... *what?* He's heading towards them.

'Hermione?' David says impatiently.

'Oh, um. Yes, they are Draco Malfoy; he just went upstairs, and this,' because now he's standing right there, 'this is Professor Snape. Hogwarts' Headmaster.'

'Acting,' says Snape. 'Professor Granger, you appear to have the only free chair in the room at your table. May I?'

She looks around. It's true. There's just the one chair. Oh, this will be fun. If one defines 'fun' as 'mortally awkward.'

'By all means, sir, um, I mean, Professor Snape. Please. Allow me to introduce David Fitzhugh. My, my boyfriend. David, this is, um, Severus Snape.'

'How d'you do,' David says, extending his right hand.

'Charmed,' sneers Snape, ignoring the hand and raking his eyes over David's blue cotton shirt and rumpled khaki trousers, the mackintosh slung over the back of his chair. 'Muggle, I presume?'

David leans back in his chair and looks speculatively at Snape. 'I suppose I am. Though it's the first time I've ever been called it to my face.'

Snape smirks. 'Well. Get used to it. You'll hear it often enough as long as you're shagging Granger, here. That and... other things.'

Oh, already headed towards a pile up. Brilliant 'Professor Snape,' Hermione breaks in, 'I saw you come in with Malfoy. Are you here to lend support?'

""Support?"" The sneer is back. 'He asked me to wait for him. I said I would. I suppose I might "support" him back to Hogwarts if Longbottom hexes his bollocks off.'

'But with any luck, they'll be up there balling each others' brains out within half an hour.' Snape stares at Hermione as he doles his next words out like treacle, dark and slow. 'A little fucking can go a long way towards making peace on earth, don't you find? Donald?'

Her face goes red and her mind seems to short circuit. *What... what... ?*

'It's David. I would say, Septimus...may I call you Septimus?'

Hermione shifts uncomfortably in her seat.

'Call me Snape.'

'Right. Snape.' David's fingers are intertwined with hers, and he brings her hand up to his mouth to kiss. 'I'm all in favour of a little fucking. Or a lot.'

'David!' *Ugh!* Hermione squirms, acutely uncomfortable now. For one thing, she can't hold on anymore. 'I'm so sorry, just, excuse me, I'll be right back. Um. You both behave, please.' She pulls her hand out of David's and scurries off to the loo, hoping no harm will come to her boyfriend while she's gone.

Left alone with him, Severus withdraws his attention from the Muggle Granger's shagging. *What abysmal taste she has. Weasley the Sixth, and now this?*

Seemingly, the Muggle's not in a mood to be ignored.

'So, Snape. I hear you're rather a famous hero in your little world. You're just quite amazingly brave, it seems. Well. You don't look so tough to me. You look like a weedy bastard, to me.' He leans forward. 'I am a triple black belt. Do you know what that means?'

Severus looks at the man in chilly surprise. 'Do enlighten me.'

'It means that if you touch her, I can break you in half three different ways. So keep away.'

'I can see what Granger sees in you. Your conversation is so... appealing.'

'Just know this: she's taken. In fact,' and here the prat smirks at his own wit, 'she's taken all kinds of ways. She likes variety. And I,' the berk leans forward, 'am happy to oblige her. Because she is a *fantastic* fuck.'

Another few seconds of this and she'll be a fantastic fuck with a pile of smoking ashes for a boyfriend, but here she comes, hurrying through the crowds from the toilets. So Severus just says, 'Cheers.'

As Granger sits, Severus stands. 'If Draco's thrown down the stairs at any point, I can be found in the snuggery.' He turns, takes a step, and turns back. Timing is everything. 'Granger, I am forgetting my other errand. Sybill's been called away on family business...some aunt in Bristol is *in extremis*, or something like that. I need you to patrol tonight.'

'But I...'

'No buts. You're next on the rota. You'll still have plenty of time with Derek, here. Just be back at the castle before nine.'

And he threads his way over to the bar and ducks through the snuggery door, without once looking behind him.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 6

Minerva takes a break, Hermione takes a new post, Severus takes up the cudgels, Neville takes a risk, Filius takes his chances, and Rolanda takes bets on the outcome. Written as a gift for Magically25 in the 2010 SS/HG gift exchange. Prompt: "The competition. A setting of your choice, a competition of your choice. Plenty of plotting / counter-plotting, tit for tat and escalation of consequences."

Disclaimer: Not mine, never will be.

* * * *

'What does it say?'

Hermione crumples the parchment in her fist.

'Septima's not coming.'

'Oh. That's... Why not?'

'She doesn't say. But you can bet *he's* behind it. This is... this is just *great*. Help me think, Neville. Who can we get at,' she looks at her watch, 'two hours' notice?'

He thinks. 'Sybill's never much use after nine or so, and the play goes on until when?'

'Past eleven.'

'Filius, Rolanda, Horace, and Alfrid are on the patrol rota tonight. Aurora can't; I think she has a celestial conjunction she's tracking this week. Firenze is out. Cuthbert is out. Poppy can't leave, and Irma won't. Draco's already coming.' Neville blushes. 'So that leaves...'

'Rubeus. Argus. And *him*. Brilliant. Two near-squibs and an evil bastard who wouldn't throw water on me if I were on fire.' She's quiet for a minute, considering her options. She will be damned if Snape will torpedo the seventh-years' school trip by depriving her of the requisite number of chaperones.

'Okay, Neville. You go and talk to Septima, and if she won't budge, work on Irma. I'll get on the Floo and see if I can get some help from the Ministry. He won't get away with this. We'll find someone.'

An hour later, they've found someone. 'Harry will meet us at the Barbican,' Hermione reports happily as she, Neville, and Draco take their seats in the Great Hall for dinner. 'And Ginny's going to see if she can drop James with Molly and come too. Why didn't I think of them in the first place? This will be wonderful!'

'Old school reunion,' says Draco glumly. 'Huzzah.'

She sees Neville reach out and graze Draco's hand with his own, under the table. 'It'll be fine,' he murmurs. 'We'll be fine.'

Draco smiles. He does that often these days. Sometimes she thinks she might even grow to like him rather a lot. After he's been sweet to Neville for a few more years.

And Neville. She started the school year feeling half guilty and half smug that she had something he didn't. Now she wonders, unwillingly but with increasing frequency, if *she* will ever have what *he* does.

Things with David have been strained ever since their aborted Hogsmeade weekend. David had insisted on being Apparated back to London after dinner on Saturday rather than spend the night alone in the inn. He'd said some hurtful, even outrageous things. And they haven't really had a chance to sort it out since, and won't until school finishes for Christmas.

Damn Snape. If he's mucked things up permanently between her and David, she'll...Well, she'll think of something very, very bad to do to him.

And here he comes, sweeping along the dais towards the Headmaster's podium. *Hateful man*.

He glares around the room until the students quiet down. 'One reminder. Seventh-years who are going on this evening's outing, please eat quickly. You need to be in the entrance hall in your Muggle clothing by twenty minutes to seven. We will walk to the school gates and Portkey in groups...Quiet, please!...we will Portkey in groups starting at seven o'clock sharp, with the last group leaving at seven-ten. Miss that, and you miss the outing. That is all.'

She grabs his elbow as he passes her chair and hisses, *We?* What do you mean *we?*

He stares down at her. "'We,'" Professor Granger. An English pronoun, denoting the speaker with one or more others. In this case, myself, you, Malfoy, Longbottom, and the seventh-years. Did you not get Septima's note telling you I would be going in her place?'

'I, um, but... Oh, we'll talk later.'

'Indeed. More's the pity.' And he moves on to his seat at the centre of the staff table.

* * *

'Justin!' Hermione steps forward and kisses his cheek. 'I'm so glad to see you; thank you again for arranging this.' She looks around. 'Is this your office?'

He laughs. 'Hardly! My office is the size of a broom cupboard. A Muggle broom cupboard, at that. No, this is a conference room. I needed a room big enough for all of you to Portkey in to, in a nonpublic part of the building.'

'Brilliant! Seventh-years, please move to those chairs over there. Your classmates will start arriving in one minute and I don't want them landing on your heads.'

As the first ten students take their seats, she murmurs to Justin, 'Did you get my message about Harry and Ginny?'

'I did, and I was able to find another seat, but it's a few rows behind the group. Here are your tickets.'

'Well, as it turns out, we will be six chaperones rather than five, if Ginny can make it. Snape, of all people, decided to tag along. Can you accommodate him?'

Justin's eyebrows disappear beneath his fringe. 'Snape? Fancy that. Well, let me see what I can do.' He walks over to a phone sitting on a side table.

In come Draco with his group and Snape with his, and, at seven-ten exactly, Neville with his.

Justin whispers in Hermione's ear as the last students are herded into their chairs, 'Taken care of. Two seats together, three rows behind the main group.'

'You are my hero,' she murmurs.

She looks at the seventh-years. Some of the purebloods are...despite two weeks of preparation, despite being paired with Muggle-born and half-blood partners...looking around them like alien visitors from another world. Which they are. She sighs.

If the inoffensive banality of a Muggle conference room is bewildering to them, what will they make of the rest of the Barbican, with its variously wide open and closed-in spaces, its Muggle-modern poured concrete and gleaming wood? And many have never encountered any Shakespeare. What will they make of the play?

She's betting they will love it all.

She takes a deep breath and steps forward to address them.

* * *

How did this happen? she wonders, as she follows Snape along the aisle to their seats. She'd imagined Harry and Ginny would take these two isolated seats; instead, she sees Ginny, Harry, Neville, and Draco's heads scattered among those of the thirty-eight students in aisles H, I, and J. And here she is in aisle M. With *him*.

They sit. He hands her a program. She's forgotten to get one for herself. 'Thank you.'

'You're welcome.' He starts to page through his program.

She's suspicious of his quiet civility. She decides to test it.

'Have you seen it before? *Much Ado*?'

'Years ago, yes. In New York. In a park. A good enough production, but... it was hard to hear everything.'

Snape? Watching Shakespeare in a PARK? In *America*? 'Oh.'

They fall silent. The seats around them fill. She steals a glance at him, intent on his program. He's wearing his usual black trousers, dragonhide boots, and white shirt, but no waistcoat or frock coat. He's come in a black Muggle jacket, now folded in his lap, and an overcoat, which he's left in the Portkey room. It's a little disorientating to see him with so few clothes on.

She swallows. *I'm lightheaded. I should have actually eaten some dinner at dinnertime*

'You?' he asks.

She jumps. 'What? I mean, I beg your pardon?'

'The play.' He's looking at her with some amusement. 'Have you seen it?'

'Oh! Oh, yes. Well, as you probably know I am directing scenes from it for the talent show...that's one of the reasons we're here. And, in fact, I, um, I acted in a production at Oxford.' She pauses. 'That's where I met David.'

He contracts his brows as if trying to recall just who this *David* might be. Then: 'Ah, yes. The *boyfriend*. Let me guess. Claudio and Hero?'

'Not even close. David was the production manager. Finances, logistics, things like that. I was, um, I played Beatrice.'

His amusement spreads across his face. He is... actually *smiling*. Most would mistake it for a sinister grimace, but she knows. It's a smile.

'Of course,' he says. 'The unmarriedable harridan.'

She's half amused herself. 'Well. She's the best character in the play. And she does find a suitable gentleman, in the end.'

'Beatrice is interesting enough,' he allows, as the house lights dim. 'I'm a Benedick partisan, myself.'

'Not Don John?' And she is sorry, sorry, sorry the instant she says it. Because his eyes flare with hurt before they ice over with disdain.

'No,' he says. 'Not Don John.' And he turns his attention to the stage and ignores her for the next three hours.

* * *

Past midnight. The students are all back in their dormitories. He is done. He wants air, then sleep.

The night is mostly clear, and very cold. He turns his back to the castle and walks down to the jetty and stands there looking out over the water.

'Professor Snape.'

'Professor Granger.'

'I saw you walking down here and I...I followed. As you see. I hope you don't mind.'

He just looks straight ahead.

She stands next to him at the jetty's edge, gazing down at the dark lake.

He can see, without looking at her, what she's wearing. A dark green dress of rough, heavy silk. Black shoes that show her toes. A black wool coat. A silver necklace. He can conjure her scent, too, from three hours of being *so close*. He takes one step away from her.

'I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings tonight. With that Don John remark. Sometimes I say the most ill-judged things. And you and I...we're certainly in the habit of taking the mickey out of each other.'

She shakes her head. 'This is coming out wrong. I don't want to excuse it away. It was rude. And just when we were having a civil conversation for the first time in... ever.'

She turns towards him and takes a step nearer, her words flowing now. '*I liked* that moment we had. I sat there the whole rest of the play wishing for more, kicking myself that I'd blown it.'

She's gazing up at him. 'I...please. Can't we start again? Can't we let the past go...whatever it held...and *befriends*? I want to be your friend, Severus.' Her hand is on his arm.

'I don't.'

'I...you...what?'

He looks down at her hand on his sleeve. 'I don't want to be your friend.'

I don't want to be your Longbottom. Or your Finch-Fletchley or your Potter or your Hagrid.

The hand he had commissioned to remove hers from his sleeve turns traitor, and holds on to her hand, and uses it to pull her closer.

And closer. And she's in his arms, and his mouth is on hers. Her lips are cool from the cold night air, and soft. He brushes them with his, once, and again, and they part. *Ah, yes*. He moves his hands up to her face, slides them into her hair, and kisses her properly.

First she receives him, then she meets him, her hands sliding around the back of his neck, pulling his head down as she stretches up into his kiss.

She breaks the kiss, gasping into the hot air between them, and pulls back to stare into his eyes for two heartbeats and then she is kissing him again, smashing her lips and teeth into his. He staggers under the onslaught, grabs her waist for balance, pulls her against him and lets her kiss him, then begins to kiss her jaw, her neck. Her hands are full of his hair.

'Ohhhhh,' she says. 'Oh.' She stiffens. 'Oh!' And it's over. She's pushing him away. Her hand is over her mouth and her eyes are filled with horror. 'Oh, David! Oh, god. Oh, *no!*

'I...this...' She flutters her hands in distress.

He takes one step closer to her, and another, not bothering to veil his expression or hide what he's about. He wants another kiss *David's* not his concern.

With a strangled little scream, she turns and starts running towards the castle, stumbling in her ridiculous shoes. She's too distraught to take a second to Transfigure them. He does it for her, eliciting another scream.

He watches her go and, when she's disappeared around the front of the castle, he turns back towards the lake.

* * *

'Well, it's not *going* to happen again.'

'Why not?'

'Wha...why *not*? Because it was a ridiculous mistake! I have a boyfriend I am very much in love with! And you hate me!'

'How do you deduce that?'

'You mean, apart from your entire demeanour towards me for the last fourteen years? Your contempt, your sabotage, your insults, your *sneering*? And also, you said so.'

'When did I say I hated you?'

'Last night! You said you didn't want to be my friend.'

'I'm having trouble detecting the phrase "I hate you" in that declaration. Surely you can come up with other ways of construing my words.'

'Oh, fine. You didn't say it with words. But you still do. Hate me.'

'What an interesting reality you inhabit, Professor Granger, where you are more familiar with other people's emotions than they are themselves. Is it comforting to know so much, or is it a burden? A little of both, perhaps?'

'You know, if you're trying to convince me to kiss you again, you're going about it all wrong.'

'Ah, now, do tell me. What would be the right way to go about it? In all earnestness, I want to know.'

'Simple,' she sniffs. 'You'd just have to be someone else entirely. And the person you would have to be is David, because he is my boyfriend and is therefore the person I kiss.'

He rolls his eyes. 'Any turn this conversation takes in the direction of your "boyfriend"...horrible word, by the way...isn't constructive. He is entirely irrelevant.'

She gapes at him. 'Now who's living in a unique reality? In what way is it irrelevant that I have *lover* already, that is, a man I love and who loves me and with whom I have sex in the context of a monogamous relationship?'

'In that you are entirely wrong for each other, a fact you'd do well to admit before you waste too much more time with him.'

'And you and I are not wrong for each other?' *Why am I phrasing it as a question? It's a self-evident fact*

'We're certainly not wrong when it comes to kissing. Or, do you want more experimentation to be sure of it?' He pushes away from the doorway where he's been leaning, as though to approach her.

'You stay away from me! What I *want* is someone who is my friend as well as my lover, not someone whose pleasures in life include abusing me personally and undercutting me professionally and then every once in a while, um, kissing me.' *Kissing me so that my brain stops working and I can't sleep all night*

'It wouldn't have to be every once in a while. The kissing could take over from those other things to a fairly substantial degree.'

It's among the most unromantic propositions she's ever received, a fact her body doesn't seem to grasp. More kissing...lots of kissing; hot, wanton kissing, starting right now!...is just a really, really great idea, according to her racing heart and her buzzing skin and her somersaulting stomach and her... *No, it's not!* This is horrifying.

'Get out,' she says. 'Get out of my office.'

'Why?'

Outraged, she snaps, 'Well, first of all, because *she said so* and it's *my room*. And second, because this conversation is over. It's going nowhere good.'

'I disagree.'

'Shock! Surprise! You disagree with me! You want to prolong a quarrel! Well, how about this for a conversation clincher: I would not voluntarily kiss you again if you were the last man on earth. I don't trust you at all, and I have begun to actively dislike you.'

'That's right.' She nods emphatically. 'Before this year, I had only ever admired you, honoured you, worked and hoped for your well-being. But I've now endured nearly three months of your obstinate and completely unwarranted hostility towards my work...my legitimate, authorised work. I've wasted *so much* energy anticipating your tricks and stratagems and shrugging off your disdain. I like a good fight as much as the next person, but this...I'm tired of it!'

'I have no idea why you're being this way. If you have some principled objection to these programs aside from the fact that you think they're stupid and a waste of time, I have yet to hear it. I am left with the conclusion that you are acting out of pure spite, and that your motivations are personal, and petty, and nihilistic, and UNWORTHY!'

Her volume is quite high now; *god, it feels so good to let this out..* 'Either you hate Muggle culture, or you hate the Ministry, or you just hate me. Any way I look at it, you disappoint me. Your character is not what I thought it was. And all that? DOES NOT MAKE ME WANT TO KISS YOU!'

For a moment, they just look at each other.

'I see,' he says. 'Thank you.' And he leaves.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 6

Summary: Minerva takes a break, Hermione takes a new post, Severus takes up the cudgels, Neville takes a risk, Filius takes his chances, and Rolanda takes bets on the outcome. Written as a gift for Magically25 in the 2010 SS/HG gift exchange. Prompt:
"The competition. A setting of your choice, a competition of your choice. Plenty of plotting / counter-plotting, tit for tat and escalation of consequences."

Disclaimer: Whose? Hers.

* * * *

'I can't tell you.'

'Why not?'

'Because I don't know. He's not telling me.'

'Neville! This is making me extremely anxious. How can I plan an effective defence if I don't know what to anticipate? Can't you... I don't know... find out somehow?'

Neville takes in and lets out a breath. 'Hermione. If you are asking me to spy on Draco, you need to reconsider that request. If Draco and I cannot trust one another, we're lost. He says it's nothing to worry about, and I believe him. That's all.'

'Oh, god, Neville, you're right, of course you're right, and I'm sorry.' She blows a lock of hair out of her eyes and returns her gaze to the front of the room, where her Shakespeare students are rehearsing a scene from *Much Ado About Nothing*

Elsewhere in the castle, she knows, others are practising for the talent show, which will take place the night before the Christmas holidays begin. Groups of students from every house are singing, dancing, playing, planning costumes and sets and makeup.

They're doing it together, Muggle-born and pureblood, Slytherin and Gryffindor, first-years and seventh-years and even some staff. There's a sense of excitement in the air, and it's thrilling to her. It's everything she could have hoped for from this project.

If only she knew what Snape and Malfoy were planning. The Headmaster has been alarmingly quiescent. He hasn't picked a single argument with her since the morning after *that night*. Indeed, they've hardly spoken to each other in weeks. And now he and Malfoy have actually signed up as an act in the talent show.

What could the horrible man be planning?

At the front of the room, Peter Gwynne puts an arm around Charlotte Felton's waist and says, 'Only foul words, and thereupon I will kiss thee.'

Charlotte wrinkles her nose and pushes him away in exaggerated disgust: 'Foul words is but foul wind, and foul wind is but foul breath, and foul breath is noisome, therefore I will depart unknissed.'

Hermione sighs. 'Miss Felton, a word please.'

The girl walks back to her. 'Charlotte, please try to relax. Remember, she's *enjoying* this sparring. She actually *fancies* him.'

'I know, Professor Granger. It's just difficult. I don't fancy Peter and I don't fancy his arm around me.' She tosses her long blond hair and glances up at Gwynne...lanky, gawky, adorable Gwynne...who is waiting patiently.

'That's why it's called "acting," Miss Felton,' she says acidly. 'If playing this role is so onerous to you, I know Miss Greene would be more than happy to step in.'

'I'll try.'

'Good girl. If it helps, try to think of someone you *do* fancy, perhaps in secret. You are holding back, dancing around him with your words, giving away only the tiniest glimpses of your heart. But those glimpses are tantalising to him, and to the audience.'

'Casting disaster?' asks Neville as the girl rejoins the rest of the cast and resumes the scene.

'Absolute train wreck,' she murmurs, then calls, 'Better! Much better. You look much more, um, comfortable. Don't let it get too flirtatious, though; she's still mostly very hard on him. Keep going.'

To Neville, she says, 'My fault. I loved Gwynne as Benedick, and Felton seemed a good Beatrice...she's pretty and she's clever...but they have no chemistry. He's the kind of boy that will surprise us all someday in some marvellous, unexpected way, and she's the kind of girl that will grow up and marry a banker and call it good.'

She puts both her hands over her face. 'I can't believe I just said that.'

Neville pats her on the back and stands to go. 'Why don't you come by my rooms when you're finished here? It sounds like we're overdue for a chat.'

She raises her face to his and wipes away a tear. 'Yes, please.'

* * *

'Did you kiss him back?'

She groans. 'I did. I can't believe I did. It makes me dizzy every time I think about it.'

'Dizzy in a good way, or dizzy in a bad way?'

'Bad, Neville! Bad! How could kissing that...that...*greasy git* be good?'

He shrugs. 'Well, speaking as a gay man, I have to concede he's pretty snoggable.'

'What!'

'Not exactly my type, of course, but absolutely. He's, I dunno *joli-laid*.'

'Pretty-ugly? What does that mean?'

'It means someone unbeautiful who's still somehow really attractive. He has something of that. I'd imagine he's a good kisser.'

'Good, bad, indifferent...it's not the point! The point is I have a boyfriend and still I kissed that, that, tha *Snape*. And, yes, fine, it was really good, and I wanted to do it again in spite of everything. Three weeks later, I still want to. And this whole thing is making me look at David and think, oh, why don't I feel like that when I kiss him? I mean, *he's the man I love*, right?'

She's looking at him as though he can answer that question for her, and being Neville, he looks back at her with too-kind eyes and a silence that says what he won't put into words.

'You think maybe I'm just telling myself I love him when maybe I don't anymore? Or maybe I didn't ever, really?'

He says nothing. She feels like slapping his earnest, patient face.

'Well, maybe we're not all made for the kind of love you and Draco have, Neville. I mean, lifelong enemies who turn out to be soul mates? That's not a model most of us can emulate. Maybe love for the rest of us is less about passion and fireworks and yearning and more about trying to make things work in an imperfect world.'

The more she says, the more miserable she becomes. She stops talking and frowns into her teacup.

Finally, Neville says, '*Life* is about trying to make things work in an imperfect world. There's no escape from that. If you imagine every problem Draco and I ever had is solved, you're wrong. Really wrong.'

'And I'm not comparing you and David to us anyway. David's a nice bloke. He seems to care about you, which bespeaks his excellent taste. It seems like the two of you could make a go of it. But you're the only one who can decide if that is what you want.'

'What about Snape?' she whispers, half to herself.

'Sort David first,' says her friend. 'Snape's relevance now is this: is your kissing him a symptom of what's happening between you and David? Or is it,' and he smiles, 'the beginning of a whole new disease?'

* * *

Filius finds Rolanda on the Quidditch pitch.

'What are you quoting now on the shagging?'

She shakes her head. 'No more odds. It's a pool now. Don't worry, your original bet is still good. But if you want more action, you have to pick a date. Ten to get in, winner takes all.'

'Damn!' he says. 'What d'you still have open?'

She turns to the appropriate page in her notebook. 'December 18, 21, 30. January's wide open from the fifth. So that's good, anyway...looks like you'll make the spread on your first bet.' She smiles at him reassuringly.

'I suppose. Okay. I'll take 18 December.'

She notes it. 'Done. Good luck, Filius.'

* * *

'Merlin, that was fantastic!' Hermione's hands sting from clapping.

Neville's shakes his head in appreciation. 'Who'd think Portia Creevey would be such a sultry crooner? She's going to be getting some unaccustomed attention from now on. And Sybill on piano? I had no idea.'

'Neville!' she turns to him, grabs both his arms. 'This is going so well! I'm so happy!'

'I know. You should be happy, and proud. It's a complete success.'

'Just the one act to go,' she says. 'The mystery act. And, Neville, I don't care! Nothing he could do now could ruin the night. I win!'

There's a lot of movement now at the front of the hall. 'What are those?' she points to a couple of tall black boxes that some of the fifth-years are rolling on to the stage from the wings. 'They look like...'

'Speakers,' says Neville.

'But those are electronic! And look, look! That's an electric bass and an electric guitar! Two electric guitars! And amplifiers! Those are *microphones*!'

Draco walks out from behind the curtain. He's dressed in jeans and black work boots and a faded black t-shirt. The students roar at the sight of him. He smiles and bows and raises his wand. Cables snake around him, hooking up mikes and amps and speakers. Sybill's piano is Transfigured into a bank of electronic keyboards. A chair upstage becomes a drum kit, with 'The Joneses' scrawled on it.

Draco adjusts the central microphone and says, 'Good evening, Hogwarts. Hope you're having a fine time.' Cheers and applause erupt and surge as four more people walk onto the stage.

Sybill, out of her concert black and into her usual shawls and baubles, steps behind the keyboards. A skinny man with black hair and wearing a t-shirt that says 'Metallica' takes up one of the guitars. Aberforth Dumbledore takes the seat behind the drums. And Snape, his white shirt untucked and sleeves rolled up, slings the strap of the bass over his shoulder.

'Check check check,' says Draco into his mike, and the band take it in turn to check their sound levels, with Draco giving 'up,' 'down,' and 'okay' signals to someone

offstage.

'Oh. My. God. *Neville!* How?'

Neville's smiling fondly. 'I don't know. He's just really, really good at Transfiguration.'

Snape raises a finger and the audience lights dim. Spotlights hit the band. And they start playing: a clutch of single guitar chords punctuated by drums, a ripple of bass, then the stranger really starts playing his guitar, Aberforth takes up the beat, and Draco sings:

I was happy in the haze of a drunken hour but heaven knows I'm miserable now

His gaze brushes over Neville, and he smirks.

I was looking for a job and then I found a job and heaven knows I'm miserable now

The students are screaming and clapping and now most of them are on their feet, surging towards the stage, carrying Neville and Hermione along with them so that the two of them are just feet away from the band.

She stares up at Snape, whose hair is tenting his face while he concentrates on his instrument. His long, strong hands with their bony wrists are made to play the bass. *Who could have guessed?*

On the line 'What she asked of me at the end of the day, Caligula would have blushed,' he looks right into her face for a moment and smiles his unsettling smile.

She blushes. *Trouble. This is big, big trouble.*

They launch right into the second song from the first.

The boy with the thorn in his side, behind the hatred there lies a murderous desire for love

Neville's shining eyes are on Draco, who is dancing around the stage like a teenager. Hermione sways in place beside Neville, occasionally clutching his arm, and lets the loud, shimmering music shake every column of air in her body.

How can they look into my eyes and still they don't believe me

How can they hear me say those words and still they don't believe me

They sound so good. The guitar player is amazing. Aberforth and Snape hold the rhythm like they've been playing together for years. Sybill's mostly done percussion so far; maybe she has more to do later in the set. Draco's brilliant on vocals...Portia Creevey's not the only singer who'll have a fan club after tonight.

And when you want to live, how do you start, where do you go, who do you need to know

Six songs. Two encores. Tears slide down Neville's cheeks during some of the songs. Hermione can hardly take her eyes off Snape throughout the set.

Both band and audience are sweaty and spent by midnight, when a muttering Argus, a happy Poppy, and a yawning Hagrid organise the prefects to get everyone to their dormitories.

'See you at Horace's?' says Neville, on his way backstage.

She smiles weakly and nods.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 6

Summary: Minerva takes a break, Hermione takes a new post, Severus takes up the cudgels, Neville takes a risk, Filius takes his chances, and Rolanda takes bets on the outcome. Written as a gift for Magically25 in the 2010 SS/HG gift exchange. Prompt:

"The competition. A setting of your choice, a competition of your choice. Plenty of plotting / counter-plotting, tit for tat and escalation of consequences."

Disclaimer: You know what I like about JKR? Pretty much everything. Have you seen her hair these days? So shiny! (Oh, yeah, and all this Potterverse stuff belongs to her. This fan fiction is written and published for the nonremunerative amusement of myself and others.)

* * * * *

'Hufflepuff, class of 1981. Or I would have been. I dropped out after fifth year.' He taps his cigarette over an ashtray.

'Why?'

He snorts. 'I'm half-blood but grew up Muggle. Five years at Hogwarts, I decided wizards are fucking barking.'

He gestures towards Snape. 'He and I used to play together, here and home in Manchester. We were mates, even though I was younger. We'd practice upstairs at the Hog's Head, cause we could plug in there. Aberforth sat in sometimes. That was before Severus turned into a complete shithead.'

'When he took the Mark.'

'Yeah.' Johnny shrugs. 'In those days it was "choose sides, you have to choose sides." I just wanted to play music. So I left.'

'Mmmm.' She glances over at Snape. He's still in Horace's toils, and Septima and Alfrid are talking at him too. She longs for him to come and talk to her and she dreads it. 'And you came back to play Smiths songs with your old mates because... why, exactly?'

'We keep in touch. He asked it as a favour. And Little Malfoy told me the man needed help with a bird.' He blows smoke and looks at her amusedly. 'I'm guessing that would be you.'

He stubs out his cigarette. 'Got to run; I have a one o'clock Portkey back to the States. Good luck.'

He walks over to Snape and to her shock they exchange some sort of matey hug, complete with back pounding. He says something in Snape's ear and jerks his head in her direction, claps him on the shoulder again, and leaves.

She looks hastily away. *Oh god, I should just leave now. Go to bed. Why am I hanging around here like some groupie?*

Too late. He's walking towards her with two glasses of wine, one of which he hands her.

'Thanks, um, thank you.'

'My pleasure.'

Damn it! I don't know how to do this

'So,' she says. 'How many famous rock-star friends *do* you have?'

'Just the one. Those aren't really my circles. Johnny and I knew each other when we were kids.'

'And played together, he told me. You are a surprising person, Severus Snape. I begin to think I don't know you at all.' She takes a hasty sip of wine and wipes one sweaty hand surreptitiously on her robes.

'I think you probably know me well enough to be getting on with. There will always be more to... discover. In the course of events.' His thumb moves slightly across the surface of his glass and, helpless, she imagines it on her skin. *Shit.*

She gulps wine, and soldiers on.

'That set was amazing. I, um, I knew most of the songs; I have an aunt who was really into that music and I'd hear it at her house, so..*So that anecdote has nowhere to go.* 'You sounded fantastic together. Sybill really surprised me tonight. And Aberforth! And Draco...all the young hearts will be breaking for him next term.'

Silence.

Oh to hell with it She turns towards him just a little more, uncrosses her arms, says slowly in a considering voice, 'I really don't know, though, how wise it is for staff members to appear quite so... sexy... in front of the students.'

'It's a problem, I agree.' His eyes never leave her face. *Draco* is very appealing.'

'I wasn't referring to Draco, just then.'

'Neither was I, actually.'

Surely the air between them is no longer just air.

She takes a deep breath. Looking out over Horace's sitting room, she says, quietly, 'I want to thank you for getting so brilliantly into the spirit of the talent show. Muggle music, expertly played. Perfect. And you played across houses...with a Hufflepuff and a... what's Sybill's house?'

'Gryffindor.'

'Oh! Hmmm. Well. Anyway. I did not expect it, and I found it... wonderful.'

'Good. Because I did it entirely for you.'

Now there's simply *not enough* air. She glues her gaze to the flowers on Horace's mantelpiece as if they can steady or inspire her.

'For me?' she squeaks. 'What, um, what do you... um... '

'What I mean is this. I hope to demonstrate that I do not hate Muggle culture and that I do not hate you. And to tell you I have not been warring with you out of either principle *or* spite.'

She looks back up at him, confused. 'Then what...?'

Now it's his turn to look away. 'I may have started in spite. But soon enough I was fighting simply... for you. To get that spark out of you. You're magnificent in battle. I thought... you were enjoying it, too. I was wrong.'

She's utterly flummoxed. 'Severus! That's insane! That's just...*who* would enjoy being constantly, *constantly* embattled?'

He takes a step away from her to deposit his glass on a small table, and folds his arms over his chest. 'You'd be surprised. Listen. Hermione. You should know this about me...I was in effect raised by wolves in human form: I call them Mum and Da. Beneath this debonair exterior,' he sweeps a hand up and down to indicate himself, 'I am really rather poorly socialised, in patches.'

She laughs at this, steps nearer, and reaches across him to put her own glass on the table. 'And already I begin to discover things about you.' She's very near him now, inside his space. She feels like she's standing with him at the summit of a very tall mountain.

'I can't stop thinking about kissing you,' she murmurs.

He's very still. 'What about David?'

She's silent for just a few heartbeats, savouring the moment before she tumbles, exhilarated, down the other side of the mountain.

'David and I broke up two weeks ago.'

One deep breath later he says, 'Would you care to continue this conversation elsewhere?'

'Please.'

'Follow me to my rooms in five minutes.'

'Mine are closer.'

'Done. You go first.'

'Do you think we'll fool a single person by leaving separately?'

'No.'

She takes his hand. 'Together, then.'

* * *

'I thought... going... rooms.' She gasps out the words between kisses.

'Shhh.' He pushes her back against the wall outside Horace's door. 'Taste you first.'

'Yes,' she says, and lets him pin her wrists to the wall beside her head while he kisses her open mouth and her ear and neck.

But now he needs to hold her face and bury his fingers in her hair and she apparently needs to work one hand inside his robes and up to his shoulder blades while the other wraps around his neck.

After the first desperate, humid clinch they stare at each other. Half her face is aglow in the dim torchlight; the other half is in shadow. He lays one hand along her jaw, touching her soft fresh skin. *At last.* His thumb brushes her lip and she kisses it, feather light, then bites it, rather hard.

'My rooms, Professor Snape. Now, please.'

* * *

The first time he wakes in her bed, it's because she has hold of his cock, which has apparently woken before the rest of him.

She slings a leg over his and guides him closer to his new favourite place. 'Hi,' she whispers. 'You don't mind, do you?'

He doesn't mind.

The second time, he threads his way in near darkness to her bathroom. When he comes back into her bedroom, he stops beside the bed. The duvet's up around her waist but her breasts are bare, her arm flung up next to her head like a child's. She's so beautiful.

He flicks the duvet off of her and begins kissing her from her toes up. By the time he's reached her inner thigh, her hands are in his hair, and he sucks on the flesh to mark it, and she gasps.

Afterward, he moves to get off of her. She says, 'No, stay,' and shifts a little, and they fall asleep with their legs entwined.

The third time, he's actually dreaming of a hundred jangling alarm clocks, and the dream wakes him up. The room is silent and daylight is glowing through the curtains. Hermione is a lump under the bedclothes and a riot of hair on her pillow.

He rolls out of the bed as stealthily as he can and pulls on his trousers, then finds his watch. Nine-forty. Breakfast is over. The students are on their way to Hogsmeade Station to catch the Hogwarts Express. *Bugger.*

He's half-naked and it's cold. '*Incendio*,' he says to the logs in her sitting-room hearth. He Floos Filius.

'Oh, not to worry, Horace and Rubeus and I handled the send-off. All's well.' Filius looks almost jubilant. 'You just have a lie-in, and we'll see you... um, when we see you.'

Severus scowls and stumbles back to the bedroom.

She's sitting up in the bed, the sheet held up to her chin. Her hair looks like she's just fought free of a bramble. Her mouth would make roses look like chaff.

This is as far as he's been from her in the last nine hours. It feels very far, just now. His hand, hanging loose by his side, twitches.

He is at a loss.

Because she's awake, and watching him, he can neither crawl back into her bed nor reach for his shirt without either gesture communicating something different than what he intends. So he just stands there and twitches very slightly, awaiting his fate.

'Good morning,' she says. She's impossible to read.

'Good morning.'

'Headmasterly duties sorted?'

'Of necessity, since I seem to have slept through them.'

She lets the sheet drop just a little, so that the banquet that is her shoulder is bared. 'Lovely. Care for a lie-in?'

He leaves his trousers puddled on the floor where they fall.

* * *

'Here you are, Filius. Pool and wager, all made good. Congratulations.' Rolanda pushes a marvellously plump, clinking bag over to him.

The staff table is sparsely attended at lunchtime, and the four stalwarts are clustered at one end, out of their usual places.

Horace grumbles. 'Missed it by a day. Really, I ought to have guessed. The talent show...these sorts of things *justbreed* liaisons.'

Septima shakes her head. 'I was off by a whole week, and I ran calculations on over a dozen scenarios. Method, logic, analysis...all failed me. Gives me pause, you know? Just how valuable *is* my field?' She sighs, and stabs a chop with her fork.

'So,' says Rolanda, pouring herself another coffee. 'What are you going to do with all that gold?'

Filius's smile widens into a grin.

'I confess I *have* been giving it some thought. Just daydreaming, as it were. I rather fancy a beach somewhere warm, with good night life, where I could meet new people and maybe have a bit of fun.' He has a look of nearly boyish eagerness as he leans in towards his colleagues. 'What do any of you know about... *Ibiza*?'

* * * * *

A/N: Yes, that was Johnny Marr, guitarist of the Smiths, making a cameo in chapters 5 and 6. Severus chose the set list that his cover band, the Joneses, played, and it was as follows:

- 1. Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now**
- 2. The Boy With the Thorn in His Side**
- 3. How Soon Is Now**
- 4. There Is a Light**
- 5. Unloveable**
- 6. Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me**
- 7. Ask**
- 8. Please Please Please Let Me Get What I Want**

Thanks for reading this little romp; hope you enjoyed it.

squishes all round