

For Hogwarts: A Regency Gamble

by Subversa

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 22

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My beta readers for this project were Lariope and DeeMichelle; my beta picker was MagicAlly. Alpha readers were Mischievous_T, Annie Talbot, Machshefa, and Lady_Rhian. I am indebted to them all.

My dear husband, SubHub, was my co-conspirator every step of the way in this story, and if you see something terribly clever, most likely, it is his hand at work.

Chapter 1

September 2001 to June 2002

'Therefore, it can be seen that Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is bankrupt. The extraordinary expense of renovations following the Battle of Hogwarts has depleted operating expenses so completely that, at the end of the summer term, the school must close its doors.' Beanie Counter-McPhail completed his report of the dismal state of the school's finances and resumed his seat, fussily straightening his multitude of parchment sheets into perfect alignment.

As if to underline the calamitous nature of the words still hanging in the air of the first floor conference room, the clock on the mantelpiece chimed the hour, and the Headmaster consulted his pocket watch to substantiate its veracity. It was six o'clock, and the Board of Governors' meeting dragged on still.

Lucius Malfoy, splendid as ever in silver robes that exactly matched his eyes, smoothly took charge of the meeting again.

'Our thanks to our Treasurer,' he said, and allowed the assembled Governors to murmur their appreciation to the Ministry accountant who served as their financial officer. 'As we covered at our last meeting, there is sufficient operating capital to provide for the remainder of this school year.' Lucius stood, lifting the serpent-tipped cane in his hand and gesturing with it towards the blackboard. Affixed there were tedious charts with madly squiggling multi-coloured lines of financial doom. 'The adjustments to the debt structure and diversification of the shares portfolio will more than correct for the temporary shortfall...in three years' time.'

Voices continued on in the same vein, and the Headmaster, who had heard it all before, shifted in his chair, permitting his restless gaze to take note of the lengthening September shadows visible upon the grounds. How had Dumbledore suffered through these dreary meetings for so long? The old man had been Headmaster for decades.

Movement below drew his attention as he became aware of a small group trodding along the path to the castle doors, two women and a man. His lip curled at the sight of the unmistakeably messy black hair of the male. Good God, a Board of Governor's meeting *and* a visit from Potter, all in one day? Whom had he offended so grievously as to deserve this fate?

He was at a stand to identify the females, though. One was a slender creature with long, golden, curly hair and fluttering, feminine robes; the other was a deliciously curved woman clad in tailored Muggle business attire ... and much more to his taste. The close-fitting skirt stopped at her knees, permitting a satisfactory glimpse of stocking-clad legs and heels just high enough to emphasise the shapely calves. The neat white blouse tucked into the dark skirt served to accentuate the dip of her waist before the flare of her hips, which swayed slightly with each purposeful step she took. It was a shame he had failed to notice her before she had passed him...it would have been nice to see her *front*, always his favourite bit...and the cloche she wore in place of a witches' hat hid her hair from him completely.

Seeing such a vision was akin to a drowning man sighting a flotation device...though his ocean was one of endless figures and calculations...and the woman's figure was far superior to anything the accountants had to offer. Thus it was with an incongruous smirk that he allowed Lucius to reclaim his attention.

'That leaves us with the necessity of providing for school years beginning in 2003 and 2004. We would like to address the chief problems...that there are no funds to support the underprivileged students' tuition...and there has been no pay rise for the staff for the fourth year running.'

The Governors flicked their eyes uncomfortably towards the Headmaster, who sat with his deputy and a number of his teachers at one end of the massive conference table. The Hogwarts teachers returned these glances with stern, authoritarian stares, as only professional educators can do. The deadliest of these glares was from Professor Mortelle, his new Defence mistress. The woman would have unnerved the Dark Lord...no wonder Lucius was entranced.

The Governors looked quickly away again.

Griselda Marchbanks spoke up in her quivering voice. 'Lucius, hasn't the Ministry for Magic appointed a committee to research the problem?'

The door opened, and Harry Potter entered, stopping to hold the door for the two women who followed him into the room.

'I apologize for our tardiness, Mr Malfoy,' Hermione Granger said confidently, plucking the dark felted hat from her head and allowing her appalling hair to fall to her shoulders.

The Headmaster could only stare in tight-lipped annoyance. *Hermione Granger?*

'Miss Granger is Senior Assistant to the Minister for Special Projects, Madam Marchbanks. She heads the Ministry committee you were speaking of,' Lucius said smoothly, inviting the Granger girl forward with a gesture of one manicured hand. 'Would you introduce your companions to us?' he said to her.

'Penelope Clearwater,' Granger said, indicating the pretty blond, who nodded and smiled, 'and everyone knows this young man, I suppose.'

Potter grinned at the murmured greetings and ducked his chin in a way that made the Headmaster want to smack him on the back of the head.

Granger then took charge of the meeting as if she had been born to boss, which was, the Headmaster admitted, nothing but the truth. But who would have thought the buck-toothed, bushy-haired know-it-all would grow into such a toothsome morsel?

'Our recommendation is, frankly, nothing less than fundraising,' she was saying, and the Governors were focussing on her as if she were an authority...*aadul!* Some of the doddering old fools were even taking notes.

With an inward smirk, the Headmaster took up his quill, deciding that doodling whilst the girl assumed he was attending to her tiresome ramblings would be a satisfactory pastime. It would not do, of course, for his teachers...much less his *deputy*...to catch him at it, but he could prevent that easily enough. The Half-Blood Prince had created a number of eminently useful spells for students who were seldom thinking of class, even when they were *in* class. He cast one of these as he sketched a caricature with protruding front teeth and meticulously rendered, wildly spiralling hair.

'... throughout term time, with a major fundraising project to take place during the summer hols ... Harry, hold this where the Governors can see it.'

She thrust a chart into Potter's hands, and the twit stood obediently at her side, holding the drawing as if he were no more than an easel upon which Granger placed her exhibits. It was, in fact, a perfect use of The-Boy-Who-Lived-To-Make-The-Headmaster's-Past-An-Open-Book-to-the-Public.

Nice one, Granger, he commended her silently.

His eyes moved to her again, noting that if one paid no mind to her teeth-grindingly earnest face, her front ~~was~~*quite* as satisfactory as the back view had been. The womanly curve of her bottom was balanced by the bosom which filled her simple white office blouse as agreeably as her bum filled the skirt beneath it. It never failed to amaze him when one of his students...particularly a most *irritating* one...grew to be a comely woman, for he never thought of them as sexual beings when they were under his care. No, not even when he was forcefully peeling one from the co-conspirator of her mad-brained choice on the Astronomy Tower, after curfew.

Of course, he had never been troubled to perform that particular agency for Granger. He had kept a particular eye on her during the horrific year of the Triwizard Tournament, for the Durmstrang champion had made the little Gryffindor the object of his attentions...and his affections...but those demonstrations, which had overwrought the adolescent wizard with predictable results, had scarcely moved the girl. She had emerged, slightly ruffled, from the Bulgarian's embraces and tripped off to her tower dormitory without a backward glance, leaving Krum quite dissatisfied.

'With the use of the Arithmantic equation I designed especially for this analysis, the cost-to-benefit projections have shown that a Hogwarts Regency Week, to be held the first week in August, would raise ...'

'What?' The Headmaster would normally have cringed at the yelping quality of that particular expostulation, but he had no time to worry about it now. 'Have you lost what passes for your mind, Granger?'

Of course he hadn't meant to sound quite so denigrating, but the tight-lipped expression shot at him by Lucius, coupled with the pain of the sharp kick delivered to his calf by the pointy-toed boot upon Deputy Headmistress McGonagall's foot, informed him that he had crossed a line.

The girl's eyebrows arched, and she turned to face him, fearless in her self-assurance. 'Perhaps you could tell me what your objections are, Headmaster, and I would be happy to explain further.'

'What profit could possibly be gained from such a preposterous scheme?' he demanded. 'Surely the cost of staging it would far outweigh ...'

Granger nodded, as if agreeing with him, but when she spoke again, she addressed the Governors. 'The castle is virtually unused during the summer hols,' she said. 'There would be no cost for the rooms to be prepared for use by paying guests, and the house-elves are already in place to provide food and resort-calibre service. Much of the food to be consumed will be provided by the castle gardens, chicken coops, and livestock herds. Madam Malkin has signed on as an event sponsor, and the advertising she will receive as a consequence has bought for us a substantial reduction in her prices for Regency costumes.'

'Costumes?' the Headmaster snapped. 'You expect people to *pay* for the misery of wearing period *costumes*?'

The girl marched over and laid a folder before him. He noted the slightly tarnished Celtic knot ring adorning her left hand. Wasn't she involved with the youngest Weasley boy?

'You'll find the material from my research in here,' she said with exaggerated patience. 'There are brochures from Muggle resorts that provide similar services, including their fee schedules, as well as information on the wizarding shopkeepers who are willing to sponsor our event and provide discounts.' She flipped the folder open and indicated a parchment sheet covered with her neat handwriting. 'I've provided a summary here and a conversion of all the Muggle prices into wizarding money equivalents.'

The Headmaster stiffened; she was standing too close to him, the scents of her cosmetics and other preparations inundating his finely-tuned olfactory senses. Going on the offensive, he stood, towering over her, but she held her ground.

Looking directly into his face with warm brown eyes, she reiterated, 'Let me know if you have any questions. I'll be happy to provide additional information.'

He did not speak, for he was too angry to do so, although he had no notion of why that was so. It was a stupid idea, to be sure, but why did it provoke such combativeness in him?

The blond woman...Penelope Clearwater, a former student...slipped between them and placed a delicate hand upon his sleeve. 'I will explain to you, sir,' she said breathlessly, looking up into his face with melting blue eyes. 'Would you like to discuss it over dinner? My treat, of course.'

Severus Snape snatched the folder from the table and strode from the room without a backward glance.

The Board of Governors met again three months later, in December, but the Headmaster sent his deputy to the meeting in his stead and remained in his office. No impertinent former students could get into his office without knowledge of the password, but old friends were undeterred by such considerations.

Lucius Malfoy strolled into his office with the insouciance Severus had always envied.

'Skiving off your duties, Headmaster?' Lucius asked, pausing before a table and prodding a delicate silver instrument with one meditative finger.

'Don't touch that,' Severus snapped waspishly. Lucius did not respond, so Severus addressed his back. 'I have far more important things to do than listen to you lot prattle on about nothing.'

Malfoy glanced over his shoulder, his grey eyes far too perspicacious for the Headmaster's comfort. 'But the lovely Miss Clearwater was present, and she asked after you. Might be a touch of hero worship going on there.'

The Headmaster did not dignify that barb with a response.

'Come, old chap, you promised me dinner at the High Table tonight,' Malfoy reminded him. 'Leave off pretending to be busy and keep your word...the intriguing Professor Mortelle awaits.'

'Very well,' the Headmaster said sourly, abandoning his completely clear desk to lead the way to the Great Hall.

They descended the spiral staircase and walked down the corridor, the long legs of each man matching the other, stride for stride. They did not converse as they moved down the staircases, for Severus was considering the Christmas holiday looming ahead of him, and his companion was rapt in contemplation of his own. They were in the Entrance Hall when a clamour of voices and pounding from down a side corridor attracted their attention.

Prepared to silence the offenders and send them about their business, the Headmaster entered the room, astounded to see that it was being remodelled in the fashion of a gentleman's club, such as those prevalent during the nineteenth century ...

His thoughts were derailed at the scene which met his eyes. Two trained trolls, used most often for heavy labour, stood to one side, holding up crown moulding, as if they had been in the act of placing it when they were halted. Three ladders were set against the walls, and at the top of two of them stood house-elves with carpenter's belts draped across them like Mexican bandoleers. The elves were listening intently to the human standing on the centre ladder, wearing an old-fashioned carpenter's hat. It was a woman, as evidenced by the skin-tight jeans she wore, topped by a shirt that was no longer tucked in, because the woman's arms were up, gesturing as she explained what she wanted. Her lower back, bare and smooth, was exposed to the chilly air. The Headmaster permitted himself the veriest moment to appreciate the uncovered flesh before noticing the tall, ginger-haired man standing off to the side. It was Ronald Weasley, his arms crossed defensively over his chest as the woman belaboured her point.

The Headmaster stepped forward. 'Miss...' he began, and the woman twisted around to glare at him, moving so quickly that her cap flew from her head, allowing a mass of brown tangles to escape.

'I might have known it was you, considering the evidence,' the Headmaster shot at her, spurred to go on the offensive by an impulse he couldn't control.

Granger climbed down the ladder and marched up to him. 'Evidence of what?' she demanded.

His lip curled into a sneer. 'Bossing others about...and knowing it all, of course.'

She opened her mouth to reply, but Lucius stepped into the breach. 'I say, Miss Granger, this is the spit of the old Wizard's Club in London.'

Granger smiled, and the smile transformed her features, lighting her eyes and softening her mouth. Severus looked away from her.

'Thank you!' she said. 'I was able to find the original blueprints in the Ministry building archives, but we're only going to do the one room.'

'Gods be praised,' the Headmaster muttered.

The girl gave no indication that she even heard him. She turned aside to place a placating hand on the Weasley boy's arm, and though she spoke softly to him, the cretin jerked away from her and climbed the ladder she had vacated.

'Dinner,' Lucius prodded, taking Severus' elbow and compelling him into the corridor again.

Three months later, when the Governors met, the Headmaster contrived to be out of the castle. Returning from his annual visit with the Healers at St Mungo's, he was pleased to think they would have all cleared off by now. He entered the enormous front doors of the castle, unwinding the scarf from about his scarred throat, and was stunned to see a woman in a nineteenth century ball gown hurrying down the staircase from the first floor.

Her hair wasn't up in a cap this time, but he didn't need to see her hair to know her. It was Hermione Granger, and the high-waisted dress suited her somehow. Even so, the garment was not made for running down stairs, and Severus wasn't at all surprised when she tripped and went flying. With great presence of mind, he flew to meet her, so that when her body impacted his, he had no way to steady either of them, and he hit the marble floor with Granger atop him.

'I'm sorry!' she cried, scrambling off and peering down into his face. 'Are you hurt?'

True to the time period, the neckline of her gown scooped deeply, revealing a fair bit of cleavage. His head was going to ache like the devil before long, but the coming pain would be almost worth it ... for the view.

'Hermione!' Weasley appeared at the top of the stairs, his expression unhappy.

Severus heaved himself to his feet, suppressing a groan. 'I am unhurt,' he lied to the girl.

She looked at him closely. 'I don't believe you,' she said, ignoring her swain, who called to her a second time.

'Getting into character?' Severus asked, wishing to take her focus from his possible hurts. 'Aren't you starting a bit early?'

She laughed, her expression lightening considerably, and Weasley began to stomp down the staircase. Still ignoring the boy, she said to Severus, 'I just wanted to show the Governors an example of the costuming Madam Malkin will be providing for us,' she explained. Weasley came up behind her, and she indicated the ridiculous tail coat and knee breaches he was wearing. 'This is the men's formal wear,' she explained.

Weasley wrapped a hand about her upper arm. 'I was just joking with you,' he said, sotto voce.

Granger pulled away from him. 'I didn't find it amusing,' she said angrily.

Weasley looked wounded. 'You used to think I was funny,' he said, and it sounded like an accusation.

Granger turned and swept away from them without answering. Unwilling to remain and become the possible repository of unwanted confidences, Severus said, 'Good evening, Weasley,' and began the long climb to his quarters to nurse his hurts.

When the Board of Governors met in June, it fell to Severus' lot to escort them about, showing them the preparations which had been made for the Hogwarts Regency Week event. They toured the gentleman's club, the gaming room, and the different saloons and reception rooms, each decorated in authentic Regency style...which was to say, apparently, in a hodgepodge of Chinoiserie, classic Grecian lines, hideous animal-leg sofas and sideboards, and bloody uncomfortable chairs, all upholstered in nauseating colours and garish materials.

'Where will you hold the hunt, Headmaster?' Madam Marchbanks inquired, leaning heavily upon her walking stick.

Lucius stepped close to the old woman. 'The hunt will be at Malfoy Manor,' he said, sounding rather offhand about it. 'We have a number of thoroughbreds in the stables now, and we've a line on borrowing more as needed. Will you be riding out with us, Griselda?'

Severus had to admire his friend's relentless charm. Madam Marchbanks, a terrific crony of Augusta Longbottom's, had been one of the holdouts on permitting Malfoy to resume his place on the Board of Governors. She had a long memory and little use for 'so-called reformed Death Eaters' as she termed them. Still, Lucius had persistently shown the old termagant nothing but a mixture of respect and gentle raillery, until he broke through her defences.

Now she laughed, a harsh bark followed by a coughing fit. 'Wouldn't you look foolish if I did, you shameless tease?' she said. 'The *Prophet* would have a field day with that one. "Former Head of Examination Authority Dies Mysteriously at Malfoy Manor."'

Lucius offered his arm, and the old witch placed a claw-like hand upon his sleeve. He replied, 'More like, "Distinguished Horsewoman Marchbanks Leads the Field in Regency Hunt at Malfoy Manor,"' he replied, leading her on to the next room.

The cavernous area given over to Madam Malkin's wares and her cohort of tailors was much exclaimed over, and Severus was not surprised to see a true excitement for the project growing in the Governors themselves. After all, the Granger girl had been clever enough to give them all a discounted price to join in the event, and many of them would be present as participants. Granger had been very clever in many ways; there was no getting around it. She had goaded and hounded wizarding business owners into supporting the idea, had extorted discounts from them, had marketed her project in all the major wizarding newspapers and periodicals across the English-speaking world and the Continent, and had filled up every open spot available for participants. The expected revenues from this Hogwarts Regency Week far exceeded her original projections, and it appeared that by the time the Governors met again in September, the two years' of shortfall would be naught but a memory.

Single-handedly, the ferocious Brain of the Golden Trio had engineered the rescue of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry from bankruptcy...barring, of course, utter disaster.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 2

Thursday, August 1, 2002

Morning

Hermione took another bite of cereal and frowned over her to-do list. Should she draft Ron to help her make the personalised schedules? Or should she pack him off to Malfoy Manor to perform the final count of thoroughbreds available for the hunt? He detested what he called 'fussy work', which he might feel the schedule-making to be, but he was also unpredictable in his reaction to all things Malfoy. What must it be like to have a biddable boyfriend? Someone who supported one in all endeavours and accepted instructions without argument? She sighed and abandoned her list for more coffee.

Penny looked up from her clipboard. 'What is it?'

It was the final day before the guests who had enrolled for early registration would begin to arrive for Regency Week. Hermione and her team of volunteers were in residence at Hogwarts and hard at work on all the last minute details. She and Penny were having breakfast together in the Great Hall with the teachers before tackling a very busy day.

Hermione gestured at her list. 'Oh, I'm just trying to decide what to give Harry and Ron to do today. Are all your assignments made?'

Penny's cheeks turned a bit pink, making her even prettier than usual. Hermione wished the same were true for her, but when she was embarrassed, she simply looked like a tomato with bushy hair.

'I have a meeting this morning with the Headmaster, to keep him up on our progress, you know,' Penny said, sounding a bit breathless.

Hermione nodded, being careful to look very serious. Penny's sudden, inexplicable crush on Severus Snape had occurred only after *Wizarding Hello* had published a retrospective of the Headmaster's life the previous summer. The Headmaster had *not* commented for the article, and Hermione had thought that some of the reported affiliations and romances were doubtful in the extreme, but there was no question but that the pictorial spread had been impressive...and influential. In particular was the candid shot of him taken by Dennis Creevey when the Wizengamot had rubber-stamped the Minister of Magic's recommendation that Severus Snape be cleared of all wrong-doing by the War Crimes Tribunal. Snape's broad, triumphant smile as he turned to shake hands with Harry Potter had transformed him into a different sort of man from the dour Potions master everyone remembered. But even more telling was another photograph of him, obviously taken when he was unaware of being watched. It showed him with his face to the wind, hair blowing back, gazing into the distance as if into a limitless future. Somehow, when looking at that picture, one tended not to notice the oversize hooked nose, but the blazing eyes, determined mouth, and strong, angular jaw all drew the eye. The article and photographs had captured the public's imagination and changed popular perception of him, even amongst some of his former students.

'And the other things on my list, of course,' Penny hastened to add, indicating the parchment beside her plate. She ticked each item off with her quill as she read them out, the self-conscious blush slowly ebbing from her face. 'Cho and Padma have charge of the music room, sheet music, and instruments. Lavender, Parvati, and Pansy will do the final count on the costumes and mark them off against the guest list.'

Hermione pressed her lips together, determined not to make a rude remark about Pansy Parkinson. It seemed hypocritical for Parkinson to be so determined to help raise money for Hogwarts when she had been willing to run away when the school was under attack from Voldemort...she'd even suggested handing Harry over to appease the Death Eaters!...but as an adult, she had been very active in charity work, so she had established a reputation as a doer of good works. Besides, her father, Fortescue, was on the Board of Governors; there'd been no real question of excluding her.

As if in answer to her name, Pansy hurried up to them, annoyance sitting quite comfortably on her rather hard face.

'Now what?' Hermione blurted, earning a particularly malevolent glare from Pansy.

'It's Blaise Zabini,' she said, speaking pointedly to Penny. 'He just owled a cancellation. And he ordered a *full set* of costumes! Even a bespoke riding coat for the hunt!'

Penny stood, abandoning her breakfast. 'Well, he's not cancelled early enough to get his deposit back,' she said practically. 'But it's a real shame, because I've seen the things Madam Malkin made for him. Let's see if we can change his mind, Pansy. You're his friend, aren't you?'

The two girls left, their heads together as they discussed how to put Zabini's bespoke costumes to best use. Hermione watched them go, unaware of Harry's arrival.

'Are you all right?' Harry asked, slipping into the seat Penny had vacated. 'You look as if you might have another headache.'

Hermione turned to him with half a smile. Trust Harry to notice how she was feeling without having to be told!

'Nothing wrong with me that enough caffeine won't mend,' she promised him.

He served himself from the warming platter, selecting eggs and several fat sausages. Busying himself with spreading jam on his toast, he asked, 'What's on for me today?'

Hermione displayed her list to him. 'Everything is assigned but these two tasks at the top. I've been trying to decide where to use Ron today, and you'll take the other job, by default.'

Harry rolled his eyes towards the ceiling of the Great Hall, where fluffy white clouds scudded across a sky of faultless blue. 'Never mind me...I *like* being at the bottom of everyone's list.'

His words were spoken with a gleam in his eye, but Hermione defended herself anyway. 'As if you're at the bottom of *anyone's* list! And you know how difficult Ron can be...I want to give him something to do where I can get a full day's work from him.' She looked toward the door. 'Where *is* he, anyway?'

Harry shrugged, keeping his eyes on his plate, and Hermione recognised his evasive techniques which, in truth, were about as sophisticated now as they'd been when he was eleven years old.

'Out late down the pub?' she suggested.

'A bit,' he said noncommittally.

She would have to settle for that, she supposed.

Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, and George Weasley approached en masse. 'We're growing the shrubbery for the maze today, right?' George asked, nicking a piece of toast from Hermione's plate.

Hermione slapped his hand. 'Get your own breakfast!' she objected, but George only laughed.

'I've been using Nargle magic,' Luna confided serenely. 'I've taught the spell to George and Neville...it's working a treat. Nargle enchantments are perfect to encourage rabid plant proliferation.'

Neville bent down, pretending to tie his shoelace. 'We're *not* using her spell,' he whispered. 'But we'll have the job done by sundown...no worries, Hermione. The hedges were grown here for the Triwizard Tournament. We just have to remind them of that and encourage them to grow again.'

Hermione smiled her thanks, and her three friends took seats at the table to enjoy their breakfasts.

Then Professor Mortelle walked in, her vibrant red hair perfectly groomed, her carriage confident and purposeful. She was of average height, buxom and curvaceous, with eyes the colour of sapphires. She wore peacock blue robes over a golden brown sheathe dress, the whole tied together by the iridescent scarf she wore, a shimmering confection of blues, greens, golds and browns, like the tail feathers of a peacock. On her feet were stiletto heels that matched the robes perfectly.

Hermione sighed enviously. 'That woman has the most gorgeous shoes I've ever seen. She must spend every Knut she makes on her wardrobe.'

'Not exactly a black-robes sort of teacher,' Harry agreed. 'Do you know her at all?'

'I've spent some time around her. She's a bit intimidating at first, but she has a truly wicked tongue...she'll have you laughing, even when you know you oughtn't. I think she may be the cleverest witch I've ever met.'

Harry snorted. '*You're* the cleverest witch...everyone says so.'

Hermione pursed her lips for a moment. 'I've thought about that,' she admitted. 'The truth is, Lupin said I was the cleverest witch of my age...but Professor Mortelle is closer to your parents' generation. Besides, she was educated at Durmstrang...Remus probably didn't know her.' She grinned at a sudden thought and lowered her voice to a whisper. 'I think Lucius Malfoy fancies her...it's rather sweet, really.'

Harry made a flapping motion with one hand, as if to indicate his distaste for the subject matter. Hermione subsided, and they continued to eat in silence for a space of time until Harry spoke again, his manner hesitant.

'Hermione, have you ... talked to Ginny?'

Hermione cocked her head for a moment, considering, and then she decided to be direct. 'You know why she isn't coming for Regency Week, Harry.'

He gave her a pained look. 'But how am I going to keep them *off* me?'

She set her cup in its saucer and met his eyes with grave deliberation. 'Tell the truth,' she said quietly. 'Tell the truth, and you'll have an entirely *different* sort of problem...but one you might like better.' She smiled at him lovingly and patted his cheek.

A sneering voice spoke from above them. 'Affecting, but at the breakfast table, Granger? Before I've eaten? Have some consideration for my digestion.'

Hermione and Harry looked guiltily over their shoulders, much as they might've done in Potions class, caught whispering when they ought to have been brewing. Headmaster Snape sneered down at them, but Hermione thought the attitude didn't quite reach his eyes.

She'd been thinking that a lot, lately.

'Morning, Severus,' Harry said with a grin. 'And leave Hermione alone...she isn't used to your sense of humour like I am.'

Snape inclined his head, causing his hair to swing forward, hiding his face. 'Good morning, Regency Project Committee Chairwoman,' he said, but without being able to see his expression, Hermione couldn't tell if he was having her on.

'It's *chairperson*,' she huffed, turning back to her soggy cereal.

'Know it all.'

She whirled, a retort on her lips, but the Headmaster had moved on, strolling down to take a seat beside Professor Mortelle. Had he really murmured that hated epithet, or had it been her imagination?

'He's *impossible*,' she muttered, taking up her quill and drawing an unnecessary line beneath the word 'side-saddle', the tip of her quill breaking through the parchment and leaving a spreading ink stain on the tablecloth.

'As long as you react to him that way, he's going to keep on,' Harry told her, clearly amused. 'Severus is always going to provoke you, if you let him...it's one of his little pleasures...he says teachers don't have many. But if you just move past it when he's like that...if you don't react to it...after a while, he'll stop ... mostly.'

Hermione snorted. 'He still treats *you* as if you're not quite bright,' she pointed out, 'and you're his greatest advocate.' She looked down the table, noting the half-smile on Snape's lips as he listened to something Professor Mortelle was saying. 'That newspaper photograph of you outside his St Mungo's room...the one with the *He's the Bravest Man I Ever Knew* headline...was the making of him.'

Harry gave her a very serious look, suddenly the fully qualified Auror, rather than an awkward schoolboy. 'I don't believe that,' he said. 'He made himself what he is by the life he lived. He couldn't keep up the pretence of being a graceless git forever. His true colours were bound to show. He was always going to be found out eventually, regardless of anything I said or did.'

Hermione stood up, giving his hair a fond tousle. 'Keep telling yourself that,' she said, gathering up her things. 'So I can count on you to go to Malfoy Manor and get a final count on the horses and equipment?' She detached the appropriate sheet and slid it across the table to him. 'Record exact numbers, Harry...this is *important*.'

He gave her a cocky salute. 'Orders received, Boss!'

Hermione gave him a withering glance and stalked out into the Entrance hall. She still had planning to finish, but there was no reason why she couldn't do it outside, in the fresh air.

She was sitting beneath her favourite lakeside tree, copying out Ron's to-do list for the day, when Draco Malfoy found her. Hermione and Draco had become friends...confidantes, even...after the war, but Draco tended to gad about too much for Hermione to see him very often.

'Severus said you'd be down here,' Draco said, conjuring a rug and placing it beside Hermione before sitting.

'Snape doesn't keep up with my comings and goings,' she snapped, unaccountably irritated.

Draco gave her a sidelong look. 'Could've fooled me,' he said, laughter hovering on the edge of his tone. 'Who got up your nose already today?'

Hermione slammed her planner closed and slapped it on top of her clipboard. 'No one! But what are *you* doing here, Draco?'

He raised his eyebrows. 'I'm a paying customer, Granger...mind your manners.'

She exhaled her annoyance and tried for some composure. 'I know you're signed up, but even early registration doesn't begin before tomorrow, so why are you here?'

Draco lolled back on one elbow, careful to remain on the rug, as if worried about getting grass stains on his immaculate, tight-fitting white jeans or the ice blue shirt he wore above them. 'I must've mistaken the date,' he said, his grey eyes sliding away from hers, as if unwilling to make contact. 'Where are your boyfriends?' he asked.

'Ron is sleeping late, and Harry is on assignment,' she informed him. 'But don't think you can hang about here, getting in the way...we have loads of work to do today.'

Draco laughed out loud. 'No doubt lounging about by the lake is on that massive to-do list of yours.'

'What's it to *you*, Ferret?'

Hermione glanced back to see Harry standing at the top of the slope, looking belligerent. Draco, on the other hand, changed as if a switch had been flipped. The laughter disappeared from his face, and he was his old, insolent self.

'The Scar-Head speaks,' he drawled, sounding bored.

'Why don't you answer her question?' Harry said aggressively. 'What are you doing here?'

Malfoy sat up straight, his rigid back to Harry. 'If you want to talk to me, come down here,' Draco said. 'I have no intention of straining my neck to carry on a conversation with you.'

Harry walked downslope until he was planted between Hermione and Draco. Hermione gave his jeans leg a tug. 'Leave him alone, Harry. He's not bothering me.'

Draco leant forward, addressing Hermione around Harry's legs. 'I was in France, visiting Mother,' he said. 'That's where she lives since the divorce, you know. Her sister was there...a woman called Andromeda Tonks...and she had an ankle-biter with her.' He stood suddenly, his grey eyes on level with Harry's green ones. 'Some little changeling with blue hair, called *Teddy*.'

Harry's fists clenched, and Hermione scrambled up hurriedly, placing a placating hand on his arm. 'Malfoy's just winding you up,' she said to him.

Harry took a step forward, his nose inches from Draco's, just as if Hermione were not clutching his arm and giving it admonitory tugs. 'That's my godson you're talking about,' Harry snarled. 'And he's not a changeling, Malfoy...he's a Metamorphmagus, just like his mum, your *cousin* was...as anyone but an idiot could have worked out for himself.'

'But the idiots of the world have *you* on their side, Potter...so there's nothing to worry about*there*.' And Draco stepped away, turning his back to them, fussing with the cuffs of his long-sleeved shirt.

'Harry, you're supposed to be at Malfoy Manor,' Hermione reminded him, stepping into the space Draco had vacated.

'I went up to brush my teeth and saw Ron...told him you were looking for him. He said he'll find you directly after breakfast.' But all the time Harry was talking to her, he never looked away from Malfoy's back.

Draco pivoted. '*You* are going to the Manor, Scar-Head?' His grey eyes travelled from Harry's messy hair to his well-worn trainers and back again, a sneer on his lips.

Harry jerked his arm from Hermione's grasp. 'Fuck you, Ferret,' he said, and he headed furiously up the slope.

Hermione shook her head. 'Well, I hope you're happy, Malfoy,' she said. 'You've only been here for fifteen minutes, and there's already trouble.'

Draco gave her a glittering smile. 'Don't worry your bushy little head about it,' he said. 'Obviously, The Boy Who Whinged needs a guide about the Manor stables...it's not as if he's ever been there before, after all.'

He Vanished the rug and walked away with a smirk.

'Draco, you should leave him alone when he's in a mood like this,' she called after him, but Malfoy gave her negligent wave and continued on his way without looking back at her.

'You'd better not get in his way!' she cried at his diminishing back, but Draco gave no sign he had heard her. With a huff of frustration, she went in search of Ron, his to-do list for the day in her hand. If she got an early start on making the personalised schedules, she could always go to the Manor later, in case Harry didn't get the job done ...

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 3

Thursday, August 1, 2002

Afternoon

Ron Weasley sat dejectedly at a table in the teacher's staffroom, his large, sometimes clumsy fist wrapped about his wand. His freckled face was scrunched in concentration as he transferred information to Xenophilius Lovegood's scheduled activities for Regency Week, frequently consulting Hermione's handwritten list.

'I can't believe you're even letting the old git *come*,' Ron muttered, painstakingly moving *Wednesday morning, 9 A.M., dancing lessons in the Trophy Room* from Hermione's master list to his parchment, the incantation of her magic copying spell still awkward on his tongue and unfamiliar to his wand. 'He would've handed us over to Death Eaters without batting an eye.'

Hermione did not look up from her task. She had found no easy way to mass produce the individualised schedules, for everyone was signed up for different classes, functions, and events. Yet nearly all the Muggle sources she had consulted had provided their participants with individual 'dance card' type documents to help them keep up with when and where they were supposed to be. Of course, the Muggles could just pop all the data into a computer and print schedules out in no time. But *her* version would be superior, because she was using real parchment and had fashioned her master list with a real quill and genuine India ink! She had made a master list of all possible events and created an enormous stack of parchment sheets with each day's meals already recorded, because those would be the same for everyone. All they had to do now was add each participant's name to the top of the parchment and use her copying spell to put down each of their scheduled activities.

The only problem was that Hermione was completing ten schedules for every one that Ron managed, and he had already spoilt three by spilling or splotching ink on them. Even though they had eaten nothing but sandwiches in the staffroom for lunch, it felt as if little progress had been made. She was going to be at this all night, and that meant no sleep for her, because the guests would begin arriving on the morrow!

Ron nudged her foot under the table. 'Are you listening to me, Hermione?'

She made a real effort, most of the time, to be patient and kind to Ron; he was, after all, *heboyfriend*. But she was so stressed over the preparations for the event that her patience was at an end.

'Don't kick me!' she snapped crossly.

'I said, why are you letting old Lovegood come to the party? He would have given Harry up to Voldemort!'

Hermione completed Romilda Vane's schedule and took a new sheet to begin the card for Finbar Quigley. 'We've had this discussion already, Ronald,' she replied. 'You would have done the same thing if your daughter had been taken by the Death Eaters...and Mr Lovegood was already punished, wasn't he? The Death Eaters put him in Azkaban and kept him there until the end of the war!'

Ron didn't respond, but his lips compressed, and she knew he was angry. Why did he have such a difficult time forgiving people? By the way he judged others, you would think *he* was a paragon! Then the staffroom door opened, and Ron twisted round to see who it was, as if he were expecting someone to come in and rescue him.

But it was only the Headmaster.

'Oh, it's *you*,' Ron said rudely, and Hermione nudged his foot under the table...perhaps a bit harder than she'd meant to. 'Shit!' Ron shouted, jerking back from the pain in his shin and spluttering ink all across the page.

'The name is Snape, Mr Weasley,' the Headmaster said silkily, and Hermione was distracted from the mess Ron had made of yet another page by the minute quiver at the corner of Snape's mouth.

'He wasn't calling *you* shit,' Hermione said, loyally defending her swain.

The Headmaster's eyebrows arched. 'Such language, Miss Granger,' he murmured, slanting a sidelong glance at her.

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek. Was he teasing her? His black eyes *seemed* to be laughing. Why was he so difficult to read? She opened her mouth to retort, but the Headmaster slipped into an armchair and picked up a magazine from the table littered with reading material abandoned there by other teachers.

'Don't mind me...please, carry on with your ... project.' And he opened the periodical and looked down at it, his hair falling forward with the motion. To all appearances, Snape then lost himself in his reading material.

'Let me have it,' Hermione said to Ron, reaching out her hand for Mr Lovegood's schedule.

Ron flung it at her and hunched his shoulders. 'I'm bloody bored with this,' he said, looking out the window at the sunshine and the glint of water in the distance. 'Why can't we take a break? Walk with me by the lake.'

Hermione continued siphoning the excess ink from the parchment with her wand, ignoring her boyfriend's pleas. Perhaps if Ron stopped trying to skive off work, Snape would not hear her reprimanding him. She darted another look at the Headmaster, but his face was hidden from her by the curtain of his rather stringy hair.

Ron abandoned the straight backed wooden chair and moved around the worktable to sit beside Hermione. When she didn't look up from what she was doing, he leant toward her, his lips near her ear. 'Wouldn't you like to steal a bit of alone time?' he said. 'It's been ... *forever* since we were able to ...'

Hermione jerked her head away from him angrily, supremely conscious of Snape sitting five feet away. Did Ron *really* want to have *this* conversation in front of an audience? *This* audience?

She could feel Ron stiffening beside her as he registered her annoyance. Sitting straight again, the wheedling tone gone from his voice, he said quietly, 'Where were you last night? I knocked at your door when I got in from Hogsmeade.'

'Oh?' she said, her voice high and strained. 'What time was that, Ronald?'

She felt rather than saw his shrug. 'Half-two, maybe?' he said. 'The pub closed at two.'

'I was *sleeping*,' she replied coldly. Honestly! Did he think a girl wanted a drunken sot in her bed in the wee hours of the morning?

'I pounded on the door,' Ron said, persisting. 'Why didn't you let me in?'

'I didn't hear you,' she said, completing the clean-up of his messy parchment. 'Are you going to finish this?' She offered it back to him, turning to look in his face.

Ron looked obstinate. 'You should've let me in.'

Snape cleared his throat rather loudly, and Hermione flushed with embarrassment. What must he be thinking of them? And Ron's ears were turning red, never a good sign.

'What do you want, Snape?' Ron snarled.

'I don't like to interrupt, of course, but I couldn't help overhearing,' he said, his expression bland. 'Mr Weasley, perhaps it would be helpful for you to know that an unused door to the Headmaster's chambers is situated on the same corridor as Miss Granger's room.'

'So?' Ron said, and he sounded so belligerent it was all Hermione could do not to hex him. What was his problem? All she wanted to do was finish creating the individualised schedules! Why was he trying to start an argument with the Headmaster?

Snape, however, answered in a tone that was descending from bland to bored. 'So, you were knocking on *my* door, you twit...not hers.'

The back of Ron's neck was as red now as his ears. 'Why is my girlfriend sleeping next to you?' he demanded.

Hermione was furious. 'Ronald!' she said sharply.

But Snape was unmoved. He answered simply, 'Miss Granger requested rooms for herself and her helpers in the teachers' wing, so as to leave all the best chambers for paying guests,' he said, and seeming to lose interest in the conversation, he redirected his attention to the magazine he held.

Hermione was mortified. It was bad enough that Ron was constantly starting rows with her, but to have him do it in front of the *Headmaster* was going too far.

She stood, moving away from him, and began to tidy her work materials, straightening the completed stack...woefully small!...and gathering the parchment Ron had ruined. She wadded each piece into a tight ball before sending them all to the bin with the flick of her fingers. The hot, angry words on the tip of her tongue she held back, determined not to have it out with Ron for Snape's edification...and doubtless...his *enjoyment*.

She was still struggling to think of something neutral to say to him when the staffroom door opened and Draco breezed in, followed by Harry, who looked as angry as a wet hen.

'Good afternoon, everyone,' Draco said, walking past the worktable and stopping beside the Headmaster. 'How are you getting on, Severus?' He turned slightly to include the trio behind him in the conversation. 'What have I missed whilst keeping ickle Potter here from being trampled by tame horses?'

Snape snorted audibly at this, but Harry ignored the provocation. Instead, he placed his inventory in Hermione's hands. 'There you go,' he said. 'I believe there are enough horses to provide mounts for everyone who's already signed up for the hunt.'

Hermione nodded thoughtfully as she looked over the list of horses, saddles, bridles, and related equipment. 'Yes, but we need to be ready to provide additional horses if

more people sign up for the hunt,' she said. 'It's the most expensive activity we're offering, so I'll find a way to accommodate everyone who wants to ride...the money's for Hogwarts, after all!'

Ron sidled over to Harry. 'Nice weather for flying today, eh, Harry?'

Hermione rolled her eyes. Truly, Ron was no help at all.

Draco peered over her shoulder. 'What are you working with, Granger?' he said, picking up the completed schedule for Dimitar Zongraf. 'Some sort of copying spell?'

Hermione nodded, a little impressed that Draco had picked up on it so quickly.

Draco collapsed into the seat Ron had vacated and looked up at the trio brightly. 'I'm *good* at this,' he boasted, making shooing motions at Harry and Ron. 'You two go do something manly and sweaty whilst Granger and I whip these out.' And without being told what to do, he pulled his wand from his sleeve and began to study the master list.

'You don't have to tell me twice,' Ron said, turning from Hermione without a word of goodbye and striding to the door. He paused there, looking over his shoulder. 'Are you coming, Harry?'

Harry hesitated for a moment, staring suspiciously at Malfoy. 'Maybe I should help Hermione,' he said.

Snape groaned audibly. 'Run along, Potter. Take Weasley for a turn on the Quidditch pitch, and allow Miss Granger to complete her project. Guests begin arriving in the morning, you know.'

Harry appeared to be torn. 'If *you* make sure Malfoy doesn't annoy her, Severus, I'll go.'

Snape looked up and bared his teeth at Harry. 'If *you* don't stop annoying me, you'll be sorry,' he promised darkly.

Harry laughed then, as if Snape had said something funny, and he walked up to Ron and slapped him on the back. 'Fancy a bit of flying?' he said with a grin, and the two left the room.

Hermione looked doubtfully at Draco. 'Do you really want to do this?'

Draco rolled up his sleeves, fussily. 'I frequently helped Mother address invitations,' he said. 'The process looks quite similar.'

She taught him the spell, and they settled down to work in companionable silence for half an hour. At the end of that time, Hermione had recovered her composure enough to say, 'Did you and Harry get along?'

Draco shrugged. 'I suppose so,' he said. 'Why?'

Hermione answered with another question. 'Draco, where's Blaise?'

Draco completed the schedule for Pansy Parkinson and laid down his wand. 'I haven't got a clue,' he said irritably.

Hermione sighed. 'Have you fought with him again?'

Draco tossed his head, white-blond hair stirring before falling obediently in place again. 'I'm finished with him. Could we please not talk about it?'

She placed her hand on his, and he gave it a quick squeeze, then picked up his wand again. The staffroom door opened, and Hermione suppressed a groan. *Surely* Harry and Ron weren't back already? But when she lifted her head, she saw Professor Mortelle come in, with Lucius Malfoy following.

'Good afternoon, all,' Mr Malfoy said expansively, obviously in high spirits.

Draco's head came up from his work. 'Father!' he said.

The elder Malfoy crossed to Draco, who stood to shake his father's hand and exchange a brief, one-armed embrace with him. Draco would never achieve his father's height, but they were so alike in their colouring and bone structure that their relationship was apparent.

'Draco, have you met Professor Mortelle?' Mr Malfoy reached a hand to her, and she came to him, a social smile upon her carefully coloured lips. 'Leticia, this is my son, Draco. Draco, Professor Leticia Mortelle.'

Hermione watched them with amusement. Mr Malfoy seemed unusually jovial, but Mortelle and Draco were each wary of the other, despite the practiced nothings they exchanged, punctiliously polite. Idly, she speculated that the red-haired witch would have been Sorted into Slytherin, had she attended school in the UK. But was she attracted to Lucius Malfoy, as he was to her? Hermione hadn't been able to determine this from observing them, and she had to admire the older woman's style. She suspected that Malfoy was as much in the dark as anyone, yet his pursuit was undiminished, even after all these months of apparently no progress.

Professor Mortelle seemed to take keen interest in the making of the schedules, for she took a seat beside Draco, entering into a low-voiced conversation with him. Hermione, however, found her attention staying on Mr Malfoy, who took a seat across from the Headmaster.

'Why is there no drinks tray in this room?' Malfoy inquired. 'It is quite inconvenient!'

Professor Snape tossed his magazine onto the table from which it had come. 'Because it's the *staffroom*, Lucius. The place where teachers come for a cup of tea on their free periods. I have no desire for my teachers to be imbibing spirits during their work days.' Still, he raised his voice and said, 'Staffroom!'

A house-elf appeared before him, bowing deeply, addressing its bony knees. 'How may Herpie serve the Headmaster?'

Mr Malfoy looked startled. 'Did he say *herpes*?' he inquired, his humorous grey eyes meeting those of Professor Mortelle, who had looked up at the question.

Her blue eyes brimming with amusement, Professor Mortelle replied, 'I think *not*, Lucius.'

'A dram of scotch for Mr Malfoy,' Snape ordered the elf. 'From the Headmaster's stash, mind.'

Herpie popped away, and Snape glared at his friend. 'Do make an effort not to mock the house-elves,' he said waspishly. 'Hogwarts does not have an endless supply of them, as the Manor seems to enjoy.'

Mr Malfoy sat straighter, propping his serpent-head walking stick against his armchair. He placed a perfectly manicured hand against his breast. 'I, mock a house-elf?' he said in injured accents. 'Never say so! I completed a full twelve months of Ministry sponsored Diversity Training and Sensitivity Sessions. A *year*, Severus! If you spread such rumours about me, I'll be sent back for a refresher.' He sniffed dramatically. 'Besides...you might make me cry.'

He shuddered, drawing a snort of laughter from Snape and a giggle from Hermione. She had to admit that Mr Malfoy could be quite droll when he exerted himself...and his manner towards her had changed dramatically since the end of the war, the dissolution of his long marriage to Narcissa Black, and yes, his year of Wizengamot-mandated incarceration at the School for Cultural Diversity. Sometimes she wondered if he only acted the part of the reformed Death Eater, but in these last several months of close

work with him on the fundraising projects for the Hogwarts Fund, she had never once caught him out in his old ways.

The house-elf returned with a serving tray of heavy crystal goblets and a rather dusty bottle of Scotch. 'Does sir require further service?' Herpie asked squeakily.

The Headmaster demurred, and the elf departed as Mr Malfoy took up the bottle, wiping the dust from it with his own handkerchief. 'You've trained the elves well,' he said approvingly. 'Clearing the dust away magically could alter the contents of the bottle.' Pleasure curved his lips. 'This is the Macallan Fine and Rare,' he said, near reverence.

'Dumbledore received two cases of the '39 vintage when he defeated Grindelwald,' Snape said, taking up a goblet and holding it out to be filled.

Malfoy bent forward to do the honours, but for some reason, Hermione could not look away from the Headmaster's profile. She was caught out at it when he turned his head and looked directly into her eyes.

'May I ... entice you, Miss Granger?' he inquired silkily, his black eyes enigmatic.

A small burst of air expelled from Hermione as her lips parted in surprise; she was strangely discomfited. In an instant, it seemed as if she and Snape were alone in the room, and his words hung between them like an invitation to something entirely *other* than sixty-five year old single malt. Her heart did something funny in her chest, her breath quickened, and her hands seemed not her own, tingling with the mad urge to reach out to him.

'Don't do it, Granger,' Draco said gaily, his familiar, if exasperating voice bringing her swiftly back to reality. 'You're such a lightweight, a sip of that stuff would put you out for a night and a day!'

With a huge exercise of will, Hermione tore her gaze away from Snape's, and she groped blindly for her wand. She had to appear undisturbed by that little episode...an aberration of her mind, she was sure, brought on by nothing but an irritation of the nerves, by stress...and continue on as if nothing had happened.

Nothing did happen, she thought stubbornly, but her trembling fingers seemed to say differently.

'... and Leticia has crafted the most delightful spell!' Mr Malfoy was saying as Hermione pulled herself out of her own head. She glanced at Professor Mortelle, who was watching her with something perilously close to understanding.

'The non-riders who come to us for lessons before the hunt will receive more than basic instruction in equitation,' Malfoy enthused. 'They will be taught a spell which will *keep them in the saddle*!'

'That's it, Granger!' Draco chortled. 'Now you *have* to participate in the hunt!'

Hermione swallowed. 'I was always going to *be* there, Draco,' she said. 'But you know I don't like ...'

'Riding a thoroughbred is nothing like flying on a Thestral,' Draco scolded. 'And with a spell that won't let you fall, you'll be all set!'

His bright smile was deceptive, because she saw the devilish glint in his grey eyes. 'You can't force me to...' she began, but somehow, the Headmaster was suddenly at her side.

'Excellent,' he said, with a slight bow in her direction. 'Lucius and I shall expect you to make one of our party, Miss Granger, as the head of this entire enterprise must belong with the hunt host and the Headmaster, wouldn't you agree?'

Hermione looked helplessly from Snape, whose eyes looked every bit as roguish as Draco's, to Mr Malfoy, who toasted her with his glass of scotch, to Leticia Mortelle. The sly professor smiled at her sweetly and said in her cultured voice, 'Then it's settled, Hermione.'

The clock on the mantel chimed the hour. 'How did it get so late?' Lucius complained. 'I do hate to rush through a good glass of Severus' scotch, particularly since he's so stingy with it.' Yet in spite of his words, he swallowed the remainder of the spirit and stood. 'I must away to the Manor to dress for dinner,' he informed the room at large. 'I hope you've ordered a particularly fine feast for your tireless Regency Week workers, Headmaster. We've earned it, wouldn't you say?'

Hermione watched as Snape looked Mr Malfoy over, from the top of his silky blond head to the tips of his handmade, Italian leather footwear. 'Yes, Lucius; I can see you've worked your fingers to the bone.'

'Oh, I wouldn't say that,' Professor Mortelle murmured, delivering a coquettish smile. 'But I, too, must excuse myself. Dressing for dinner is ... time-consuming.'

'Precisely what I was saying, my dear,' Mr Malfoy said, taking up his cane and offering his arm. 'Please, let me escort you.'

The two exited the room, and it seemed as if a good deal of the colour and vitality left with them. Hermione turned doggedly back to her stack of incomplete schedules.

'Don't be late for dinner, Draco,' the Headmaster said, and Hermione looked up, to see those dangerous black eyes fixed upon her, in spite of his words. 'If you're late, I will have to put myself to the trouble of ... coming to fetch you.'

And with an ironic bow to her, Snape turned in a swirl of black and strode to the door.

'What I would give for *hispresence*,' Draco said appreciatively.

What I would give for ... someone like him Hermione thought, but what she said was, 'We'd best hurry, Draco, or neither one of us will be at supper.'

And with renewed energy, Hermione and Draco attacked the task at hand.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 4

Thursday, August 1, 2002

Dinner

The Headmaster made a good meal of the house-elves' offerings that night at dinner. Of more interest to him was watching the collected Regency Week workers present, and from his place at the head of the High Table, he observed their interactions with all the shrewdness he had employed in his years as Dumbledore's man, if not with the same level of urgency. Miss Granger was seated at mid-table, with Potter on one side and Weasley on the other, much as they had been during the times when they and their doings had deprived him of sleep, which had been far too often for health or comfort. Longbottom sat to Potter's left and George Weasley to his brother's right. Across from them ranged the Lovegood girl, Cho Chang, Lavender Brown, and the Patil sisters. Nearer to hand were Lucius and Leticia on Severus' right and Draco and Pansy on his left. Penelope Clearwater, whose wide-eyed pursuit of him he found quite unnerving, sat beside Leticia, trying desperately to find a foothold in what she perceived to be the Headmaster's 'Inner Circle'...at least, that is what he had read as her intention when he had unscrupulously peeked into her mind that morning at his daily 'progress report' meeting.

Minerva McGonagall sat at the foot of the table, the other professors who had elected to remain for the summer...in spite of the threat of Regency Week...seated about her. Slughorn in particular was enjoying the wine, hedonist that he was. The mood was vaguely celebratory, no doubt helped along by the champagne Severus had permitted to be disgorged from the Headmaster's stores, and some at the table were already a bit the worse for drink. But Hermione Granger had not touched the wine poured into her glass, save to raise it when the toasts were made: once in praise of the work completed and again in hope for the success of the Regency Week.

Miss Granger had been showing signs of waning patience throughout dinner, her expression stormier with each glass Weasley drank and each increase in the volume of his unsolicited observations and opinions. Having closely observed her, Severus was convinced the girl was less than happy. The nagging question of why he ought to care, he was unwilling to consider, and he shied away from it like a ferret from a Hippogriff.

The younger Weasley, having partaken of more wine than food, was loud and obnoxious, but it was nothing Severus hadn't seen from the boy before.

'... such a weird idea,' Ronald Weasley proclaimed to his brother, who watched him with a resigned expression. 'Why would anyone pay to dress up in those stupid clothes? To spend a week acting like a bunch of Regency wankers? What, drinking and gambling and dancing the bloody minuet?'

Miss Granger pushed back her chair and swept along the dais to the side entrance, her gaze straight ahead, her lips pressed together in an angry line. Even so, her exit was capped by the nearly silent closing of the door, rather than the slam Severus might have expected of the Hermione Granger he had known when she was his student. The girl had obviously gained some self-control in the years since he had taught her ... perhaps even some subtlety.

The idea was vaguely disturbing.

'Well done, Ron,' his brother said snidely. 'Hermione's not speaking to you now, so you don't have to sneak away for Poker Night.'

It seemed to the Headmaster as if the former twin engaged in his bantering still expecting to have his sentences finished and his sentiments echoed by the brother now four years gone.

The younger sibling scowled down into his goblet. 'She's been obsessed with this thing for a year!' he said defensively. 'Do you know how much of it I've had to listen to? She hasn't been able to think about anything else.'

Lavender Brown giggled shrilly. 'I knew they wouldn't make it,' she said to no one in particular, giving Weasley a rather malicious look from beneath her lashes.

Longbottom hurried into speech, as if in hopes that if he did so, no one would notice the Brown girl's hateful comment.

'Yeah, it is the fourth Tuesday of the month. And I feel lucky tonight, after growing two acres of eight-foot tall hedges in less than a week!'

Longbottom grinned at the young women sitting across the table from him, then stood to receive the ironic congratulations of George Weasley, who had been his chief lieutenant in the project. George clapped Longbottom on the shoulder and looked over his shoulder at Potter.

'Where can we ... retire to prepare for Poker Night?' he asked.

The Headmaster smirked. Although he had managed to avoid most of the invitations Potter sent to the monthly card game, his one experience had taught him that the young war veterans considered drunkenness as a necessary adjunct for wagering hard-earned gold against one another in their so-called Poker Night depredations.

Potter looked down the table to Severus. 'Professor Dumbledore's portrait always joins us at Grimmauld Place,' he said. 'Where are his portraits in the castle?'

Severus did not let his inner sigh escape his lips. 'We had best retire to my office,' he said. Glancing down the table, he included Longbottom and the Weasleys in his next words. 'Go with Potter. He knows the password.' Damned if he was going to give it out in front of all these people!

Pansy Parkinson spoke up, her tone accusatory. 'I suppose it's just *Gryffindors* invited to the card game.'

Potter laughed as he passed behind Severus' chair. 'Wait, I'm going to stay here if you're going to call Severus a Gryffindor again.'

'Oh, they'll let their betters into the game as long as there are enough Galleons involved,' Draco said. 'It's females they don't want, love.'

Penelope Clearwater stood then, her soft voice raised merrily, forced though it sounded. 'Oh, as if we want to be around for all the drinking and gambling! We women have our own plans tonight!' She called down to the group still seated across from Ronald Weasley. 'Isn't that right, girls? Cocktails in the blue parlour?'

'We're all set up there,' Miss Chang replied. 'Herpie promised to bring a bucket of ice at nine o'clock sharp.' She nudged one of the Patil girls, presumably the one who had been in Ravenclaw, Chang's own House. 'Padma brews up a fabulous Gooseberry martini.'

Severus could not but be aware of Draco's grey-eyed stare, directed over his head...probably at Potter. 'I think I'd like a martini,' Draco said. 'You ought to join the girls, Scar Head.'

Severus resisted the urge to look over his shoulder to see Potter's face.

'You'd be ... welcome to play cards, Ferret.'

The boy's voice sounded so tight it was surprising he had managed to force it from his throat...but one had to hand it to Potter, whose kindness to misfits had been something of legend in his student days...as little as he might want Draco at his card game, he couldn't bring himself to repulse his old school enemy.

Draco sneered. 'I'd rather clean toilets.'

Potter snorted. 'I'll tell Hermione...she'll be happy to give the house-elves the night off.'

Draco looked sulky, but Pansy placed her hand over his, and he kept his mouth shut. Lucius caught Severus' eye, and he knew it was time to scatter the party before a full scale battle broke out.

'The card game will begin at nine o'clock as well,' he declared, rising to his feet. 'Ladies and colleagues, I'll bid you adieu.' He nodded pleasantly to the former students clustered at mid-table and exchanged a speaking look with Minerva, who invited her co-workers to join her in her quarters for a glass of sherry.

Leticia Mortelle stood. 'I believe I'll join Professor McGonagall and make an early night of it.'

Lucius stood as well, grey eyes looking almost directly into brilliant blue. Severus glanced at Leticia's feet, ensconced in black leather pumps with gold gilt serpents twining up the extremely tall heels. She was the only human being he knew whose quantity and quality of footwear exceeded Lucius'.

'I had hoped you might walk with me in Mr Longbottom's newly grown shrubbery,' Lucius said, taking Leticia's hand.

Severus noted with fascination the ease with which his colleague disentangled herself, a vibrant smile the consolation his friend received. 'I'm afraid I'm not dressed for it,' she said pleasantly. 'Perhaps another time.'

Lucius inclined his head, accepting this gentle rebuff with equanimity. 'Clearly, then, I may claim your company when Miss Granger declares it to be an outdoor amusement day.'

Leticia's carefully accented brows arched. 'That is rather sly of you,' she said, and it was clear that coming from her, this was a high compliment.

Lucius bowed his head to her, and remained in that posture until she walked away from him, her heels clicking on the floor. Then he addressed his son.

'Draco, I'll see you at home later?'

Draco shook his head. 'The house-elves have prepared my room here already, Father. I am at the castle for the duration.'

Severus slipped out the side door as the others made their plans for the evening to come. Miss Granger's exit rankled with him. Although Draco and Potter's sniping, Weasley's drunkenness, and Miss Brown's maliciousness had been unpleasant, it was Granger's unhappiness that remained with him. Before he had to be present for Poker Night, there was ample time to find her and ... do his duty. Clearly, the welfare of the director of the coming festivities was of paramount importance.

He found her in the staffroom, standing beside the armchair he had occupied that afternoon, when he had been pretending to read a magazine whilst she and Ronald had quarrelled. She was holding the same magazine in her hands, now. He recognised his danger.

Her head swivelled upon his entrance, her keen eyes piercing him with their percipience. She had made an effort to dress for dinner, wearing a frock she might have chosen to wear out to an upscale Muggle restaurant, its clinging fabric and short skirt showcasing her physical charms quite nicely...and it was black, his favourite colour.

'You were never reading this,' she said accusingly, thrusting the magazine towards him as if it were a weapon he ought to fear. '*Witch Weekly*?'

He accepted the periodical from her hand, taking care to keep his expression blank. It would never do for her to catch him out eyeing her up. Not meeting her gaze, he stared instead at the ridiculous magazine cover, which featured a smiling Potter from the waist up, with head-shot photographs of Weasley, Longbottom, and Severus in ovals about the edge of the page.

'But it's the Most Charming Smile Award issue,' he pointed out reasonably. 'Surely you don't imagine I fail to monitor my progress again Potter.'

Granger snatched the magazine out of his hands. 'I've had enough mockery for one night,' she snapped, pivoting to throw the magazine onto the table top.

Severus studied her bowed head and slumped shoulders, wondering why he had the impulse to touch the potion-straightened brown waves of her hair. Could he do it without her knowing?

Giving himself an angry shake, he directed his attention instead to the problem at hand. The objective was to simultaneously encourage and amuse her, a combination of influences which, in his experience, seldom led to much introspection on the part of the recipient. In fact, he frequently achieved his ends without tipping off the recipient to his manipulations.

'Tell me, Miss Granger, what caused you to choose "Regency Week" as your primary fundraising project?'

She straightened herself, chin rising and shoulders straightening, before she turned to face him.

Good girl, he thought approvingly.

Just for good measure, her chin rose another fraction before she spoke. 'I researched,' she said, as if that were a full and reasonable explanation.

'I read your research,' he reminded her. 'There were other options available to you...options which might have proved less ... objectionable to some of your associates.' He managed a small, ironic smile. 'One of my personal favourites was the "Hotel Ocean Cruise". I think you would have made an exceptional "Cruise Director".'

The hoped-for answering smile did not appear. In fact, she stomped one small, high-heeled foot. He hadn't noticed her footwear before; the heels were particularly flattering to her calves ...

'Stop making fun of me! And *really* stop looking at my legs!'

He raised bland eyes to her face. 'Don't flatter yourself, Granger,' he said. 'It's just that I haven't seen an adult woman stomp her foot in ... well, let's say that the witch of my acquaintance who was fond of that sort of thing met with an unfortunate accident at the end of Molly Weasley's wand.'

The girl had the grace to blush, much to his relief. He was going to have to make more of an effort not to ... notice her.

'All right,' she said, graciously exempting him from the disdain reserved for wizards who dared to admire her charms. 'The reason why I chose the Regency Week out of all the possibilities is that I believed the castle would lend itself most easily to that theme.' Her attention then drifted to the back of the armchair, and she became unaccountably fascinated with the seam where the fabric met, her fingers tracing along it with careful attention. 'Besides,' she added, addressing her busy fingers, 'I am a fan of the literature of the era.'

Severus found himself drawn into her captivation with the cushion upholstery, watching her stroke and probe the ridge of flowered material. 'Do you mean to say that this entire enterprise is the result of your *reading* preferences?'

She snatched her hand back, abandoning her exploration of the textures of the fabric. 'Of course not!' she objected hotly. 'Interest in the works of Jane Austen is at a modern-time high! Muggles are making more films and television programmes based on her books than at any other time. Even men are not proof against interest in the time period, thanks to the extensive materials available concerning Admiral Nelson, the Duke of Wellington and Napoleon Bonaparte.'

He looked into her face, noting that she no longer appeared dejected; she was far too engrossed in defending her project. 'I see,' he murmured, trying to seem as if he had been properly chastised. 'Now I understand.'

Her eyes, the brown of warm honey, narrowed suspiciously. 'You're still mocking me,' she declared.

The impulse to convince her otherwise fluttered against his consciousness, and he pushed it away. What a pointless waste of time *that* would be.

'I believe the young witches are congregating in the room designated as the "blue parlour",' he informed her, smoothly changing the subject. 'If you prefer, Professors McGonagall and Mortelle are congregating with some of the other teachers in McGonagall's rooms.'

She allowed herself to be distracted. 'And which of those two groups will you join?' she asked.

'Ah,' he said. 'Neither. You see, I am hosting the monthly poker game in my office.'

Her jaw dropped, her eyes suddenly alight with mirth. 'You're not!'

He closed his eyes for a moment, permitting her to see his chagrin, knowing it would amuse her and lighten her spirits, which was the end result he had set out to achieve.

'I am,' he said, and then he opened his eyes with a pained expression. 'And furthermore, if you had an ounce of decency, you'd send me off with kindness rather than *mockery*.' He injected injury into the final word, and he could see her delight as he turned her accusation back upon her.

She laughed aloud and produced a folded scrap of linen from a hidden pocket at her hip, offering it to him with a little curtsy. 'Please, kind sir,' she said, her lowered eyes and courteous words pure Regency. 'Take my handkerchief as a good luck token, with my goodwill.'

As he accepted the handkerchief, his fingers touched hers, and he knew an impulse to grasp her wrist and hold it captive. As if in response to his thoughts, she peeked at him from beneath her lashes.

'I hope you clean them out,' she said, sotto voce, and obviously much cheered, she sailed out of the staffroom, a gleeful smile upon her face.

Severus wafted the embroidered, lightly scented good luck token beneath his substantial nose, deeply breathing of her perfume. Then he tucked the dainty scrap of fabric into an inner pocket, his attention wholly absorbed by the strange tingling sensation in the fingers she had brushed. Although he had resisted the temptation to grasp her wrist, it still seemed as if he could feel the delicate bones of her wrist clasped in his hand, and the sensation as real to him as the handkerchief safely resting against his heart.

'Folly,' he muttered to himself, and he turned on his heel to keep his appointment for Poker Night.

A/N: You may view Hermione's little black dress here:

<http://herpie-houseelf.livejournal.com/1166.html>

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 5

Thursday, August 1, 2002

Night...the Poker Game

Severus trod up the staircases from the ground floor staffroom, sternly pushing the memory of his interaction with Hermione Granger from his mind. Instead, he forced himself to think about the ordeal ahead of him: Poker Night.

Not all Severus' skill at repelling other people...skill which was prodigious by anyone's standards...had sufficed to convince Lily's son that Severus did not desire his admiration or friendship. And despite Potter's annoying perseverance, years of the habit of loathing the boy had not been dissolved overnight; their association had developed slowly. Severus' natural embarrassment at having his personal history aired to everyone present at the Battle of Hogwarts had been the first point of contention between them.

'You might have kept your mouth shut, stupid boy.'

Unblinking green eyes had refused to cringe from his anger. 'I watched you die, Severus...it's not as if I was expecting you to survive and care what I did with your memories.'

So Severus had been exposed to the world for the lovesick fool he'd always been, only to find that the world aggrandised him for it. And somehow, the revelation of his great secret had allowed him, at last, to let go of the memory of his first friend and only love. Vindication from the Wizengamot, receiving the Order of Merlin he had always craved, and having his re-appointment as the Headmaster of Hogwarts confirmed by the Board of Governors had been all of the same piece, in his mind. The feckless dreams of an angry young man had become the realities of life for the honoured, respected man in his prime. Allowing Potter to befriend him had seemed a small price to pay, particularly as the boy had come at him straight on, with no subterfuge or evasion.

'I was wrong about you, sir. I don't deserve it, but I hope you can forgive me. I think my mother would want us to be friends.'

That had properly scuppered him and his plans to shut the boy out. Potter was, of course, right about that: Lily *would* have wanted them to be friends. Severus' decision to permit the boy to know him had been his last act of devotion to her. The goddess of his dreams had been an invention of his tortured regret. The real, imperfect Lily Evans had been a far more interesting and complex person, and by taking the hand of her son in friendship, he had finally allowed her to assume her proper place in his life ... as a memory of his past.

When he ascended the spiral stone staircase to his office, he saw the Headmaster's desk had been levitated out of the way, and a large, round wooden table put in its place beneath Dumbledore's portrait. Before his indoctrination in the mysteries of Order Poker Night, Severus had never known that a portrait could play cards...what sort of sense did *that* make?...but at the one poker night he had attended at Grimmauld Place, he had seen the dealt cards *fly* into the portrait. And in the next moment, the old

man had held the cards beneath his crooked nose, blue eyes intent upon his hand.

'What bloody *good* does it do him to win?' Severus had demanded of Arthur Weasley, whose love of Muggle card games had been the genesis of these silly gatherings. 'What use has a portrait for gold?'

Arthur had grinned around the large Cuban cigar clenched between his teeth as he shuffled the card deck. 'We always throw chocolate cauldrons into the pot...the brandy-filled ones. The old gentleman does love his sweets, you know, and the liquor in the candy is enough to make him a bit tipsy. Any gold he wins is donated to the charity of his choice.' Lowering his voice he had added, 'It makes him feel a part of things, doesn't it? Half the time he falls asleep in the middle of the game, and we just deal him out.'

Now Dumbledore's portrait greeted Severus' entrance with urbane affability, as if it were still *his* office, and Severus were the visitor.

'Good evening, Severus,' the old wizard enthused. 'I see you're standing in for our friend Arthur tonight. Harry, here, has been telling me about Regency Week!'

Severus slanted a sardonic glance at Potter, who grinned at him, unabashed. Longbottom sat to Potter's right, and the two Weasleys sat to his left. And Severus noted with irritation that the seat directly beneath the portrait had been left vacant for him.

'I've been telling you about Regency Week for almost a year,' he pointed out acidly, sweeping across the room to occupy his inevitable place. 'And if you kibitz tonight, I'll put you in the dungeons for a month!'

Dumbledore chuckled good-naturedly. 'And rightly so, my boy...rightly so!'

Decanters of brandy and Firewhisky occupied the drinks tray, set upon a wheeled trolley within Severus' reach. The smoking highball glasses before each of the young wizards informed Severus what their chosen poison was...and from the tenor of their conversation and the volume of their voices, it was obvious that they had used up the time when he had been assuring himself of Miss Granger's welfare in drinking generous draughts of Firewhisky.

Good. That would improve his chances. They had roped him into participating in this farce, and they would soon learn their error. No Slytherin entered into a game without using every advantage at his disposal to assure his victory.

Bloody pot-valiant Gryffindors.

'All right, you losers!' Ronald Weasley said, taking up the deck Potter had just shuffled. 'I'm ready to pick your pockets!'

Longbottom managed a rather creditable sneer...Severus was impressed.

'Shut it, Ron!' Longbottom called merrily, taking a manly gulp of Firewhisky. 'Damned if I'll let you win all my gold tonight!'

The youngest Weasley boy, renowned for his chess-playing prowess, had also become famous for winning the biggest pots in the poker games. Severus had heard Arthur say the boy actually supplemented his income regularly from his winnings.

'You shut it, Neville!' Ronald replied, dealing a card onto the surface before George and continuing around the table, his smartly delivered offerings disappearing into the pigment of Dumbledore's portrait before materialising in the old man's gnarled hands. 'Dealer calls five card draw, deuces wild. Ante up!'

Severus removed his purse from his pocket, selecting the Galleons from within and stacking them before him, much as the others had done. He watched as Potter did the same, digging into his jeans pocket...but not withdrawing his hand until he had carefully counted the pieces of gold already placed on the table by Longbottom and Ronald. Of course. It was well known that George Weasley made a bundle of gold from his joke shop, and the pile of Galleons before him reflected that. But Longbottom and Ronald were relatively low-paid workers in their positions, one as an apprentice with an Herbologist, the other as an Auror. Potter had the wealth inherited from his family...the Potters had always been well-to-do...and already he served as the assistant Head of the Magical Law Enforcement office at the Ministry. The boy would not wish to put more money on the table than his friends could produce.

When five Galleons had been tossed, clanging, into the middle of the table, along with two foil-wrapped chocolates, they were ready to begin.

'Care for a cigar, Headmaster?' George inquired.

Accepting the fragrant cigar and permitting the younger man to light it for him, Severus studied his benefactor. George was decked out in a ridiculous hat, soft and puffy like a chef's toque and as tall as a top hat, its painfully colourful surface decorated with clubs, diamonds, hearts and spades, all red and black on a garishly chequered green and white background.

Blinking his eyes against the onslaught of tastelessness, Severus settled down to play in earnest.

For the first hour, luck at the table seemed pretty well divided. Only Potter failed to win a hand, and in fact, he folded rather frequently, which gave him ample time to drink whilst the others bet and raised one another. When Herpie arrived with a plate of sandwiches and an offer of tea (which no one, save Severus, accepted), Potter was three sheets to the wind, and Ronald, ever the competitor, kept pace with him, glass for glass.

As for Dumbledore, he slumbered peacefully in his frame, his contribution occasional soft snores.

In the second hour, George Weasley dealt a game with the ridiculous name of Texas Hold 'em, and Severus found he liked the format quite well. The younger wizards were becoming ever more intoxicated, and Severus found them quite easy to read...save for Ronald. Say what you might about Ronald Weasley, he had a superb poker face.

Severus dealt a hand, choosing Texas Hold 'em. He dealt each player two cards, and after the small blind and the big blind, each player had contributed five Galleons to the pot. The flop revealed the three community cards: the six of diamonds, the jack of clubs, and the queen of hearts. Severus consulted his cards again: the two of clubs and the six of hearts. Interesting. Already, he had two of a kind.

Longbottom tossed a Galleon into the pot and looked to Ronald, who picked up a coin and pushed it forward without looking at his gold. 'I'll see your one and raise two more,' he said, flicking the other two Galleons into the pile.

The others matched his wager with no one raising, and Severus dealt the turn...the six of spades. Longbottom laughed nervously, expressing his excitement for the pair now showing in the community cards. Severus enjoyed an inward smirk. He now held three of kind. If his luck were holding, he could win this pot and take all of Longbottom's and Ronald's gold. Potter and George had larger piles of gold from their wins, but surely taking out two of the players would shorten the game.

Longbottom, his face flushed, added five Galleons to the pot. Ronald matched the five and added three more. Potter carelessly tossed his eight Galleons into the pile, mumbling, 'Call.' George and Severus called as well, but Longbottom waffled for a moment before adding three of his last five Galleons to the pot.

Severus dealt the river, placing the card meticulously along the four community cards already showing, and the table as a whole drew breath.

It was the six of clubs.

Severus felt a rush of exhilaration. He had four of a kind! The only hands that would beat him were a straight flush or a royal flush; both hands were impossible with the community cards. The pot was his; he had only to lure the others into piling up the gold.

He reached for his teacup, allowing his fingers to tremble before grasping the handle. After sipping, he rubbed his fingertips over his thin lips.

Longbottom looked at his last two Galleons, as if knowing he would never be able to keep pace with the last wager. 'Check,' he said, his head bowed over his cards, careful not to make eye contact with the others.

Potter grinned around the group. 'Three of a kind on the table!' he said excitedly. 'Let's keep it interesting!' He pushed ten Galleons into the pot.

'I fold,' Longbottom said miserably, dropping his cards face down on the table. 'My luck's run out.' He took up his glass and drained it.

Ronald cast a measuring eye over his gold. Ten Galleons would take a large bite out of his gambling capital. But Severus knew that with three of a kind in the community pot, it would be hard for a true card player to stand down. With an almost careless movement, the youngest Weasley brother pushed his gold into the center of the table. 'Call,' he said.

George added his ten gold pieces, and Severus swallowed nervously. Belatedly, he assumed a superior sneer. 'I'll call your ten and raise you five.' He added fifteen Galleons to the pot.

Potter laughed and matched the wager. 'This is great,' he said, tilting his head back to gaze with inebriated absorption at the gilded ceiling.

But neither Weasley was smiling. Tension was thick as Ronald and George added the required gold to the pot.

Potter laid his cards down. 'Three of a kind and queen high,' he said.

Ronald showed his hand. 'I've got that beat...three of a kind, ace-king high.'

George swore and threw his cards down. 'I've only got ten high.'

Ronald crowed and reached for the pot, but Severus said, 'That's mine, Weasley.'

Ronald looked mutinous. 'Do you have a full house?' he demanded angrily.

Severus revealed his cards. 'Nothing so mundane,' he said, beginning to sweep the pot toward him. 'Four of a kind.'

Potter chortled aloud in the Headmaster's general direction. 'Good one, Severus!' he said, as gleeful as if he'd won.

Ronald reached for his wand and started up with such anger he spilt his drink and the wand spit forth red sparks setting his cards on fire.

'Oi, Ron!' his brother cried, taking off his lucky poker hat and beating at the blaze until it extinguished. 'Grow up, would you?'

The younger brother's ears flamed to match his head. 'You saw him over there, looking all nervous and rubbing his mouth!'

Potter shook his head, as if doing so might make him less intoxicated. When that failed, he touched Ronald's arm, speaking with the slurred, serious tones of a concerned drunk. 'He bluffed you, mate. How many times have you done that to the rest of us?'

Severus arranged the Galleons he had won in a row of neat stacks, letting the hostilities flow around him like flood waters about a boulder. Had tensions run this high in his previous Poker Night experience? He did not remember it so. Perhaps Ronald had simply suffered enough disappointments in love this week to make this defeat at cards harder to swallow. *Mustn't smirk about that, either,* he reminded himself.

George picked up the charred remains of Ronald's cards with a moue of distaste. 'I suppose these can be salvaged,' he said, taking out his wand. 'Unless someone has another deck of cards?'

Severus spoke up silkily. 'We could bring the evening to an end, if you like.' He knew there was little chance of them taking his suggestion, but there was no harm in making it.

Ronald laughed harshly. 'You'd like that, wouldn't you?'

George puzzled over the remnant of charred, wet playing card. 'I'm not sure this can be set right.'

'Hermione could do it,' his brother averred. 'I could ask her to come ...'

'Oh, that shouldn't be necessary, Mr Weasley,' Dumbledore said, and Severus turned to see the old man wakeful...alert, even...his blue eyes bright behind his half-moon spectacles. 'Severus, you'll find a deck of cards at the back of the bottom desk drawer.'

Severus gave a shake of his head. 'There are no playing cards in my desk, I assure you.'

Dumbledore seemed amused. 'Do you flatter yourself that you know all the secrets of the Headmaster's office?' He gestured towards the desk. 'They're quite ancient, but I'm sure you'll find them serviceable.'

Severus rose purposefully. 'Anything to move this ... evening along,' he said, clearly hearing the word *farce* in his mind. He moved to his desk and took hold of the handle of the bottom drawer. He was intimately acquainted with every nook and cranny of his workspace, but he would humour the portrait, or he would have no more peace that night.

The drawer opened easily at his touch and still contained the items he expected: the box for petty cash, his personal stash of liquorice whips, extra quills, parchment and ink...but no playing cards, ancient or otherwise.

'At the *back*, Severus,' Dumbledore's portrait chided. 'There's a compartment at the back...I'm surprised you've never noticed it before.'

Severus glared daggers at the animate collection of oil smears upon canvas, only to be met by Dumbledore's most angelic smile. 'Perhaps a Revealing Spell would be of help?' the portrait offered.

Declining to reply as the old goat deserved, Severus probed the back surface of the drawer with impatient fingers, sensed the hidden cavity, as he was now looking for it, and easily Vanished the partition. As promised, there was a parcel wrapped in rather brittle parchment secreted in the small space.

Why on earth had the devious old bastard hidden a deck of cards behind a magically protected barrier? Dumbledore had never done anything that Severus was aware of without an eye out to some future scheme.

As if reading his thoughts, the portrait offered an explanation. 'Those were given to me in my youth by an old warlock who had once served in the court of Napoléon Bonaparte,' he related chattily. 'They were a relic of his family...sixteenth century playing cards.'

Severus began to open the covering and the parchment disintegrated in his hands, revealing a black velvet drawstring bag. He opened the bag and withdrew the playing cards. They were slightly smaller than modern decks, on heavy stock paper which had aged to a shade of ivory. The backs of the cards were blank, but the face cards were colourfully rendered in reds, blues, and golds. The non-face cards bore simply two hearts or four diamonds...the requisite number of the symbols of each suit...with no numerals in evidence.

'These will do,' he said decisively, returning to the table.

But he was sitting alone. Longbottom was up, peering curiously at the aloe vera plant Severus kept on the window sill, a habit from his days as a Potions master, when burns were not an uncommon occurrence in his classroom. The Weasley brothers were in low-voiced conversation across the room, and Potter had disappeared.

'Are we, in fact, finished for the evening?' he inquired.

'Don't get your knickers in a twist, Snape,' Ronald said, obviously still smarting from his loss. 'Harry's gone to the loo.'

Severus did not respond...why dignify the rudeness?...but waited with what patience he could muster for the pigeons to return to the table to be plucked.

Longbottom wandered back to his seat and poked morosely at what was left of his gold. 'I ought to just go to bed,' he said. 'I'll be able to survive only one round of betting!'

George broke off his conversation and took up the decanter, leaning across the table to refill Longbottom's Firewhisky. 'But you *want* us to have your gold, Neville,' he said. 'Drink up and lose like a man.'

Longbottom began to giggle like a girl, prompting George to join him, and Dumbledore's portrait tittered, but Ronald did not. He was far too busy eyeing the pile of Severus' winnings, resentment rolling off him in waves. Potter provided a distraction by returning from the loo, his air of amiable inebriation displaced by an expression of discomfort.

'I should've made Malfoy play cards,' he said. 'He wanted to come, but he thought we didn't want him.'

George snorted. 'Malfoy was right. We don't want him.'

Potter stood straighter and rubbed one hand over his tousled hair, as if to tidy it. 'He's got as much right to play cards here as we do. I'm going to find him and make him play poker.'

Longbottom shook his head. 'I dunno, Harry. I don't think anyone can make Draco do anything he doesn't want to do.'

Potter's brow darkened. 'I could,' he said decisively.

Ronald grabbed Potter's arm before he could turn away. 'No, Harry. It's too late. You can make him play next time.' Ronald frog marched Potter to the table. 'Let's win our gold back from Snape.'

Severus smiled thinly. 'Yes, let us finish this up, shall we?'

He shuffled the old cards, which were strangely stiff, far less pliable than the slick decks he was accustomed to handling. The younger wizards resumed their places and added their gold pieces to the one Severus had already pushed into the middle of the table for the ante.

'Dealer calls five card draw,' he said, falling back on the first poker game he had learnt to play at his father's knee.

George nodded, the ridiculous hat swaying atop his fiery head. 'Deuces wild?' he inquired, all business now. 'One-eyed jacks?'

Severus curled his lip. 'Certainly not. Nothing is wild. You are dependent upon Lady Luck...and your obvious *skill*, of course.' His sneer gave a clear indication of his opinion of the skill in question.

Chatter ceased as Severus began to deal out the cards.

'You may deal me out of this hand,' Dumbledore said. 'But perhaps someone would oblige me with a chocolate?'

George tossed a sweetie into the portrait, and the players picked up their cards, brows furrowed with concentration.

'There's no numbers on 'em,' Potter said, holding one of the cards at arm's length.

'Just count the spots, mate,' Ronald advised.

Potter squinched his eyes up. 'That's easy for you to say. They keep moving,' he complained.

Then they fell silent as they examined their cards. Severus waited a beat, watching the faces of his competitors. Longbottom and Potter both looked pleased, but the Weasleys were much better at masking their expressions. Surely Longbottom, with only one Galleon left to wager, would be out after this hand. But the one Severus wanted to defeat was Ronald, though he could not precisely define to himself why that was so. There were many annoying people in the world, to be sure, but Ronald Weasley had made it his business to irritate and upset Hermione Granger ever since the two had set foot in Hogwarts, seven days before. Their personal problems were just that, and Severus had no interest in their 'relationship'...indeed, the very word was nauseatingly maudlin...but he needed Granger in functional shape to bring off this outlandish Regency Week, and Ronald jeopardised her state of mind. Severus couldn't fling the boy from the castle, as badly as he was tempted to do so, but he could punish the whelp by depriving him of the extra gold he was used to winning at Poker Night each month. With that accomplished, the ordeal of Regency Week would commence on the morrow, and when it was done, *all* of them could clear off, leaving him in peace.

He picked up his cards one by one, as was his wont, arranging them in his hand by suit, in descending order.

The king of hearts.

The ten of hearts.

The ace of hearts.

The jack of hearts.

Old protective habits die hard, even when one is not in imminent physical danger. Occluding with all his might, as if the Dark Lord were looming over him, ready to peruse his thoughts, Severus reached for his fifth card. If it were a queen, he would have a straight. If it were a heart, he would have a flush. If it were the queen of hearts ... *such a thing would never happen to me, I am Severus Snape, and the universe has rules about the sorts of hands I am dealt* ... well, if it were the queen of hearts, he would have not just a straight flush, but a *royal* straight flush, the highest hand one could achieve in poker. He took up the last card.

The two of clubs.

Longbottom threw in his last Galleon. 'I'll bet one,' he said with a grin, as if he had already resigned himself to his coming defeat.

Potter tossed in a Galleon, too nice a fellow to be the one to bring Longbottom's evening of card playing to an end. Ronald had no such compunction. 'I'll see your one and raise you two,' he said with cool confidence.

'I'm out,' Longbottom declared, throwing his cards face down. 'Good luck, everyone.'

George, Severus, and Potter added their three Galleons to the pot.

Severus looked inquiringly to Potter.

'I'll take three cards,' the boy responded.

Weasley tossed in two cards, and Severus dealt replacements. George asked for three cards.

'Dealer takes one,' he said, adding his two of clubs face down to the pile of discards.

Both Weasleys looked at him sharply; it was fairly rare for someone to request only one card in a hand of five card draw. It generally indicated quite a good hand...unless, of course, one were bluffing.

Potter looked at his cards and pushed gold to the pot. 'Two Galleons,' he said.

Ronald swept his remaining gold into the pot, and his voice was steady, his words scarcely slurred despite his heavy drinking as he said, 'I'll see your two and raise you twenty.'

George whistled, and Severus met Ronald's eyes. Ronald returned his measuring look coolly, as Dumbledore's portrait said, 'Oh, this is exciting!'

But Severus scarcely heard him, for he had taken up his card.

The queen of hearts.

With his Occlumency shields in place, as if readying for a solitary audience with the Dark Lord, his face was an unreadable mask...such facility with Occlumency had been his greatest strength as spy for the Order of the Phoenix...but his inner voice was babbling incoherently in his mind.

He held a royal straight flush, not only the best hand he had ever been dealt, but the best he had ever seen in any poker game he had played or observed.

Tobias Snape had been a violent, uneducated ne'er-do-well, whose only contribution to his son's education had been an encyclopaedic knowledge of card games. When Severus' mum had been at work, and it had been Tobias' responsibility to watch him, his old dad had dragged him about to seedy, smoke-filled pubs and gambling dens. There, Severus had watched Tobias lose the housekeeping money over tables of stained green baize covered in poker chips and overhung with desperation, misery, and cigarette smoke.

Severus raised his eyes again to find Ronald still fixated upon his face, the boy's blue eyes calculating.

Potter tossed his cards onto the table. 'Too rich for my blood,' he said, and rose with slight unsteadiness to his feet. 'Need the loo,' he added, weaving away in the general direction of the bathroom.

George tugged his lucky poker hat lower on his forehead. 'I'll see you,' he said, pushing his remaining fifteen Galleons into the centre of the table, then scribbling an IOU on the notepad provided for that purpose and adding it to the pile.

Severus decided to make an end of it. He took up his wand and wafted all of his gold, well over one hundred Galleons, into the pot. 'See you, gentlemen, and raise you one hundred.'

George turned to him incredulously. 'Are you mad?' he demanded. 'One hundred is the house limit for these poker games! No one ever bets that much.'

Severus replaced his wand, raising one eyebrow but holding his tongue. George could certainly afford to gamble that high, but did he have that good a hand? At the very least, Ronald would be flat broke and unable to continue.

Ronald's face had gone white beneath his multitudinous freckles, and there was an ugly twist to his mouth. 'Let him do it,' he spat. 'What difference does it make? He's cleaned us all out. And I could have beaten him on this hand!' He waved his cards furiously.

Severus glanced pointedly at the clock above the mantelpiece, which showed the time was now past midnight. 'How else am I to bring this tedious business to an end?' he asked, injecting his tone with boredom. He allowed his frostiest smile to touch his lips. 'If you're so sure of your hand, you could, of course, write an IOU.'

George snorted. 'If he has five Galleons in his Gringott's vault, I'll eat this hat.' He dragged the item in question from his head and threw it into the pile.

Severus slanted a glance at George. 'As much as I would enjoy seeing that, Mr Weasley, somehow I don't think you'll be asked to honour your promise.'

Ronald surged to his feet, shoving his hand into his pocket as if he thought to find an extra hundred gold pieces hiding there. Instead, he drew out a slightly crumpled parchment, covered in elegant calligraphic script.

Longbottom, who had been following the interactions with the slightly blurred attention of a man whose sodden brain could barely focus, said, 'What's that, Ron?'

Ronald threw it from him in disgust. 'It's my bloody personalised schedule...it shows every fucking minute of the day I'm to spend as Hermione's escort...she's got every damn thing on there but when to fart and how long to piss.'

Severus watched the piece of ivory vellum float through the air, wafting gently, as if air currents were blowing through the Headmaster's office for the express purpose of making its journey more interesting. As it descended, he had a flash of a vision, of Granger happy, in good spirits, putting all of her energies into making a success of their fundraising venture...Granger, with an ironclad excuse not to have to put up with Ronald's exasperating whining...Granger in his hands, rather than those of her inept boyfriend. And as the schedule ended its journey atop George's lucky poker hat, elevated by the mound of gold beneath, Severus knew what he must do.

'Very well, gentlemen,' he said smoothly. 'I accept your wagers.'

The silence remained unbroken for a long moment, during which elation battled with suspicion on Ronald's face. Look at the fool! He was desperate to win the pile of gold, but he was mistrustful of Severus' motives.

The boy was definitely not as stupid as he looked.

Then the sound of the flushing toilet reached them, and the moment of silence was broken.

'Oh, well done, Severus,' portrait Dumbledore enthused. 'Very generous of you, I must say.'

Severus turned a withering glare upon the old man, and he threw a chocolate cauldron into the portrait with rather more force than was strictly necessary. 'Stop your mouth with that,' he said. 'Next time, they'll be laced with Dreamless Sleep rather than brandy!'

Dumbledore peeled the foil from his treat and twinkled engagingly. 'Just so, Headmaster Snape.'

Potter fell into his seat. 'So, who won?' he asked. 'Are we finished?' He yawned widely. 'I'm shattered.'

Longbottom leant close to him. 'Snape just bet about a hundred and twenty five Galleons,' he whispered, as if the information were a secret. 'And George wagered his lucky hat, and Ron threw in his Regency Week schedule.'

Potter gave his head a shake. 'That's stupid,' he said. 'Severus won't accept those as bets.' He turned a stern glare on Ronald, the effect of which was somewhat diminished by his slurred words as he chastised his best mate. 'If Hermione finds out you even pretended to bet her in a poker game, she'll have your balls.'

Ronald hunched a shoulder at Potter, scowling. 'She won't know if you don't blab it to her...and you'd better keep quiet too, Neville.'

Longbottom held up his hands peaceably, but George only laughed when his brother's fierce gaze fell upon him. 'Go ahead, ickle Won-Won...threaten me.'

'Fuck you, George,' Ronald muttered.

Severus grew bored with the bickering...he was quite ready for the louts to be gone from his office.

'I've accepted your wagers,' he said, his tone one of reprimand. 'You must show your cards, now.' He looked down his nose at Ronald. 'That's the way the adults play the game, you know.'

Potter's exclamation of disbelief was but noise to be disregarded; all that mattered was the turn of the cards.

'I've got two pair,' George said. 'Sixes and nines.' He grinned lewdly. 'Sixty-nines! Get it?'

Longbottom giggled again, but Severus had eyes only for Ronald. The younger wizard raised his chin. Severus could see the boy wished to be supremely confident...sure of the superiority of his hand...but Severus had already bluffed him once, and he was struggling with his poker face.

'I can beat that,' he said, and he laid out his cards: the two and three of hearts, the four and five of clubs, and the six of spades. 'I've got a straight. Beat that, Snape.'

'Certainly,' Severus said, and he laid out his perfect royal straight flush, the red of the hearts bright against the ivory card stock.

'Blimey,' George breathed.

Ronald shot to his feet, his chair falling over. 'No one gets a hand like that! You cheated!'

Potter stood and wrapped a hand about Ronald's arm. 'Don't be thick, Ron.'

George performed the same office on the other side. 'You're making a bigger twat of yourself than usual,' he informed his younger brother. 'Apologise or I'll kick your arse for you.'

Dumbledore's portrait spoke up, and it was a bit amusing to Severus to see how much authority oil-on-canvas could wield. 'No one cheated, Mr Weasley. A word of apology, and the matter is forgotten.'

Ronald threw off his captors, sending Potter staggering back into Longbottom's lap and George into his recently vacated chair. Ronald reached across the table. 'You can have no possible use for this,' he said, but when his fingers touched the parchment, he jerked back with a shouted expletive. 'You burned me!'

Severus plucked the parchment up, tucking it into the inner pocket with Miss Granger's handkerchief. Then he took the hat as well, thrusting it into the portrait, where Dumbledore accepted it and promptly replaced his wizard's hat with it.

'A mere Stinging Hex,' Severus scoffed to Ronald. 'And no apology is necessary, for me, Mr Weasley...I cannot, however, answer for your *girlfriend*.'

'Fuck you, Snape!' the boy cried, beyond himself with outrage.

'Well, you've done a capital job of it on yourself,' he observed dryly.

Ronald turned and flung out of the room, and Severus was shaking his head in amusement as he scooped the gold from the table into the petty cashbox from his desk drawer.

'G'night, Severus,' Potter said from the doorway, the only one of his guests to speak to him before leaving the room.

Severus strode across to him. 'Go to bed,' he advised. 'You look like hell. Do you still have the Hangover Cure I gave you?'

Potter grinned. 'I don't leave home without it.'

Severus jerked his head impatiently toward the door, and the boy gave him an ironic salute before heading down the stairs.

When Severus was finally alone in his office, he looked across at Dumbledore. 'Well, *that* went well,' he said.

The old man, looking utterly absurd in the preposterous poker hat, grinned at him like a child with his first Chocolate Frog. 'You have no idea *how* well, Severus.'

A/N: For those not acquainted with poker hands and how they're ranked, you may see the list here, as well as a picture of George's lucky hat:

<http://herpie-houseelf.livejournal.com/883.html>

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Friday, August 2, 2002

After Midnight

Hermione rolled from her side to her back, looking for a comfortable position. Reaching her arm up, she punched her pillow, trying to shape it to suit her. Crookshanks, disturbed from his rest, meowed his annoyance and leapt to the floor. She'd been tossing and turning since ten o'clock, when she had retired to bed, fresh from her encounter with the Headmaster. He had been so odd today...almost droll at times...almost flirtatious at others. What on earth did it mean? How was she supposed to interpret Snape's behaviour? Good heavens, Voldemort had been a gifted Legilimens, and he had never figured Snape out. How was she supposed to do it?

The guests would begin arriving in the morning, expecting to immerse themselves in a Regency world. Hermione had spent the last year immersing herself first, to be prepared for this day...but had she done it well enough? Had she succeeded in teaching the house-elves how to address the guests and how to behave? Would her helpers do their parts to create the illusion of Regency times?

She rolled again to her right side, staring with unseeing eyes at the wall within reach of her fingers. Ron had been with her through all of it. He'd been by her side when she'd researched, when she'd written her proposal, when she'd taken meeting after meeting with the wizarding shopkeepers and business owners she hoped to lure into sponsoring the event...but the more time that had passed, the more impatient with it all Ron had become. What did that say about their partnership over the long run? What kind of partner...*husband*, her mind whispered...would he make for a woman of her ambitions? She had been delighted to be promoted to the position of Senior Assistant to the Minister for Special Projects; she had been thrilled to head up the committee to find a solution to the Hogwarts budget problem. However, she would not be content to stay in that position. There were many, many subjects that interested her, and she wanted to explore them all, until she found what best suited her.

She really wasn't interested in getting married and starting a large family. She had nothing against marriage...her parents had been happily married for going on thirty years, hadn't they?...and she had no objection to a child or two, in several years, when she'd had time to find her best place in the working wizarding world, where she could do the most good. But Ron wanted to start having babies as soon as they were married, and he was genuinely horrified at the notion of using any sort of birth control...no one in his family did, he said. It was, after all, a blessing to have a large family...he said that, too...and she wasn't sure she agreed with that. What was the good of having more children than you could provide for? Didn't Ron remember how unhappy he had been with all the hand-me-downs he had endured in his life?

All of those topics had been discussed between them until they were utterly exasperated with each other, but his recent behaviour was what was concerning her most now. He had grown to hate everything about Regency Week, and his negativity was dragging her spirits down...he was, in effect, spoiling it for her, when she had put all her might into making it a successful event...and a *fun* one.

It's abominably selfish of him, the unwelcome voice in her mind told her.

She flopped to the other side. She didn't want to think that of him. It was too painful...too *final*...because Hermione knew she could never bear to live her life with a selfish man.

When the pounding began, she had actually begun to doze, and the loud noise startled her into wakefulness, her heart pounding as hard as the banging on her door.

"Ermy-knee!"

She sat bolt upright in bed. It was Ron.

"Ermy-knee! Wake up! I gotta talk to you," he shouted before beginning to pound his fist against her door again.

"Honestly!" she said aloud, standing up and pulling on her woolly pink dressing gown over the old red Arsenal FC tee-shirt she wore to sleep. "I'm coming!" she cried.

Ron did not cease calling her name or pounding on her door until she unlocked and opened it, her teeth clenched so hard her jaw hurt.

"Hey," he said, managing to focus his eyes on her face. He petted her head with one hand and grasped her waist with the other, as if he thought to pull her into an embrace.

Hermione jerked away from him. "What do you want?"

He frowned. "I want to see you...I bloody well haven't done in days and days...yeah, and I want to talk to you, too."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "It would appear you are too drunk to be up for either."

He grinned at her, an expression meant to be engaging. "I can manage, I think."

Hermione placed a hand in the middle of his chest to forestall another attempt to enter her room.

"Go to bed, Ronald," she said firmly. "I'm tired and need to sleep...and you need to sleep, too. We need to be up and in costume by seven o'clock in the morning, when the first guests are arriving for early registration. All you have to do is consult your personalised schedule and plan accordingly."

She tried to close her door, but he placed his foot squarely in its path. "Yeah, I need to talk to you about that." A frown touched his freckled face, as if he were thinking very hard about what he wished to say.

"Well?" Hermione prodded him. "Get on with it, whatever it is."

He sighed heavily, expelling the odours of whisky and filthy cigars, as he always did on Poker Night. She recoiled in disgust.

"Ronald, you *reek*! Just go away!" She kicked at his leg to dislodge his foot from the doorsill, but he was unmoving.

Disregarding both her words and her actions, he said, "I don't have my schedule, babe. I ... lost it."

Hermione closed her eyes to count to ten. She was so angry she was having trouble taking a deep breath, which she tried to do to keep from shouting at the top of her voice.

"Go to where you saw it last and try *Accio*," she said when she could trust herself to speak. "If you can't find it, you'll have to wait until I have time to make another for you."

Ron scowled at her as if she were being obtuse. "I didn't *misplace* the damn thing," he informed her. "I bloody well *lost* it, 'Mione."

She stomped her foot. "You're not making a particle of sense, Ronald!"

"To Snape!" he shouted over her. "I lost it to Snape in the card game!"

Hermione felt as if her head were going to explode from sheer exasperation. "The more you talk the less sense you make, Ronald. Now GO TO BED!"

He grasped her upper arms and lifted her up to his eye level. "Why won't you listen for once?" he shouted. "I wagered the schedule on a hand of poker, and Snape won it off me."

Hermione managed to get one hand up inside the sleeve of his Chudley Cannons tee-shirt. She grasped skin on the tender underside of his arm and pinched with all her might. Ron immediately dropped her.

'Bloody fucking hell!' he screeched.

With full control of her arms restored, she withdrew her wand and levelled it at him. She couldn't remember being this angry since the night she had delivered Umbridge to the centaurs. When she spoke again, her voice was sharp and low, her breaths coming in panting gasps.

'Are you standing there telling me that you wagered your place as my escort in a card game and *you lost*?'

He swallowed and nodded mutely, his blue eyes darting between her face and her wand. 'Don't be angry,' he pleaded. 'Snape made me do it.'

She laughed, a harsh, bitter sound. 'Oh, of course he did, Ronald. Snape would like nothing better than to squire me around for a week of Regency fun.'

'I didn't mean to do it, babe, I swear. It was ... it was an accident!' He opened his arms and took a step towards her. 'I'll talk to him in the morning and take it back from him, I promise you. Let's kiss and make up!'

The notion of kissing him now...*ever again*, her inner voice whispered...was nauseating in the extreme. She had thought that once the fun of Regency Week began, she and Ron would make it back to how they'd been before...back to the days when she still thrilled to be seen with him, her tall, good looking boyfriend, the champion Quidditch Keeper, sought after by girls far prettier than she was...but in that moment she knew that such a thing was not in the cards for them.

Holding his gaze, she deliberately withdrew the old, battered Celtic cross ring from her left hand...the cheap ring he had given her two years before to 'hold a place for a diamond' when he could afford one...and she extended it to him.

'I think we'd be happier apart,' she said quietly.

Ron looked as if he'd taken a Bludger to the belly. His eyes bugged out and his mouth hung open...not his best look. Hermione stepped closer to him, offering the ring.

'Take it, Ronald, and go to bed. I'm finished with you.'

Ron stood still for a moment longer, his mouth slowly closing, even as his ears became pink, then red. His hand shot out, knocking her arm away from him, sending the ring clattering to the stone floor. 'Don't behave like a stupid bint!' he shouted.

Suddenly, Hermione's temper blew, like a star going supernova, and a spell flew from her wand, white light that hit his arm.

'Don't you dare call me names!' she screamed. 'Get out of my room before I call a troll to *make* you go!'

At the first sound of Hermione's screeching voice, Crookshanks shot out from under the bed as if he'd been propelled out of a cannon, darting betwixt Ron's legs and out of the room.

Ron rubbed the sore spot on his shoulder where her Stinging Hex had hit him. 'You're just *like* Snape,' he spat at her. 'You two were made for each other! I hope you enjoy the ugly git!'

He scuttled backwards, as if afraid to turn his back to her, and Hermione bent to retrieve the ring and run after him. 'Don't forget this!' she shouted, and she threw it at him, happy when it hit his cheek and bounced to clang off the wall behind him. 'GO AWAY!'

He made a rude gesture. 'I should have dumped you months ago! You've not been a proper girlfriend since you started hanging around here all the time working on your precious Regency Week! You won't even snog me, much less shag me...and you were *never* any good at it!'

Hermione felt her reason slip its leash. '*Oppugno!*' she shrieked.

But Ron was far too familiar with that spell to stick around. Turning so quickly that he stumbled, far too inebriated to be sure on his feet, he lurched down the corridor toward his room, his gait somewhere between a run and a stagger, his arms waving wildly to ward off his attackers. The hail of fat yellow birds pursued him madly, clawing and pecking every inch of exposed flesh they could reach. He looked so ridiculous that Hermione laughed out loud, a bitter, malicious sound. She watched until Ron's door slammed closed.

Hermione glanced about for her cat. The corridor was not a long one. There were three rooms situated along the corridor, which dead-ended at the wall at the end; Hermione's was the third room. She walked down the length of the passageway to a larger corridor, but she did not see Crookshanks. The wall braziers cast weird shadows on the walls as she passed, but she was not in a fanciful mood, and the odd shapes did not alarm her.

She made the kissing noise she used to summon him to mealtimes. 'Crookshanks!' she called softly, suddenly concerned for the inhabitants of the neighbouring rooms as she hadn't been when rowing with Ron. 'Come, Crooks!'

But the flat face of her great orange tomcat did not appear out of the gloom. She paced then to the dead end of the passage, but all she found was a door, ajar. That door had never been open before...in fact, she had thought it was only a wall...so she felt sure no one slept in there...but what if she were wrong and walked into someone's bedroom? Wouldn't that be embarrassing?

'Crooks?' she called outside the slightly open door, which was open just enough to allow for the passage of a bushy cat. But Crookshanks did not come.

Giving up, she turned aside to her room. She ought to get in bed again and sleep, if she could manage it. She had no desire to startle paying guests with her haggard appearance in the morning. She considered leaving her door open a crack so Crooks could get in when he came back, but what if Ron decided he had more to say and came back? She didn't want him getting in. So she set the latch firmly, then locked and warded it for good measure.

It wasn't until she was under the covers again, in the anonymous dark, that she allowed herself to cry.

The Headmaster sat in his favourite armchair, returning the yellow-eyed stare of the fantastically ugly cat that sat, alert and tail flicking, in the matching armchair directly across from him.

'Don't look at me,' he said to the cat, taking another sip of the medicinal brandy in his glass. 'I didn't invite you in here...I only wanted to listen to the show. Pity it was over so quickly, but he's no match for her, you know.'

The orange cat stretched out on the chair as if it were granting a great concession, its eyes never leaving the Headmaster's face.

'That's right,' the Headmaster agreed, languidly crossing one long leg over the other beneath his dressing gown. 'Keep me under your eye, and I can do you no harm.'

The room in which he sat with his visitor was a large one, even by Hogwarts standards, for it was the Headmaster's bed chamber. Adjoining the Headmaster's office, it was part of the suite of rooms given over to the use of the school's Head. Schoolteachers...even Headmasters...did not make great quantities of gold in their jobs, and the Board of Governors was careful to compensate the teachers in other ways...ones which cost them no money. The Headmaster's bedchamber was entered from a door in the office. Upon entering, one was struck by the magnificence of the massive four-poster bed, which was situated on a raised dais in the middle of the room. The posters

were carved into the likenesses of the mascots of the four Houses, and the wooden railing connecting the four carvings was hung with heavy flowing fabric. In Dumbledore's day the fabric had been crimson, but Severus had chosen instead a darker shade, the colour of the midnight sky, deepest blue. Doors to the left led to his dressing room and his bathroom, so opulent as to make the prefect's bathroom look pedestrian. To the right was his sitting area, chairs and a sofa arranged about the hearth, all upholstered in rather aged chintz: a pale yellow background covered with poppies. It was hideous, but serviceable, and Severus was loath to replace it.

On the wall with the hearth was a door which led into a little-used corridor near the teachers' rooms. The door was never used...indeed, Dumbledore had placed an ornate drinks trolley there, as if it were part of the wall...but Severus preferred to keep the trolley nearer to hand. That wall was also one in common with the guest room assigned to the Granger girl. He had had nothing to do with the room assignments; and Granger certainly did not know the location of the Headmaster's rooms.

He had been sitting in his chair, enjoying a bedtime sip of brandy when he had heard raised voices. Ah, Weasley was explaining himself to his girlfriend...what better entertainment could one hope for? He had crept to the door and cracked it open, the better to listen. He hadn't counted on the girl's mangy familiar streaking into his room as if pursued by the Hounds of Hell. By then, the combatants had been in the corridor shrieking at one another, and he dared not move to close the door. He'd had an uncomfortable, unbreathing moment when the girl had stood outside his bedroom door cooing for the return of her flat-faced feline familiar, but to his immense relief, Granger had given it up and gone to bed, like a sensible woman.

He smirked. Wouldn't she have been mortified to walk in on him in his dressing gown? He preferred to sleep in his underclothes in summer, a vest and boxers, so she would have been treated to the sight of him with bare legs and feet...she would have been greatly nonplussed, he thought. Of course, he could have discussed his possession of Weasley's personalised schedule with her...wait, she would have been in her nightclothes as well, would she not? Perhaps a filmy black negligee, feathered mules upon her manicured feet ... or a frilly pink babydoll nightie, her smooth legs and feet bare ... with her curvy figure, she'd be a treat in lingerie ...

He indulged himself with these entertaining thoughts until his brandy was gone, then he stood.

'It's time for you to go,' he informed the cat.

The creature, which had gone to sleep, opened its lantern eyes and blinked, its only response.

'Shoo,' Severus said. 'I'm going to close this door, and I won't have you waking me to get out.'

The feline closed its eyes again, as if Severus were speaking to someone else.

'Stubborn cat,' he said, crossing to the door. 'If you disturb my sleep I'll ...'

But the cat lowered its round head to its paws, purring so loudly Severus could hear it from where he stood.

Unfortunately, he could also hear the soft sobs coming from the next room. He stood at the door, his posture curving in until his forehead pressed against the stone lintel, and he stared helplessly at the floor, enduring the girl's tears until nothing came from her room but silence. He straightened up, his thoughts far away, and as he moved, he saw a flash of metal.

Opening the door fully, he stepped into the corridor and picked up the cheap, tarnished ring the girl had flung at her dismissed swain. Striding back into his bedchamber, he walked to the tall chest where he placed the contents of his pockets when he undressed at the end of the day. Lying in the center of it was a parchment covered in calligraphy, and upon the parchment there was a ladies' handkerchief. He placed the ring upon the square of the linen and closed his eyes.

What the hell was he thinking? Did he even know what he was doing? He slammed the door on the questioner in his mind, his lips twisting in a derisive snarl.

'Bugger,' he swore and stomped off to bed.

A/N: You may see the ring Hermione threw at Ron here:

<http://herpie-houseelf.livejournal.com/1304.html>

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

For Hogwarts: A Regency Gamble

Chapter 7

Friday, August 2, 2002

Before Breakfast

Hermione ran lightly down the main staircase to the Entry Hall. Her helpers had done a good job, placing era-appropriate paintings, occasional tables, and flowers as if this were the foyer to the country seat of a Regency gentleman. Beside one ornately scrolled occasional table there hung an enormous full-length mirror, framed in gilt. The mirror had been Parkinson's idea, and Hermione had to admit it had been a good one. Their guests would be dressed in Regency costumes, completely unaccustomed garments, and they would be curious about how they looked...particularly the witches, of course, but even wizards were possessed of some vanity...Lucius Malfoy had been known to pass as much as a quarter hour examining his look from every possible angle. Now, she paused before it to inspect herself.

She had practiced several Regency hairstyles collected from books she had studied at the Muggle and wizarding libraries. It was amusing to her how much the fashions of each group had resembled the other in the early eighteen hundreds. When had they diverged? Why had the wizards chosen to maintain their old fashioned way of dressing?

She had finally settled on two hairstyles, one for day wear and another for evening wear. Now she had her hair coiled into a bun set high, just beneath the crown of her

head, wrapped with a braid that was just long enough to circle the bun once. The hair too short to cooperate had been curled into corkscrews which graced her nape, her cheeks, and her forehead with wispy brown curls. Her makeup was minimal, for the ladies of the day had worn little of it; glossy colour on her lips and mascara on her lashes was all she permitted herself. About her throat she wore a simple locket upon a velvet ribbon. Her walking dress, suitable for receiving guests or strolling about the grounds, was figured muslin, pale pink flowers upon a white field. The skirt was embellished with three rows of pink ruffles near the hem, and the scoop neckline was augmented by a filmy white fichu to modestly cover her cleavage. She had a lovely pale pink pelisse to wear over her dress when she ventured out of doors, and she couldn't wait to try it out with the modest poke bonnet that matched it.

Satisfied with her appearance, she looked over at the registration tables, where Parkinson sat with Lavender and Parvati, waiting to assist the guests in registering for the event. Each of the young women was dressed in the proper styles of the times. They would hand out to the guests the packets containing their personalised schedules, the detailed lists of their costumes, and the location of their rooms.

The guests would be directed to the Great Hall for breakfast, after which they would spend much of the morning with Madam Malkin and her tailors, having their costumes fitted. In the afternoon, there would be a picnic by the lake, followed by lawn games and wandering about the maze.

Hermione felt a pang of sorrow. Ron was supposed to have been at her side for all the festivities, and she had often daydreamed about how much fun...how *romantic!*...it would be. But Ron had proved once and for all how little she meant to him...for if he loved her, he'd love her projects as well, wouldn't he?...and so she would be alone for the event. She didn't expect Snape to actually follow Ron's schedule...he had made it quite clear from the beginning that he would do the bare minimum required of him to make the event work...but she was determined to present a happy face to the guests. They were paying for the Regency experience, and she was dogged in her determination to deliver it to them.

After all, the point of it all was to support Hogwarts, and she would do anything for her school...she had spent some of her happiest times there. Hadn't she met Harry and Ron at Hogwarts? And been menaced by a three-headed dog, Petrified by a Basilisk, chased by a werewolf, pawed by a Durmstrang Quidditch player, threatened by angry centaurs, cared for Professor Flitwick when he had been Stunned by Professor Snape on his way to kill Dumbledore, and fought for her life against Voldemort's invading Death Eaters?

Wait ... had she *ever* been happy at Hogwarts?

'Good morning, Hermione!'

She turned from her reminiscences to see Penny Clearwater approaching, golden and lovely in celestial blue. 'How pretty you look!' Hermione exclaimed.

Penny laughed, but she looked pleased. 'You look pretty too!' she declared, but Hermione knew better. She couldn't hold a candle to Penny or Lavender or the Patil sisters when it came to physical beauty.

Penny consulted the small pocket watch pinned to her bodice like a brooch. 'It's seven o'clock!' she said excitedly. 'They'll begin arriving any minute!'

With their arms linked like Regency era friends, the girls went out the front castle doors to await the horse-drawn carriages that would deliver their guests from Hogsmeade. A special run of the Hogwarts Express would deliver some of them, and others could Floo or Apparate to the Three Broomsticks to ride up in one of the carriages. Hermione was determined they would begin their Regency experience from the moment they arrived in Hogsmeade, which is why she had insisted upon horses rather than Thestrals to draw the carriages.

Hagrid had frowned at her. 'A course I can teach the horses the way to the castle from the village...but 'Ermione, wizards and witches from those times knew all about Thestrals too! It'd be just as authentic fer you to use them as horses!'

Hermione had been adamant. 'No one in a Jane Austen novel ever rode in a Thestral-drawn carriage!' she declared.

Hagrid had accepted his defeat gracefully. 'If you say so,' he agreed.

Now the first carriage rumbled up from the winged-boar gates, containing two middle-aged couples Hermione did not know. Excitedly, Penny squeezed her hand; then the couples were exiting the carriage, and Penny and Hermione dropped simultaneous curtsies, causing the strangers to stare, agog.

'Welcome to Hogwarts Manor,' Hermione said, smiling in welcome. 'Please come in...the servants will bring your bags. We're so glad you've come!'

And she led the way inside, leaving Penny to greet the next carriage.

Harry tugged at the cravat, a monstrous white scarf a foot wide, which had to be folded and wrapped about his throat...a tortuous process for which Hermione had, thankfully, created a spell. The 'points' on his shirt collar stood stiffly up about his chin; his waistcoat was cream with baby blue stripes; his dark blue coat fit so snugly that it had taken him five minutes to wriggle into it; and the pale buff pantaloons were more like tights than trousers...if he had any unplanned reactions south of the beltline, he would have no secrets from any observers.

He loved Hermione like a sister, and Hogwarts was the first home he had ever known, but if he had realised what an ordeal Regency Week would be, he never would have agreed to participate in it. And today, the guests would begin to arrive, and he had to endure the next ten days of being surrounded by people who admired him and wanted to know him. Ten days! Why did she call it a week, which even a troll knew was seven days, if she was going to allow 'early registration' which prolonged the thing into ten days?

He added the pocket watch on its fob to his waistcoat, but damned if he was going to hang the quizzing glass about his neck...it looked like the ugly old jewellery Dudley's Aunt Marge used to wear.

By the time he was fully outfitted, he felt as if he needed another bath. How in hell could those Regency blokes stand to wear all these clothes in the summer? They were stifling! He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. He didn't have any more time to fuss about with it; breakfast was being served in the Great Hall, and Hermione wanted him to be there to greet the early arrivals. Apparently, the promise of his presence had been one of the selling points for the rather outrageous price Hermione was charging people to participate in the event.

He stared at his reflection one last time, dreading the idea of being 'Public Harry' every minute of every day until this thing was ended. Why couldn't Ginny have come to be his date just one last time...for old time's sake? Without his 'girlfriend' on his arm, he would be stalked and flirted with by girls he had no interest in. He knew that Ginny was in love with the Keeper of the Kenmare Kestrels...a decent bloke by the name of Kevin Kerwin...but Ginny knew very well what *his* proclivities were. Not that he was precisely *out*. Bugger it all, he wasn't out at all. His liaisons had been furtive and short-lived, and he just did not relish the notion of his preferences becoming grist for the mills of the *Prophet* and Rita Skeeter's weekly rag, *Probe! Magazine*.

It made him tired just thinking about it.

Resolutely, he went to the room next door and knocked. 'Ron! Are you dressed?'

The only sound coming from Ron's room was stertorous snoring.

He pounded harder. 'Ron! Wake up!'

No answer. Harry eyed the door and considered *Alohomora*.

'Thinking about adding housebreaking to your repertoire?'

Harry turned his head to glare down the corridor, his lips pressed together in annoyance. Draco Malfoy leant against the mouth of the corridor, one booted foot crossed negligently over the other, twirling a quizzing glass on its ribbon as if he'd been wearing one all his life. Far from looking uncomfortable or out of place, both feelings Harry had experienced about the Regency costume, Malfoy looked perfectly at ease.

And *fine*. The annoying git was born to wear skin-tight clothing and look good doing it.

'Did you get lost, Ferret?' Harry demanded. 'This isn't the part of the castle for paying guests.'

Malfoy shrugged. 'I was coming to see if Hermione might need me for anything.'

Harry turned away from the door, Ron forgotten, and walked up to Malfoy, wishing he were tall enough *tdoom* over him, the way Severus did with people. For some reason, Harry wanted to see the Ferret cower.

'Hermione has been downstairs practically since daybreak,' he said. 'Besides, I'm sure Ron wouldn't appreciate you coming down to his girlfriend's bedroom.'

Malfoy laughed, his grey eyes as pale as winter ice. 'Oh, I don't think the Weasel is worried about *me*, Scar Head...any more than he'd be worried about *you*, eh?'

Harry bristled at Malfoy's implication. The erstwhile Slytherin had always been a puzzle to him. But Malfoy was nearly as careful as Harry was about keeping the wizarding press out of his personal relationships. The only person Harry had seen Draco's name linked with in the last year or so had been Blaise Zabini, and Malfoy had been friends with Zabini since they were at school, like Harry and Ron had been. Hanging around with your schoolmates didn't mean a thing, relationship-wise ... but that didn't mean he couldn't get up Malfoy's nose about it.

'Where *is* your boyfriend, anyway?' Harry asked with wide-eyed innocence, already knowing that Zabini had cancelled his plans to attend Regency Week.

The laughter died out of Malfoy's face, and his eyes grew darker, like storm clouds gathering on the horizon. 'You should mind your own business, Potter.' Malfoy pushed himself from the wall, and his mouth puckered into a petulant sneer. 'I'm going down for breakfast. And don't watch my arse as I walk away!'

Harry forced a smile. 'Don't twitch it like a girl,' he advised.

The Ferret might not have twitched his bum like a girl, but he flounced like one, Harry reflected as he watched Malfoy go.

Hermione stood near the door to the Great Hall, waiting for the last guests to arrive. Fifteen people were now arranged about two large round tables, partaking of breakfast. The guests (amongst whom were Molly and Arthur Weasley, whose holiday had been paid for by George, and Fortescue and Amaryliss Parkinson, parents of Pansy) were still dressed in their own clothing, but Hermione's helpers were in costume and scattered amongst the breakfasters, providing colour and context to the Regency theme. Harry laughed with Molly and Arthur and riveted the other diners at his table, most of whom had met him for the first time that morning, whilst Luna Lovegood, authentically clothed in simple jonquil muslin, conversed with the diners at the second table. The Parkinsons had seemed somewhat dismayed at first by Luna, but once Draco had joined the table, resplendent in his Regency garb, they had appeared to be quite content.

Penny Clearwater still waited outside the castle for the final carriage...they were expecting seventeen people for the early registration group, now that Zabini had cancelled...and the girls at the registration table were becoming restless. Hermione consulted the clock. It was now an hour past the time the guests were supposed to arrive; something must have delayed the arrival of Finbar Quigley and his partner, whose name had not been provided to them. Hermione made a mental note to obtain the second person's name for inclusion on the personalised schedule she had prepared.

Thought of the schedule made her bite her lip. No, she would *not* start feeling sad and sorry for herself about Ron...not now, when she needed to be welcoming and inviting to the guests. Snape would never actually wish to *use* Ron's schedule...to step into Ron's shoes, as it were...he could barely tolerate her, and he had no interest in joining in all the activities. To hear him talk, you would think he had loads of work to do, even through the summer hols, though any time Hermione had been in Snape's office, his desk had been curiously bare.

Determinedly, she dragged her mind back to the problem at hand. Since Ginny had declined to continue pretending to be Harry's girlfriend any longer, Harry was without a partner, too. *He* could step in and take Ron's place as her escort. That would work out well for both of them.

With a decisive nod, she signalled Parkinson and company to join the breakfasters. There was no point in keeping them at the registration table; when the stragglers showed up, Hermione or Penney could take care of them.

Parkinson, Lavender, and Parvati were pleased to be released, and Hermione admired the lovely picture they made in their costumes as they hurried to the Great Hall. The she went out the front doors to fetch Penney inside.

Severus stood on the second floor landing, looking over the stone balustrade at Granger, standing by the door to the Great Hall like a Regency hostess waiting to greet a late guest. She was precise in every detail, from the taming of her bushy mane into a careful hairstyle to the pink kid slippers upon her feet. It was a shame, he reflected, that she had to tuck the wisp of linen down the front of her dress and obscure her bosom, but it would undoubtedly be on display when she dressed for dinner in the evenings. She might think him indifferent to this entire affair, but the truth was that he had carefully studied all the materials she had left for him, as well as doing a bit of research of his own.

He felt ridiculous in the period clothing, but he had spied Potter and Draco having words down an eighth floor corridor that morning, and he looked no worse than they did in costume. He was unaccustomed to wearing blue coats and yellow trousers...the Regency men must have been a set of poncey gits!...but he knew from his reading that Granger had the clothes right, so he would grit his teeth and wear it ... for Hogwarts.

As he watched her, she glanced over her shoulder, providing him a fine view of her profile, and for a moment her eyes closed, and she bit her lip. Not that he could blame her for it; he would bite that full, rather pouty lower lip too, given half a chance.

No! No, he would not think of her that way, as if she were a stranger with whom he would never speak. He had fallen into the habit, because the first time he had seen her bottom and her swaying hips he had been unaware of her identity, and his attraction to her body predated his knowledge of her name. But it had to stop; his unwilling fascination with her allure led him to say things to her that were totally improper. He had no business teasing her, much less *taunting*...and it didn't matter how deliciously she coloured up when he flustered her. Regency Week was serious business, and he would treat it...and her...accordingly.

For if this farce...no, this *project*...was a success, then the shortfall in the school budget would be made up, and the girl would go away from Hogwarts. He wouldn't have to see her or deal with her again...not on a regular basis.

And that would be best for everyone.

She flitted to the end of the Entrance Hall, motioning the girls there into the Great Hall; then she went through the front door, returning shortly with Miss Clearwater. Severus stepped back quickly, not wishing to be seen. Penelope Clearwater had always been a good student, an outstanding Prefect, and a pupil of good sense, as demonstrated by her interest in Percy Weasley, another serious student. But her sudden, unprovoked attraction to him, Severus, was appalling.

What he needed was a decoy...someone in whom he could evince interest, who would forestall Clearwater's pursuit of him.

He peered over the balustrade again, and Clearwater was gone, but Granger still stood in the doorway of the Great Hall, as if hesitant to go in. The piece of parchment bearing Ronald Weasley's name...the boy's personalised Regency Week schedule...nestled in the inner pocket of the ridiculously tight coat Severus wore, and he remembered it with a pang. If he hadn't goaded Weasley the night before, the ginger-haired whelp would be at Granger's side even now, escorting her in to breakfast. Severus had thought, when he accepted the schedule as a wager, that he would take Weasley's place and keep Granger on an even keel. But what had seemed a simple matter at the poker game loomed as an impossible task in the bright light of morning. He couldn't see himself dancing attendance on her...dancing *with* her!...taking responsibility for the girl's day-to-day functionality. It would be far too taxing ... not to mention dangerous.

She bit her lip again, and he gritted his teeth. As things stood, Granger was alone...single...a woman at a 'romantic' event without a partner. In short, she would be a target for every single male who chanced to attend Regency Week...and Merlin knew any single men with a particle of sense would be buzzing around her like bees about a honey pot.

He considered that. Granger, pursued by handsome, fit young men. Granger, courted and flattered. Granger, in the throes of a fresh, new romance.

It would be an unmitigated disaster! How could she possibly concentrate on her *job*, which was to manage Regency Week to a successful conclusion, if her head were turned by some twit in knee breeches and stockings?

And why the fuck had he permitted her to include a 'money-back guarantee' in her Regency Week advertising? If she fell apart, and the whole event went to hell, the paying guests could demand their Galleons be returned to them!

It all became clear to him in an instant: It was his duty as Headmaster to partner Granger, keep single men away from her, and support her spirits, for Hogwarts! That his attentions to Granger would dissuade Clearwater was merely an added incentive to make the bitter pill sweeter.

He would have to suck it up and take it like a man.

Hermione smiled to see Penney, Parvati, Lavender ... yes, and even Parkinson, seated with the guests and partaking of breakfast. There was nothing holding her at her station by the door except for her own unrealistic expectations. It had been silly of her to dream of having a Regency holiday with Ron. He had been against it from the start. But going into the room by herself and sitting down with everyone else would put a seal on the reality of her solitary state. It made her feel sad to even consider it.

Motion from the corner of her eye made her turn, and coming down the staircase she saw the Headmaster, the picture of Regency elegance. The close-fitting coat displayed the breadth of his shoulders as contrasted with his narrow waist, and the knitted pantaloons showcased long, slender, well-formed legs. Good God, who could have possibly known the fit body Snape had been hiding behind those billowing cloaks for all these years?

He stopped before her, and Hermione dropped a tiny curtsy, as was the custom of the day. 'Good morning, Headmaster,' she said.

Snape responded with the proper inclination of his upper body, slight but noticeable: a gentleman's bow. 'I hope the morning finds you well, Miss Granger?'

She smiled, pleased that he was conforming to the social niceties. 'Quite well, sir. And many of our guests have arrived...will you join them for breakfast?' She motioned him in with her hand, the excellent hostess situating a late-coming guest.

He offered his arm. 'If you will accompany me, and show me how I must go on.' One side of his mouth quirked upwards. 'I fear I am not as well prepared as your helpers in all the appertaining ... customs.'

Hermione's felt an odd fluttering in her tummy. Snape was charming her! On purpose! And what an odd reaction she was having to him, as well, just as she had done the day before, when their hands had touched. But now he was offering deliberate contact ...

'And we must make haste to break our fast,' he continued, his midnight eyes daring her to disagree, 'because whilst the guests meet with Madam Malkin, you must instruct me in the niceties of playing at bowls...for that is next on our schedule, is it not?'

She felt the force of his will...of his personality...in a way she had never done before, and though it made it difficult for her to breathe properly, she was unable to break eye contact with him. Without a further thought for Ron, or expectations, or anything save the man before her, she tucked her hand into his arm and walked with him into the Great Hall.

A/N: You may see how to tie a Regency cravat and a portrait of a Regency gentleman here, as well as pictures of a ladies muslin dress and spencer:

<http://herpie-houseelf.livejournal.com/1651.html>

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 8

Friday, August 2, 2002

Morning and Afternoon

Severus acquitted himself well at breakfast, he felt. Sitting with Miss Granger at the table with Potter and the parental Weasleys, conversation was easy, and at the prompting of the Regency Week workers, Severus was reminded to maintain the conversational style of the time. There was much laughter amongst his tablemates, most of whom were in a holiday mind-set, and that made his job all the easier.

Soon after he was seated, the teachers entered the Great Hall en masse, resplendent in their Regency costumes. Severus resorted to biting the inside of his cheek to keep

from laughing aloud at the spectacle of Flitwick, tricked out like a Dandy, complete with a ridiculous number of fobs and seals about his person. Lucius had managed to include himself amongst their number, and he was very smart in his bespoke gentleman's raiment, looking quite smug with Leticia upon his arm. Severus hid his smirk behind his teacup as he sipped. He had seen Lucius evince interest in other women since Narcissa had left him, but never with the persistent determination he had shown in his pursuit of Professor Mortelle. She was nothing like Narcissa in appearance, with her fiery hair and brilliant eyes, and there was a fire in her, which Severus had encountered more than once in discussions of Leticia's curriculum and her teaching style. He preferred Leticia's fire to Narcissa's distant, icy disdain for everyone and everything but her immediate family, but he had been surprised to find that Lucius was drawn to her. Narcissa had always been perfectly proper, never a hair out of place, and Leticia possessed those attributes, as well, but there was a dangerous...not to say sinister...edge to Leticia that Narcissa completely lacked. And Lucius appeared to be drawn to that very thing, like the proverbial moth to flame.

Severus almost hoped to see his friend's wings singed...it would do him a world of good.

Look who's talking his inner voice goaded.

Lucius and Leticia took the open seats beside Severus, and his old friend promptly inquired after the previous night's amusements.

'Did you enjoy your card game?'

Severus slanted a glance at him. 'Need you ask?'

Lucius did not bother to hide his smirk. 'Ah, it would have been a sight to behold.'

'Dumbledore's portrait certainly seemed to enjoy it,' Severus allowed.

'Even so, I'm rather surprised to see you dining amongst your guests,' Lucius commented, sotto voce.

Severus felt a flash of annoyance. 'My movements are scarcely your concern,' he said, and turning to Miss Granger, he addressed an unexceptional comment to her.

At length, she rose from her chair. 'If everyone has finished their meal, I would like for you to accompany me to Madam Malkin's rooms. She is the head seamstress here at Hogwarts Manor, and she has prepared some garments for each of you, appropriate for your stay here, in the country.'

The guests rose, a buzz of cheerful conversation rising with them. Severus took the opportunity to stand and speak quietly into Miss Granger's ear. 'Shall I come with you to Madam Malkin?' he inquired.

He noted with an almost satyric pleasure the flush which rose in her cheek, followed by her fingers, which rose to touch the spot at her temple where her hair had stirred in response to his breath. Her eyes flew to his face, her lips parted in surprise, and just as quickly, she averted her gaze.

Impulse propelled him one step closer to her, the action coming before he could form the intention to do so.

'There's no need,' she said quietly.

Her reaction to him stirred the instinct of pursuit on a level beyond conscious thought. Struggling to keep his voice level, he said, 'Then when and where shall I find you again?'

She moved away from him, greeting the first knot of gathering guests with a smile and directing them to follow the waiting house-elf to Madam Malkin's rooms. When the last straggler had moved forward to join the departing throng, she looked at him again, although this time her brown eyes fastened upon his neck cloth, failing to make the full distance to his face.

'There's no need, sir,' she repeated firmly, and dropping a tiny curtsy, she turned to follow her charges from the room.

He had scarcely completed his answering bow when his so-called friend's irritating voice reached his ears.

'Scorched!' Lucius chortled, a laughing look goading Severus into throwing his table napkin onto his plate with scarcely controlled violence. 'But never fear, you'll make a recover, I'm sure,' Lucius hastened to add.

'Bugger off,' Severus suggested before stalking out of the room.

Hermione waited to one side of the cavernous room given over to Madam Malkin and her workers. The guests were presented with their wardrobes, and each of them was conducted to a fitting room to make sure all was well before being dispatched to their bedchambers with a house-elf in tow to assist with fetching, carrying, and donning the strange garments.

Hermione responded automatically to any remarks addressed to her, but her mind was grappling with a problem.

What was going on with Snape, and how could she make it stop?

It was completely disruptive to her schedule to have the Headmaster lurking about, distracting her from her duties. Having Ron about was one thing; he could be (mostly) trusted to receive and carry out instructions, and thus make himself useful to her. But she couldn't make use of Headmaster Snape in the same way, and taking away any potential utility, his presence was nothing but a disruption. His *presence* was ... different from Ron's. His body wasn't too different; they were both tall and broader and heavier than she, although Snape was, admittedly, more slender than Ron. No, it was more Snape's voice that disturbed her, for it insinuated itself into her mind, whether she liked it or not, and his manner towards her was totally troublesome for her. He didn't ignore her and discount what she said as Ron was wont to do; instead, sitting with her at breakfast, he had attended to her comfort as well as her conversation. No, it couldn't be permitted to continue in this way. Snape would continually distract her from what she ought to be thinking about and doing, and that couldn't be permitted to happen. She had a job to do, and nothing was more important than doing it well.

She would have to find some way to put him off.

It was a perfect summer's day, and Lucius felt an almost unseemly jubilation, just being in the sunshine beneath the fluffy white clouds with the delightful Leticia Mortelle upon his arm.

'Come,' he had said, planting himself before her as she left the ladies' sitting room, 'you know you are promised to me for a walk in the maze.'

She had regarded him coolly from beneath her darkened lashes, with the enigmatic smile which made him want to snatch her up and kiss her, regardless of where they might be when the maddening expression touched her lips. 'I am quite sure I never made any such promise,' she had objected.

Undeterred, he had taken her hand and placed it on his arm. 'You did not naysay me when I suggested it, and that is the same as agreeing,' he had informed her. 'And I see that you have already put on your spencer...a charming shade of cerulean, I must say, and it complements your eyes delightfully...so we are quite ready for a stroll about the grounds.'

She had eschewed a bonnet, choosing instead to carry a frivolous little parasol to guard her complexion from the injurious sun, and still her hair shone like burnished copper upon her brow. Her mere presence made him feel as if he were a young man again, younger than she was, even, though he knew he was older by better than a decade. He had ceased to wonder at his feelings and the reasons for them; all that mattered was his capacity still to experience such energizing joie de vivre.

'Will the Headmaster be joining us?' Leticia inquired, and Lucius saw Severus bearing down upon them with a determined look upon his face.

'Oh, I don't think we're his objective,' Lucius replied, glancing towards the lake, where house-elves had assembled a number of lawn games for the guests to choose from. 'Isn't that Miss Granger in the pink coat?'

Leticia chuckled. 'I believe you're right,' she said. 'Miss Granger will be the recipient of the Headmaster's attention.'

Lucius drew Leticia's hand more fully through the crook of his elbow, covering her daintily mittened hand with his. 'Let us go this way, toward the hedges which Mr Longbottom has so cleverly provided for us...I believe we will be quite alone, in the maze.'

And when Leticia raised slightly mocking eyes to his face, he tightened his fingers upon the hand he held. She returned no answering pressure, but she neither reprimanded him nor withdrew her hand, and triumph filled him as he navigated a path far from the milling crowd about the lake.

Harry stood beneath a beech tree at Hermione's shoulder, a shuttlecock in his hand, which he occasionally tossed up and caught again, doing what he could to stave off boredom. As he had feared, people he didn't know continued to make attempts to talk to him. He answered them as kindly as he could, but all the attention made him nervous. He would much rather be playing at wizard's chess with Ron, or flying on the Quidditch pitch, even if Neville *had* grown a huge maze over the ground there. But Ron was nowhere to be seen...although it seemed he had woken up, because he hadn't been in his room when Harry had checked back after breakfast...and Hermione had forbidden flying for the duration of Regency Week as being 'unauthentic'.

'Don't be daft!' he'd retorted. 'Wizards have been flying on brooms for centuries and centuries!'

But she'd refused to budge, so here he stood, wondering how he was going to get through ten more days of this without losing his mind.

Hermione handed out battledores and a shuttlecock to Arthur Weasley, who was as excited as if they were plugs and fuses.

'Oh, this is going to be such fun!' he exclaimed to Molly, who was watching him with fond amusement.

'Of course it is, love,' she agreed, and the two of them went off to attempt the Muggle game.

Hermione turned to Harry with a smile. 'Oh, come on, Harry,' she chided him. 'It's not nearly as bad as camping out for weeks on end with nothing to do but starve, freeze, and take turns wearing a piece of Voldemort's soul about our necks!'

Harry laughed out loud. 'Well, when you put it that way, I can't disagree with you.'

Hermione patted his arm. 'That's better,' she said. 'Have you seen Ron?'

'No, but I know he got out of bed, because he isn't in his room.'

She plucked at the edge of her long pink coat-like thing. 'I was hard on him when he came to my room last night.'

Harry didn't know what to say to that, so he kept his mouth shut. Over her shoulder, he saw Severus coming their way, and the Headmaster looked none too happy. 'Say, Hermione, did you do something to make Severus cross?'

Hermione looked up then, rather like a rabbit confronted by a predator. 'Why? Is he here?' She turned nervously, and when she spied Severus, she darted into the nearest group of guests, kindly offering to show Mr Parkinson how to bowl his ball close to the kitty.

Harry tossed the shuttlecock into the air again, and was surprised when a hand shot out to capture it. He turned and saw Malfoy tossing the shuttlecock again.

'Do you think you can play this game?' Malfoy asked.

Harry studied the Ferret's face, looking for some sign that Malfoy was having him on, but the only thing he saw was boredom almost matching his.

'I've played it,' Harry said. 'My aunt had a set.'

Malfoy thrust a racquet into Harry's hands. 'Come on; let's show the others how it's done. Not a one of them seems to be able to work it out.'

Harry accepted the racquet willingly. Even playing badminton would be better than standing around waiting for the house-elves to serve the picnic lunch.

Parkinson was attempting to show her parents how to play at battledore and shuttlecock, without the involvement of the net, but Harry was pleased when Malfoy stepped up to the net strung between two advantageously placed saplings. Malfoy removed his long-tailed coat and waistcoat, apparently meaning to play in his shirtsleeves, and Harry could not help but notice how the warmth of the sun had caused the white shirt to mould itself to Malfoy's torso, accentuating the muscular definition there. Harry's mouth went dry, and he swallowed, trying to force himself to look away. What did it matter to him how the Ferret looked without his clothes on?

'Head's up, Potter!' Malfoy called, and the shuttlecock was sailing over the net to him.

Harry returned the shuttle, and they settled into a steady back-and-forth. Guests who had struggled to work out how to play stopped their efforts and stepped up to watch the two young men who could do it properly. Before long, they were taking sides and calling out encouragement. Harry missed a return and good-naturedly informed the spectators that they were a noisy lot.

'Keep playing, Harry!' George called merrily. 'You know how we Regency bloods carry on...we're going to wager on who's going to win!'

Neville was roped into assisting George, and before long, all the gentlemen were crowding about them, placing their wagers. Harry and Malfoy continued their game, and when Malfoy missed a return, he grinned at Harry, his white-blond hair plastered to his forehead.

'I think they like us!' he said, and it seemed to Harry as if the other man looked him over closely, grey eyes speculative. 'You could take off your coat, you know...you're going to spoil it, sweating like that.'

Harry was staring at Malfoy now, as if the Ferret's inspection of him gave Harry the right to return the assessment, with interest. But he had no intention of taking off his coat...he was neither as lean nor as fit as Malfoy, and he was acutely aware of his shortcomings.

'Just play!' he snapped, and another spirited exchange began, the spectators shouting encouragement, even the bowlers turning aside from their sport to watch Harry and Malfoy battle away at badminton.

Hermione watched her pupils wander away, one-by-one, until she stood alone with the bowls ball in her hand.

'Tell me, Miss Granger...have you included competitions amongst your lawn game activities?'

The voice fell upon her like a coating of fondant on a ripe bit of fruit, but when she turned to him, his expression was far from inviting. She lifted her chin.

'I have not, Headmaster, but I can see that it was an unfortunate omission. It would appear that our guests quite enjoy a bit of competition.'

He nodded somewhat curtly, turning his attention to the combatants engaged across the net. 'These two certainly do...always have done...and even a grudge match is an acceptable past-time, if it keeps the ... dubs in tune.'

She laughed, delighted to hear such a Regency phrase upon his tongue.

He turned back to her, his coal-dark brows arching above equally black eyes. 'Have I got that right?' he demanded.

'Perfectly!' she said, unable to prevent herself from smiling at him. 'If you mean it keeps the money coming in,' she added.

He nodded once, now ignoring Harry and Draco to look her over. 'How are you doing?' he asked.

'It's going fairly well, I think,' she said. 'It was falling rather flat before Draco and Harry began to play, but they all seem entertained now. And the helpers are going amongst them to show them how to speak and behave with one another.' She spotted the house-elves approaching, levitating bulging picnic hampers, rugs, and frosty jugs of lemonade before them. 'I can get the picnic set up, and by the time Harry and Draco are finished, lunch will be ready for us.'

Snape placed a restraining hand upon her elbow, and she looked up at him questioningly.

'Allow the house-elves to do their jobs,' he suggested. 'They know their business, I assure you. Come for a stroll with me, and when we return, we can join the others for a light repast.'

Hermione looked anxiously toward the house-elves, who had begun to spread rugs beneath the shade of the trees and place cushions in strategic spots for comfort. She would be ever so much more at ease directing the house-elves than having an awkward, private conversation with the Headmaster. But how could she refuse him without giving offence?

As he had done that morning, he tucked her hand into his arm and began to walk, and she went with him, feeling helpless to refuse. Peeking at him from beneath her lashes, she saw his hawkish profile, dominated by his hooked nose, beneath which was a mouth that could thin to show displeasure, curve to confuse her with possible amusement, or relax into disarming laughter. She didn't realise she was staring until he looked down and their gazes locked, hers suddenly embarrassed, his inquisitive.

'You need have no scruples about accepting my escort, you know,' he said, beginning to walk along the edge of the lake. 'My only purpose is to lend you what aid I can and to replace your intended partner, whose interest in this project was ... less than keen. It is all for Hogwarts, after all.'

Hermione briefly wondered what Ron would think, seeing her strolling along with the Headmaster. He oughtn't to be surprised, since he'd practically given her to Snape...but would he be jealous? She almost hoped he would; it would be a balm to her hurt pride to think that Ron was the least little bit put out by Snape's attentions to her.

Forcing her mind back to the Headmaster's words, she had to admit she liked what he said. It was in his best interests to make sure that Regency Week was a success, wasn't it? After all, if the Headmaster ever hoped to secure a pay rise for his teachers...or himself!...he needed for the guests to be satisfied. Hermione was determined to make a success of the project because she believed in it and had devoted a year of her life to meticulous planning and the execution of those plans. In all the world, there was really no one else who had as much at stake in Regency Week as she did, except for Severus Snape.

He was right. He was the logical partner for her during the ten days of the Regency project, and to give him credit, he hadn't taunted her about her boyfriend's defection from her side; Snape obviously had no intention of tormenting her about her personal life for the duration of their partnership.

'Thank you, Headmaster,' she said, stopping and drawing him to a stop, as well. 'I appreciate your frankness. I accept your offer.' She cleared her throat and looked away from him, across the lake. 'You're right.'

One of his laughs, the ones that made her forget what she was supposed to be thinking about, brought her attention back to his face. Even his eyes seemed to brighten when he laughed.

'Could you say that again?' he asked with mock solemnity. 'I really haven't heard that from you as frequently as I ought.'

Hermione laughed out loud. 'You're impossible!' she declared, deciding that she would loosen up and speak to him as she did her contemporaries. He wasn't her teacher, demanding deference and respect. Rather, he was her partner in bringing the Regency project to a successful completion...for Hogwarts...and as such, it was important for them to be comfortable together. They would be in one another's company for most of their waking hours, after all.

The Headmaster placed one hand over his heart and inclined his head, allowing his hair to fall forward, a screen for his expression. 'At last, we begin to understand one another.'

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 9

Friday, August 2, 2002

Evening

Hermione gave herself an hour to dress for dinner, because her evening hairstyle was a bit more complicated than the one she had adopted for daywear. She divided her hair at the back of her head by parting the top section from the bottom. The top back segment she divided into three sections, braiding each into a careful plait. With the plaits pinned out of her way, she combed the bottom back section up and wound it into a bun. The braids were then shaped into semi-circles above and to each side of the bun and pinned into place, with the bun rather like the center of a large flower and the braids like three petals. With the remaining sections at the front, she patiently created corkscrew curls on either side of her face.

As she worked, she thought about the evening to come. There were no elaborate plans for the guests' entertainment tonight. After dinner, they would play parlour games, and Hermione would lead the ladies upstairs to bed no later than half ten. No one was *required* to seek their beds early, of course; they were all adults and could choose their own bedtimes. But tomorrow they would commence with lessons in dancing and riding, both of which required some physical energy, and she didn't want her guests too tired to enjoy their time with the dancing and riding masters.

Satisfied with her hair, she chose a dress from her wardrobe and slipped it on. Pausing before her mirror to assess the full effect of her garments, her hand rose nervously to her chest. How in the world had the women been comfortable with such revealing necklines? Perhaps for the more flat-chested ones the fashion had not been quite so daunting, but for a girl with a real bosom, it was very revealing.

'Don't fret, dearie!' the mirror encouraged. 'You look a treat!'

'It's easy for you to say,' Hermione replied waspishly. 'It's not your chest on display for the world to see!'

She twitched the fabric, worried that the narrow skirt showed rather too much of her hips and bum...why couldn't the Regency dresses have had more ~~skirt~~ to disguise one's disadvantages?

'No,' the mirror declared without being asked, '*it doesn't* make your bum look too big!'

Not staying to hear further mirror wisdom, she hung her reticule about her wrist and left her room.

The guests were gathered in the main drawing room on the ground floor, aperitifs in hand. Miss Granger had insisted that they have ratafia, madeira, and sherry on hand, but Severus had stepped in and firmly insisted upon modern drinks being available, as well, for the paying guests.

'The more they drink, the happier they'll be,' he had informed her, and the girl had acceded to the strength of his argument.

The Headmaster stood at the back of the room, one elbow propped on the mantelpiece, his hands free of drink. At his side was Lucius, and they were trading laconic, acidic comments about the milling throng in their odd costumes.

'Don't they realise that the clothes do not make the man?' Lucius complained, his critical eye upon Fortescue Parkinson, who incessantly tugged at his cravat and fidgeted with the two inches of waistcoat that showed below the high-cut front of his coat. 'A man dresses, assures himself of his perfection, and he leaves his room, never to give another thought to his raiment.'

Severus gave him a sidelong sardonic sneer. 'Is that why I so frequently catch you out admiring yourself in the mirror?'

Lucius glared at him. 'There is a vast difference between admiring one's appearance and fidgeting about with it,' he informed his friend. Taking one step back, he surveyed Severus closely. 'I must say that this style of dressing suits you.'

Severus did not agree aloud; he never actually spoke of his appearance. But he did not disagree with Lucius' observation. The fashions of the time of history dominated by Napoleon Bonaparte looked well on a tall, slender figure, and he was not displeased by his reflection in the mirror, though he never bothered with the bit above his neck cloth, save to make sure he was cleanly shaven and combed.

To change the topic, he nodded toward the knot of teachers seated near the window, where the early evening sunlight spilled through the long French doors. 'Professor Mortelle looks well this evening.'

Lucius willingly turned his attention to the copper haired witch. 'She's simply amazing,' he said quietly.

Severus' eyebrows arched in surprise. 'What, no bombastic declarations?' he goaded. 'Don't you feel well?'

'I am very well indeed,' Lucius continued to gaze at Professor Mortelle, his expression inscrutable.

'This is a change!' Severus said. 'Have you given up the quest? After all, the lady still shows no sign of returning your ... regard.'

Lucius turned gleaming grey eyes to him. 'But you weren't with us today in the maze, were you?' he said with a hint of boasting.

Severus chuckled. 'You pressed yourself upon the lady in the shrubbery? It sounds like a comedy of manners! A scandal, in fact!'

Lucius frowned at him. 'For a man whose subtlety earned him an Order of Merlin, your understanding of the delicacy of wooing is surprisingly lacking, Severus. One employs persistent pressure, to be sure, but it is a force of admiration and approval, not sordid lechery.' He pondered for a moment before adding thoughtfully, 'One works one's way up slowly from the verbal love-making to the physical ... very slowly, indeed, with a certain sort of lady.'

Severus felt the scowl forming on his face and fought to dispel it; his role in Regency Week was that of affable host, and well he knew how people were put off by him in his blacker moods. Nevertheless, Lucius' sudden assumption of elder-brother manners...what presumption!...was most unwelcome, and Severus needed to make sure the other man knew his error.

'Please, keep your sex life to yourself,' he said icily.

Lucius looked shocked. 'This isn't about something so ... so base. I am pursuing the lady in earnest!'

But Severus was not attending to him. Hermione Granger had entered the room and stood for a moment on the threshold, surveying the guests. The soft salmon pink of her silk dress was flattering; the colour seemed to warm her eyes and complement the faintly burnished threads of chestnut in her hair. The low square neckline...*look at the face, not at the breasts!* he chastised himself...was trimmed with metallic gold braid, as was the hem, and about the empire waist was a matching gold corded tie. She completed her toilette with flat gold slippers, a pearl necklet about her throat, and evening gloves. She was, in the parlance of the time, complete to a shade, and he was unable to take his eyes from her.

Then Lucius moved past him, walking to Miss Granger with a smile upon his lips, as if he were the host...as if he were her escort...and Severus experienced a flash of something that felt perilously like jealousy, an emotion with which he was far too intimate.

Before he knew what he was about, he was stepping between them, taking Miss Granger's hand from Lucius' grasp and lying over his shoulder, 'I believe Leticia is trying to gain your attention.'

Miss Granger laughed, seemingly a touch flustered by the rush of male attention. 'Good evening,' she said, smiling up into Severus' eyes.

He felt his lips curve in answer. He took her hand and led her towards the hearth. 'Might I bring you sherry?'

She thanked him, but instead of walking away from her...yes, Lucius was behind Leticia's chair now, taking part in her conversation with Minerva McGonagall, but why leave his prize unattended?...Severus motioned a house-elf near and took two glasses of sherry from its serving tray. He offered one to Hermione, then touched his glass to hers.

'For Hogwarts,' he said by way of a toast.

She smiled, seemingly pleased with him. 'For Hogwarts!' she agreed, and they drank.

Harry gave up on making his hair behave and hurried out of his room. He was later than he'd meant to be, and Hermione would be none too pleased with him for keeping the guests waiting. It was only because he, Malfoy, and a few of the betting men had stayed behind to continue with the badminton playing when the others had gone indoors to dress for dinner.

'Pssst...Harry!'

He stopped on the first floor landing and looked around, seeing Ron lurking in the shadows.

'Where've you been all day?' Harry demanded.

Ron came into the light, and Harry saw that he was dressed in his Regency garb.

'I've been around,' Ron said vaguely.

Harry shook his head. 'Why don't you just grovel and get it over with? It's what you usually do.'

Ron's jaw clenched. 'She's paid me no attention for a year. She's been a terrible girlfriend. I won't say sorry unless she does.'

But Harry was still shaking his head. 'You bet her in a card game, mate. That wouldn't have been a good idea even if you'd won the hand. She would've always been angry with you for it. Losing her just makes it worse.'

If possible, Ron looked even more stubborn. 'I didn't bet *her*,' he argued. 'I wagered the schedule, not her.'

Harry frowned at him, trying to follow his reasoning. 'Look, Ron, you don't treat your fiancée like that...like she doesn't matter to you.'

Ron looked down. 'We aren't *engaged*, exactly,' he muttered to his feet.

Harry felt confused. 'But you gave her that ring...and I could've sworn you said you were engaged ...'

Ron's head came up. 'We have an understanding!' he blurted.

Harry turned aside in disgust. 'Yeah, mate. Well, come on down to dinner. She's going to be furious if we're really late, you know.'

'Wait!'

Harry paused. 'Now what?'

'I need someone to sit with at dinner. I'm not going to be without a partner if she has one.' He looked hopeful for a moment. 'Unless Snape is ignoring her, and she's all alone?'

Harry gave him a pitying look. 'Severus is a decent bloke,' he said. 'You've never understood that about him. No, he isn't ignoring her. I've seen him with her everywhere today.'

Harry continued down the staircase, not caring now if Ron came along or not. But Ron followed, still talking.

'Will you go in and find someone who'll sit with me?'

'Like who?'

'Luna!' Ron said. 'Parvati. Lavender. I don't care, as long as it's a female.'

Harry reached the ground floor, Ron upon his heels, and they headed for the main drawing room. 'All right, but after this, you get your own dates!' Harry shot over his shoulder.

The clock was chiming the half-hour when he entered the room, which meant they'd all be going in to eat any moment. Harry smiled and nodded to the people who greeted him, threading his way through the guests until he came to the group of helpers, who stood together listening to George as he told one of his funnier stories. Harry wasn't distracted by it; he'd heard the punch line before. Lavender Brown stood slightly separated from the others, poking in her cloth handbag, looking for something.

Harry touched her shoulder, and she looked up. 'Hi, Harry!' she said cheerfully.

'Listen, Lavender...Ron wants to know if you'll sit with him at dinner.'

Lavender looked as if someone had told her she'd won a prize. 'Is he fighting with Hermione?' she asked.

'It's complicated,' Harry said uncomfortably. 'You could ask him. He just wanted to know if you'd go into dinner with him and sit beside him, that's all.'

Lavender narrowed her eyes suspiciously, and Harry was already considering whom he'd approach about it next when he received assistance from an unexpected quarter.

'Oh, throw the boy a bone, Lav,' Malfoy said, slipping away from the helpers to stand beside Harry. 'Give the Weasel a treat.'

Lavender giggled, as if Malfoy had paid her a compliment...which Harry supposed was true, in a way.

'Draco,' she said, touching the silly arrangement of feathers she wore in her hair. 'I guess I could do it ...'

Malfoy took Lavender's hand and pulled it through his arm. 'That's right...as a favour to Harry,' he encouraged, leading her through the crowd. Harry followed in their wake, and the Ferret glanced back at him. 'I suppose the Weasel is in the Entrance Hall?' he asked.

Harry nodded and grinned at him, masking his confusion. Why would Malfoy intercede to help him out? Who knew what went on in that Slytherin soul? Well, Harry had to admit, when he was playing sports...or helping out in an awkward social situation...the Ferret had his uses.

Hermione sat in a chair near the door, her eyes drawn frequently to the clock upon the mantelpiece. Dinner had gone well, with the guests enjoying the food...a mix of old-time fare and modern...and particularly the wine. The ladies had withdrawn at the end, to amuse themselves in the drawing room while the gentlemen enjoyed port and cigars. Padma Patil had surprised them by showing herself to be adept at playing the piano, and she played a soothing sonata for them. Parvati had produced several samples of needle work and shown them around the group to stir up interest for her sewing classes, whilst Penny had done the same with her drawings. Parkinson had drifted into a corner with Lavender, where the two chatted animatedly.

Hermione tried not to stare at Lavender, but it was hard not to. When Ron had waltzed into dinner with Lavender Brown on his arm, Hermione had been stricken mute with fury. Her so-called boyfriend had hidden himself from her all day long...probably too ashamed of himself to show his face!...and when he had finally shown up, it had been

with Lavender! Hermione could not but be aware that Molly and Arthur Weasley were casting very worried looks her way, and to make matters worse, Ron had never looked at Hermione once through the entire meal. She had simply no idea what to make of his behaviour. He didn't seem the least bit sorry for anything he had said or done. Didn't he care about her?

Snape had behaved rather oddly at dinner, as well. From his place at the head of the table, he had been careful to make sure Hermione's glass was always filled, had offered her the first choice of every dish, and had included her in every conversation he initiated with those sitting near them. In fact, he had kept her so busy that she'd had no real time to think about Ron and his behaviour until she'd left the table.

Now, she just wanted the night to be over. The day had gone well, with no disasters, and the guests seemed in a mood to be pleased with everything, which augured well for the success of Regency Week. But Hermione was exhausted from the strain of seeing after everyone's welfare, and she was quite ready for her bed. Her unhappiness about Ron simply added to her weariness; she suspected that she was going to cry when she was alone and wanted to get it over with.

The gentlemen came in from their port and cigars, and the ladies received them gladly. Ron stalked past Hermione, looking better than he had any right to in his Regency costume, and immediately began to talk and laugh with Lavender. Hermione felt a stab of jealousy. It wasn't the first time Ron had acted this way...he'd had a fling with Lavender whilst they were still at school, after all...but it seemed terribly unfair to her that he would do it *now*, when she needed to devote all her attention to making the fundraising project a success.

The Headmaster stopped at her side, his black eyes searching. 'All went well,' he assured her before she could ask.

'In here, as well,' she said. 'Many of the ladies are sincerely interested in the pastimes of the day, such as drawing and needlework. I think they will very much enjoy the classes we have arranged for them.'

He nodded. 'You thought of everything, in fact,' he assured her. 'I hope you won't mind my saying so, but you seem quite tired. Must you remain for the parlour games? Could not Miss Clearwater do the necessary, so that you could go to your room and rest?'

Hermione was touched. Who would have ever believed that Snape could be such an attentive escort? She glanced at the clock, seeing that it was nearly nine o'clock. Surely she could withstand ninety minutes more of socialising.

'Thank you for your concern, sir, but I will be fine,' she promised. 'I believe I can manage on my own...it's only table games, not anything tiring or difficult.'

There was a clattering from the Entrance Hall, and Hermione rose from her chair.

'Are we expecting anyone?' the Headmaster inquired.

'Yes, we had two more scheduled to arrive this morning, but they never came,' Hermione explained before hurrying down the short corridor to the Entrance Hall.

Two house-elves were carrying in baggage, and a fair-haired young man was looking about the space with an awed expression. Hermione recognised him at once. 'Finbar Quigley!' she said, coming forward and dropping a proper curtsy, which seemed to confuse him. 'Welcome to Regency Week!'

Quigley, who played Beater on the Irish National Quidditch team, was also a player for the Ballycastle Bats. Hermione had been surprised when he'd written to sign up for the week, but Harry and Ron had been quite excited about it. She recognised him from his photograph in the newspaper...and also, she had to admit, because she'd been expecting him.

'Erm, thanks,' he said awkwardly.

She smiled her friendliest smile. 'I'm Hermione Granger,' she explained.

He eyed her with appreciation, and she felt her cheeks reddening. Damn this low-cut gown!

'Oh, so *you're* Hermione,' Finbar said with a winning smile. 'That explains a lot.'

Hermione didn't know what to say to that. What on earth could he mean by it? And wasn't he supposed to have someone with him?

'Did your friend come with you?' she asked, glancing to the massive wooden door, which was still open to the night air, a house-elf holding it ajar, frozen in a deep bow of greeting.

'Herm-own-ninny!'

She heard his voice before she saw him coming through the door, an expensive-looking broomstick in his hand. Viktor Krum thrust this into the hands of a hovering house-elf and advanced precipitately upon Hermione, catching her up into his arms and giving her a kiss upon each cheek.

'Greetings!' he cried, his frequently sullen face animated with pleasure.

Hermione struggled. 'Viktor, put me down!'

He did so, grinning down at her unrepentantly. 'You are surprised to see me, yes?' he demanded.

Hermione straightened her dress, making a note to herself that evening gowns with low necklines were not good for sudden violent movements. The period undergarments, somewhat less restrictive than modern day ones, did not fill her with the same confidence regarding their ability to keep her breasts appropriately under cover.

'Yes,' she answered belatedly, 'yes, very surprised. So you're Finbar's companion?'

Viktor nodded, turning to his friend. 'I am signed now to play Quidditch with the Bats this season,' he explained to Hermione, his arm about Finbar's shoulders. 'It is our holiday, and when we saw your advert, we thought we would come here.'

Hermione nodded, wondering how on earth she was going to keep two professional Quidditch players entertained for ten days.

Viktor slapped Finbar on the back. 'Didn't I tell you she is beautiful?' he demanded loudly.

The Headmaster stepped into the light, and Hermione realised he had followed her from the drawing room and had been standing in the shadows this whole time. The expression on his face was perfectly polite, but she thought the courtesy failed to reach his eyes. Indeed, when he spoke, his tone was almost biting.

'Welcome back to Hogwarts, Mr Krum,' he said, and Hermione felt a flush of real pleasure when Snape executed a very proper Regency bow.

Viktor seemed not at all taken aback, for he answered with a click of his heels and a bow of his own. 'You are Professor Snape!' the Bulgarian declared, and he pulled his teammate up for an introduction.

'Fin, this is Severus Snape, the war hero. I knew him when I was here for the Triwizard Tournament!'

Hermione watched as the three men exchanged greetings, indicating with hand gestures for the house-elves to carry the baggage upstairs. When the men reached a pause in their conversation, she spoke to them.

'The guests are playing games in the drawing room, and then we'll have tea before bed,' she explained. 'Would you care to join us, or would you prefer to go to your rooms?'

Fin gestured to the Headmaster's Regency clothing. 'But we're not in costume,' he said.

'It is of no matter,' the Headmaster said woodenly, and Hermione added her encouragement.

'Truly, we would be very happy to have you join us.'

Another figure emerged from the corridor, and Hermione saw it was Harry. He came forward with real pleasure, his hand outstretched. 'I thought I heard your voice!' he said, advancing towards Krum.

Further introductions followed, and the two newcomers were carried off to the drawing room triumphantly by the Boy Who Lived.

When they were alone again in the Entrance Hall, the Headmaster gave Hermione another searching look. 'Will you go up to rest now?' he asked. 'I will convey your instructions to Miss Clearwater and say what is necessary to the guests.'

Hermione shook her head. Somehow, the arrival of her two missing guests had dispelled her earlier melancholy mood. Why should she care now about Lavender preening herself over Ron's attentions if Hermione could have Viktor Krum at her side? That would be enough to really annoy Ron!

'I'm not at all tired,' she assured the Headmaster with a distracted smile, and with her thoughts pleasurably full of revenge, she followed the young wizards back to the drawing room.

Severus remained where she left him for a full minute, no sign of his inner turmoil evident save for the slow clenching and unclenching of one fist. Krum was an ill-favoured creature, sallow of skin, with a hooked nose and a strange, duck-footed walk...but he was a famous athlete, and women behaved oddly around such men. And Granger had experienced a miraculous return of vitality upon the arrival of these latecomers.

With an expression of grim determination about his eyes, Severus stalked back to the drawing room, intent on his primary objective: to protect Hermione Granger from the distraction of the attentions of another man.

For Hogwarts.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

For Hogwarts: A Regency Gamble

Chapter 10

Saturday, August 3, 2002

Morning

Breakfast the next morning was a volatile affair, yet Severus endured it with commendable aplomb, in his estimation. Krum, whom he remembered as a gruff, dour individual, was full of a holiday spirit, and with the encouragement of the young people, he and Quigley were the life and soul of the party. Miss Granger appeared perfectly ready to partake of their raillery, but Severus was pleased to see that she did not lose her sense of decorum, for all that. She was still very much focused on the job, and Severus could not but be glad to see it. He did not sit beside her at table, for Krum had appropriated that seat, but he had a fine view of her from his place amongst his teachers, and he was gratified to see that she looked well-rested, her eyes bright with purpose.

He could, therefore, consume his own meal without concern for his partner in this enterprise; she was well and could manage on her own whilst he ingested caffeine and plain porridge. He allowed a house-elf to refresh his coffee and pulled his schedule from his pocket to peruse his agenda for the day. At the motion, Ronald Weasley's eyes rose from his plate, and he tracked the trajectory of the personalised schedule from Severus' pocket to the table, then raised accusing eyes to Severus' face. Severus arched an insolent eyebrow and waited for the boy to speak, wondering if they were to mar the relative peace of the morning with a brawl. But Weasley apparently thought better of his impulse and returned his gaze to his plate of eggs and sausages.

Severus studied the timetable. They had both dancing and riding this morning, more's the pity. He didn't see why the guests couldn't simply choose one of those and be content with their choice, but Miss Granger had been scandalised by the suggestion.

'Do you realise how much we're paying per lesson per head?' he'd demanded of her early on in the planning. 'It's outrageous.'

She had not looked up from the binder of printed material which had been her bible during the development stages of the Regency Week project. 'Both riding and dancing were an integral part of life in those times and two of the chief avenues of socialisation and enjoyment,' she had replied firmly. 'Furthermore, the Muggle organisations that stage these sorts of events *never* stint on those areas.' She had shoved a parchment in his general direction, her eyes still never lifting from her work. 'Have you forgotten that we charge a premium for each of those activities, over and above the base event price? It is well worth the added expense, I promise you.'

His lip curled at the memory of her calm assumption of authority. Insufferable girl! But an efficient one, whose vision was well on the way to saving the school from an embarrassing shortfall. One had to give her credit...and he would make sure she received it, when all was said and done.

Miss Granger looked about at the young people. 'Have you finished eating?' she inquired. 'I must take Viktor and Fin up to Madam Malkin before we meet with our dance instructor. Penny, will you be sure everyone finds their way to the appropriate room?'

Miss Clearwater acquiesced, and Miss Granger rose from her carved wooden chair, one of many which had replaced the benches at the long tables in the Great Hall. Right

she had been that the ladies would never manage the benches in their long period dresses! As Miss Granger stood, Krum bounded to his feet and put his arm about her waist.

'Have I told you how pretty you look today?' he asked her, his accent far less noticeable now than it had been when he first came to Hogwarts, eight years before.

Severus blinked. Had it only been eight years? It seemed like an eternity since the return of the Dark Lord.

Miss Granger flushed, seemingly pleased with the compliment. She gave only a tiny shake of her head in response to Krum's question, and she disentangled herself from him to lead him and his friend, Quigley, upstairs to Madam Malkin's workroom.

'Fin, wait up!' Ronald Weasley called.

Quigley turned in response to the hail and quickly fell into conversation with Weasley as they left the Great Hall, trailing Granger and Krum.

Draco smirked to Pansy Parkinson, who sat at his side. 'Perhaps the Weasel has finally found someone more to his taste than Granger.'

Parkinson snorted but did not respond, her glance darting quickly to and away from Severus' face...as if they were school pupils and worried what the Headmaster would say. Would the silly children ever grow up?

The thump of a metal goblet hitting the table was heard, and Severus frowned to see Potter's face so red and angry.

'Why don't you try to keep your filthy tongue off my mate, Malfoy?'

Draco blinked once. 'But Potter, I assure you that I would never touch your filthy mate with my tongue,' he said in dulcet tones.

The other young people laughed, but Severus could only wish the two would desist the constant bickering. None of them were schoolchildren anymore, and it was past time for them to put aside their youthful aversion to one another.

Just as you did with your old schoolmates? his inner voice inquired maliciously, but he pushed the thought away. It was not to the point. The important thing, here and now, was that this entire affair was for Hogwarts, and Potter and Draco needed to remember that and behave accordingly.

Potter was jumping from his chair, throwing his cloth napkin at Draco. It had not the weight to make the journey from Potter's seat to Draco's, but his intent had been clear.

'If you had your gloves, you could slap me in the face with them, and then we'd have to duel,' Draco mocked, flicking the serviette with one disdainful finger.

'Don't think I couldn't take you,' Potter shot back at him.

Draco shrugged and stood as well, dusting non-existent crumbs from his sleeve. 'But I wasn't speaking of wands, Potter...I was speaking of a true Regency duel...with pistols.' He looked up and locked eyes with Potter. 'My father has just such a set of duelling pistols in his collection, an old family heirloom...oh, and a house-elf trained to load them.'

Severus chose that moment to stand, as well. 'If you are quite finished providing entertainment for us over the breakfast cups, Potter, I would like to see you in my office before we begin our day's activities.' He stared at the boy's face until Potter finally tore his eyes from Draco and looked at Severus. '*Immediately*,' he added in a menacing tone.

Potter tilted his head slightly, as if to stretch a kinked muscle in his neck, and Severus could see him pulling himself together. 'I'll be along directly, Headmaster,' he said. Then he turned without another word and stalked out of the Great Hall.

Draco watched Potter walk away, and Severus was puzzled by the expression on the boy's face. Rather than the dislike or disdain he would have expected, Draco seemed rather sorrowful...wistful, even. Did he think such sniping was the way to go about endearing himself to Potter and Weasley? And was he so bereft of friends that he was driven to hankering after the company of the Gryffindors? It was true that the only one of the boys from his House with whom Draco still associated was Blaise Zabini, as Vincent Crabbe had died in the war, and Gregory Goyle seemed unable to remain out of gaol long enough to sustain a meaningful existence in the social circles where Draco moved.

Then Draco tossed a droll comment to those sitting near him and sauntered out of the room, the picture of Regency insouciance.

Severus securely tucked the schedule bearing Ronald Weasley's name back into his pocket and murmured his excuses to the members of his staff amongst whom he was sitting.

McGonagall laid a claw-like hand upon his sleeve. 'You'll be at the dancing class?' she stated, as if she would brook no argument from him.

He allowed himself one eye-roll, an exercise which relieved some of his building inner irritation. 'Yes, Professor, I will be at the dancing class.'

He attempted to pull out of her grasp, but she just tightened her grip, much as a cat will dig in its claws if prompted to relinquish a prize with which it is not yet finished toying. 'And you'll do the reading I assigned you?' she persisted.

Severus peeled her hand from his arm and took a full step back, out of her reach. 'I will ... consider it,' he said.

She scowled. 'Don't make me compel you, Severus!' she called after his retreating form, but he feigned deafness and made good his escape.

Hermione sat upon a chair in Madam Malkin's rooms, waiting for Viktor and Fin to be finished with the tailors assisting them in their costume fittings. She took out her clipboard from her reticule and enlarged it. So far, the morning was proceeding along on schedule. Dancing class would begin at 9:30, followed by a riding lesson at 10:30, and lunch at 12:30. The afternoon was given over to working on the group theatrical and lawn games. Other activities could be provided for those interested, such as a drawing expedition to one of the local sites of interest (Hermione could understand the desire to draw pictures of pretty flowers, but why would anyone want to draw a picture of the Shrieking Shack?) or a quiet afternoon of sewing whilst being read to from a novel...by Jane Austen, of course.

She shifted her attention to a large mirror across the room, where Viktor stood whilst Madam Malkin magically adjusted the hem of his coat. She hadn't seen Viktor in at least two years, when he had been in London for a week and they had gone to dinner a time or two. That had been before she and Ron were officially a couple...before he'd given her the silver ring to hold a place for a diamond that never materialised...and Hermione had enjoyed Viktor's admiration, though she had declined his repeated offers to share her bed. She liked Viktor, and always had done, and there was no denying that his attentions to her had always given her some status amongst her peers. However, the previous evening in the drawing room, when Viktor had been paying her such ceaseless compliments...and, if she wasn't mistaken, staring far too frequently at her chest...the Headmaster had seemed quite annoyed. His black eyes had tracked her every movement, it seemed, and he had radiated disapproval. Did he dislike Viktor? It was puzzling, and she had lain awake for some time attempting to work out what objection the Headmaster might have to Viktor Krum. She had been unsuccessful in her attempts to make sense of it, but she would continue to monitor the situation, and if necessary, she would speak to Snape about it. After all, Viktor was a paying guest, who had bought a bespoke wardrobe, as well, and it was important for him to feel welcome and at ease during his stay at Hogwarts.

Laughter from behind her drew her attention, and she turned to see Fin standing before the other large mirror whilst a tailor pinned up his sleeves. Ron leant against the wall, his face animated and happy, chatting with the older wizard. Ron had always been Quidditch mad, ever since Hermione had first known him. His worship of Viktor Krum, star Seeker, had been ever at war with his jealousy over Viktor's attentions to Hermione. Naturally, he would relish the opportunity to rub shoulders with another professional Quidditch player. He had found his work as an Auror to be rather boring, she knew. Being a Dark wizard catcher didn't mean it was all intrigue and duels; he

did a good deal of paperwork and skulking about in surveillance details, work for which he had little patience.

She sighed as she watched her boyfriend...*former* boyfriend, she reminded herself...in unselfconscious interaction with someone other than herself. Why did he have to be so scornful of the things that were important to her? And why didn't he see her more as a person...as much of a person as a Quidditch player, for instance...and less as a fixture he pinned to his lapel and wore as a ... a fashion accessory, or something?

Viktor came to her then, followed by two house-elves laden with clothing and accoutrements. He was dressed in a gentleman's country attire, complete with elegant black boots, fawn fall-front trousers, and a dark blue coat. He smiled at Hermione and bowed. 'You see, already I am learning!' he boasted. 'Now we can go to the dancing, and we can practice together.'

Hermione put her work away in her reticule, which she had treated with an Undetectable Extension Charm, and stood to walk with Viktor. 'Yes, we can go down together, and I will find a partner for you, but I may be too busy with other things to dance this morning.' She smiled, hoping to soften the blow. 'All the rest of the guests are arriving tomorrow, you know, and I have many details to check on.'

They stepped into the corridor, which was empty, and Viktor seemed rather *too* encouraged by her smile, for he pulled her into his arms and bent his head to kiss her.

Hermione recoiled...who wanted to be mauled about at this time of the morning?...and she planted the palms of her hands against his chest, trying to hold him off.

'Viktor!' she said in a strained whisper. 'Stop it!'

'This *is* a public corridor, is it not?' an icy voice inquired.

Hermione wrenched herself out of Viktor's grasp and turned to face the Headmaster.

'Good morning, sir,' Viktor said, offering a handshake, but Snape seemed curiously blind to the hand, for he answered with a stiff bow. Viktor, only slightly discomposed, bowed as well.

Snape fixed Hermione with a fulminating eye. 'May I speak with you?' he inquired.

Hermione smoothed the skirt of her simple white morning dress, reflecting that being around Viktor meant she was constantly having to straighten her clothes. 'Certainly, Headmaster,' she replied calmly.

Snape sent Viktor an icy stare, though he addressed Hermione. 'Alone, Miss Granger?'

Viktor nodded in understanding. 'Ah, you are discussing business matters for Regency Week!' he said wisely. 'I will see you at dancing, Herm-own-ninny!'

He clicked his heels together and bowed...not precisely the way of an English Regency gentleman, but who knew how Bulgarians had behaved in those days?...and it was such an endearing attempt to play by the rules that she didn't have the heart to correct him. Then he went inside the room again, calling for Fin.

'If it's not too difficult for you to cease mooning after Mr Krum, I should like to walk with you,' Snape snapped, indicating to Hermione that he wished to proceed along the hallway.

Hermione felt her face flush, but she began to walk with him, hissing from the corner of her mouth, 'I do ~~not~~ *noon* after anyone!'

'You must pardon my mistake, then, for it appeared that you could scarcely bear to part with him!'

Hermione finally looked into his face, her brow furrowed. What in the world ailed the man? 'Are you feeling unwell, sir?' she asked in a different tone of voice.

'Of course I'm not unwell!' His thin lips curled to show his scorn of the very notion.

They had reached the staircase landing, and Hermione leant against the marble balustrade. 'Well, you're behaving oddly, so I thought I'd ask,' she excused herself.

He scowled, his dark eyebrows meeting above the bridge of his considerable nose. 'Tell me this,' he said abruptly. 'Shall I hand over Weasley's schedule to Krum? Would you prefer his company?'

Hermione tilted her head to one side as she studied him. 'Why on earth would you think that?' she asked. Truly, the last thing she needed was to be wrestling with Viktor every minute of the day.

Snape's nostrils dilated as he drew breath. 'Because contrary to Regency decorum, you can't seem to keep your hands off one another!' he retorted.

Hermione shook her head resolutely. 'You're wrong,' she informed him. 'I have no trouble keeping my hands to myself, and Viktor will get the message ... eventually.'

Snape's scowl seemed to lessen a bit. 'Shall I communicate the message for you?' he asked.

Hermione gave a definite shake of her head. 'Absolutely not. I will take care of it.' She straightened and consulted the watch pinned to her bodice, a trick she had learnt from Penny. 'I have to speak with the kitchen elves about lunch for Mrs Parkinson...she's got an allergy to nuts, and the menu needs to be adjusted...and then I'll meet you in the Trophy Room for dancing class.'

Snape put a hand on her arm to halt her. 'Are you sure you would not prefer to have Krum as your partner?' he asked again, and there was something in his voice that made her stop.

Gazing up into his face, containing the whirl of thoughts pounding through her mind...*so much to do!*...she actually *looked* at him. She saw the tightness of his lips, the strain about his dark eyes, the vertical line between his brows, and felt the impulse to smooth it away...but she didn't. He stared at her hard, intensity radiating from him, and for a moment, she was afraid he had read her thoughts. She was frozen, and it seemed as if it was harder for her to catch her breath. Her lips parted as she drew breath, and surely she was imagining the way his gaze drifted to her mouth ...

'N-no,' she babbled, desperate to the end the silence between them. 'No, I wouldn't prefer to have Viktor as my partner!' She began to back away. 'But I must hurry, now...goodbye!'

And she left him alone on the landing, feeling his eyes burning into her back even as she fled.

Harry took a turn around the Headmaster's office, nudging one of Dumbledore's old Dark Detectors with the tip of a finger as he waited for Severus to show up. Severus always told him not to touch things when he was here, but there was nothing Dark to be detected, so how could it hurt anything? He glanced over his shoulder at Dumbledore's portrait, but the old wizard appeared to be sleeping...and he was *still* wearing George's stupid poker hat.

He smiled to himself for a moment, but the good mood couldn't hold. He *hated* being called to the Headmaster's office like...well, like a schoolboy in trouble with the Headmaster...but he owed Severus the respect of coming here, as asked. Harry had to put up with a lot from Severus now, because of how guilty he felt about how he had treated Severus when he was at school. Sometimes it really got on his wick to give in, but Harry would remind himself then of the years of being loathed and reviled that Severus had suffered in the service of the Order of the Phoenix, and his resistance would crumble. How had Severus been able to keep it up, year after year, with his life at

constant risk, when everyone he knew was against him, and when he was expecting to die in the end?

Harry doubted *he* could have done what Severus did, and the knowledge humbled him.

But it didn't mean Severus didn't act like a git sometimes, because he did.

The door to the office opened, and Severus erupted into the room, a forbidding expression on his face.

Harry didn't know what to say...Severus was never receptive to so-called supportive talk...so Harry sat down before the Headmaster's desk and waited.

Severus strode to the window, where he stood looking out at the bright summer morning for a moment before he whirled back to face Harry.

'Do you know that your behaviour all too frequently leads me to wonder why the Death Eaters were the only group who were held to need re-education?'

Harry blanched as the words struck home. The worst part about it was that Severus was not shouting or blustering but quiet and very serious. 'What do you mean?' he asked, dreading the answer.

Severus came forward and half-seated himself on the edge of his desk, leaning slightly towards Harry. 'I mean that your expressions of intolerance are insupportable. You get away with it because you're the Boy Who Lived and Died and Lived Again...but that doesn't make it acceptable, Harry.'

Harry swallowed. Severus almost never used his proper name, so it was an indication that he was in dead earnest. 'Malfoy is such a bastard!' Harry blurted.

Severus' expression did not change. 'He made some tasteless jest about Weasley's interest in Quigley...you lot make offensive jokes about one another's manliness and prowess on an hourly basis. Why would you object so completely to one comment out of a thousand?'

Harry crossed his arms defensively over his chest. 'He was implying Ron's gay...making fun of gay people!'

Severus closed his eyes for a moment, as if summoning up inner fortitude. 'Draco *is* gay, you twit! He can make jokes about it if he wants.'

Harry's mouth dropped open. 'He is not!'

Severus frowned. 'I was his Head of House,' he pointed out. 'I assure you it is true...but it is not information for you to spread about. That's not the point of our discussion. You're making a fool of yourself with your displays of pig-headed ignorance, and you're welcome to continue doing so, if you desire...but *not here*. Not during this event, with all the time and energy put forth to make a success of it by Miss Granger and her team...of which you are a member, I might remind you!' He stood, looking cold and stern. 'I will not have her work brought to naught! And some of these people have paid to be here to socialise with *you*, and I am going to make sure they get what they want: the opportunity to socialise with the national wizarding hero. If I have to put a Gagging Jinx on you, Potter, you will behave yourself in the presence of the guests at this event!'

Harry felt like an idiot. Malfoy (he was gay?) *always* got under his skin, and had done ever since the first time they'd met in Madam Malkin's shop, when they were eleven years old. (Had he known he was gay then?) How in the hell was Harry supposed to stop doing something he'd done for more than half his life...namely, bicker with Malfoy? (Did other people know Malfoy was gay? How could Harry not have known?)

Harry realised Severus had said something to him...something requiring an answer...and he had to respond.

'Sorry?' he said, dragging his attention back to the Headmaster's office.

'Do I have your word that you'll behave yourself?' Severus demanded, sounding as if he were hanging onto his patience by the tips of his fingers.

Harry stood. 'All right, Severus,' he said. 'Anything you want.'

He offered his hand, looking straight into Severus' eyes. *Maybe he'll look in my mind* he thought. He'd be welcome to, because Harry had every intention of keeping his promise. It was only going to be for eight more days, after all. And this wasn't about Malfoy...it was about the school...and for Hogwarts, Harry could do anything.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 11

Saturday, August 3, 2002

The Rest of the Day

Arthur Weasley sat down heavily on the chair beside his Molly, wiping his face with his handkerchief. 'I think we're coming right along!' he said, giving her plump hand a squeeze.

But Molly was staring across the room. 'Look at Hermione, dancing with the Headmaster,' she said. 'Why isn't she dancing with Ron? And why didn't they sit together at dinner last night? Or at breakfast this morning?' She twisted about in her chair, looking in the other direction, and Arthur gave a bit of a sigh. His wife had ever been a wilful woman, but ah, what a woman!

If he could only get her attention away from their children for any length of time ...

'And there's Ron, dancing with that Lavender Brown,' she continued in an urgent undertone. 'He isn't even asking Hermione!'

Minerva McGonagall, who was instructing the dance class, clapped her hands and dismissed the guests, telling them all how well they'd done at learning the quadrille and urging them to return on the morrow. Arthur smiled at his wife.

'Now we have an hour before lunch, while the youngsters go to a riding lesson,' he enthused, consulting his personalised schedule. 'What would you like to do? A sit down in the drawing room to chat, perhaps? Or back up to the room for a bit of a kip?'

Molly stood and shook the creases from her lovely Regency gown. How well the periwinkle blue looked with her hair and her skin. Had any wizard ever been so lucky in his wife? But she was muttering to herself, as if shaking out her skirt was preparation for heading off on some mission or other.

'... there's George, I'll just pop over and see if he's talked to Ron or Hermione about...'

Arthur stood and took her hand, pulling it resolutely through his arm. 'A walk in the maze it is, then!' he declared, smiling at Molly.

She bit her lip. 'But don't you think we should find out...'

He shook his head, beginning to walk with her. 'I think we should let the children work through their own problems, love. This is *our* romantic holiday, remember telling me that?'

A tiny smile touched her lips. 'How else was I going to get you to agree to come?' she asked playfully.

Arthur heaved an internal sigh of relief. She wasn't going to make him get severe about it, then. 'That's a fair question,' he agreed. 'You might have said...' he looked to see if anyone was listening to them before bending his head to whisper in her ear, "'Come to Regency Week and I'll spend an hour a day in bed with you!'"

She burst into gales of laughter, and his hand tightened upon hers. Never had there been a finer woman! If she was worried about Ron, he'd have a word with the boy. Anything to set his Molly's mind to rest.

Draco placed his hands on his hips, in direct imitation of Hermione's posture, and raised his eyebrows as high as they would go.

'Those are your choices, missy. I can give you a leg up, or you can use the mounting block in the stable yard.'

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest, always keeping one eye on the small chestnut mare. 'I don't see why I can't Levitate myself up,' she argued.

'And I thought you wanted the authentic Regency experience!' Draco mocked.

Hermione darted a glance in each direction. It wouldn't do for ... anyone to see her being skittish and awkward about this riding business. She'd bespoke a riding dress, which had been fashioned from one belonging to the Princess Charlotte, and it was very smart, a dark blue velvet with military-type epaulettes and a fabulously full skirt. And she'd been building up her courage about it for months now!

'Don't worry...riding a thoroughbred isn't the same as flying on a Thestral...Firefly will take good care of you.' He stroked the horse's mane. 'She was my mother's, and there's not a finer mount in the stable. I chose her for you especially.'

Hermione gasped and grasped his arm. 'Draco...how is it that such a prat can be so thoughtful?'

He shook his head and bent, cupping his hands. 'A lapse on my part, I admit. Now, step up and shut up, silly,' he commanded, 'and I'll help you arrange that skirt on the side-saddle.'

Severus stood beside Lucius in the main tack room, his attention riveted by the passage taking place betwixt Draco and Miss Granger. He couldn't say he cared for her appearance in the heavy riding habit. It covered every inch of her...why, she even wore a white shirt and a cravat with it, much like a man's!...and the hat was not feminine at all, save for the frivolous plume of feathers protruding from it. But he very much wanted her ahorse...wanted to ride beside her through the fields. He couldn't have said why this was so...but there were many impulses he was having lately which he could not explain...and all of them seemed to stem from his association with her.

'Good job, Draco,' Lucius said aloud, and Severus saw Draco toss the girl into the saddle. He showed her how to hold her reins and began to lead the horse through the stable, toward the sunlit courtyard where the riders were gathering for their lesson.

Severus hung the beaver hat he'd been carrying on a wall peg and strode through the door.

Lucius plucked it up and strolled after him. 'You're supposed to wear the hat, old boy,' he said, smiling.

Severus swung up into the saddle of his black Arabian stallion, and Apollyon danced beneath him, eager to be away. 'I don't wear hats,' he said. 'Leticia misplaced hers...see if she wants it.'

'But what are you going to do in a beginner's riding lesson?' Lucius demanded, amused.

Severus looked down his nose at his laughing friend. 'I shall pick up some pointers, of course,' he replied, and allowed Apollyon to make his way towards the sunlight.

Lucius stared for a speculative moment at the smart Regency era top hat in his hands, then turned and spent an equal span of time watching Leticia as she waited along the wide stable corridor before the stall of her horse, wherein the stable-elf was performing saddling duties. Lucius had meant for Leticia to ride Firefly, Narcissa's mare, but Draco had repudiated the suggestion.

The two had shared a bottle of claret the night before and finalised the list, pairing riders with available horses. 'Professor Mortelle wouldn't appreciate Firefly as Granger will,' Draco had objected. 'She's far too fiery herself; she would probably over-excite the horse.'

Lucius had sneered. 'Your mother would be horrified at the notion of the Granger girl aboard her mare.'

Draco had met his eye, grey to grey and unsmiling. 'Mother doesn't live here anymore, Father...and she did not enjoy riding as we do...she has no more love for Firefly than she did for any of the servants.' He'd turned his attention back to the study of the list. 'I love Mother with all my heart, but she is not a warm person. She does not miss the Manor; she much prefers living quietly with...'

Lucius had thrown up a hand as if to ward off a blow. 'Don't mention that woman's name to me!'

And Draco had continued to discuss the mount assignments as if the reference to Narcissa and her Sapphic companion had never surfaced.

'Professor Mortelle will be well-matched with Gadabout,' Draco had said firmly.

Lucius had filled each of their glasses again, a frown between his brows. 'Gadabout is my second-best hunter...not what I would call a quiet ride. He is not a ladies' mount.'

And Draco had laughed, the first sound of unmitigated enjoyment Lucius had heard from him in recent memory. 'Then he'll suit Professor Mortelle right down to the ground! Have you *seen* her ride, Father?'

Now the red-haired witch stood before Gadabout's stall in a severe Regency-style riding dress of bottle green velvet, her hair rolled simply into an elegant chignon, her head bare. But it was the implement in her hand that arrested Lucius, pinning him on the spot, his eyes riveted upon the black leather riding crop, his heart beating harder, as if he'd been exerting himself.

She handled it nonchalantly, as if it were an everyday part of her ensemble, but its place in her tightly gloved hands filled his mind unbidden with images best left to private venues rather than well populated areas.

As if feeling his eyes upon her, Leticia turned her head until their eyes locked, and in an instant, it seemed as if she knew his mind exactly. Her brows arched over her brilliant blue eyes, and slowly her lips curved. Lucius was driven to approach her, knowing his reaction was all too evident, that he would do better to turn away from her, to hide his sudden, violent desire to be alone with her...to kneel at her feet and adore her...but he was helpless to conceal his emergent need.

He walked willingly into the ken of a woman he now recognised as a skilled temptress.

He stopped very near to her, surely too close for social propriety, but such considerations seemed quite unimportant in that moment. Though she stood six inches shorter than he did, he had the distinct impression of looking up at her, and the almost imperceptible nod of her head showed that she recognised his state of inchoate craving.

'Well, Lucius?' she asked.

Her tone was one of almost unbearable intimacy, and naked in his unaccustomed...thought not precisely unwelcomed...vulnerability, he spoke the first words that came to his mind.

'The crop suits you.'

The incipient curve of her luscious mouth completed now the full smile, and almost as a physical event he felt her acceptance of his veneration.

'So it does.'

At the other shadowy end of the building, Harry stood in an open stall door, staring at the saddled horse there with some trepidation. The stable-elf had put the saddle and bridle on the horse and looped the reins about a metal circlet apparently placed for that purpose.

'Does sir need help mounting?' the elf had inquired.

'No, thanks,' Harry had replied, sending the little groom about his business.

Now Harry looked into the incurious eyes of the horse and swallowed. At least it had no talons on its front legs, though it was a nice shade of grey, just as Buckbeak the Hippogriff was. Hoping that no one else was around to see how awkward The Boy Who Lived was with a thoroughbred, Harry kept his eyes locked with those of the beast and bowed, just as Hagrid had taught him.

'Potter, what the hell are you doing?'

Harry cringed inside at the Ferret's incredulous tone, but he was a disciplined fighter; he knew if he looked away before the horse returned his bow, it could well be the last thing he ever did. Once Harry Potter learned how to conduct an encounter with a magical beast, he did not forget the lesson.

'I'm asking permission to touch him, Malfoy. What does it look like I'm doing?'

Still, the horse returned his stare with rather bored interest, as if it thought Harry were amusing enough but wondered when the real entertainment would begin. In truth, the horse didn't seem nearly as dangerous as Buckbeak was.

'I see,' Malfoy murmured, and then he was moving forward to pet the horse's neck, breaking Harry's eye contact with the beast.

Harry straightened up, annoyed. 'Now I'm going to have to start over...I'm going to be late for the lesson, and Hermione is going to be unhappy with me. Thanks loads, Malfoy!'

Malfoy looked at him, and although Harry thought the other wizard seemed amused, he wasn't laughing out loud. Harry supposed he ought to be thankful for small things where Malfoy was concerned.

'Look, Potter, I suppose those Muggles who raised you didn't have horses,' Malfoy began.

'My Aunt Petunia wouldn't have allowed a little pet in the house, much less a great dirty thing like that,' Harry replied before he could stop himself.

The horse snorted, and Harry felt compelled to say, 'No offence meant.'

Draco grinned outright. 'Horses aren't like Hippogriffs,' he said. 'They're tame. You don't have to bow or ask their permission to touch them.'

Harry crossed his arms over his chest, feeling a bit ridiculous. Malfoy was going to have a field day telling *this* story to his mates. 'Well what *do* you do with them?' he demanded impatiently.

'Do this,' Draco said, and pulling a sugar cube from his pocket, he fed it to the horse on the flat of his hand. The horse accepted the treat, its lips moving over Malfoy's palm until it found the tiny lump of sugar. Malfoy then offered a cube to Harry. 'Go ahead,' he encouraged. 'Duds is friendly.'

Harry took a step forward with the sugar on his hand as Malfoy had done.

'Be good to Harry, boy,' Malfoy said to the horse, stroking its dark grey mane. 'You're going to like him. You'll see.'

The warmth of the horse's breath and its rubbery lips on his hand felt strange, but not unpleasant. When Malfoy motioned for him to do so, Harry put his free hand on the horse's neck and petted him.

'Did you call him Duds?' he asked Malfoy, turning his head to look at him. There was no way Malfoy knew the name of his cousin Dudley, but the coincidence was pretty funny.

Malfoy was very still for a moment, looking back at Harry; then he stepped away and began to fuss with the stirrups on the saddle. 'Yeah, he has some fancy name like Evening Attire, but I call him Duds...means the same thing, only shorter.' He completed the adjustment of the stirrup leather and took another step back, indicating the horse's feet.

Harry glanced down and saw the black hooves, above which were dark grey fetlocks, followed by white stockings.

'See? Looks like he's wearing spats,' Malfoy said. Then he bent and laced his fingers. 'Grab the pommel of the saddle and put your boot here...I'll give you a leg up.'

Harry didn't like to allow Malfoy to help him, but what else could he do? People were waiting, and Harry had no idea what he was doing with the horse.

When he was in the saddle, Malfoy gave him some pointers about how to position his feet in the stirrups and how to hold his reins. 'You'll do,' he said. 'I'll see you out

there.'

Malfoy led Duds out of the stall and released the bridle. Harry looked back over his shoulder as he rode off.

'Thanks,' he said gruffly.

Malfoy smiled, which made Harry's stomach feel as if he'd missed a step going downstairs. Why did the wanker have to be so good looking?

'You owe me, Potter!' he said, then turned to find his own horse.

Hermione sat awkwardly on top of Firefly, wondering how on earth Regency ladies had managed to ride horses for pleasure, much less to ride them over jumps, in this position! Her left foot was securely in the stirrup, and her right leg was resting on the leaping horn, but she felt completely inept, particularly after an hour in the riding ring with the riding master, a Squib by the name of Horologium Black. There were plenty of others in the beginners group with her who were every bit as bad at riding as she was, but she hated being amongst their number. Draco was in the next ring with the intermediate riders, and Professor Mortelle worked with the advanced riders in the meadow set up with the different types of jumps.

'Are you comfortable? May I assist you in some way?'

She looked over to see the Headmaster on his coal black horse. The man wore all black as well, save for the white shirt; even his cravat was black. Unlike the other men, he wore no hat upon his raven's wing hair, which was tied back, a look she had not seen on him before. It made him seem different to her...exotic, somehow...and the sight of him on the sleek, beautiful horse made her feel very odd. If she hadn't known better, she would have identified the feeling as ... arousal, but that was impossible. This was Snape, after all. Most likely, it was just some sort of soreness from the unaccustomed activity of riding. It would pass. But coming as it did on top of her confusion with him on the first floor landing that morning, she was particularly discomposed and found it hard to meet his eye.

'Thank you, sir, but I am fine,' she said. 'We are now just on our way back to the stables.'

He urged his horse to move alongside hers. 'Then I will bear you company.'

Hermione was acutely aware of him, sitting his horse and looking like a dashing Regency gentleman...if a bit of a rakish one. *If he weren't in costume, you wouldn't be so confused* she assured herself, but she didn't know if it were really true.

'That's a beautiful horse,' she said to him. 'Do you ride him often? You seem almost to move as one creature.'

'This is Apollyon,' he informed her. 'He is mine...a gift from the Malfoy family when the war was done. I ride him as often as I can, which is not always as often as I would like.'

Hermione wanted to ask why the Malfoys had felt compelled to give him such a gift...a horse of that quality would surely cost several thousand Galleons...but she had no desire to offend him, so she resisted. Instead she said, 'You ride very well.'

He slanted a look down at her, his dark eyes sardonic. 'As if you could tell a good rider from a mediocre one, after one riding lesson?'

She laughed. 'Well, you look good to me!'

She flushed when the words were out of her mouth...how might he take them?...but his attention was swiftly distracted from her.

'Severus!' Lucius Malfoy called, sitting astride his large white horse. 'We're going to have a gallop across the hunt course...will you come?'

Professor Mortelle reined up beside Mr Malfoy, looking cool and elegant atop a bay horse of the same size and fiery temperament as Mr Malfoy's mount. The Headmaster looked at Hermione. 'I must leave you now,' he said. 'I will join you again at lunch.'

'Have fun!' Hermione urged, and with a certain feeling of disappointment, she watched him canter off to join his friends, and the three of them set off riding three abreast, their horses leaving the ground and taking the first fence as if they had been synchronised in some way.

Hermione was conscious of a stab of envy...how she would have liked to make a fourth in that riding party!...but even with Professor Mortelle's spell to help her keep her seat on Firefly, she would not be ready for jumping for quite some time. It was disheartening.

Turning her horse towards the stable, she rode to join the crowd of guests who were being assisted to dismount. Ron, Fin, and Viktor were standing along the fence line, joking with one another and flirting with all the girls. Parkinson, Parvati, Padma, and Penny were with them, as was Lavender, and they were a merry group. But when Viktor spied Hermione, he strode past the grooms assisting people to dismount and reached up to grasp Hermione's waist.

'Come down,' he urged her with his most winning smile. 'I will help you.'

Hermione wanted to be off the horse, so she allowed Viktor to assist her down. It was odd to be on her feet again, and her legs were rather wooden, but it wasn't until she took her first step that she knew how sore she was. She leaned on Viktor's arm, and Penny came to her with a sympathetic exclamation.

'Are you terribly sore?' she asked solicitously. 'You'll see in your bathroom a small brown bottle of Savoir Smith's Sore Muscle Reliever...the Headmaster told me about it. Pour some in your bath water, and it will help with the discomfort.'

Fin came up to reclaim Penny's attention, and Viktor took the opportunity to slip an arm about Hermione's shoulders. 'I would be happy to massage your sore parts,' he murmured into her ear.

And in the distance, the three horses, black, white, and brown, rose as one and cleared another fence. Hermione scarcely heard what was being said to her.

'Herm-own-ninny?'

Hermione smiled up into Viktor's face. 'Thank you,' she said, having no clue to what she might be responding. 'I must hurry back to the castle, now...lunch will be served soon, you know!'

And stepping away from him, she turned on the spot and Disappeared.

She checked in the kitchens to be sure Mrs Parkinson's special lunch had been prepared as instructed, then she hurried to her room...but Ron was there before her, blocking her way in.

'Where's Krum?' he said, his voice low and throbbing with anger. 'Didn't he come along to "massage your sore spots"?'

Her anger flared immediately. 'If he was going to massage my sore spots, what business would it be of yours?'

He grasped her upper arm. 'You're *my* girlfriend...have you forgotten that?'

She wrenched away from him. 'With all the flirting you're doing? What's supposed to help me remember?'

He reached for her again, but she drew her wand. 'Go away! I have to get ready for lunch! I don't have time for this!'

Ron threw his hands up, his face flushed with rage. 'Nothing new about that! You haven't had time for me in months! But you have plenty of time for everyone else...Krum and even Snape! What's wrong with you?'

Hermione was far too angry to speak to him. She pushed past him into her room and warded the door behind her.

She was not there to see Ron's precipitous flight down the corridor, at the end of which he found his sober-faced father.

Arthur put an arm about his son's shoulders. 'Come for a walk with me, Ron. I think it's time we had a talk.'

Savoir Smith's Sore Muscle Reliever was like a miracle cure for her saddle soreness, and Hermione was able to manage the rest of her day with no muscle discomfort. The afternoon hours offered many different amusements to the guests, and Hermione was free to consult her clipboard and follow up on every detail, confident that her helpers would look after things.

When she appeared at dinner that night, she was in good spirits. Everything was in train to go off the next day without incident, when the remainder of the guests would arrive. She sat amongst the ladies in the drawing room after dinner, enjoying their chatter about all the things they had done that day. With this small group, the project was succeeding very well; if she could manage to deliver the same experience to the larger group, she would be quite satisfied.

Knowing that she would need to be up and on top of everything soon after dawn the next morning, she slipped away early to seek her bed, pleased with how the day had played out.

Severus saw Miss Granger as she withdrew for the evening, and he approved her choice. Sunday would be a trying day, and he needed her fresh and competent. His satisfaction lasted for a mere fraction of a moment, however, because he next saw Ronald Weasley leave his group of boisterous friends and follow the girl.

Damnation.

Speaking to no one, Severus exited the drawing room, stepped into a hidden cupboard, and Floo'd to his bedroom. He stalked to the far wall, opened the door there, and turned to his favourite armchair, only to find a ginger cushion occupying it.

'How do you continue to get into this room?' he demanded of the flat-faced creature.

The orange tomcat blinked complaisant yellow eyes at him, but did not move from his chair. At least this time he was prepared for the Crookshanks visitation. From the top of the highboy, he retrieved a tin of cat biscuits and dropped one on the rug. The uninvited visitor flowed out of the chair onto the floor to investigate.

'Thank you,' Severus said, and stepping over the cat and its treat, he assumed his seat, prepared to wait for the arrival of Miss Granger and her swain.

He had not long to wait. He heard the light step of Hermione Granger and the closing of her bedroom door, very quickly followed by the much heavier tread of Ronald Weasley and the knocking of fist against wood.

'What do you want?'

She sounded irritated...excellent.

'I want to talk to you. Let me in, Hermione.'

Presumptuous whelp. Why should she let him in?

'Go away, Ronald. I have a tonne of things to do tomorrow, and I'm going to bed now.'

Good girl. Stick to your guns.

'I don't want to fight anymore, love. I ought not to have wagered the stupid schedule. There. I'm sorry.'

Good God, surely the girl wouldn't fall for that smarmy tone of voice!

'Stupid schedule? *Stupid?*

Ah, she didn't like that. Better go to bed, Weasley.

Severus Summoned the drinks trolley and poured a tot of brandy.

'It's just a piece of parchment, Hermione!'

Digging in deeper, Weasley?

'That's been your attitude all along! You never cared about Regency Week!'

Her tone was escalating to screeching range...they had best end it quickly.

'I cared about *you*! I wanted to spend time with *you*! I wanted your attention for myself once in a while!'

Severus shook his head. Weasley had no clue how to go about pleading his case; that was clear.

'If you cared about me, you'd care about what's important to me!'

Severus took a mouthful of brandy and pondered that statement...it was true enough, to a point.

'I want to be important to you, not play second fiddle to your bloody projects all the time!'

Ah, had that truly been the way of things? Severus could feel a certain degree of sympathy for the boy, in that case...still, Weasley plainly had no idea of the best way to handle a woman.

'You were important to me, you idiot! I wanted you to be *with* me for this week...what could be more romantic than a week in Regency times?'

Tears were in her voice now...couldn't the whelp hear them?

'Romantic! What's romantic about watching you run around seeing to things for a solid week? When have you once sat down to simply enjoy what you've done?'

Severus paused in the act of bringing his glass to his lips. When *had* Granger ever relaxed enough to appreciate her achievement? Obviously, the *experience* was important to her, above and beyond its benefit to Hogwarts.

Instead of an answer from the girl, the door slammed closed, followed by the expected pounding and shouting, but it was not opened again. Severus waited to hear Weasley's door open, but it did not...the boy had gone downstairs then, to find some solace for his lacerated self-esteem amongst the gathering of single young witches there.

The stone shell of the castle's impregnable walls had been built a millennium ago, but many of its interior walls had been created in later years, when the need for more dormitory rooms and classrooms had become evident. Some of the walls, then, had been fashioned of planks of wood, decorated with moulding at top and bottom, perhaps, but were not as dense as the stone of its floors and exterior walls.

It was through this less than impenetrable barrier that Severus heard the girl's sobs of misery. His eyes closed, his head falling forward slightly, as if from a heavy burden upon his shoulders. She was a terrible girlfriend, to hear Weasley tell his side of it, but she was an efficient, ruthless project manager. She might have ... challenges on the interpersonal front, but she was still very young, with her head full of Regency fantasies. She did not deserve to be so unhappy. A proper man could show her how to apply that indomitable spirit equally to her work and her loving...Weasley was simply too green himself to see what needed to be done.

His eyes opened at the sound of a movement, and the girl's familiar leapt onto the armchair opposite his and began to clean himself.

'Why do you not go to your mistress' room to comfort her?' Severus demanded of the feline.

Crookshanks looked up from his cleaning activities with a flat, yellow stare, almost as if he were posing the very same question to Severus.

A/N: You may see a Regency ladies riding habit here:

<http://herpie-houseelf.livejournal.com/1950.html>

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 12

Sunday, August 4, 2002

The morning dawned as bright as she could have wished, and Hermione slipped on her best afternoon dress, a fine figured muslin of tiny French blue flowers upon a white background. The empire waist, hem, and neckline were trimmed in braided bands of French blue. When she hurried to the entrance hall, she saw that she was the first one down, just as it ought to be. She organised the registration table, making sure everything was in order there, and soon she was joined by her helpers, all wearing their best day dresses and excited about the true beginning of Regency Week.

At eight o'clock, the Headmaster descended the stairs, precise to a pin in his Regency clothing. Penny hurried to him, her blue eyes fixed upon him hopefully. Hermione approached more slowly, ignoring the flash of annoyance she felt. Penny had a real interest in Snape, unlike Hermione, who simply needed the Headmaster to stand in for her former boyfriend as an escort.

I ought not to intrude upon Penny's private moment with him, she thought.

Even so, he did not speak until Hermione came to a halt beside Penny. 'I thought it behoved me to greet the guests with you,' he said to Hermione. 'They might expect to see me...though Potter's presence might be more welcome,' he added sardonically.

Hermione could not prevent her chuckle. 'Oh, Harry won't be down until it's time to eat breakfast,' she assured him. 'He's not exactly an early riser.'

Snape inclined his head in agreement, and then held out his arm to her. 'Shall we go out to greet our guests?' he said.

Hermione darted a glance to Penny, who looked somewhat miffed, but it did not prevent Hermione from taking the Headmaster's arm and walking with him out into the August morning to greet the arriving guests.

There was a room just off the Great Hall which they had all taken to calling Violet's antechamber, as it was Violet's portrait which hung in the room. After breakfast, George and Luna went to their table in the antechamber, ready to sign up guests for the Regency Week theatricals. Apparently, putting on theatrical performances had been something the people of the Regency would do during a stay in the country, and somehow, George had received the assignment of coordinating and directing it. He and Luna had been working together on the project of growing the hedges for the maze...under Neville's direction, of course...and it had seemed only natural to invite her to help him with the theatricals, too. The performance would take place on Friday night, which meant George and his helper had barely five days to put together a competent cast to perform for their fellow guests.

George sat down in a chair and opened the director's book, where he had penned notes to himself about possible players for his theatrical endeavour. He had chosen selected scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as their project, and he already had some ideas of whom he could tap to take certain parts.

Other tables had also been set up about the room, where those in charge of various projects sat: McGonagall for dancing classes, Lucius Malfoy for fencing classes, Professor Mortelle for the language of fans, Professor Binns for the history of the Regency, Penny for drawing, Parvati for stitchery, Padma for music, Parkinson for period manners, and Draco for riding lessons. They were to remain in place until lunchtime, at which point Hermione said they could simply leave their sign-up parchments on their tables for the guests to sign.

Very few guests had wandered into the antechamber yet, so George took his opportunity to approach the fencing lesson table. Luna, as usual, was at his elbow, ready to

assist.

Lucius Malfoy lifted his quizzing glass to his eye and looked them over. 'Yes, Mr Weasley?' he drawled.

George, undeterred by Malfoy's high-handed ways, grinned irrepressibly. 'Listen, Malfoy, I have a proposal for you.' George leant forward, as if to divulge a great secret, and Luna leant with him, at precisely the same angle.

Malfoy looked bored. 'You have my ... undivided attention.'

'I want you to take the part of the Theseus in our little theatrical ...' George told him.

'... the Duke of Athens,' Luna added helpfully.

Malfoy's eyes widened slightly. 'And why would I agree to something so ... improbable?'

George leant closer still, Luna echoing his movement exactly. 'Because I'll get Professor Mortelle to play Hippolyta ...' he imparted.

'... the Duke's fiancée,' Luna provided.

Malfoy's gaze slipped to where Professor Mortelle sat, arranging a colourful array of fans upon her table top. 'And have you secured her pledge?' he asked meditatively.

'Leave it to me,' George promised.

Hermione peeked into the antechamber at mid-morning, pleased to see it filled with throngs of guests, all of whom had already attired themselves in their Regency garb. She threaded her way through them, stopping at each table to view the sign-up lists; she was delighted to see how enthusiastically everyone was responding to the offerings.

The only list with very few names upon it was the one before the nearly transparent Professor Binns, who was making the time pass by reading a text book. He did not look up when she stopped at his table, but someone else spoke to her.

'Tell me, Miss Granger, have you put a curse on these parchments?' a sly voice inquired. 'Will those who fail to attend end up with unsightly spots upon their faces?'

Hermione whirled to the Headmaster, who was looking down at her with a good deal of amusement in his expression, but she was not appeased by his friendly attitude.

'I never meant for that to happen!' she whispered, horrified by this reference to the sign-up list for Dumbledore's Army. 'I wanted the spots to be persistent, but I never meant for them to be permanent!'

Snape did not speak, but put a hand at the small of her back and manoeuvred her up the steps and into the Great Hall, which was empty save for the house-elves tidying up the detritus of breakfast.

'I was only joking,' he said then, tilting her chin up with the tip of one long finger, then immediately withdrawing his hand from her face. His dark eyes were intent and watchful as he studied her. 'I know you never meant lasting harm...and I also know who provided the treatment that finally cleared Miss Edgewood's complexion.'

Hermione felt her face crumple, though she fought against the reaction. If Ron hadn't been keeping her upset half the time, she wouldn't feel like bursting into tears so frequently. Snape thrust a handkerchief into her hands, and she dried her eyes impatiently.

'It was a terrible spell...I ought never to have used it without being sure it wouldn't hurt someone,' she admitted.

He looked solemn. 'I've never heard that you've done anything of that nature again,' he said quietly. 'We all make mistakes when we're young.'

She was surprised he would say such a thing, and she must have shown it, for he added in a wry tone, 'Believe me, I know.'

She tried to return the handkerchief to him, but he shook his head. 'Keep it...one never knows when such a thing will be useful.' A faint smile curved his thin lips. 'Besides, I owe you one, for the token you gave me on Poker Night.'

The feeling of confusion which had been dogging her the last few days touched her again, and Hermione looked down, poking the fine lawn fabric, embroidered with his initials, into her reticule. 'Well, you put it to good use, didn't you?' she said, thinking about Snape winning Ron's schedule from him.

'As you say, Milady,' he said, and there was something in his tone when he spoke the last word that was between a taunt and a caress.

She looked up, startled. 'Don't call me that!' she objected, unsure if she felt exasperation or alarm.

'Call you what?' He delivered his blankest expression.

'You really are impossible, aren't you?'

He produced an ironic bow, and she huffed and walked away.

After lunch, an abbreviated dancing class was held. The vast majority of the participants had not been present for the previous lesson, so McGonagall began that day with the easiest and most familiar of the Regency dances, if not the most widely danced in Regency times: the waltz. With the couple hand-in-hand, the man's opposite hand at his partner's waist, the waltz had been considered 'fast' by many in those days, and though it had been danced at town parties in London, it had seldom been seen in the country until later years. Clorinda McTavish, a distant cousin of McGonagall's, was an accomplished pianist, and she had been offered a deeply discounted rate to attend Regency Week and play for the dancing classes and evening entertainments that might require such accompaniment. She was of an age with McGonagall, with short-cropped silver hair and a prim, prune-like mouth. Now she played waltz after waltz, strongly marking the time to assist the merry...and in some cases uncoordinated...attendees to learn the proper way to go about dancing it.

Severus waited in vain for Miss Granger to appear. He considered sending a house-elf to fetch her, but he had little doubt she would send back a denial of some sort, claiming event business. Instead, he watched the galumphing herd attempting to produce a creditable waltz, and his smirk of unholy amusement earned from Minerva McGonagall a glare and a sharp reprimand.

'If you have nothing better to do, Headmaster, you might offer to dance with one of the unpartnered ladies!'

He held up one hand as if to ward off a blow. 'Peace, Minerva,' he murmured. 'I shall leave you in possession of the field.'

And slipping from the room, he set off to change into his riding clothes. Surely he would see the girl at the Manor stables, though why he should so strongly wish to do so was a subject he didn't care to dwell on ...

Hermione dressed in her beloved riding dress, thrust a jaunty yellow daisy through her buttonhole, and set out for Malfoy Manor. Joining the booted guests gathered by the hearth in the drawing room, she led the way through the Floo.

She allowed Draco to boost her into Firefly's saddle without protest, thanking him distractedly and riding out to the stable yard. She was still smarting from Snape's reference to the debacle with Marietta Edgecomb and the spell which had emblazoned the word 'sneak' across the faithless girl's face in bulging pimples. But even more, she was confused by the kindness he had shown afterwards...saying he was sure she'd never done such a thing again...and the teasing use of 'Milady'. What did he mean by it?

More importantly, why was she still brooding about it?

Horologium Black greeted the beginning class, much larger today than the day before, and worked to get them all going about the paddock at a walk. Hermione tried to execute all the riding master's instructions, but she had a difficult time keeping her mind on the lesson. It would have been easier had the experienced riders not been practicing their jumps within her sight. The black-clad rider on his equally black horse drew her eye more than once. There were other men whose grace in the saddle exceeded that of the Headmaster, and riders aplenty who cleared the jumps with the same facility he showed, but it was Snape to whom her gaze returned over and again.

The Headmaster was on foot in the stable yard when the lesson was over, and although Penelope Clearwater stood chattering at his side, it was Hermione upon whom his dark gaze was fixed as she rode toward the stable.

He came forward as she reined to a stop, looking her over critically. 'Your seat is satisfactory,' he commented, 'and already you are coming to ... grips with your reins.'

Hermione preened herself on the praise she received, storing up the slightly giddy feeling to enjoy at a later time. From this man, she was not accustomed to receiving commendation.

Her pleasant reverie was cut short as he reached for her. 'Come...I'll help you down.'

It was not so different from dancing with him, as she done the day before, this business of being lifted down from horseback. Yet she found herself more acutely aware of him than before, of the strength of his hands and the smell of him, a muddle of male sweat and musky shaving lotion.

She was thinking of Snape as if he were a man, and that didn't feel at all *seemly*, somehow.

Penny was standing just behind him, chattering brightly to Hermione about the ride, but her words were impossible to distinguish above the sound in Hermione's head...like a crashing of the tide upon the rocks...only it was her heart beating so loudly in her ears, and she couldn't seem to form a coherent thought, much less utter a rational word.

Snape's attention was fastened upon her face, a concerned...questioning, even...look about his eyes, but Hermione stepped quickly away from him. In so doing, she stumbled over the long skirt of her riding habit, her daisy fell to the dirt, and she tried to carry it all off with aplomb, although she felt totally embarrassed.

'Thank you,' she muttered.

The Headmaster bent to retrieve her lost flower, and she took the opportunity to go to Penny, rather like a drowning woman to a refuge. 'Can we discuss the arrangements for the evening's entertainment?' she asked the other witch.

Penny cast a rather wistful look at the tall, silent wizard who watched them. 'I was just speaking to the Headmaster about that,' Penny said with a soft smile for Snape.

Hermione tugged upon Penny's arm. 'No, I mean the *ladies'* amusements,' she insisted, avoiding Snape's eyes.

'I will excuse myself, ladies,' Snape drawled, and after bowing, he Disapparated.

Penny sighed loudly. 'I wish he would help *me* down from my horse,' she lamented sadly.

Hermione shook her head, but she didn't say aloud what she was thinking.

I don't want him to touch you

Later that afternoon, Hermione induced Draco to walk with her to the maze and back, so that she could see how the guests were spending their free afternoon hours.

'Why can't you go with Severus?' Draco demanded. 'I was going to challenge Potter to another bit of shuttlecock and battledore...the guests loved that!'

Hermione busied herself with rearranging the shawl draped about her shoulders. Her nerves were still buzzing from her contact with Snape at the stables, and she didn't want to have to deal with him again just yet...certainly she did not want to be alone with him for any length of time. Who knew what he'd say or do, or how she'd react to him?

Draco was by far the safer bet.

'You'll still have plenty of time for playing with Harry when I'm finished with you,' she said firmly, tucking her hand in his arm.

They strolled down to the lake, passing, along the way the groups engaged in different games. The house-elves had spread refreshments beneath the trees, and Hermione was satisfied with the variety of drinks and nibbles offered. It filled her with pleasure to see the brightly clad Regency folk enjoying the summer sunshine and one another whilst involved in period amusements.

Then Draco uttered an exclamation of anger, and Hermione turned to see him confronting a young man with a camera...a young man who had been about to take their picture.

'What are you doing?' Draco demanded angrily. 'I didn't say you could photograph me!'

Hermione knew that Draco had an abhorrence for the small but annoying group of wizarding paparazzi; he had no wish to publicise his private life, and he was a perennial favourite of the photographers. She had often teased him that it was what he got for being so good-looking, but she also knew he had paid off more than one photographer not to publish photographs of him with other men.

'There are loads of guests with cameras, you know,' she began in a quick undertone, and then she recognised the cameraman. 'And that's Dennis Creevey. His brother was a photographer...he died at the Battle of Hogwarts.' She went forward to the alarmed looking young wizard with a friendly smile. 'Hi, Dennis! Of course you can take photographs, but not of Draco, because he doesn't care for it.' After a moment she added, 'In fact, it would be best if you ask someone before taking their picture.'

Dennis nodded, backing away as if he was still a bit afraid of Draco's wrath. 'Okay, Hermione. It's good to see you!' He waved and moved on to the group playing at bowls, his camera swaying about his neck on its black strap.

Before dinner that evening, an hour was scheduled for the guests to gather in the drawing room, where the double doors had been thrown open to include the next room as well, to accommodate the increased number of people. A large drinks table was staffed by the unobtrusive house-elves, and everyone was encouraged to mingle and meet.

Neville stood miserably to one side, hot in his costume and dreading the mingling. Life had been easier for him when he had lived always in Harry's shadow, but the Serpent Slayer had achieved a certain cachet of his own after the war. Strangers would walk up to him on the street and speak to him, and Neville hated it. He never knew

what to say to someone he didn't know. Harry and Ron had told him it was a good thing...that girls would swarm around him and want to sleep with him...but Neville wasn't comfortable with that, either. In lots of ways, he wished things were like they'd been before.

As he watched the door, a young woman he'd never seen before came into the room, and his lips formed an 'o', as if he meant to wolf-whistle. The girl...for she was surely younger than Neville...had flaxen hair which clustered all about her head in ringlets, and her eyes were a clear blue so distinct that Neville could discern the colour from his place against the wall. She wore a silvery dress that reminded Neville of falling water. She hesitated for a moment in the doorway, and the Quidditch players, Fin and Krum, detached themselves from their group and bore down on her purposefully.

But the girl walked away from them, straight to Neville. Astonished, he stood straight, as his gran was always telling him to do, and when the beauty curtsied to him, he bowed in response. Was she lost? Did she think he could introduce her to Harry? He couldn't do that right now, because Harry and Draco were still down by the lake, playing at badminton.

But the girl was extending a gloved hand to him and speaking in a soft throaty voice, tinged with a French accent.

'You are Neville Longbottom, yes?'

Neville took her hand, staring stupidly into her beautiful face, and the longer he stared, the weirder he felt. Being near this girl made him want to keep her attention...to impress her...to somehow win her favour from all the other men in the room. Emboldened by an impulse he'd never felt before, he raised her hand to his lips, and she blushed.

'But I don't know your name,' he said, still holding her hand, fascinated by the pink tinge of her cheeks.

She took a step closer to him, and he realised how much taller he was...how tiny she was in comparison to him. He was filled with a sudden manly determination to shield her from harm, and keeping her hand, he walked around her like an orbiting satellite, until she stood against the wall, and he was between her and the rest of the room.

'Of course you do,' she insisted softly, her blue eyes still fixed on his face as if he were some sort of god. 'I am Gabrielle Delacour...I met you when I was ten years old.' When Neville still looked confused, she elaborated. 'In the Tri-Wizard Tournament, my sister had to rescue me from the lake...remember?'

And the girl's identity crashed into place in Neville's befuddled mind. She was Fleur Weasley's younger sister...she had been just a little girl the last time he had seen her.

'Of course,' he answered. 'I remember.'

She stepped closer still. 'You are the Serpent Slayer,' she said, as if perhaps Neville had forgotten. 'I have read every word ever written about you in the newspapers. I think you're the most courageous man I've ever heard of.'

Neville didn't mean to mention Harry, but it came out of his mouth anyway. 'No, you're thinking of Harry Potter.'

Gabrielle, who smelled like the most exotic bloom Neville had ever encountered, tucked her small hand in his arm. 'Harry is a wonderful person,' she said with absolute conviction, 'but *you* are my hero.'

Neville had wished to shield her before, but now he knew he would fight for her...to the death, if necessary.

'Is there somewhere we could sit together and talk?' she asked sweetly.

And he led her through the open French doors into the rose garden he had planted near the castle, just for such use.

Ron joined in the general laughter as Fin and Krum returned to their group, minus Gabrielle.

'Foiled by Neville, of all people!' George chortled.

Ron was bored. Hermione wouldn't talk to him...not that he was sure he wanted to talk to *her*, mind you...and he wasn't interested in flirting with Lavender or one of the Patil sisters. He's been there and done that, really. He'd rather be watching a Quidditch match, or down the pub, drinking with his mates.

Regency Week was turning out to be as big a bore as he had expected it to be.

Penny Clearwater came up to them, and she had someone with her...a girl who seemed quite familiar to Ron, as if he'd once fancied her...but he couldn't quite place her. She was shorter than Penny, with great dark eyes and dusky curls bound up with band of sapphire blue cloth, the same colour as her evening gown. She had a good figure, from what he could see of it in the long skirt; her hips were rounded, and her chest was quite nice to look at. Then he glanced again at her face, and knew he'd been caught out eyeing her up.

Penny was introducing Fin and Krum, and through his embarrassment, Ron caught her name.

'This is Miss Romilda Vane,' Penny said, and the dark haired girl gave a very proper curtsy. 'And you know George and Ron, don't you? They were in your House.'

Romilda smiled at each of them, but it seemed to Ron as if she held his eyes a bit longer than George's. They began to move as a group towards the drinks table, and Romilda fell back to walk beside him.

'You didn't have to stop looking, you know,' she said, darting a flirtatious glance from beneath her lashes.

'Dunno what you mean,' he lied, taking advantage of her permission and peering again at her cleavage. Impressive.

She laughed. 'Where's your fiancée?' she asked.

Ron shrugged. 'I'm not engaged,' he muttered. 'We just had ... an understanding.'

Romilda laughed again, and Ron was surprised. He didn't remember her from school, but whoever she was, this Romilda Vane was a jolly sort of girl...not at all like the very serious Hermione.

'Can I get a drink for you?' he asked, putting a hand at the small of her back to warn off any other bloke. This one was his...at least for now.

Sybill Trelawney sat quietly on a small sofa in a darkened corner and adjusted her various scarves and shawls. She didn't care to come down from her tower...it clouded the Inner Eye, and that was not a good thing for a Seer...but the Headmaster had been adamant that she make an appearance. As little as she had liked him when he was a younger man, even Sybill had to admit that Severus Snape had proved himself a hero before the war was over. If he wanted her to make herself available to the guests, then she would do so...and if he wanted her to do a bit of crystal gazing in the cause of helping the school, she would do that, too.

For Hogwarts, there was no sacrifice too great.

'Excuse me, but are you Professor Trelawney?'

Sybill looked up at the man who had spoken to her. He was of average height, much of an age with her, she would guess; his most distinguishing feature was a quantity of

fluffy white hair. He wore a proper Regency costume, but he had charmed his pantaloons to an iridescent shade of yellow, which gave him a very distinct appearance.

'I am Sybill Trelawney,' she replied, inclining her head slightly. 'Have we met before, sir?'

The gentleman inquired with a gesture if he might sit down, and Sybill graciously indicated that he might. He perched on the edge of the sofa and angled himself towards her, his slightly protuberant eyes bright.

'I am Xenophilus Lovegood,' he told her, 'and my daughter, Luna, has often spoken of you to me.'

He smiled at her, a kind, gentle smile, and Sybill felt her lips curving in answer. 'Ah, your Luna is a very good girl,' she cried, delighted to be able to deliver a good report to the parent of a former student. 'Always so attentive in class, and with quite a gift for Seeing. I cannot tell you how many times Luna has gone out of her way to inquire after me, Mr Lovegood, and to ask how I was getting on.' She nodded in fond remembrance.

'Thank you, madam,' the gentleman replied, 'but please, you must call me Xeno. Already I feel that we will be good friends.'

Sybill could not recall the last occasion she had spent time with a man so courteous, so truly the gentleman. She leant towards him, offering her hand. 'And you will call me Sybill, if you please.'

When his two large, warm hands engulfed hers, Sybill was assailed with a delicious, shivering tremble.

George waited for Lucius Malfoy to move away from his companion towards the drinks table. George then went quickly to stand before Professor Mortelle.

'Good evening, Professor,' he said, smiling jovially. 'You are looking particularly beautiful tonight.'

The titian-haired witch smoothed one hand down her peacock blue gown. 'Thank you, George,' she answered sweetly, but her eyes were slightly narrowed, as if she were suspicious of his motives. 'Might I assist you in some way?'

George nodded happily. 'You are a woman of acumen,' he said. 'You can see when a bloke has a plan.' He glanced towards the drinks table, making sure Malfoy was still otherwise employed. 'Professor, I would like to ask you to take on the part of Hippolyta in our little production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I have Mr Malfoy's promise to play the Duke of Athens, but only if you will take the part of his Amazon queen. And truly, ma'am, there's no one else I could ask, in good conscience, to take on the role.' He drew himself up straight and spoke the truth. 'Regardless of whether or not Mr Malfoy plays the part of Theseus, only you can properly play the queen of the Amazons.'

Leticia burst into laughter, but it was a ladylike sound, like the tinkling of bells. 'You are a wicked young man,' she scolded him, but for all her raillery, there was a speculative look in her blue eyes. 'Very well, I will play the part...but only because there are no other Amazonian women about to take on the role.'

George punched the air. Just wait until Luna heard!

'Thank you, Professor...you've made me the happiest man at Hogwarts!'

And giving her a proper bow, he hurried off to find Luna and tell her the good news.

Severus watched George Weasley's interaction with Leticia Mortelle, wondering what the witch had done to make the boy punch the air and hurry off. Lucius had certainly been behaving strangely this weekend; in fact, his fascination with his red-haired femme fatale had intensified to such a degree that Severus couldn't be with them and not notice the tension. He resolved to stay out of it; whatever they were brewing, it was none of his business.

The younger Weasley was paying court to a young woman whose one claim to fame in Severus' memory was as the culprit who had given Potter a box of chocolates laced with love potion...the same chocolates which Weasley had ingested on the day he almost died. Of course, the poison that had nearly killed him had been in the wine Slughorn had given him to drink, not in the love potion. But Potter had once related the story to him of how ridiculously Weasley had behaved whilst under the love potion's influence. Did Weasley realise he would have cell-deep memories of his fleeting, potion-induced passion for Romilda Vane? Ought Severus to warn him?

Certainly not. The prospect of letting it play out was far more entertaining.

Though they were drawing nigh unto evening, the summer sunlight was still bright out of doors, and Severus saw Gabrielle Delacour amongst the rose bushes with Longbottom firmly caught in her toils. The boy had grown to be a tall, broad-shouldered man, but he sat upon a bench with the glamorous Miss Delacour, reduced to near lunacy, his mouth hanging open wide enough to draw flies. Longbottom was wise in the ways of plants and fungi, but did he realise how a woman with Veela blood could confuse his senses and influence his choices? Ought Severus to warn him?

Same answer.

Trelawney was deep in conversation with Xeno Lovegood, which made a bizarre sort of sense. What made Severus much happier was seeing a delightfully flushed Miss Clearwater receiving the addresses of Finbar Quigley. It did his heart good, as well, to see Pansy Parkinson gaining...and holding...the attention of Viktor Krum. To his mind, the fewer single young wizards abroad, the better.

But the person for whom he was looking...the person about whom he could not seem to stop thinking...had been evading him for the best part of the day, and he was determined to put an end to it. He could understand her reticence...after all, she had been with Weasley since they were at school, and to be suddenly single would be disconcerting for her, at best...but he had to maintain her presence amongst the guests and preserve her functionality.

For Hogwarts.

Relentlessly, he visited each group of guests, exchanged courteous nods and greetings with each person who hailed him, but he did not stop to chat, for he was on a quest. He left no corner uninvestigated, and in the end, he ran his quarry to ground in the kitchens. She had no business there, for the elves were feverishly preparing to serve dinner. But truly, she was staying out of the way; she sat quietly at a table in the corner of the room in her ivory-coloured evening gown, her clipboard before her as if she were working.

But when he drew closer, he saw that her unfocused gaze was fixed not upon her organisational charts, but upon the wall before her, and her ungloved hand, rather than wielding a quill, was mindlessly twirling a corkscrew curl at her temple.

'Your guests are wondering where you might be,' he said, taking her hand and rescuing the curl from its depredations.

Her large, honey-brown eyes watched him guardedly, and she gently withdrew her hand from his.

'I...' she began, but he did not allow her to finish. He drew her to her feet, watching as she returned the clipboard to her reticule. Then he picked up her discarded evening glove from the table and waited whilst she pulled it on again.

'I don't know why I'm not in the drawing room,' she said, her attention stubbornly riveted upon her glove.

He took the newly gloved hand and tucked it into his arm. 'Do you not, Milady?' he said, looking down into her face, his hand covering her fingers.

She flushed and looked away. 'I don't know what you mean,' she protested, her voice muffled.

He continued to look down at her, patient and as inexpressive as he could manage to be, but she did not lift her eyes to his again. How could he reassure her of her of the safety of his regard...of his interest in her welfare...and at the same time convey to her his disinterest in her in any carnal sense? *Liar*, his inner critic observed, but he ignored the voice. Any admiration he felt for Granger's physical charms was irrelevant; she was not the sort of female to indulge in the types of amorous intrigues he favoured...where mutual physical satisfaction was sought with no strings and no future plans, but a cordial adieu in the morning light...and he had no intention of trying his luck with her. No, he would have to communicate his intentions by actions, rather than words, and trust to her quick mind to pick up on the message he was sending.

Accordingly, he did not speak again but led her through the kitchen and back to the drawing room.

After dinner, during which Hermione sat at the Headmaster's right hand, distracted and picking at her food, the guests scattered to the pursuits of their choice. George and Luna induced a number of their play participants to partake of a read-through of their parts; many of the older men dispersed to the clubroom, where they could drink and play games of chance; the older ladies sought their withdrawing room, where they could gossip and work at their tambour frame embroidery, a selection of which had been provided for them to choose from; and in the room where the pre-dinner gathering had been held, many of the young people induced Clorinda McTavish to take her place at the pianoforte so they could practice their dancing.

Hermione asked Harry to check in on the men...for women of the Regency times would never have entered a men's club...and she made sure the sewing circle ladies were comfortable. She dreaded a return to the drawing room, because she had no interest in fighting off Viktor's enthusiastic attempts to pull her into dancing with him, nor did she relish the idea of watching Ron pretending as if she were not in the room whilst he pursued the single girls who wanted to dance with him. Hovering in the corridor, she wished she had her wristwatch. She would not wear it pinned to her evening dress, for it would have spoiled the appearance of the gown, but it would have been nice to know if it were late enough to pretend to herself going to bed was a reasonable choice to make.

The Headmaster was upon her before she knew she was not alone in the corridor. How did the man move so silently?

'I am persuaded you do not feel well, Miss Granger,' he said gravely.

Hermione began walking, for it seemed a bad idea to stand about with him in the semi-darkness of the interior castle corridor. 'I have a slight headache,' she lied. 'I'm thinking of going early to bed.'

He took her hand and pulled it through his arm, but panicked by his touch, she attempted to pull away.

They had progressed as far as the Entrance Hall, where they stood, glaring at each other. He refused to release her, but scowled down into her face. 'Please rid yourself of the idea that I have designs upon you, Granger,' he hissed. 'We are allied in this ... this *event* ... and that is the extent of our association!'

Hermione heard him with mortification. What was wrong with her? Every time Snape appeared, she seemed to completely lose track of what she was supposed to be doing, and furthermore, he seemed fully cognizant of her perturbation. Obviously, he was not ... *confused* about her as she was about him. The realisation made her suddenly angry.

She lifted her chin. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' she declared. 'I'm not thinking about you, Snape! And what's more, it's unfair for you to have a go at me when I don't feel well! I can walk up to my room without any help from you!'

His annoyance was gone in an instant, as if having her raise her voice to him was far more acceptable than the suspicion that she was attracted to him.

'I have no doubt that you can,' he said, retaining her hand and beginning to walk with her to the staircase. 'Nevertheless, I will feel better if I see you safely there, as any *gentleman* would do.'

His stress upon the word brought Hermione back to the proper frame of mind. He was staying in the character of the gallant Regency aristocrat, and she ought to return the favour to him.

'I thank you, sir,' she replied.

As they climbed the steps, they spoke of the day's happenings, and Hermione acknowledged to herself that Snape was not the disinterested spectator she had expected him to be in Regency Week. He had evinced disdain for the project from the beginning...had, it had often seemed to her, disagreed with her at every turn as plans were being laid...and had given the impression that he would show up for the event only as a matter of necessity. Instead, he was proving to be a bulwark of reliability, a staunch ally, and...hackneyed expression though it was...a tower of strength.

Standing at her door with him, she offered her hand and thanked him for his consideration. To her surprise and gratification, he carried the gloved digits to his lips.

'Of course, Milady...for Hogwarts.'

She swallowed, bobbed a tiny curtsy, and escaped into her room. The wild swinging of her thoughts on Snape was giving her the same seasick feeling she experienced aboard Muggle theme park rollercoasters...and the headache she had feigned was coming on. It was as if she could maintain neither a negative nor a positive opinion of him for longer than five minutes at a time. She was beyond bewilderment, well into the realm of lunacy.

The worst thing of all was the insane realisation that she wished she had invited him into her bedchamber.

Severus stared for a moment at her closed door; then he paced down the corridor and let himself in the darkened entry at the end. This time, he was not surprised to see the orange cat, though he was a bit startled when it darted past him into the ill-lit passage. Was it running to demand its entrance to *her* presence?

Lucky sod.

He moved to the tallboy and began to empty his pockets, the first ritual in preparing for bed. From within his coat he removed Ronald's personalised schedule, a dainty ladies' handkerchief, a tarnished silver ring, and atop this last, he placed a wilted yellow daisy. Upon further consideration, he placed the flower between the pages of the book he carried in his pocket, pressing down firmly to flatten it.

'Fool,' he said, but there was little heat in his voice. His idiocy was undisputed...why did he retain possession of all these things?...but he was rather too weary of body and perplexed of mind to properly berate himself tonight.

Instead, he crossed to pour a snifter of brandy and seated himself in the chair closest to the wall...her wall...listening for the nightly outpouring of her broken-hearted tears. With his left hand, that one closest to her, he pressed fingertips to the smooth wood separating them, as if a careful examination of the surface would answer the unformed questions in his mind.

When the brandy was gone, there was yet no sound coming from the girl's room. In some measure gladdened by this fact, he went off to bed and dreamt restless, unremembered dreams.

A/N: The Author has altered Gabrielle Delacour's birthdate to make her eighteen years old at the time of this story.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 13

Monday, August 5, 2002

Hermione did not sleep well that night. Snape's delivery of her to her door, almost as if he had wished to preclude anyone else from doing so, had not prevented her from lying awake till all hours, trying to sort out her feelings. She had never before refused to accept one of Ron's half-hearted apologies, and it made her feel odd not to give in. But in the past when she had forgiven him, it had been because she missed him and wanted him to be with her. Now, she didn't miss him at all, even though he had been her boyfriend for so long that she scarcely knew how to think about herself without him. Being single would also change how she interacted with men. With the security of a steady boyfriend at her back, she had been able to relate to other men without constraint, confident in her status as half of a couple. But now, she found herself somewhat unhinged by Viktor's flirtation and Fin's admiring looks and yes, even by the Headmaster's punctilious, Regency era courtesies to her.

Never mind the bizarre force field which seemed to surround them whenever Snape was with her, heightening every one of her senses to a fever pitch.

Waking with the dawn light streaming through her window, she felt not at all rested. Still she rose and dressed, put her hair up, and cheated with a bit of make-up to hide her pallor. The best cure she knew of for emotional turmoil was work, and there was plenty of that to be done!

She went first into the Great Hall, which was meticulously set for breakfast. Next she went into the kitchen, where she was met by Herpie, who bowed until his nose touched his knees.

'Yes, Miss, we is getting along very well,' he assured her. 'Miss can leave the food to the house-elves and enjoy her meals.'

Climbing up the steps again to the Entrance Hall, she encountered Snape. He was down betimes for breakfast, and a familiar line appeared between his brows at the sight of her face. He came forward immediately.

'Are you well?' he inquired, his manner almost gruff. 'You're pale.' His lips tightened for a moment, and then he said, 'I thought you had slept well last night.'

Hermione paused in surprise and tilted her head to one side, considering him in his blue coat of superfine and buff pantaloons. 'Why did you think...how would you know how I slept?'

For several moments neither of them spoke nor looked away. He studied her with narrowed eyes, and she wondered why he would say such a thing. Finally, he led her along the way to an unused classroom. He gestured her within and cast a Privacy Spell at the door.

'Your room is near my quarters,' he said quietly. 'In the past few nights, there have been times when I have heard you weeping...but last night, you did not. Not that I could hear.'

He had heard her crying? Then had he also ...

He spoke again before she could ask. 'I also heard your disputes with Weasley...the loudly spoken parts, at any rate...but you need have no worries that I will talk about what I've heard.'

Good God, Snape had been a witness to her rows with Ron? Could anything be more humiliating?

'Wait! How can your quarters be near mine?' she said doubtfully. 'There are only three rooms on my corridor, and Harry and Ron have the other rooms there.'

Snape looked discomfited. 'It is the door at the end of the corridor,' he said stiffly. 'It is seldom used. But it leads to the Headmaster's chamber, which has a wall in common with yours.'

She couldn't decide how she felt about that. There was something about the idea of Snape sleeping on the other side of her wall that was strangely disturbing, but not in a totally bad way. At any rate, no matter what she felt about the situation, there was no changing it. Every room in the castle was being put to use, including those in the student dormitories; in fact, those had been the cheapest beds available for booking. So, since there was no place for her to move to, she might as well be blasé about it.

Forcing herself to sound cheerful rather than pathetic, she said, 'Then it's no hardship for you to walk me to my room at night.'

He was quite still for a moment, the harsh planes and angles of his face impassive. Then he bowed. 'As you say, Milady.'

Though she was secretly pleased with the nickname, Hermione felt honour-bound to protest. She turned away from him, throwing up her hands comically as she did so.

'Don't call me that!'

He moved past her to open the door. 'Call you what?' he deadpanned as she passed through the doorway.

Some of the classes met that morning after breakfast; amongst them was the Use and Language of Fans, taught by Professor Leticia Mortelle. She was regal that morning in a walking gown of purple lustring, and she carried a fan of delicately painted lavender silk set upon ivory sticks. More than twenty ladies came into her first floor classroom, and she greeted each of them graciously, inviting them to choose a fan from amongst those arrayed upon a nearby table.

From just outside the doorway, Lucius Malfoy watched her, his whole body aching to possess her...to be possessed...it was all one thing, and he could scarcely think of anything else.

She was an exquisite, terrifying woman, and he had admired her from their first meeting, but his slide into true attraction had only begun at Christmas...and it was not until two days ago that his epiphany of her with the riding crop had sealed the fate of his helpless love for her. Where else in the world did there exist such a perfect blend of ruthlessness, rapier wit, and rampant (if tightly reined) sexuality?

No, he would make no comparison with Narcissa...he would not waste the thought upon her.

Now he stepped into Leticia's classroom, just as she was preparing to close the door.

'May I help you, Lucius?' she inquired pleasantly...but there was a warning in her eyes, and he thrilled to it.

'I am here to be instructed in the language of fans,' he explained, drawing a few giggles from the collected ladies about the room.

Leticia's eyebrows arched. 'Fans are for ladies,' she pointed out. 'Gentlemen do not carry them, so this class can be of little use to you.'

He picked up a Chinoiserie fan, black with gold gilt figures upon the sticks. 'But men did carry them, chérie, in the eighteenth century.' He touched the handle to his lips, his grey eyes intent upon her face.

Her mouth curved, enchanting blue eyes dancing. 'And already you flirt with the fan, don't you?' She turned from him, speaking over her shoulder as she did. 'Sit here, with me, and I will use you as a model...you may demonstrate for me.'

A lesser man might have scorned such an invitation, but Lucius cared nothing for the women there to hear Leticia speak...only she mattered, and she had welcomed him into her classroom.

Hermione waited until the ladies streamed from Professor Mortelle's classroom; then she entered, clipboard in hand...only to find Lucius Malfoy with his back pressed firmly to the blackboard, his arms full of Leticia, whose lips were pressed just as firmly to his mouth.

Her mouth forming a soundless 'o', Hermione stood frozen in the doorway. She had no intention of interrupting...ought to go away immediately, in fact...but found she was loath to walk away from such a show of unfettered passion. She was stricken with a piercing envy...when had she ever been kissed with such abandon?...and she studied the way Mr Malfoy crushed his lady to him with desperate hands, how Leticia wound her fingers into the hair at the nape of her swain's neck, as if the better to control his movements, and how her other hand, trapped between her chest and his torso, held a slightly crumpled lavender fan.

Hermione was recalled to her sense of place and time when one of Mr Malfoy's hands, leaving for a moment its job of holding his lady as close to him as might be possible, gestured for her to go...more a plea than a command...and Hermione backed out of the room, softly closing the door.

Obviously, things had gone quite well for Professor Mortelle's Use and Language of Fans class. She put a tick mark upon her clipboard parchment and moved on.

In dancing class that morning, Professor McGonagall attempted to instruct her pupils in the intricacies of the minuet. It might have been because of the large number of couples in the room, or because of the relatively early hour...or indeed, because the young people were more interested in interacting with one another than paying attention to their instructress...but there was a distinct lack of progress being made. Only one couple, shy though they had been together at the beginning of the lesson, showed an understanding of the steps, and Minerva was quick to pick up on their facility.

'Sybill,' she called, when the music had stopped.

Professor Trelawney approached, her partner trailing at a discreet distance.

'You and your partner seem to know the dance. Would you demonstrate its proper execution for the guests?'

Arthur Weasley, who stood near the front of the room holding his wife's hand, added his voice to the plea. 'Please do, Professor Trelawney. Molly and I saw how well you dance it...show us how to do it.'

Sybill blushed, the youthful reaction adding flattering colour to her thin cheeks, and she glanced at Xenophilus Lovegood. Xeno, whose trousers on this occasion had been charmed to an alarming shade of chartreuse, bowed. 'I have no objection, dear lady.'

Sybill smiled mistily at Minerva. 'Mr Lovegood and I both learnt the minuet in our youth, you know,' she said.

Xeno took her hand and led her to the center of the room. When Madam McTavish began again to play Bach's Minuet in G, Sybill and Xeno showed the respectful watchers how the thing was properly done.

Hermione checked in with Parkinson, who gave her to understand, with a brusqueness that would have been considered quite rude in Regency times, that her class on Manners and Customs of the Regency had been a success. She looked Hermione over with the insolence that had made Hermione hate her at school.

'Why don't you put that stupid clipboard away and go enjoy the day for a change?' Parkinson demanded irritably. 'Go and dance with the Headmaster or something. I don't need you buzzing around me like a busy little bee, and I'm sure the other girls don't either.'

Hermione pressed her lips together, determined not to tell Parkinson off. She spun on her heel to go, but Parkinson let off a parting shot.

'And stay away from Krum while you're at it...I fancy a go at him, myself.'

That made Hermione pause and look over her shoulder, suddenly interested. 'Do you?'

Draco was the only person present in the History of Magic classroom, where Professor Binns was speaking in a droning, monotonous voice about the political ramifications for the Muggle government in the Napoleonic wars. Hermione sat down in the desk next to his, where he lounged with his legs stretched out before him and crossed at the ankles, his fingers laced at the back of his neck.

'What are you doing?' she whispered.

'Having a bit of a nap,' he answered. 'I was passing by, and the old boy was droning on to no one.'

Hermione began to make a note on her clipboard, but quick as a striking snake, Draco snatched it from her hand. 'Will you stop that?' he said testily.

She reached for it, but he held it up over his head, keeping it from her.

'Draco, give me that!' she cried, and her noise caused Professor Binns to pause in his monologue and look at them.

'Sorry, sir,' Hermione said.

Binns nodded distractedly. 'Do try not to disrupt class, Miss Garner,' he said.

Draco jumped up and left the room, and Hermione followed him.

'Give me my clipboard,' she demanded. 'I'm in charge of this event, you know...I keep up with everything using my clipboard!'

Draco allowed her to close her fingers on the clipboard, but he did not release it. 'Hermione, this thing is running like a well-oiled Muggle machine. You worked on it for a year. Would you just unclench and enjoy it?'

She frowned. 'If I do that, everything will fall apart.'

'Could you just trust yourself for once?' he said, finally allowing her to take possession of her property.

She shook her head stubbornly.

Draco sighed, hands on his hips. 'Fine. I'll make a game of it. You give it a break for the rest of the day and enjoy the activities. Tomorrow at breakfast, you can thank me...oh, and tell me about all the blokes you flirt with.'

Hermione flounced away without answering him, but he had put the idea in her mind, and it wasn't easy to dislodge.

Hermione left her clipboard behind when she departed the castle for Malfoy Manor. She had come to enjoy her riding lessons more than she would have thought possible, and she had developed a true affection for Firefly, whose manners were as nice as her gait was easy. Those of the beginning class who had proven themselves adept at staying in the saddle (not difficult to do with the use of Professor Mortelle's spell), at holding their reins properly, and who expressed an interest in doing so, were instructed by Mr Black, the Squib riding master, to attempt the trot.

Hermione frowned as she struggled to follow the instructions she was given, but she found the faster gait to be bumpy and uncomfortable...she was sure her bum would be much sorer at the end of this lesson! To add to her dissatisfaction, the advanced riders were riding over the upcoming hunt course, so she could not glance up at will to watch the Headmaster and his beautiful black stallion soaring through the air over the jumps as if they were possessed of one mind and one body.

Harry found that he had a knack for riding Duds. It didn't come to him as effortlessly as had broom riding, but he took to the trot easily, understanding how to post the trot and shifting up and down to smooth the ride for himself. He saw that Hermione was having a more difficult time of it. How on earth was a person supposed to ride side-saddle and rise on every other stride?

The intermediate riders were dismissed while the beginners were still riding, and Harry noticed Malfoy at the paddock fence, watching him. Reining up, he walked Duds in that direction.

Malfoy sat his horse with a casual ease, looking like something out of a Muggle period piece film in his Regency riding dress astride his sleek white horse. It bothered Harry how much he liked the Ferret when they were engaged in some sport or other together. Sunday evening they had stayed outside playing match after match of badminton, struggling to achieve supremacy over one another...but they were well-matched, and they had been forced to end the contest all but even on the overall score. They had been late to dinner, earning a scold from Hermione, and had ended the evening in the men's club, drinking too much of that port wine and playing together at a card game called piquet. The Ferret had won, so Harry was determined to get better at it.

'You're not terrible at riding,' Malfoy pronounced. 'Would you like to try something more fun than posting?'

Harry grinned at such unqualified praise. 'Yeah,' he said.

Malfoy dismounted and opened the far paddock gate, allowing Harry to ride Duds through. The white horse made a nickering sound at Duds.

'Al and Duds are friends,' Malfoy said in an offhand way, and from his pocket, he produced a small black thing, which he enlarged with an unspoken incantation. It was a helmet-like black hat. 'Wear this,' Malfoy instructed, handing it up.

Malfoy was the leader when they were on horseback; this was the tacit rule they followed, so Harry put on the hard black hat. 'Did you say your horse's name is Al?' he asked.

Malfoy swung easily into his saddle again, taking up his reins and turning his horse. 'It's really Alabaster Moon, but I call him Al...'

'...because it's shorter,' Harry finished for him. That made sense. Duds followed Al automatically, as if he knew Al and Malfoy were the leaders, and soon they were riding side by side.

'I don't know about you, Potter, but I'm bored with all this riding around in circles,' Malfoy said. 'I'm going to show you how much riding can be like flying.'

Harry couldn't repress his grin. 'Wicked,' he said approvingly.

Though she had not seen him since she'd arrived at the stables, Snape was waiting for Hermione when her lesson was over. He stood beside Apollyon, and as she approached, he came forward and took Firefly's bridle.

'Posting the trot must be near impossible on a side saddle,' he commented. 'Leticia was telling me about it...she said some ladies just suffer the bumping, but others go straight to the canter.'

Hermione wasn't sure what all the terms meant, but she enjoyed looking down at the Headmaster in his riding clothes with the sun on his hair, making it look almost blue in its black sheen, like a panther's pelt. Something about having his hair tied back...revealing the angle of his jaw rarely seen behind his curtain of hair...made him seem different to her. And when he seemed like a different person, it was not as distressing to her to be so confoundingly attracted to him.

'Would you like to try something different?' he asked her.

Hell yes, she would. A tumble in the hay with this Dark, slightly dangerous, unfamiliar wizard would make her day. And relieve a bit of stress.

But this train of thought was derailed when Leticia Mortelle walked over to smile up at Hermione, her riding crop tucked beneath her arm. 'Let me urge you to do it,' she said. 'You've worked very hard to make this venture succeed...now it's time to relax and enjoy it.' She stepped closer and spoke more quietly, as if to exclude the Headmaster from their conversation. 'Your participation, at this point, is more important than your continued governance of the event, Miss Granger. The ladies will look to you to see how to permit themselves to be immersed in the delights of the time period.' She turned to go, tossing over her shoulder, 'All work and no play makes Hermione a very dull girl!'

Hermione watched Professor Mortelle walk away, but when she looked back to the Headmaster, she saw that his gaze was focused on her.

'Please,' she said. 'Please...let's try something different.'

He took the leather lead he held in his free hand...what she had taken for his reins...and attached it to Firefly's bridle.

'We'll try the canter on the lunge line,' he said, and led her back into the paddock. 'When you're comfortable with it...later in the week...we can go for a ride across the fields.' He looked up at her, a slight smile on his face. 'I think you'll find it more ... engaging.'

Hermione felt her heart trip into a faster rhythm, but she only nodded and smiled in return. If they rode across the fields, they would be alone ... alone.

Anything might happen when a woman was alone with a man.

Ron went in to lunch with his new mates, Fin and Viktor, and the gaggle of girls who were always around them. But it was Romilda Vane who secured the seat beside him, and he was glad of that. It was heady stuff, this experience of being pursued by a pretty girl...an eminently shaggable girl...after the year of Hermione's neglect and lack of interest in him. Even so, he was a bit disturbed to see Hermione's place at the table empty...and even more so, to see the place from which Snape presided over the meals empty, as well.

Romilda, who had a sharp eye for details, noticed the direction of his thoughts. 'Hermione and the Headmaster must be having lunch somewhere else,' she said, watching Ron from the corner of her eye.

Ron cheered up a little. 'Yeah, maybe they're eating in his office...working on organisation type stuff.'

He addressed himself fully to his lunch until Romilda spoke again. 'Or maybe they're having a picnic lunch at the Manor. They have lovely gardens there, you know, and you could sign up for a box lunch to be eaten there for any day you wished...it was on the registration form.'

Instinctively, Ron reached for his schedule...had he and Hermione been scheduled to eat a picnic lunch today?...but of course, he didn't have a schedule. He'd lost it to Severus-bloody-Snape in the bloody poker game. He stabbed a roasted potato with his fork.

'I noticed Hermione isn't wearing her engagement ring anymore,' Romilda observed.

Ron hunched his shoulder, wishing Romilda would shut up. 'It wasn't an engagement ring. We had an understanding.'

Romilda giggled, and he thought she said something.

'What?' he said, rather more aggressively than he'd meant to sound.

'Nothing,' she said with a satisfied little smile.

But he was sure she had said, 'Oh Hermione understands, all right.'

After lunch, Gabrielle asked Neville to show the maze to her. 'I am told that you grew the hedges in less than ten days! How clever you must be!'

Neville blushed and pulled at his cravat, which seemed a bit tight. Dancing with Gabrielle in the class had been very exciting...touching her, even just her hand, was intoxicating...but it didn't make it any easier for him to take all of her admiration. Growing up, Gran had never had much good to say about Neville, and at school, the only teacher who really thought he did well was Professor Sprout. Strangers thought the Serpent Slayer was pretty cool, but Neville knew better. He had been talking a good game in his defiance of Voldemort, but he never would have managed to kill the snake if the Sorting Hat hadn't been forced onto his head, with the Sword of Gryffindor conveniently tucked inside.

Still he went with her out into the bright summer afternoon, and she tripped happily along beside him, an angel in a celestial blue dress trimmed in ecru lace. Other men watched them go with envy in their eyes, and Neville was man enough to be aware of that and to preen himself on it, even if he knew it had nothing to do with him and everything to do with the uncritical heart of Gabrielle Delacour.

In the maze, he let her try to work it out, skipping down a promising avenue, only to find a dead end there and bouncing away to another with a ripple of delighted laughter. Neville went where she led, like a dog on a lead. When Gabrielle grew tired of the sport, he guided her unerringly to the heart of the maze, where he had planted a carefully planned, lovingly cultivated garden of rare beauty. Red roses, purple irises, yellow daisies, and pink peonies bloomed in profusion.

'Oh,' the French girl breathed, her awe apparent. 'Oh, Neville, it is so very beautiful.'

But his worshipful gaze was glued to her expressive face, and when her sky blue eyes met his, he answered her. 'No, Gabby...you are.'

Hermione soaked for a while in her bath, thankful as always for Savoir Smith's Sore Muscle Reliever. She closed her eyes and let her mind wander.

Having Snape's attention all for herself, with him in an instructive mood, was immensely satisfying; when he wasn't teaching a classroom full of hormonal adolescents, he was a good tutor, clear in his instructions and patient with her many errors. She had actually enjoyed the canter, once she'd got it straight in her head how she was to sit and to coordinate her movements with those of Firefly. And best of all, he had lifted her from her saddle again, and time had seemed to slow to a crawl as she held to his shoulders, her eyes locked with his, her tummy full of cavorting butterflies.

The moment had been broken by the boisterous arrival of Harry and Draco, leading their horses and exchanging jovial insults; Snape had stepped hurriedly away, as if discovered in wrong-doing. Hermione would have cheerfully slapped her best friend for the interruption, but it had done her heart good to see Harry so involved in something other than work...and happy at it.

Perhaps Harry and Draco would learn to be friends as she and Snape were learning to be friends. It would be a nice legacy to take away from the whole Regency Week experience, if she could simply stop herself from indulging in the persistent lustful thoughts that visions of Snape on horseback filled her mind with.

She ran one hand along her body, nipple pebbling beneath her palm before her fingers trailed past her ribcage, dipped into her navel, and disappeared beneath the warm water, intent upon ridding herself of the ache which owed nothing to her riding muscles.

Ron sat beneath the beech tree by the lake, drinking the cup of ale a passing house-elf had happily supplied him with. A warm presence was at his back, and he glanced up to see that Romilda was kneeling behind him, her breasts pressing against his back. She smiled when he looked at her, and she took his cup from him, drinking from it without asking permission.

'You're a saucy wench,' he informed her lazily, wondering how much of a tumble one could risk in daylight. Would a Notice Me Not Spell provide enough cover for him to teach her about what happened to naughty girls like her?

The wench in question gently bit the lobe of his ear, pressing more firmly still against his back. 'Oh, I can be saucier,' she whispered.

He turned to put his arms around her, but she backed away, laughing into his eyes. 'Not out here,' she told him, rising to her feet.

His reaction to her assault made it impossible for him to immediately stand as well. He shifted uncomfortably, a moue of annoyance on his lips. 'Where then?' he asked her.

Her eyebrows arched. 'I'm in the Gryffindor dormitories with a roomful of single girls,' she informed him. 'But don't you have a room to yourself?'

The girl had wasted no time nosing out that bit of information. 'Yeah,' he said, and she winked at him and walked away, her shapely bum swaying.

'Blimey,' he muttered, watching her go.

Sybill strolled along the path to the maze, her hand tucked into Xeno's arm. Luna had, at lunch, objected to the shade of her father's trousers...'But it's ugly, Daddy'...so Sybill had charmed her walking dress to a matching shade, done likewise with her parasol, and invited Xeno to stroll with her in the shrubbery.

The sheer audacity of it still amazed her. How could she be so daring? So very intrepid? But she had not been so lucky as to draw the admiration of any gentleman in more years than she cared to count, and this was her opportunity to enjoy it. Why, she'd been so euphoric before bed the night before, she had lain down without even thinking of her evening glass...*Bottle*, her mind whispered...of sherry.

'Tell me about yourself, dear lady,' Xeno said, with the complete attention peculiar to him, a trait she had seen few people display.

Sybill stared straight ahead, debating. Ought she to answer him truly? To share with this stranger the fascinating truth about herself? She was tempted, but did she dare? So many had laughed at her for it...they thought she didn't know, but of course she did...but they were unimportant people, their minds full of the mundane.

Something told her that this man would understand...appreciate, even...the truth about Sybill Patricia Trelawney.

'I am a Seer, dear sir...descended in an unbroken line from the great prophetess witch, Cassandra of Troy.'

He stared down at her, his protuberant eyes wide and believing. 'I knew it!' he exclaimed softly. 'I knew it, as surely as the Crumple-Horned Snorkack runs through the tundra of subarctic northern Sweden!'

Sybill peered at him, all a-tremble with triumph. 'I knew it!' she echoed softly. 'I knew you would have the Mind to understand!'

His hand covered hers, tightening slightly over her gloved fingers. 'Tell me everything, dear lady!'

And so she did, pouring her accomplishments, triumphs, and slights into his willing ears, and he absorbed every word of her gospel, according it unquestioningly the significance of unvarnished truth.

Hermione dressed with particular care for dinner, finding that her after-bath nap had refreshed her so much that she didn't even need make up to brighten her complexion. Everything was going very well, and diverting her mind from obsessing over details to revelling in enjoyment was becoming easier.

She went down to the drawing room, where everyone was gathered to enjoy an aperitif. She smiled at the number of ladies fluttering their fans and responded with unfeigned delight to the greetings she received. The Headmaster was there ahead of her, wearing a coat that, with each passing evening, seemed to darken ever more, to the point that it now appeared to be midnight blue. She was gratified when she saw him and realised he was watching her. Had he done so ever since she entered? Had he been waiting for her? She thrilled to the possibility, trying to remember if she had ever felt like this before. When she was fifteen, and the world famous Viktor Krum had sought her out? When she was eighteen, and Ron had finally scraped up the courage to kiss her?

No, she had never felt quite like this before.

She took a glass of madeira wine from a passing elf, and when it became clear that she was coming to him, Snape met her halfway.

'You appear none the worse for wear for your riding adventure,' he commented quietly.

She smiled into her wine, thinking, It's marvellous what a warm bath will do for a girl after a hard ride! but she didn't reply to him.

A shriek of laughter from across the room drew everyone's attention, and they looked to see Pansy Parkinson hanging upon Viktor's arm, gazing up at him as if he were her dependence and delight. But it was Romilda Vane whose behaviour Hermione noted. The buxom brunette stood with her arms about Ron's waist, a position completely against the mores of the Regency time...no one would have engaged in that sort of public display...and Ron had an arm about her shoulders.

A week ago, seeing Ron with another woman would have infuriated her. Even yesterday, she had gone to bed early rather than put herself through the misery of watching him flirt. But now she felt curiously detached from him and his actions; not as if he were a stranger, for she would never be that separated from him or Harry...not after all they'd done together. No, it was more like seeing someone you'd known from school misbehaving in public...a weary sort of disgust, but no wrenching emotion.

Snape spoke into her ear, his warm breath stirring the curls at her temple against her cheek. 'Does it distress you to see him so? Shall I take you into the garden?'

Hermione turned to face him...turned her back on Romilda and Ron...and gave a slight shake of her head. 'Not at all,' she assured him, sipping her wine.

George sat on a stone bench in Neville's rose garden, his director's book in his hands. He had assigned all the parts for their little production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, except for Puck. None of the men had the right feel for the part, and it had to be cast properly or none of it would work. He sucked upon the tip of his Sugar Quill, which had been flavoured with Firewhisky...a little experiment of his, which he was in talks with Honeydukes to license for sale in Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. He knew whom he wanted for the part, but he had his doubts about getting his way.

Luna came out of the house into the garden, looking very pretty in a jonquil yellow evening gown. Another girl might have tarried by the French doors, gazing at the flowers or the sky, waiting to be approached, but not Luna. She walked straight to him and sat down on the bench beside him. That was one of the things he liked best about her...she didn't act girly all the time. Girly-acting women were exhausting to be around, and George just didn't have the patience for it, these days.

'Taking a break from breaking hearts in there?' he asked her with a sly wink.

Luna regarded him with a serious expression. Come to think of it, Luna seldom joked around, which was one of George's *raisons d'être*...and even so, he liked being around her. She was the most restful female he knew.

'You don't have to do that,' she said earnestly, her manner open, unguarded.

George frowned. 'Do what?' he asked.

'Entertain me, George,' she said solemnly, and reaching out, she took his hand.

Then you have no use for me at all, he thought forlornly.

His mind scrambled for a comeback, but George didn't know what to say. He and Fred had come into the world cracking jokes, and entertaining the room had been their *modus operandi* for as long as he could remember. But Fred had been gone now for four years, and though the pain had dulled, the empty space was always right beside...as well as inside...him, echoing and bone-deep lonely.

Withdrawing his hand, he gave hers a little pat. 'All righty, then. Let's go eat.'

And without another word, Luna serenely accompanied him inside.

Ron sat with Romilda at dinner, and he couldn't help but be distracted by her square-cut neckline, which exposed so much of her creamy bosom. Even so, he found himself watching Snape and Hermione at the head of the table. Hermione never once looked down the table at Ron; she seemed to be riveted by her own conversation. And she was smiling...laughing, even. Ron hadn't seen Hermione lighten up that much in months. What the hell was Snape saying to her?

Romilda ran a fingertip over the top of Ron's hand, sending a shock straight to his groin...not really the sort of thing a bloke wants to have happen at dinner with so many people. Hastily, he moved his hand out of her way.

She leant towards him, providing an even clearer view down the bodice of her gown. 'What time?' she murmured.

He darted a glance at Harry, wondering if he'd heard, but Harry was talking to Penny Clearwater. 'Better not, tonight,' he answered her.

'No?' Her lower lip protruded...a pretty pout.

Ron looked away from her. 'No.'

There was dancing 'practice' again after dinner...really just an excuse for flirtation, it seemed to Ron...and the theatrical people worked on the play, and the older witches and wizards separated to their particular pursuits. Hermione, though, was the life of the party, sparkling and bubbly. She had the house-elves set up tables for parlour games, and it was rather disgusting to watch her playing at a game called Speculation with Snape at her elbow, full of advice. Romilda divided her attentions amongst the other single blokes, but Parkinson was dominating all of Viktor's time, and Fin was doing his best to talk to Penny...but it seemed to Ron as if Penny was watching Hermione and Snape, too.

Finally, he left the drawing room and went in search of the men's clubroom. Perhaps a few drinks and some thinking...or card playing...would help him work it all out.

George finally invaded the men's clubroom to run down his quarry. The target was sitting at a small round table with Harry, playing cards.

'Might I have a word, Draco?'

Malfoy turned his head with exaggerated surprise. George half expected him to employ his quizzing glass, as his father had done, but he simply sneered.

'What do you want, Weasley?'

Harry lifted his glass to George. 'Have a drink?' he asked.

'I want you to be part of the play,' George said to Malfoy, ignoring Harry. 'I want you to play Puck. It requires a certain ... whimsical melancholy.'

Malfoy's nearly white brows drew together over his eyes, as if he were annoyed, but George could tell he was interested. 'I am familiar with Shakespeare, you twit,' Malfoy said disdainfully.

'No one else could do it, mate,' George urged. 'Think about it.'

Malfoy shrugged and played a card. 'Maybe I will.'

Harry chortled. 'You, Ferret? In a play?'

Malfoy directed a sneer at Harry, but Harry was giggling too much to notice.

'It's your turn, Scar Head,' Malfoy snapped.

George could have hugged Harry. That put a seal on the deal!

'Two o'clock tomorrow, Malfoy, in Violet's antechamber...I'll have a house-elf drop the script in your room.'

'Go away, Weasley,' Malfoy snarled, and George, having bagged his prey, was happy to do it, whistling as he went.

Severus saw the girl to her room that night, feeling the unfamiliar brightness rising in himself and doing all he could to ignore it, if not deflate it. She had come to him in her sea foam green dress, stones shined to resemble emeralds at her throat above the breasts he tried very hard not to notice...come straight to him, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a young, beautiful woman to seek him out for nothing but the pleasure of his company. There were many things of which he had to acquit Hermione Granger, little though he liked to acknowledge it to himself; one of those things was any sort of ulterior motive where he was concerned. Unlike the women he had bedded since the war ended, this was a witch who had no interest whatsoever in his so-called heroism, his imaginary social position, or his purported secret stash of gold. No, this vital woman looked at him and saw only Severus...saw him more clearly, perhaps, than anyone had done in years.

She smiled at him. 'It's been a fun day,' she said. 'Thank you for the riding lesson...that may have been the best part.'

Her eyes were soft, like the velvety petal of a flower, her lips particularly plump and lovely...and he was losing his fucking mind.

Stepping back, he bowed. 'It was my pleasure,' he said woodenly.

A shadow passed over her face, as if she were disappointed...or hurt. He clenched his jaw.

'Well,' she said uncertainly, 'I suppose I'd better get to bed.'

'Good night,' he said tersely.

When she opened the door, the cat slinked into the hallway and twined about Severus' ankles, meowing.

'Stop it, Crooks!' she said, bending to pick him up. 'You'll get hairs all over his trousers!'

Severus thought of the chair in the next room already covered with ginger fur, but he said nothing.

She held the cat in her arms and gave him a rueful smile. 'Good night!'

He bowed again, and finally, she went into her room, closing the door behind her. He sagged with relief, briefly resting his forehead on her doorjamb before entering his room and going directly to the drinks trolley. The brandy was medicinal tonight, rather than for pleasure, and he downed it in two quick swallows, like a potion for illness.

Then he was in the chair by the wall, leaning forward with his elbows on his legs, his hands dangling uselessly. He had accomplished his goal...had pushed Weasley so far away that she barely noticed the whelp any longer...but now she was fully his responsibility, and Severus was finding it very difficult going. How could simply keeping company with an attractive young woman be such a chore? If he were her contemporary...a thick twenty-something with nothing in his head but sex and sport...it would be easier, but as a mature man, he saw the traps and hazards inherent in their current course, and those realities filled him with foreboding.

With his forehead pressed against the wall...the wall of her bedchamber...he allowed himself to remember her that morning in the classroom, throwing up her hands in protest at his pet name for her...riding about the paddock at the end of his lead rein, taking his instruction...seeking him out before dinner...sparkling at the games table...and he had to suppress a groan of misery.

Then he heard her, faintly, and it seemed to him as if she were talking to her familiar, her tone playful. Then there was quiet, and he waited...for what he didn't know...only knowing that he would not sleep until she did.

It was in the silence that he heard it...faint again, but unmistakeable.

Severus

He didn't know where it came from, the spell which rose to his lips...it was one he had learnt as a firstie, to make communication from one dormitory to the one adjacent possible after everyone was abed...but he spoke the incantation, then said her name.

'Hermione?'

She squeaked...he had to smile at the sound...and there was the sound of rustling, as if we were looking wildly around her room.

'I'm in my room, but I heard you say my name. Do you ... need something?'

She giggled then, and he smirked, shaking his head.

'I feel like I'm breaking curfew,' she said.

'I did not mean to intrude,' he said. 'I will use the counter spell now. Sleep well.'

'No, wait!' she said, her voice slightly breathless. 'Talk to me.'

He was embarrassed, but not unwilling. Pillow talk, minus the pillows, had not previously come his way. 'What shall I say?'

There was a beat of silence, and in the quiet, he heard her yawn. He smirked again. She was obviously tired enough to sleep, and did not need a conversation with him to keep her awake.

'Tell me how you came to own Apollyon,' she invited, her voice now sounding drowsy and cosy...the way Severus imagined one's lover~~wife~~ his unhelpful brain provided) might sound as she drifted off to sleep in one's arms.

'It is not a pleasant tale,' he said, frowning, his forehead pressed hard to the wall. 'I made the Unbreakable Vow to Draco's mother when Lucius went to prison. I promised to watch over Draco. After the war, when Narcissa released me from the Vow, she and Lucius gave me the stallion. It was unnecessary, but they were insistent.'

She was silent, and he wondered if she slept. Then she spoke, and he knew she had considered her words before she said them. 'It was necessary to them, though. They felt they owed you a heavy debt, and they paid it the way that seemed most generous to them...with something they knew you would cherish.'

He stared at his hands, and unconsciously, lifted one to press against the wall. There was something in what she said...something he had not considered before: that the stallion had been not a convenient article the Malfoys had had to hand when they wished to give a gift, but a carefully chosen bequest given to honour the receiver.

'You may be right,' he conceded softly.

A tiny, breathless laugh. 'I wish I had that admission recorded on audio tape,' she said.

He chuckled. She was a minx; there was no question about it.

Then the reverie was shattered by the sound of pounding.

'Ron,' she said, and there was no laughter or softness in her tone.

Severus sat up straight. 'I'll perform the counter spell now,' he said. 'Good night.'

'No, don't!' she answered.

"Mione?" Weasley called, sounding intoxicated. "Mione, let me in. We have to say sorry and make up before something terrible happens."

Severus sat like a stone, aware that the palms of his hands were slick with sweat, as if something momentous were about to occur, something in which he had no say at all.

The girl did not answer, and the pounding resumed. 'I know you're in there! I heard you talking to Crooks. Open the fucking door!' And he pounded again.

The silence was so complete Severus could hear the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece, something of which he was never aware...but each second felt like an hour as he held his breath, waiting to hear what Hermione Granger would do in the face of her former boyfriend's pleas.

The next voice to be heard belonged to neither Granger nor Weasley...it was Potter.

'Come on, mate...I could hear you shouting from the stairs. Leave her alone. Now isn't the time to try to talk to her.'

Severus gritted his teeth. He would have preferred to hear the girl send Weasley packing...wouldn't that have been more definitive?...but at the very least, the idiot would plague her no more that night.

'Severus?'

He inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly.

'Yes?'

'I just wanted to see if you were still there.' She sounded almost apologetic. 'Sorry for all that.'

'You are not responsible for his choices,' he replied quietly. 'But you should sleep now, don't you think?'

She yawned. 'I suppose so.'

'Good night, then ... Milady,' he said.

There was a sound which might have been a sigh of contentment. "Night, Severus," she answered.

He cast the counter spell and sagged again to his former position, forehead pressed to the wall.

What the hell was he going to do?

Hermione moved her pillow closer to the wall and stroked it lightly with her fingertips. Severus was just on the other side...thinking of her, perhaps...her new friend and confidante. Those qualities were far more important than the ones that had been getting her blood up, lately.

She smiled into the darkness and settled into sleep.

Author's Note: Internet resources on the language of fans are very much at variance with one another, but it seems a universally accepted fact that placing the sticks of the fan upon one's lips meant 'Kiss me'.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 14

Tuesday, August 6, 2002

Morning to Evening

Ron went down to breakfast in a hung-over, sombre state of mind. His head was pounding, he had slept poorly, but most of all, he felt like a failure. Hermione wouldn't even talk to him. He had loved her since he was eleven years old...half his life!...and now he had lost her.

Or did she lose me? he thought, eschewing the food and pouring a cup of strong, black tea instead. *Dad says maybe I loved the idea of having a girlfriend more than the actual person. But she's the cleverest witch I know, and no other girl can ever understand about all we lived through the way she does.*

He carried the tea into the drawing room, which was deserted. He opened the French doors and walked out into the garden Neville had planted there, to give the castle a country-house feel. With the sun shining down on him, he drank his tea and puzzled over the facts. Did he love Hermione? Hell yeah, he did...but was it the lover kind of love? Harry always said he loved Hermione like a sister, but Ron had *shagged* her...and a bloke didn't shag his sister.

Draining his cup, he set it on the stone bench, and putting his hands in his pockets, he began to walk.

His dad had pointed out that a man didn't always marry his first love. Not that Ron was interested in marriage...not now, he was too young for that...but one day he wanted a wife and kids and a little house near Ottery St Catchpole. Hermione had never been too happy with that plan. She didn't want to live too near his family because she thought they'd never have privacy. And she didn't want a large family. Maybe one child, she said, when she was settled in her career and they could afford a nanny to look after the baby when she returned to work...but that bothered Ron. A witch was supposed to stay home and raise her children, educate them until they went to Hogwarts ... Hermione's priorities seemed askew, and always had done, to Ron's way of thinking.

Still, he remembered how they'd been before she got so obsessed with work...happy. No one could say they hadn't been happy. Going to work, coming home to change clothes, then down the pub for a bite and a pint, hanging out, drinking with friends ... and back to her flat for a shag. It had been bloody ideal.

Then she'd got her promotion at work, and before he knew it, their lives were ruled by her job and work projects. It made him angry all over again just to think about it.

He stopped, his jaw set. Dad had told him in his most serious voice that any girl would resent being wagered in a poker game, and not all Ron's arguments about how it was just a *parchment* and not a girl he'd wagered had swayed his father's opinion. Dad would have none of it.

Fine. If Ron had done wrong, he was willing to swallow his pride and do the right thing.

Now all he had to do was figure out what that thing was. He stared out over the lake and thought for a long time. At length, he nodded. It seemed to him as if there were times when all a bloke could do to prove his love to his witch was ... something spectacularly stupid ... and he was just the one qualified to do it.

Hermione slept deeply and well, with no disturbing dreams. When she woke, light was streaming into her room from the high windows, and she jerked upright with alarm...until she remembered her new project. She wasn't running the show anymore, because the show was running itself. No, she was participating in the Regency Week...immersing herself in Jane Austen's world...and that meant she could be the last one down to breakfast sometimes, instead of the first.

She stretched and went to the basin on her dressing table to splash water on her face. She was filled with an unfamiliar sensation, and she could not name it, but she welcomed it. This feeling made the world seem brighter, the colours more vibrant, and the prospect of the day ahead like a smorgasbord from which she could choose her delights.

She took up her comb and began to arrange her hair, liking what she saw in the looking glass. She stuck her tongue out at her reflection and only giggled when the mirror reprimanded her.

'If you have no respect for yourself,' it complained, 'at least have some consideration for my feelings!'

Hermione turned away to her wardrobe. 'You're a mirror...you don't have feelings!'

She dressed herself, slipped her feet into the blue kid shoes which were already showing signs of wear...how had the Regency folk kept their things clean?...and opened her door. She stared down to the end of the corridor, where shadows concealed a door to the Headmaster's room. Was Severus still there? Would it be too forward for her to knock to find out?

After an internal struggle, she decided it would not be too forward for Hermione, but for Miss Granger, the proper Regency lady, it would be unthinkable. So she went down to breakfast feeling the urge to hum a happy tune as she went.

On the third floor landing, she met up with Penny. 'You're late this morning,' Hermione observed.

Penny's lips pressed together. 'I was just thinking the same thing about you.'

Hermione was surprised by her tone. 'Are you upset with me?' she asked.

Penny shrugged, a gesture which did not sit easily on her...Penny had always been so friendly and ... tractable. Looking straight ahead as they descended the staircase, Penny said, 'You dominate the Headmaster's time and all his attention! I thought this would be my chance to get to know him, but *you* won't let me!'

Hermione felt her first unpleasant emotion of the morning, and it made her angry that such a thing had to happen. 'He's *my* escort, Penny,' she pointed out in a slightly sharp tone. 'I'm sorry if that's inconvenient for you, but it is what it is. You'll have to pursue him later, when Regency Week is over. Why don't you just ask him to dinner or something?'

Penny looked more put out than ever. 'If that were an easy thing to do, I'd have done it already!' she cried.

They had reached the Great Hall, and without waiting for Hermione's reply, Penny brushed past her and entered, pasting a smile on her face. Hermione stayed in the Entrance Hall for a moment, mourning the passing of her euphoria, and at the hands of the least likely person she could imagine. Could Penny be *jealous* of her?

The very idea was ludicrous...Penny was taller and thinner and prettier and *blonder*...but at least it made her chuckle.

'I am happy to find you in such good spirits,' a silky voice murmured from behind her.

Hermione turned quickly to face the Headmaster, suddenly prey to a number of reactions...her heart sped up, her tummy swooped, her hands began to tremble, and breath caught in her throat. She swallowed and scrambled inwardly to find her composure. Good grief, all this turmoil for the likes of Snape?

Severus, her brain reminded her, and before she could stop it, a smile touched her lips. She lifted her eyes to his and found them watching her intently. Yes, for Severus...her friend and partner and escort...there was nothing wrong with becoming a bit flustered by the attentions of an attractive man. It was quite Regency-esque, after all.

And with her acceptance of her reaction, her bliss was back, as simply as that.

'Did you rest well?' she asked him, the intimacy of their talk the night before palpable between them.

He nodded. 'As you did. I don't need to ask, for the roses in your cheeks tell your tale.'

Without asking, he took her hand and led her into the Great Hall. Ron was at table, sitting between Romilda and Gabrielle, but he didn't seem pleased about it. In fact, he was watching Hermione and Severus with a puckered brow.

Well, he wouldn't dampen her pleasure in the morning or in her company...she wouldn't permit him to. Being with Ron...talking with him...had never given her the feeling of comfort and safety she had experienced the night before, sharing confidences through the wall with the man at her side.

Seeing Hermione look up at Snape...*Snape!*...like that spelled the absolute end to Ron. He couldn't permit this to go on for another day. The slimy git was bewitching her somehow...perhaps with a potion in her drinks...and it was Ron's duty to protect Hermione from him, if she didn't have the capacity to protect herself.

Romilda laid a hand upon his arm. 'It's hard to see an ex with someone new,' she said quietly. 'I know how you feel.'

Ron glared down at her. 'You don't know the first thing about it.'

Romilda bit her lip and leant closer to him. 'Oh Ron, can't you see it? She's just terrible to you! She's never appreciated you properly...no, not even when you were at school!'

Ron felt his gut twist with self-loathing. Maybe Hermione hadn't been the best girlfriend, but he hadn't been the best boyfriend either...and if she was angry with him now, it was his own damn fault...and it was bloody well time for him to do something about it.

He stood from the table, allowing Romilda's hand to fall from his arm. 'I know you're just trying to be nice,' he told her, 'but you don't know anything about it.'

Stiffening his spine, he marched down the table to where Snape sat at the head, a bowl of porridge and a cup of black coffee before him. A very pinched-looking Penelope Clearwater sat on his left with Dennis Creevey beside her, shovelling his food in with great enthusiasm. Hermione was on Snape's right, putting strawberry jam on her toast, and none of them noticed Ron until he spoke.

'I would like a word, Snape,' he said coldly.

When the Headmaster responded, it was in a lazy way. 'Certainly, Mr Weasley...I assume you wish for this word to be private?'

Snape let his gaze move to Hermione, then back to Ron.

'That's right,' Ron confirmed.

'Very well,' the Headmaster said. 'I'll be in the clubroom after breakfast to read the newspaper. You may find me there.'

Snape's tone was dismissive, but Hermione spoke then, detaining Ron. 'That won't work,' she objected, addressing her remarks to Snape. 'After breakfast is dancing class.'

Snape arched one eyebrow in that insolent way he had, but Hermione didn't seem to mind it. 'Do you mean to show up to dancing class today, then?' he drawled.

At that, Hermione looked rather like the cat that got the cream. Were they *flirting* with one another? Ron's hands fisted.

'Of course I do,' Hermione replied, her eyes twinkling.

Blimey. When was the last time Ron had seen her so playful?

'Well then, Weasley, I suppose it will have to be after dancing class,' Snape said, but he was still looking at Hermione.

'No!' Hermione objected. 'After dancing is riding, and we have to work on my canter if I'm ever going to get to ride with you!'

Ron felt as if he had stepped into some sort of alternate universe; the entire exchange he was witnessing...was participating in...was surreal. There was no other way to describe it.

Snape's expression changed...Ron couldn't have said exactly how, because he certainly didn't smile...but his eyes seemed to warm up, somehow.

'Of course,' Snape murmured, and Hermione giggled. Her eyes met Snape's and it was obvious to anyone within retching distance that they were sharing *an* moment.

Ron fought back the urge to throw up. Penny looked like she was going to cry.

When Snape had the time to look away from Hermione, he turned to Ron again. 'I suppose it will have to be after lunch,' he said. Then, with a comical pause he looked to Hermione. 'If that will be quite convenient for you, Mil ... Miss Granger.'

Ron glared suspiciously at Snape. He had been about to call her something else...Ron was sure of it. And the satisfied smile on Hermione's face...the one she was trying to hide in her teacup...meant that she had just scored some sort of point.

'Quite convenient, sir,' she murmured.

It took all of Ron's home-training to keep from yanking Snape out of his chair just to knock him down. When he could trust himself to speak, he nodded and said, 'Right. I'll see you in the clubroom after lunch.'

He turned to walk away from them, fighting the urge to look back. He was worried that if he did, he would see them laughing together. That wouldn't have been so bad if he thought they were laughing about him...but he had a sick feeling that they weren't. In fact, he was fairly sure he had just made a very poor third in that entire conversation. His presence had not been necessary at all, except as a backboard against which Snape and Hermione could launch test shots at one another.

His girlfriend wasn't using another man to make him jealous. She wasn't thinking about him at all.

Severus danced the minuet with Hermione under McGonagall's beady eye in dancing class. He thought he had never seen so much bowing and curtsying at one time, and he would have been heartily bored if his partner had not been so happy in the exercise. There was something changed about her that he could not put his finger on. She was clearly in better spirits than she'd been even twenty-four hours before. At some point during the day, yesterday, Hermione Granger had decided she was going to enjoy her one week of Regency period activities, and she had proceeded to do so. It was a remarkable change...a damned captivating one, at that.

When the dancing class was over, Hermione hurried away to change into her riding habit, but Minerva detained Severus, backing him neatly into a corner. How the hell did the woman manage what no Death Eater had ever been able to do?

'Have you chosen your reading for tonight, Severus?' she demanded, making it sound as if he were a firstie delinquent on his homework.

'What reading?' he challenged, hearing himself sound as sulky as one of their students.

'Tonight is the dramatic reading and musicale evening,' McGonagall reminded him, her tone acidic enough to leave holes in woollen fabric. 'It has been on your schedule for two months! I know, because I put it there.'

Severus craned his neck to look over her shoulder, searching for an escape route.

Her voice rose in volume, and Severus began to worry that the class stragglers who had yet to quit the Trophy Room would hear the Headmaster being dressed down by his Deputy Head.

'You assured me, Headmaster, that if I lacked participants, I could *rely* on you for...'

Severus erupted, hissing words like magma. 'All right, *all right*, old woman! Leave it alone! I'll do it. Now *stepback*.'

McGonagall crossed her arms over her chest, looking very satisfied with herself, and held her ground. 'I knew you would read,' she said smugly.

Losing patience, Severus came determinedly forward into her personal space, and at last, she retreated, letting him move past her.

'And remember...nothing after 1820!' she called after him.

'I know the dates of the Regency,' he muttered angrily, making good his escape from the Trophy Room.

Harry skived off dancing class...he skived off it every day. The last thing he needed was for some girl to think he was paying attention to her and get ideas about The Boy Who Lived. Harry wasn't conceited enough to think anyone would find *him* particularly irresistible, but The Boy Who Lived...that mythical, heroic figure...was a different matter altogether.

Instead, he changed into his riding clothes and went through the Floo to Malfoy Manor.

Trailing down the path to the stables, he marvelled at how well he came to like horses...and *riding* them...in such a short time. Of course, he supposed that riding thoroughbreds at a privately owned stable was different than hiring a horse of doubtful disposition in Hyde Park at ninety-nine quid an hour. And having someone knowledgeable to show you the ropes...like Sirius' Squib cousin, Horologium Black ... or Malfoy, who wasn't half-bad as a companion for galloping across the open fields or playing at sports or card games...well, having someone to teach you and keep you out of trouble was priceless.

The main stable block was straight ahead, but to the side was a smaller structure, built in a similar style. Harry had always wondered what was in there, so he went to the partially open door and peered inside. The smell of the horses, their straw, both clean and soiled, was exactly the same as the main building...which meant there must be more horses within.

He slipped inside and saw that the stalls here were much larger. Did they keep more than one animal in each box? He moved down the broad aisle between stalls, and a couple of horses stuck their heads over their stall doors and nickered at him...a sound which always made him grin. But when he reached the furthest stall he drew in a horrified breath.

The animal in the stall had a beautiful, dainty head, a vibrantly red coat, and four white stockings. But its middle section was enormous, bloated...distended to the point that Harry felt sure he saw something moving around in there.

'Did you get lost, Potter?'

Harry turned to Malfoy, almost relieved to see him. 'Draco...what's wrong with this horse?'

The Ferret's proper name came out of his mouth without him thinking about it, and for once, it didn't seem important to have shown weakness ... erm, friendliness.

Malfoy smirked, but it wasn't an unpleasant expression, for it swiftly became a chuckle as he walked up beside Harry. 'There's nothing wrong with Perse...is there, girl?' He opened the stall door and went in to the mare, taking hold of her halter and stroking her muzzle.

Harry followed hesitantly, but Malfoy gave him a grey-eyed look he couldn't interpret, then grabbed his wrist and pulled his hand to the mare's neck.

'There's nothing wrong with her...she's breeding and due to drop her foal any day,' Draco explained, returning his attention to the horse and keeping his eyes firmly on her.

Harry shifted from one foot to the other, thinking that he was standing too close to Malfoy...but if Malfoy wasn't bothered by it, then he wouldn't be, either. It was really rather warm...he was fairly sure there was perspiration on his brow...and it was very hard for him to think. But he forced himself to concentrate.

Making a mighty effort, he said, 'What's her name? Purse? Like a handbag?'

'Well, her name is Persephone, but I...'

Now it was Harry's turn to chuckle, and he slanted a sidelong glance at Malfoy. 'Don't tell me...I know the drill. Perse is shorter.'

But Malfoy was already looking at him, and when their eyes met, the box stall seemed suddenly smaller and quite airless. Now, in addition to being unable to move, Harry was also unable to look away. He was frozen in place, one hand repeatedly stroking the soft chestnut mare, when his impulse was to touch Malfoy...*Draco*...instead. The silken white-blond hair looked as if it would be much softer to the touch than the horse's coat ...

The mare tossed her head, butting Malfoy and interrupting the staring contest. Malfoy laughed and gave Perse one final pat. 'No sugar for you, my girl...you'll want to get back into racing trim when this little stranger makes his entrance to the world.'

Harry recognised the escape for what it was and backed out of the stall. Turning, he walked from the building into the sunlight again, where the interlude with Malfoy began to assume a dream-like quality in his mind.

Good. At this rate, he'd have forgotten all about it by lunch time.

Severus retired to the clubroom after lunch to meet with Weasley, but he would have much preferred to continue in the company of the surprisingly fascinating Miss Granger. A single Murus Perlucidus Spell, simple enough to be mastered by a clever firstie, and he had graduated in her esteem from tolerated presence to cherished friend ... and a friend, moreover, with whom she chose to flirt.

It was a marvellous, novel experience to become the focus of a desirable woman's attentions. Not content just to accept his escort, she now sought him out at every turn. Upon entering a room, she looked for him, and finding him, she came directly to his side. What was a man to think...to *feel*...about such preferential treatment? And even then, she was not satisfied by his mere presence. No, she was all womanly smiles and beguiling glances...all silvery laughs, trilling up his spine, and smouldering brown eyes, kindling his blood.

Dalliance with Hermione Granger chanced the same chaotic danger as trifling with Fiendfyre...but even the sanest of men will hazard the heat after long enough alone, in the cold.

Severus sat at the table furthest from the door, near a window emitting filtered light into the rather dim clubroom. Two older wizards sat near the hearth, their pipes puffing, a wizarding chess game between them. Near the middle of the room, in an armchair facing away from Severus, another wizard sat with a well-thumbed edition of Wizard Weekly spread open on his knees, in an apparent doze, his hat pulled low over his face.

Weasley entered the room and came directly to Severus, a look of grim determination on his freckled face. 'I won't beat around the bush, Snape,' he said.

Severus nodded, biting back the host of sarcastic replies which sprang to his tongue. Miss Granger would not thank him for inflaming the boy by challenging his ... limited brain power.

When Severus didn't speak, Weasley said, 'I'll have that schedule back from you now...enough's enough.'

Severus felt a flash of alarm...could he, in good conscience, refuse the boy?...quickly supplanted by a wave of irritation, compounded when Weasley held out his hand, palm up.

'Why would I do that, Weasley?'

The question seemed to stump the whelp. His arm slowly lost altitude as he pondered an answer.

'Because she's my girlfriend!'

Severus flicked imaginary lint from the sleeve of his coat. 'No more so than she was when you wagered her away,' he murmured.

The boy slapped his palm on the table top, and Severus slowly raised his eyes to see the reddening, pugnacious face scrunched up in fury.

'She doesn't want you around!' Weasley squawked. 'She's only doing it to get up my nose!'

Severus shrugged. 'Perhaps she is. But why would I surrender the schedule to you? What's in it for me?'

Once again, the boy seemed knocked off course, as if he were unable to maintain his equilibrium in the face of Severus' mighty verbal blows.

What a lightweight.

Under the burden of his striving thoughts, Weasley collapsed into the chair opposite Severus. 'Well ... what would you want?'

Severus cultivated an expression of boredom. 'I did not initiate this conversation,' he pointed out.

Weasley picked up a page from the box of writing paper and quills provided at the tables, so that the gentlemen might keep up their correspondence whilst on holiday. He dipped the quill in ink and paused with it poised over the parchment. 'I'll write an IOU,' he said. 'How much do you want?'

'I will not accept an IOU from you, Weasley, not now, nor at any point in the future. I wish you will desist from offering them at every turn.' There...that would burn the whelp's pride.

Weasley threw the quill to the table. 'Damn you, Snape! Fine! I'll duel you for it!'

Severus almost began to enjoy himself. It was baiting, yes, but it was not a confrontation of his seeking...surely Miss Granger could not hold him responsible for it if Weasley complained to her ...

He gave a thin smile. 'I thought you wished to have a *serious* discussion,' he said.

No, the boy was not entirely dim. He understood the taunt.

'I'm perfectly serious, you arrogant git! I could take you!'

Severus stood, taking care to smooth his long-tailed coat. 'You could not "take" me, Mr Weasley, in a duel of wands, swords, pistols...*owits*.' He bowed in correct Regency style...just low enough to show his disdain.

Turning to go, he remained hyper-vigilant; he fully expected an outburst to follow him from the room. But it was not a shout from Weasley which made him look back...it was a self-contained chuckle.

'A duel of wits? What an excellent idea,' the boy said. And standing, he strode to stand tall before Severus. 'Headmaster Snape, I challenge you to a duel of wits...also known as a game of Wizarding Chess...for possession of the schedule of events with *my* name on it.'

The entire episode ran through Severus' mind at the speed of light as he stared into Weasley's smug blue eyes. How could he have been so stupid? He might have simply refused to part with the schedule and walked away, but instead he had attempted to rub the boy's nose in his failure, and in so doing, he had set himself up for certain defeat.

As if it had been yesterday, he could hear Dumbledore's voice saying, *for the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years*. and that had been when Weasley was twelve years old! The boy could only have improved his game with the passing of the years.

Severus could repudiate the suggestion...carry it off by saying he would not be party to such a thing...but he was no coward. The notion was a brilliant one...a master stroke...and the courageous wizard would graciously acknowledge being outwitted. Damnation...outwitted before he even sat down to the chessboard! Severus was no slouch at chess, but Weasley had even been able to outplay Dumbledore at the game, a feat Severus had never matched.

Drawing his gloves from his pocket, he pulled them on his hands, his mind racing. He would meet Ronald Weasley for the proposed chess match, or he would never be able to live with himself.

'I accept your challenge, Mr Weasley,' he said calmly. 'I am engaged with activities until this evening, after the reading...would nine o'clock be convenient for you?'

'Nine is good,' Weasley said. 'Where will we play? Your office?'

Good God, in front of Dumbledore and all the Headmasters' portraits? Not in this lifetime.

'Let us meet in the library,' Severus said. 'We will have privacy there, I should think.'

'The library, then,' Weasley agreed.

Severus feigned difficulty with one of his gloves...he was loath to quit the room whilst Weasley remained, and the redhead had meandered over to the chess-playing old men. The boy greeted the combatants, studied the board, then whispered something to one of the players. The recipient of his suggestion made a move.

'Check mate!' the victor cried, exciting a storm of protest from his opponent. But Weasley paid them no mind...he was smiling at Severus.

No one watching Dennis Creevey take his hat from over his face and scurry out the clubroom door would have suspected him of having a deep thought in his head...and in many ways, it was true...Dennis was not a young man much given to heavy-duty cogitation.

Even so, he recognised trouble when he (deliberately) eavesdropped on it, and he was alarmed. Someone in a position of power needed to be told in what peril Ron Weasley stood, and Dennis was the only one who could save him from sure death...for what else could be the result of a duel with Headmaster Snape?

Dennis had meant only to *pretend* to doze, but it was no wonder that he might have dropped off in the dim, cool clubroom, for the chair had been quite comfortable, and the Headmaster frequently spoke so softly you had to strain to hear him ... but Ron had been loud enough, even if Dennis had been rather disoriented when he was startled out of sleep.

It was after lunch, and the inhabitants of the castle had scattered in all directions; many of the play cast-members were practicing their lines in the antechamber, some of the older ladies were in their sitting room, but the person whom Dennis was seeking was out of doors...he knew for certain, because he had consulted a house-elf, and *they* knew everything.

He darted out the drawing room doors into the rose garden, meaning to take the shortcut to the shrubbery-maze. His quarry was said to be walking there, and Dennis wanted to find the person quickly. Ron's father was attending Regency Week, Dennis knew, but he didn't feel he could go to Mr Weasley...that felt far too much like telling tales and getting a mate in trouble with his dad, even though Ron was a few years older than Dennis.

Dennis Creevey came from a Muggle family. There'd been four of them: his parents, his brother, and him. His brother, Colin, had been his idol and his best mate, all in one package. Colin had been a photographer and a member of Dumbledore's Army, as well, but when his body had been found after the Battle of Hogwarts, Colin had been armed only with his wand...which was a shame, as he had been a far better photographer than a duellist. Dennis had found Colin's camera in his dormitory and taken it for his own. Sometimes, using it made Dennis feel close to his brother, but other times, it just made him feel like he'd never measure up to Colin, who'd died and left him alone to figure out how to be a wizard all on his own.

Dennis didn't feel like a very good wizard. At nineteen, he was old enough to have left school, but going back to Hogwarts after Colin died had been really hard for him. School had been impossible for Muggle-borns like the Creeveys the year of the war, and then there'd been the rebuilding of the school ... He was not a fully qualified wizard and probably never would be.

Still, a bloke didn't have to be a wizard to know the best person to go to when he was in a pickle. The best person for Dennis to go to had always been his big brother, Colin...and if Ron was in trouble, Dennis knew just what to do: find George Weasley and tell him everything.

A disinterested observer...perhaps one in the clouds, looking down on the castle from above...might have been amused by the fall-out of Dennis Creevey's misunderstanding of what he had heard in the clubroom. The rather small Creevey had found the elder Weasley brother, who had heard him out in frowning silence before adjuring him to silence. George had then gone immediately to run his brother to ground.

'Not a duel...a chess match!'

This had changed everything for George, who had begun with the principle of 'What Would Dad Do?' He was now freed to enjoy the joke for what it was, and to ponder how he could turn it to his profit ... but who with half a brain would bet against Ron in a chess game?

Lucius Malfoy had heard him out with a disdainful curl of his lip before reaching into that deep pocket and placing a handsome wager on the Headmaster to defeat Ronald Weasley at chess...perhaps Malfoy had no knowledge of Ron and the Transfigured chess set guarding the Philosopher's Stone. But the spreading of what had begun as a rumour and evolved into a wagering gala amongst the gentlemen was a thing of beauty, rather like the ripples caused by dropping a pebble into a pond of water. In short order, the secret of the chess challenge betwixt Severus Snape and Ron Weasley was, as most secrets at Hogwarts eventually became, common knowledge.

But the person on the outermost ring of that concentric, rippling circle...and therefore, the last to learn of it...was Hermione Granger.

Ron, returning to his room to change for dinner...why the hell did Regency folk have to spend half their lives changing clothes?...was startled to find Romilda Vane there, sitting in the desk chair.

'How did you get in?' he asked, noting how his voice rose to a near squeak.

Romilda held up a jar of Savoir Smith's Sore Muscle Reliever and gave him an impish smile. 'I told the house-elf that I had this for your sore shoulders, and that I had to stay to show you how to use it.'

Ron frowned at her. Honestly, the woman just didn't know when to give up the chase! He began to unbutton his coat. 'Well, you'd better clear out...don't you have to change clothes for dinner?'

She rose gracefully and crossed to him, beginning to assist with his waistcoat buttons. 'There's plenty of time for that if we skip drinks beforehand,' she said reasonably, finishing with the buttons and beginning to tug his white shirt from his trousers. 'Get this off and let me rub your shoulders, Ron...you're so tense, I don't know how you expect to be able to win at chess!'

Ron was stressed, and the shoulder rub sounded quite nice, actually. What could be the harm in letting Romilda massage his muscles?

When he was sitting on the side of the bed with Romilda's hands on his bare flesh, though, the muscle tension just seemed to move from one body part to another. It had been weeks since Hermione had let him in her bed; it was no wonder he was such a mess. A man couldn't think with all that ... excess fluid build-up. But it was a bit perplexing, this confusion and arousal from Romilda's touch when he was supposed to be concentrating on getting Hermione back.

'You deserve a girlfriend who appreciates you, Ron,' Romilda murmured into his ear as her clever fingers worked the kinks from his neck muscles. 'Someone who *wants* you...not just because you're so tall and funny and sexy...but because she admires who you are inside.'

Ron pushed himself off the bed and stood looking down at Romilda. It would be so easy to lie down with her and forget everything...but he had never been with another girl since he and Hermione had been a couple, except for the odd kiss and fumble at the pub or at a party when Hermione hadn't wanted to go with him...and he wasn't about to start now, just when having Hermione for his own again was within reach.

'You're really good at back rubs,' he said to the pretty brunette with the oil-slick hands, 'and thanks for that. But I'd like for you to go now.'

Romilda pouted, her mouth particularly kissable, and allowed her eyes to stray down to his trousers, where his muscle tension was still quite evident. 'Wouldn't you like for me to rub ... the rest of you?' she asked plaintively.

Hermione settled for the afternoon in the ladies' drawing room, doing bad tambour frame needlework whilst her mind wandered. Over and again, she remembered the feel of Firefly's muscles moving beneath her while Severus watched her, his hand on the lead attached to her horse's bridle, teaching her to canter ... almost as if he were the one striving beneath her ...

'Bother!' she exclaimed, snarling her thread again.

Flossy, the ancient house-elf who helped the ladies to correct their mistakes on their sewing projects, appeared and corrected Hermione's error with the touch of one gnarled finger. Hermione smiled her thanks; she'd been making loads of mistakes on her stitchery today, but it was difficult to concentrate when her mind continued to wander to Severus.

Penny found her there, just when Hermione was thinking about the tight fit of Severus' leather riding boots.

'What?' she said, startled out of her tumultuous thoughts.

Penny answered her shortly, her former friendliness seemingly at an end. 'I said, do you know where the Headmaster is?'

Hermione shrugged. 'He's busy this afternoon...meetings, and then he has to prepare a reading for tonight.'

'So, you aren't monopolising his time this afternoon?' Penny demanded.

Hermione resisted the urge to tell Penny off. 'I won't see him until drinks before dinner,' she replied evenly, rather proud of her measured response.

'Good!' Penny replied.

I hope he totally ignores her Hermione thought, returning to her own, more pleasant thoughts.

Finbar Quigley wandered into the Hogwarts library, curious about this room that was to be the site of the chess match all his mates were talking about...and betting on. It was an immense chamber, filled with thousands of books. Tables and chairs were arranged in different spots, some in alcoves, and it was in one of these that he nearly stumbled on the aloof Headmaster Snape, sitting at a table and frowning at a book. Fin crept away, not wishing to disturb the sour fellow. Movement at the end of a row of books drew his eye, and he saw Penny Clearwater, the loveliest girl at the castle, heading directly for the Headmaster's table. It was fairly clear that Penny fancied the Headmaster, which made Fin sad, because he fancied Penny.

They had been thrown together at play rehearsals, where Penny had been given the part of Hermia to Fin's Lysander. Playing at lovers made Fin wish it were true, but Penny seemed entirely unmoved by his admiration. Of course, it didn't help that Fin was completely useless at flirting with girls he was really interested in. Joking about with the girls who flocked around Quidditch players was easy, but when a bloke really liked a girl, things became far more complicated.

Careful to keep his distance, he crept towards the alcove again, wanting to see Penny and Snape together...if the Headmaster returned Penny's interest, then Fin would simply have to give up the hope of attracting her attention. But when he saw Penny standing over the Headmaster, it seemed to him as if the man never took his eyes from his book. Fin couldn't hear their words, but it seemed to him that Penny was asking the Headmaster something, and whatever it was, it was making her anxious. Snape, however, never even looked at her. His response was unequivocal; even from this far away, Fin could hear his firm 'No'.

Penny tarried for only a moment, wringing her pretty hands, and then she walked away from Snape, her distress evident on her face. It made Fin want to hit something...Snape, preferably...but then, he had a better idea. He would do something to cheer Penny up...something she would like. The only problem was that Fin had no idea what that could be.

He decided he would ask Viktor. Krum was never at a loss with the ladies; even when he was soundly rebuffed, the Bulgarian was never down for long. Viktor would know what to do.

The guests all showed up for the musicale evening, wearing their party clothes and prepared to be entertained. There would be dramatic readings, and then there would be music...just such entertainments as had been quite common in Regency times. The large drawing room had been set with chairs in rows, much like a theatre, and the area in front of the hearth had been provided with a teacher's lectern, in case a reader needed a place to rest his book.

Hermione wore her second best evening gown, a blue-grey silk with silvery designs embroidered about the hem. Severus, who was very elegant in knee breeches and immaculate stockings, had seemed quite distracted at dinner, but Hermione had put that down to preoccupation over reading in public.

Oddly enough, it had seemed as though all the young people were in particularly high spirits before dinner. Hermione saw, more than once, knots of the young men laughing together; it gave her the uneasy feeling that they were up to something disruptive. Still, she was determined not to fret over it. She would simply have to trust to Harry and Ron to exercise some control over their unruly friends.

She and Severus took chairs near the back of the room for the readings, with him on the aisle, so that he might easily extract himself when it was time for him to read. She was wild to know what piece he had chosen, but he had only tantalised her with it, saying that she must wait and listen if she wished to know.

Minerva looked very much the grand old lady in her dark red velvet gown over an under dress of white satin. She wore her tartan as a scarf wound about her elegant, classical Grecian hair-do, from which a few plumes extruded. Severus was less than complimentary about his Deputy's attire.

'She looks like a cockatiel,' he said, and Hermione had to giggle.

How was it that she'd known this man for half her life but had never known before this week about his irresistible, dry humour?

'Thank you for coming tonight, my friends,' Minerva began, drawing everyone's attention to her. 'You may see by your programmes that we will begin the evening with dramatic readings and will follow that with musical entertainment.' She stood straighter, looking sternly about the full-to-bursting drawing room as if it were her classroom, and Hermione noticed everyone sitting a bit taller and looking attentive; for a crazy moment, she felt as if she should be taking notes. 'I will start us off with a poem by my countryman, Mr Robbie Burns!'

The assemblage gave polite applause, and McGonagall waited for it to end before she began,

O my Luve's like a red, red rose

That's newly sprung in June:

O my Luve's like the melody,

That's sweetly play'd in tune.

Hermione loved to listen to Minerva McGonagall when she let her Scottish accent roll, and she enjoyed all three of the short poems Minerva read. Guests with whom Hermione was not personally acquainted followed with their readings in quick succession, some more accomplished public readers than others, some speaking from memory and some reading from books. Hermione was simply delighted by the lovely words.

When Severus rose to read, he glanced at her face, and she smiled up at him. 'I am all ears,' she promised.

The Headmaster reached the front of the room, and Hermione noted amongst the listeners a response similar to the one they'd given McGonagall, only more extreme. No one misbehaved in Snape's classroom.

'I shall read to you from the works of Mr Shelley,' he said, and Hermione's curiosity was piqued. Of the most famous romantic poets, Hermione thought that Shelley might be the one least often quoted. She sat forward a bit to listen.

Oh! there are spirits of the air,

And genii of the evening breeze,

And gentle ghosts, with eyes as fair

As star-beams among twilight trees:

Such lovely ministers to meet

Oft hast thou turned from men thy lonely feet.

Hermione stared at him aghast as he spoke, his rich baritone effortlessly filling the room, riveting all who listened. He consulted no book or written notes, and he did not recite as had the other speakers, sounding like students regurgitating what they had got by heart. He spoke the words as if they were his own, proceeding from his own soul, and they told the tale of a broken heart.

With mountain winds, and babbling springs,

And moonlight seas, that are the voice

Of these inexplicable things,

Thou dost hold commune, and rejoice

When they did answer thee, but they

Cast, like a worthless boon, thy love away.

And thou hast sought in starry eyes

Beams that were never meant for thine,

Another's wealth: tame sacrifice

To a fond faith ! still dost thou pine?

Still dost thou hope that greeting hands,

Voice, looks, or lips, may answer thy demands?

Hermione felt tears start to her eyes, as if she might cry. She knew Severus' story...everyone in the wizarding world knew it. Did he still, then, pine for Lily Potter, for the woman who had never loved him? How would it ever be possible, then, to win this wizard's heart?

As if she wanted his heart! What a silly thing to think! She was attracted to his body, his voice, his wit...she wanted to feel his hands on her...but that wasn't love. It was passion, and such visceral reactions required no such emotion!

Ah! wherefore didst thou build thine hope

On the false earth's inconstancy?

Did thine own mind afford no scope

Of love, or moving thoughts to thee?

That natural scenes or human smiles

Could steal the power to wind thee in their wiles?

Yes, all the faithless smiles are fled

Whose falsehood left thee broken-hearted;

The glory of the moon is dead;

Night's ghosts and dreams have now departed;

Thine own soul still is true to thee,

But changed to a foul fiend through misery.

This fiend, whose ghastly presence ever

Beside thee like thy shadow hangs,

Dream not to chase: the mad endeavour

Would scourge thee to severer pangs.

Be as thou art. Thy settled fate,

Dark as it is, all change would aggravate.

The Headmaster lowered his head, as if to indicate the end of his reading. Hermione dipped her chin and rubbed a gloved hand across her wet eyes, glad that there was no eye makeup to smear. How could he stand to bare his soul so? She could scarcely bear it for him, her heart aching for his sorrow and his loss...but it seemed he was not finished with them, for when the applause was ended, he began again.

One word is too often profaned

For me to profane it,

One feeling too falsely disdain'd

For thee to disdain it.

One hope is too like despair

For prudence to smother,

And pity from thee more dear

Than that from another.

Hermione found that she was not breathing, but the realisation still did not prompt her to draw breath. The spellbinding beauty of the words he spoke held her rapt, and another breath seemed the least important concern of all. Then those black eyes sought hers and held them, and she wasn't sure she would ever breathe again.

I can give not what men call love;

But wilt thou accept not

The worship the heart lifts above

And the Heavens reject not:

The desire of the moth for the star,

Of the night for the morrow,

The devotion to something afar

From the sphere of our sorrow?

A low, courteous bow was all the response the Headmaster gave to the thunderous applause he received, and he strode from the front of the room to disappear through a side door. At last Hermione pulled air into her lungs, shaken to the core by the look in his eyes as he had spoken the words to her. Was he flirting with her? Was he playing the part of the gallant gentleman?

She strove to calm the storm of emotion within, expecting at any moment to have him come up to take his seat beside her...but he did not come. Instead, Viktor Krum slipped into the Headmaster's place. Hermione turned a glare on him. 'That's not your chair!' she objected.

Viktor waved a hand. 'I know that!' he said. 'But the Headmaster won't be back for it.'

Hermione frowned. 'Why wouldn't he?'

'Never mind that,' Viktor said. 'I have a problem, and I need your help.'

Hermione felt impatient, but she couldn't refuse him. She was the coordinator of this event, even if she had spent the entire day in nothing but pursuing her own pleasure. People were moving about just now, the pianoforte and the harp being placed for the convenience of the musical performers, so at least Viktor wasn't interrupting anyone.

'Tell me,' she commanded.

'My friend Fin,' Viktor said. 'He pines for Penelope Clearwater, but she does not notice him. Can you speak to her on his behalf? Or tell me what can he do to please her?'

Penny was far too annoyed with Hermione to listen to her advice about men...but perhaps, if Fin could gain Penny's notice, she would stop trying to get Severus' attention away from Hermione. At least the antagonism between Penny and her was not so evident that Viktor was aware of it.

Oh! And hadn't Parkinson said something to her about Viktor?

'Penny is going to sing a song with Pansy in a little while...a duet.' Hermione glanced at Viktor, wondering if he could be pointed in Parkinson's direction. 'Why don't you and Fin sit as close to the front as you can and pay special attention to them? I'm sure they will be flattered, and Penny will be sure to notice Fin!'

Viktor looked doubtful. 'Do we have to do it now?' he asked, looking to the clock on the mantelpiece. 'It's almost nine o'clock!'

Hermione huffed. 'What difference does that make? If Fin wants Penny to notice him, you should go sit up front now, while people are moving around!'

The room had been quite full, but as people began to settle down for the musical portion of the evening, Hermione could not help but notice a marked increase in the number of empty chairs. In fact, most of the younger members of the group were nowhere to be seen, and even some of the older men were gone.

Where were they gone to?

The harp was being tuned up by a woman in a filmy white dress when Luna sat down beside Hermione. 'I love harp music,' she said in her vague way.

'Do you know where everyone is?' Hermione asked her.

'Oh, they've gone to watch Ron and the Headmaster duel,' Luna said. 'They were going to begin at nine o'clock, and it's past that now.' She arranged her skirt and folded her hands in her lap.

'What? What are you saying?' Hermione demanded, suddenly frightened. Luna's words made no sense at all!

'It's not a proper duel, you know,' Luna continued dreamily. 'They're playing chess in the library...but George says it's a rematch, so Ron can win back what he lost at cards.'

Hermione absorbed the information, her understanding lagging only slightly behind her reasoning mind. When she fully grasped what Luna had said, all trace of her mawkish sentimentality about Snape and his spouting of romantic poetry was gone, replaced by a rage so unexpected and all-consuming that she could not experience it and remain immobile. Standing, she moved past Luna and through the doorway without a word to anyone; she was through the Entrance Hall, with one foot upon the first stair up to her room when Penny's and Parkinson's prettily harmonised voices rose in song.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 15

Tuesday, August 6, 2002

The Chess Match and the Aftermath

Severus shifted in the wooden straight-backed chair and resisted the urge to wipe sweat from his brow. The lightly perfumed handkerchief...her token, given before the poker game, as a hope for his good luck...was in his pocket to remind him of his purpose, not to dry the drops of perspiration at his hairline.

He had done everything he could reasonably do to assure his success: He had consulted the volumes of the great chess masters in the school library. As a gesture of farewell, he had spouted the words of the greatest (in his opinion) of the Romantic poets whilst looking into Hermione Granger's eyes. Then he had shaken hands with his opponent over the chequered, wooden board and sat down to play his best game.

There was nothing else to be done.

Miss Granger had hated Ronald for wagering his time with her in the poker game...would she despise Severus for participating in this contest? What did a woman know of courage or honour, from a man's perspective? What did anyone know of such things in this day and age? And even if he had her ear to do so, would Severus try to explain himself?

He had given up explaining himself the day he had taken up Dumbledore's banner and become a double agent.

'Your move, Snape.'

Hermione climbed the eight flights of steps to her room, her expression stony, despite the clamouring in her mind. On the second floor landing, she glanced towards the library and saw a small crowd milling excitedly about in the corridor. She would not join them...not in thousand years...not for a million Galleons.

How could they? How could the two men who meant the most to her disrespect her so completely that they would play against one another for her favour, not once, but twice, as if she were some... '*Some Regency novel heroine*?' her mind whispered. 'No!' she said aloud. More like something to be objectified by them and their stupid chauvinistic machismo.

Well, they would learn their error! She would *show* them! She was a strong, independent, twenty-first century witch, not some dependent, powerless woman! *Like a Regency-era woman?* the voice asked again.

'It's not the same thing,' she argued.

Still, it was a question to consider. Even Jane Austen's heroines were keenly aware of their lack of choices in life. What was there, really, for a woman in the twenty-first century to long after in the nineteenth? Why did so many women hark back in their dreams to a time when women were, by law and custom, little more than chattel? Perhaps cherished and valued, but powerless, for all that...unless power were granted to them by a man.

Her steps were lagging by the time she reached her room. Crookshanks leapt down from her bed and wound about her ankles when she entered, but aside from giving him a quick scratch about the ears, she paid him no mind. Instead, she sat down at her dressing table and stared into the mirror, trying to sort out her thoughts.

She loved Regency stories and had done since she was a girl...why, she had fallen in love with Mr Darcy when she'd seen *Pride and Prejudice* on television...she couldn't have been much above six or seven years old! She loved the clothing, the manners, the courtliness, the bowing and curtsying, and most of all, she loved the strong, good men.

The draw was the romance. It was the romance, pure and simple. She and thousands of women just like her longed for that touch of romance in their lives, and living for a few hours between the covers of a book chock-full of romance gave them the opportunity to possess it. She bit her lip, staring down at her hands. There had been very little of romance in her dealings with Ron. She didn't doubt his capacity for it, but she thought it very likely that she simply did not inspire that type of behaviour in him...maybe not in any man. Yet the feelings that had stirred in her in the last two days...the attraction to Severus, with such strong overtones of impulsive recklessness...seemed to rouse the same impulses in him, too. Wasn't that proof that such romance did exist in life? It wasn't simply the clothes and the activities and the polite words of Regency Week that triggered her feelings! It was Severus Snape, himself, and she would be the world's biggest fool not to follow that road as far as it led her...at least until Regency Week ended and life resumed its normal, dull rhythm again.

Was Severus wrong to allow Ron a rematch to win back again the schedule that matched hers? Yes, and she would be sure to make her objections clear to him...but would she let it bring an unnecessary, premature end to the adventure she'd been enjoying?

Hell, no! Why should she?

She picked up her comb and began to tidy her ringlets, humming to herself as she had done when the day began, so many hours before. How long did it take for men to play a chess game, anyway? She'd seen Ron and Harry play games that were over almost before they began, because Ron was so much better at ...

Realisation dawned, and with it came terror. What if, when Severus lost the game, he thought he had also lost Hermione's company? What if he planned to be *honourable* about it, in some stupid, manly display of integrity?

The terrible possibility drove everything else from her mind. If the game was over, she had to find Severus and somehow let him know that she still wanted his escort, no matter how quickly or soundly Ron had defeated him. And if the game wasn't over, she had to find out how it was going.

Springing from her chair, she hurried off to the library.

Ron stared at the chessboard whilst Snape pondered his next move, but he had a hard time keeping his mind on the game. When he wasn't completely in control of himself, his thoughts kept on returning to Romilda and her hands on his skin. She seemed to like touching him, a novel experience for him. Romilda wasn't shy about expressing desire, was she? And she desired him, a fact which she had been making quite clear. How many blokes had a good looking girl show up in their rooms with a bottle of oil and the offer of rubbing it in?

'Your move, Mr Weasley.'

Ron dragged his mind back to the game. This was important. He had to win this match so he could show Snape ... show him ...

Almost by rote, he made his move. There were people all over the library, which made him glad he and Snape had chosen the table in the very middle of the library for their game. Most of the spectators were hovering in the stacks, out of respect for the chess players, but some of them were right out in the open, probably hoping they would win their bets. George said it was the hottest betting they'd had all week, including Harry and Draco playing blind-folded badminton.

Unbidden, a sudden memory of Romilda's perfume came to him. It was musky and flowery, much heavier than the scent Hermione sometimes wore. Because it was unfamiliar, Ron found it exotic ... and sexy. She had offered to rub him more...would have had sex with him, right then and there...and he had sent her out of his room. What was the matter with him? What sort of bloke passed up that kind of free pass on no-strings sex?

'Mr Weasley?'

Ron gave a sigh of disgust. 'All right. Keep your shirt on!' He made a quick assessment of the board and moved his bishop, taking one of Snape's knights. When the prisoner had been bludgeoned into submission, it was Snape's turn again.

Severus knew there were people lurking about, but he deliberately shut them out of his mind. All that he saw was the chessboard and the pieces, and as he executed the plan he had painstakingly researched in the library, he strained every nerve to concentrate. If he matched his best game against Weasley's best game, he would be defeated. But if he brought his best game on a day when Weasley was wanting, Severus had a chance.

And he wanted the chance to win. In his mind, it had come to be something much more than a simple game of chess, played for possession of the piece of parchment lying on the table to his left, set an equal distance from each of them. It was about his right to Hermione...to his place at her side...and now that he was in danger of losing that right, there was nothing more precious to him. He knew very well that the piece of parchment had not the magical properties he was giving it...that the girl would decide whom she wished to have as her escort, regardless of who was in possession of the schedule that matched her own...but gaining possession of the parchment had marked the beginning of his time with her, and he was loath to lose it.

The trap he had set out to create was in place, and against all expectations, Weasley had taken the first step into it when he took Severus' knight.

The group outside the library had the grace to look ashamed of themselves as Hermione walked through them to the door, her chin held high. She saw the opponents when she entered the library, but she had no wish to be seen by them. Easing to her left, she worked her way around the cavernous room, with the assurance of a woman who had spent a large part of her formative years hanging about in this very place. She knew every nook and cranny of the Hogwarts library, and she knew precisely where she

wished to be...away from the hoi polloi, and in a position where she could see both Severus' and Ron's faces.

When she reached her chosen place, she could see them both very well. Severus was glowering his blackest scowl, as if his disapprobation could cower the game pieces into obeying his will. Ron, on the other hand, looked quite distracted...looked, in fact, much as he had done through most in-depth discussions he had ever participated in with Hermione.

Did that mean he wasn't paying proper attention to the game? That Severus might actually win?

It doesn't matter who wins! her inner feminist informed her...and Hermione knew that was true. No matter who won the chess match, only Hermione would decide with whom she chose to keep company. But if Severus won, he'd be more tractable about it ... at least, she *thought* he would.

And pulling her silk shawl more closely about her, she watched and waited.

Ron's unruly mind continued to plague him with thoughts of Romilda, even as the game ground on. Snape was a better player than Ron had thought he'd be; he had a good grasp of tactics, and his strategy was quite sound. But it was a bit difficult for Ron to keep his mind on decimating Snape's forces to capture his king when visions of Romilda's cleavage kept creeping into his mind. She'd invited him to look down the front of her dress the very first night...how many women would make an offer like that? It was obvious that she'd like nothing better than to get Ron between the sheets, but she wasn't just *gagging* for it...she wasn't after everything in drop-front trousers, now, was she?...no, she concentrated all of her efforts and attentions on Ron Weasley and no one else.

And as much as it pained him to admit it, if he were being truly objective, Ron would have to say that Romilda was prettier than Hermione. Her eyes were darker, her hair more lustrous...and less bushy...and her figure was a bit slimmer. Romilda was just the sort of girl...

'Weasley! Could we get on with this?'

Ron dragged his attention back to the game with a terrific exertion of will. When he did, the formation on the board burst upon him with a mixed rush of familiarity and dread.

'Check,' Snape snarled.

Severus felt the first flash of jubilation when he saw Weasley's surprise...swiftly followed by a narrowing of focus. Ah, the boy was back from his wool-gathering now, but unless Severus was mistaken, Weasley's swift assessment...looking about for a way to lock the stable door, as it were...was too late: the horse was too far gone to be corralled again.

Severus schooled his features to impassivity and remained perfectly still, waiting to see what the boy would do. It was entirely possible that there was some way out of the trap of which Severus knew nothing. But his hopes were high, for if Lady Luck had favoured him twice in one week, he was a fortunate bastard, indeed.

After a moment, Weasley looked at him with a certain degree of respect. 'You're a sly one, Snape.'

Severus felt the joy rise a notch in his breast, even as he inclined his head to accept this high praise, as any Slytherin would do. 'It is kind of you to say so,' he drawled.

'Ah, well.' Weasley made the only move left to him, taking Severus' bishop and watching as his queen smashed the bishop with her sceptre.

With a wild fluttering of euphoria, Severus took Weasley's queen, his countenance revealing nothing of his feelings. 'I believe that is checkmate,' he said politely.

Weasley raked the board with analytical blue eyes and looked up with a rueful twist of his lips. Good God, was the boy going to be gracious in defeat? Severus would have preferred a tantrum, for he could have despised Weasley for bad sportsmanship. Such good form as this was deserving of, at a minimum, respect.

'I concede, Headmaster. It is checkmate.'

Triumph exploded in Severus, a rush of exhilaration so powerful that he was helpless to contain it. He knew that betrayal of emotion was no longer a death sentence for him, but such displays still left him shaken. He grasped Weasley's offered hand.

'Be good to her, sir,' Weasley said, like a Muggle relay runner handing off responsibility for the baton.

Severus grabbed up the parchment and restored it fastidiously to its place in his pocketbook...nestled betwixt two pages already housing a pressed yellow flower.

'Be good to yourself, Mr Weasley,' he said noncommittally...and a sound in the stacks drew his attention. A lady was scurrying madly away through the library...a lady wearing Hermione's silk shawl.

'She's going to be as angry as a wet hen,' Weasley said, his tone oddly ... supportive.

'Damnation!' Severus swore, and he strode after her.

She heard Severus speak...heard the word 'checkmate'...but still, she did not trust her ears. She had never heard it said that the Headmaster was particularly adept at chess...was it possible that he should defeat Ron?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if he did?

No, it is shameful that they would even think of having a rematch over you her rational self insisted, but Hermione wasn't much interested in rationality now. The whole surreal situation seemed very much like something from a romance novel, and all her knowledge of the politically correct attitudes could not save her from *glorying* in it. She remembered a silly song her mother had played on an old-fashioned record player when she was a little girl, where the queen-to-be sang,

Shall two knights never tilt for me

and let their blood be spilt for me?

Oh where are the simple joys of maidenhood?

Shall I not be on a pedestal,

Worshipped and competed for?

Not be carried off, or better still,

Cause a little war?

The strangely apropos lyrics were meant to be ridiculous, but even so ...

Ron spoke then. 'I concede Headmaster ...'

But it wasn't Ron whom Hermione watched...it was Severus...and the savage, primal expression that crossed his face hit her with a wave of longing so potent that she swayed on her feet. Reaching to steady herself, her hand met a shelf of books, which shifted under her weight, and she was forced to grasp the edge of a shelf until she regained her equilibrium.

When she felt stable on her own two feet again, Severus and Ron were shaking hands. What would he do now, but come looking for her? She had to go...*hide!*...no, but to calm herself. To prepare herself for the discussion she must have with Severus about ...

She turned and fled through the stacks and threaded her way through the crowd clustered near the door, who now had no interest in her...they were all complaining loudly about losing their wagers.

Ron watched Snape go off in Hermione's train with a curious lack of jealousy. The end of his relationship with her seemed suddenly final to him in a way it had not done when she had thrown his ring and proclaimed herself 'finished' with him. Perhaps that was nothing but a trick of perception, for nothing had truly changed betwixt him and Hermione tonight. The only change was that he now accepted their break-up.

He was a free agent...a single man...and he knew just to whom he wished to convey this information.

She wasn't among the dissatisfied gamblers who had wagered on him to win the chess match...silly gits obviously knew nothing about chess if they thought any game was a sure thing. So he went down to the ground floor, and he found her chatting with a group of girls in the big drawing room. Everyone was drinking tea now, for the musical performers were finished. Ron, however, had no interest in drinking tea.

Slipping up behind her, he murmured into her glossy dark ringlets. 'Come for a walk in the rose garden.'

Romilda turned to him, her dark eyes dancing. She did not speak, but abandoned her teacup on a table and walked into the fragrant summer darkness, pulling her shawl close against the cool night air.

'Well?' she asked, and looking down into her face, Ron thought she looked hopeful...as if she wanted to hear what he had to tell her. 'Did you win your chess game?'

He delivered his most engaging grin. 'Nah...I had to play the rematch for appearances, you know...but I lost on purpose.'

She looked shocked. 'Why would you do such a thing?'

Words weren't always very obedient to Ron's intentions for them, so he decided to communicate through actions instead...and Romilda was very receptive to his explanations.

She heard him coming after her, his progress audible to her, even over the thunderous beating of her heart. She didn't know why she fled, wasn't sure why he pursued, but the impulse to continue her headlong flight was irresistible. Gaining the eighth floor...staying here this week must surely have whittled five pounds from her on exercise alone!...she hurried down the corridor to her room.

She had nearly reached her door when he spoke to her...in all the long way from the library to this point he had not once called her name or asked her to stop...and Hermione froze, the handle of her door almost within reach.

'Why are you running from me?'

His tone was almost plaintive, like the puzzled query of a friend confused by her actions, and she responded to it instinctively, her former fear forgotten.

'I'm not running from you,' she protested, turning to face him.

He was beside her in an instant, and Hermione saw that she had been misled by the mild tone of his voice, for his black eyes still blazed with the crazy, exultant light she'd seen in the library. She took a step away from him, reaching behind her for her door, and he moved with her, a strange, dangerous look about his thin lips.

'You're running still, Milady...I wonder why?' he said, his voice low-pitched now, somehow insinuating itself into her mind, reawakening the weak-kneed craving she had experienced in the library.

Her mouth felt unaccountably dry, her voice unresponsive to her directive to speak. She had...*oh God, look at his eyes, he's staring at my lips*...she had words ... important ones...*no one has ever looked at me as if they wanted to devour me*...important things to say ...

'You ... you objectified me!' she managed, her voice somehow not above a hoarse whisper.

She felt the door against her shoulder blades and realised he had backed her as far as she could go ... unless she turned the handle, but then he'd be in her bedroom ...

He placed his right hand on the doorjamb beside her head, as if blocking an avenue of escape, still pursuing. 'I owed the boy a debt of honour to give him a second chance,' he said, his long-lashed, perilous eyes roaming her face, as if getting it by heart...but returning always to her lips.

The weakness which had begun in her treacherous knees in the library was migrating to other parts of her body, for she felt as if she trembled in every fibre of her being...*must have him ... can't think of anything else*.. and even her voice betrayed her senseless state.

'I'm not a *thing* to be wagered...won and lost,' she whispered, forcing the nearly incoherent words through lips which longed for other occupation.

Again, his eyes travelled from her mouth to her eyes. 'Most women would be flattered to be so ... coveted,' he informed her, his voice pitched for her ears alone. 'Look at me and say you're not a bit ... flattered.'

Hermione moistened her lips to facilitate speech, and his heightened attention at the appearance of the tip of tongue was like another rent to the shreds of her sanity. 'I can't,' she admitted. 'I can't say that.'

Something like vindication twisted his mouth, and with his left hand, he yanked the parchment bearing Ron's name from an inner coat pocket. 'Change it!' he hissed. 'Put *my* name on it!'

Hermione withdrew her wand, wishing her hand did not shake so noticeably. 'Of course,' she murmured, and with a less than perfect wave, *Severus Snape* appeared at the top of the parchment in large, bold, calligraphic script, accompanied by one stray blot of ink vaguely shaped like a heart.

Before she could make an attempt to remove the embarrassing blotch of ink, he looked at the parchment with undisguised satisfaction.

'Mine,' he growled, and then his eyes were on her face again, the possessive word hanging between them like a declaration.

Hermione, whose interior had been in a tumult for such a long stretch of time that she had begun to adapt to it as the norm, was jolted into fresh panic when his heavy eyelids fell to half-mast. She raised a hand to his chest, thinking to ward him off, but the firestorm of instinct overcame her remaining particle of reason, and instead, the

hand was sliding up as she rose on tiptoes, her face lifting, her whole being ascending to meet the onslaught of his crushing kiss.

She was jerked against the lean hardness of his body and enveloped in the intoxicating scents of Severus Snape...his spicy shaving lotion, male perspiration, the faint, second-hand cigar smoke clinging to his hair. The experience, played out a score of times in her mind over the last days, was such a culmination of anticipation and release of emotion that Hermione could hold nothing back. Coiling arms about his neck, fingers of one hand curled in his hair, the other still clutching her wand, she returned the kiss with fervour. Wishing for the full sensory experience, she went for taste, drawing his lower lip between her teeth for an instant before invading his mouth with a questing tongue. Oh! Port wine and gooseberry trifle and something elemental, metallic...*testosterone*, her brain whispered.

She absorbed it like oxygen.

Her escalation of hostilities brought his tongue for a retaliatory attack, and these extensions of themselves weaved and danced, inciting heart-racing, mind-numbing desire...the loss of any memory of a reason why it might not be a good idea to take this gasping, clinging encounter to her bed for its logical conclusion.

It was the excitement of her decision to do so that brought about an end to the most moving sexual experience of her life...one, moreover, which took place betwixt two fully-clothed participants. She felt the expressive flurry of sparks that flew from the tip of her wand, but it wasn't until the odour of burning fabric filled their nostrils that Severus put her from him.

He ripped his coat from his back and threw it to the stone floor, stomping out the ember of flame there. Hermione applied a small spurt of water to cool the overheated spot on the underlying waistcoat, and all was well again...save for the acrid, ruined evening coat underfoot and the newly rational, slightly horrified participants of the impassioned clinch.

Hermione sagged against her door, suddenly confused and very, very tired. She stared at the Headmaster's back, wondering how the muscles there would feel beneath her hands on his bare flesh. Then she gave her head a little shake...things were going a bit too quickly.

Severus retrieved the coat from the floor, and Hermione watched him straightening to his full height and squaring his shoulders before he turned to face her again. Then he bent and retrieved the parchment schedule, newly emblazoned with his name, from its spot by Hermione's feet.

'I ... I smeared the ink,' she said, knowing it was an inane thing to say, but wishing very much to fill the silence. 'Give it to me, and I'll correct it.'

One side of his mouth quirked up. 'I like it the way it is,' he said firmly. Then he swallowed and looked slightly discomfited. 'I won't apologise, Milady...but I will wish you a good night, now. Will you go in?'

Hermione approached him, and he watched her come with wary eyes, as if afraid she would attempt to pick up where they had left off. Stretching up, she kissed his cheek; he remained motionless. Then she stepped quickly away from him, and it seemed to her as if he breathed a sigh of relief.

'May I know the incantation for the spell if I wish to talk to you through the wall?' she asked.

'It is *Murus PerLucidus*,' he said.

Hermione bobbed a small curtsy. 'Good night, Severus,' she said. He answered with only a very proper bow, and she went into her room.

A/N: The Author offers apologies to any chess aficionados reading this story. The Author is not knowledgeable about the game of chess and has made up a scenario completely out of her imagination. No wizarding chess pieces were injured in the writing of this chapter.

The lyrics Hermione remembers are from the song, The Simple Joys of Maidenhood by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Lowe, from the musical Camelot. You may hear it here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T81CQfOcX5E>

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 16

Wednesday, August 7, 2002

Severus stood on the back veranda of Malfoy Manor, holding a crystal goblet filled with Bucksfizz...a mixture of orange juice and champagne. The hunt was to be held today, and the guests would Floo to the Manor for the hunt breakfast. He wore the Regency riding dress for the hunt, a garish red coat over white pantaloons, finished with unadorned black boots. The sky was overcast, the air oppressive...much like his spirits.

He was early to the Manor, and if truth be told, it was the coward's way out, fleeing the castle before Hermione was up and dressed. In the cold light of day, strong of heart and clear of mind, he could only view his behaviour of the last thirty-six hours with horror. He could not account for it, because in general, he was a supremely rational being. His life experience stood him in good stead, and he prided himself on his careful planning of every facet of his existence, always including alternate schemes for every foreseeable contingency.

Losing his mind over a pair of honey-brown eyes and an open, confiding heart appeared *nowhere* on his Life Plan.

In the flush of triumph, he had been within a hairsbreadth of bedding a twenty-two year old girl the night before. If she hadn't set his coat afire...a mishap the irony of which was not lost on him...he would have allowed himself to be carried away by her inexplicable response to his advances. It would have spelled disaster for the success of Regency Week for him to have done such a foolish thing. He had behaved with no more sense than the idiotic schoolchildren it was his lot to guard and educate.

A Malfoy house-elf appeared at his side, bowing. 'Does the Headmaster have need of more to drink?' it squeaked.

Severus thrust the untouched concoction into the house-elf's hands. 'Take this mishmash away and bring me black coffee,' he said, adding as an afterthought, 'please.'

Leaning his weight on the railing that edged the elevated terrace, he stared out into the well-tended Malfoy gardens. He had slept hardly at all after his near-disaster with Miss Granger, preferring to sit up in a chair...albeit one he had dragged across the room, away from the wall his room shared in common with hers. The last thing either of them needed was to attempt communication before their superheated passions cooled. Instead of sleeping, he had Summoned a quill and parchment and written a list of his priorities for the remainder of the week...for Hogwarts.

At the very top was the success of Regency Week. A close second was to ... manage Miss Granger. She had, for some unaccountable reason, developed a predilection for his company...perhaps even a desire to sleep with him...but he could not give in to such an absurd whim. Regardless of how desirable the act might seem in a moment of high passion, the consequences of it came at far too high a price. He had no place in his life for a needful, demanding female. He had determined at the beginning of their Regency Week association that Granger was not the type of woman to engage in no-strings sex, and that was only sort in which he was interested. The artless appeal of her ready acceptance of him could not be permitted to sway him...the pining adolescent within him who still burned to be *chosen*. No, this life he had built for himself stood on the foundation of his rational acknowledgement of what he could and could not reasonably expect to have.

A beautiful, unspoiled, achingly intelligent woman desiring (*loving* the whinging child insisted) Severus Snape was unequivocally on the 'not have' list.

'You're out and about at an indecent hour this morning,' Lucius said, strolling forward to join Severus at the rail.

The question was not posed, but Severus answered it anyway. 'I didn't sleep ... well.'

Lucius gave him a measuring sidelong look. 'After the obscenely large amount of gold you won for me last night, I expected you to be ... celebrating.'

Severus did not respond.

'In fact, old man, I wouldn't have been at all surprised to have received your regrets for breakfast this morning...perhaps even for the hunt.'

If he received no encouragement, Lucius would surely intuit how distasteful Severus found this line of banter.

'... and by separate owl, regrets from Miss Granger, as well.'

'Leave it alone!' Severus barked.

Lucius laughed softly, and Severus turned to see his old friend lowering himself gracefully onto a chaise lounge. Lucius wore a dressing gown of shiny grey fabric, inscribed all over by the shimmering outlines of white peacocks. In his hand, he bore a goblet of the champagne mixture. He drank, his mouth relaxing into the smile that did nothing to soften his chiselled Nordic beauty. After a moment of silence, he spoke again.

'I've been dying to know, Severus...how did you win?'

Severus leant a hip against the balustrade and crossed his arms over his chest. 'What are you implying?'

Lucius' silvery grey eyes crinkled at the corners, his version of Dumbledore's blasted *twinkle*. 'Come...we've been friends since you were the stringiest first-year ever Sorted into Slytherin! Tell me how you cheated to defeat the chess champion!' He lifted the goblet as if in a toast. 'After all, it is the Slytherin Way!'

Severus sneered. 'I employed no stratagems. I outplayed the boy. Why cheat when you don't have to?'

Lucius actually looked disappointed. 'How very *virtuous* of you!' he mocked. 'Rather plebeian though, you must admit.'

The serving elf approached through the open doors to the Manor morning room, bearing a tray with a steaming mug of coffee. Severus accepted it with thanks before saluting his host with it.

'Here's to a successful hunt!' he said with as much cheer as he could muster in his present state of mind.

Lucius waved a languid hand toward the leaden skies. 'I shall be wholly astonished if we're not rained off before the first fence,' he said sulkily.

Hermione settled her riding hat upon her head and turned away from her mirror, scarcely caring if she looked well. Her sleep had been fitful at best, and she had woken at last with a feeling of dread. She had to be frank with herself: she had behaved with so little restraint the night before...and Severus had been so cold when he bid her goodnight...that she didn't know what she could expect from him today. Just when she had begun to really depend on his friendship...on feeling as if he were someone on whom she could rely, no matter what...she had lost her mind and thrown herself at him. The assault had discomposed him so badly that, when they had parted, he had seemed as distant as ever.

She would rectify what had been damaged the night before by treating him today with courtesy and respect. She wouldn't again allow herself to betray her baser urges where he was concerned. She knew fully well that a man of his calibre and experience could never be seriously interested in a woman of her *lack* of worldly experience, regardless of the other qualities she brought to the table. Nevertheless, she had to maintain friendly terms with him for the rest of the week, no matter what it cost her...for Hogwarts.

With a determined lift of her chin, she marched off to join the guests for the hunt breakfast at Malfoy Manor.

The guests began to arrive, and Lucius signalled the house-elves to load the sideboards. Severus planted himself near the head of the table, where he would sit on the host's left hand. He saw her the moment she entered and was struck by her pallor...no roses bloomed in her cheeks this morning. Then she was looking at him, and there was none of yesterday's joyful welcome...no impetuous smile...instead, she averted her eyes and made her way slowly through the crowd toward him. Good God, had he offended her so grievously that she could not even spare a nod in greeting?

Ronald Weasley, on the other hand, appeared to be faring quite well. The Vane girl was clinging to his arm, and the two were so absorbed with one another that they seemed to be alone in the middle of the throng. At the very least, he felt reasonably confident that Weasley would not be challenging him for Hermione's attention again anytime soon...not that Severus currently was in possession of that commodity.

Longbottom, looking as lost and clueless as usual, had the Veela-girl in train. Half the wizards in the room, including those with wives and girlfriends, were stealing covert glances at Gabrielle Delacour, but she had interest only in the Serpent Slayer.

George Weasley was standing at the window, looking out at the grey day. He looked a bit glum, but then rumour was that he had wagered quite heavily on his brother to win the chess game. Severus thought he looked odd in solitary state...he had been, after all, one-half of the most notorious set of identical twins Severus had ever been cursed to teach. Yet it was not Fred Weasley whom Severus was now accustomed to seeing at George's side, but the Lovegood girl. The realisation amused him.

George was soon joined by Krum and Quigley, who had a pair of females corralled between them...one of whom was Penelope Clearwater. Could one of the athletes have engaged Clearwater's interest? If so, Severus would thank Merlin for deliverance! He had never given her the least encouragement to pursue him, but Clearwater had a tenacious personality: academic success had taught her that perseverance paid off, and she had wished to apply that principal to the project of making herself

indispensable to Severus Snape. The blond curls, china blue eyes, and sweet disposition had interested him not at all. He had no interest in Clearwater's brand of ornamentation to decorate his existence. Oddly enough, the second female with the Quidditch fellows was Pansy Parkinson, the girl Lucius had always hoped to have for a daughter-in-law. He and Fortescue Parkinson had planned the match when the children were babes in their cradles, but Pansy, at least, was not blind to the fact that Lucius could not seem to grasp: Draco was unlikely ever to marry a woman.

Draco was in good spirits, examining the hunt paintings hung above the sideboard with Potter, pointing out the most gruesome details. That had been one gratifying thing about this week for Severus: to see Potter learning to show tolerance to Draco. The duo were, in their way, one of the hits of the event, for gentlemen *and* ladies loved to gather to see the companionable combatants battling over whatever outdoor game they had chosen to play at on any given afternoon.

Then Miss Granger reached him, and he bowed to her. Although she reciprocated with the correct curtsy, she did so with her eyes upon the floor. Clearly, she was not happy with him. How amusing that he had been looking for some way to fend off her insatiable desire for him! He could only wish that it appeared to him in a more humorous light now than it did, rather than stinging his pride.

Lucius led Leticia to their end of the table, where she was to sit at his right hand. Professor Mortelle, smart in her mannish black riding dress, was one of the guests who'd been an accomplished rider coming into Regency Week, and she would ride at Lucius' side today, a full participant in the hunt. Severus envied his friend that...a lady whose passion for the horses and the hunt equalled his own. Miss Granger, whose progress in her lessons this week still did not provide the skills necessary to ride to the hounds, would be following the secondary ride, set for the less experienced riders, which would be led by Horologium Black. Severus had toyed with the idea of abandoning the true hunters to ride at her side, but now he was not convinced that she would welcome him...in fact, it seemed unlikely in the extreme.

The girl was virtually monosyllabic at breakfast until Lucius began to have her on, and her response then was so delicious that Severus couldn't resist joining in.

'I have read up on how the hunt is done in Great Britain these days, Mr Malfoy,' she began. 'Tell me, is the wizarding hunt conducted along the same lines?' she continued, sounding more animated than she had done all morning.

Lucius turned to her with great courtesy. 'Why, what do you mean, Miss Granger?'

She laid down her fork and sat forward. Severus, recognising the posture, wondered if she had a quill and parchment about her...if she would pull them out and begin to take notes to record Lucius' response. He hid his smirk with a sip of coffee.

'There is great controversy amongst the Muggle community now about the hunt's inherent cruelty to the fox,' Granger explained earnestly. 'Laws have been proposed in Muggle government to ban the hunting of a fox with hounds. What is the custom of *your* hunt?'

Lucius listened to Miss Granger with faultless courtesy, but Severus knew from the way the grey eyes began to dance that the Slytherin was going to tease her. Lucius had discovered early on in the Regency Week planning that it was easy to rouse Miss Granger to fervent defence of her pet projects, and he had often enjoyed the sport of Granger-baiting. Why the girl continued to take the bait, Severus could not fathom.

'Oh, we would never be cruel to a fox!' Lucius exclaimed, and Severus could see how relieved the girl was by this proclamation. 'No, we wouldn't dream of it.' Lucius sat forward, addressing Hermione with great solemnity. 'You see, we put a fox pelt on a house-elf and chase him, instead.'

Miss Granger was so dumbfounded that she could only sit with her mouth agape. Severus bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing and glanced at Leticia, who had brilliant sapphire eyes fastened admiringly upon her man.

'Oh!' Miss Granger cried, when she had recovered her wits enough to speak. 'How could you?'

'Oh, they don't mind,' Lucius assured her. 'Foxy here has been brought up for it from birth.' He indicated the house-elf removing the nearly empty platter of broiled kidneys to make room for a fresh ham.

Tears started to Miss Granger's impassioned brown eyes, and emotion caused her voice to rise. 'When all they want to do is serve...to make you happy!...how could you use them so horribly?'

Seeing Granger in full strop, Severus could only be relieved not to be the object of her indignation. In addition, some of the guests at mid-table were beginning to take notice of the fracas, and Severus knew that if the disturbance filtered down to Potter, there might be an unpleasant scene. The boy would not brook any hint of Granger being upset by a Malfoy.

Lucius was deep in his off-the-cuff explanations, and Severus could not catch his eye, so he raised a warning brow to Leticia. It was clear to him that she was enjoying the joke, but she stepped in immediately to bring the teasing to an end.

Placing a hand over Lucius' she said, 'Yes, my dear, you have had your fun...now tell her the truth of it!'

Lucius, the besotted fool, was entirely distracted by Leticia's interruption, and Severus was left to soothe the agitated Miss Granger and provide her with the proper information.

'He was having you on again,' he said quietly. 'The wizarding hunt has always used a modified Snitch to lay the scent...it is the method the Muggles are being offered as an alternative to an actual fox, though naturally their drag method will be non-magical. The Hunt Snitch lays the scent, then skips along for a space and lays again, forcing the dogs to have to sniff out the trail, rather than having it set in a straight line from point to point.'

He watched her face, glad to see that she had more colour in her cheeks now, though her eyes were still a bit stormy. 'How could you allow him to tease me like that?' she demanded.

Damnation! How had he come under fire so suddenly?

He bent his head close to her ear. 'You didn't seem very pleased with me this morning, Milady,' he said softly. 'I did not think you would welcome my interference.'

For a fleeting moment, she turned her face towards him, and her eyes met his. The ridiculous urge to kiss her crossed his mind, but people began to rise from the table, and the moment was past.

With Leticia at his side, Lucius came to the girl and bowed, his hand over his heart. 'I apologise for my terrible sense of humour, Miss Granger. It was reprehensible. Can you forgive me?'

Severus could read the thought processes in the girl's expressive face. She resolved not to make a fuss, but rolled her eyes and made a tscking noise. 'I don't know why I should expect you to behave,' she said, her playfully admonitory glance taking in Severus as well. '*Either* of you!'

Her mouth quirked up, and Severus was flooded with admiration. Ah, this was a female whose closest friends had been boys, rather than other girls...she was a superbly good sport.

Lucius raised his voice to invite the guests out to the stable yard to mount their horses and partake of the stirrup cup. The group flowed onto the terrace and along the path to the stables. Severus walked at Miss Granger's side, hopeful that he might regain his place in her good graces. After a bit, she tucked her hand in his arm.

Neville and Gabrielle were not amongst the riders; they had attended the hunt breakfast for a different reason.

'The Malfoy Manor gardens are famous in this part of England,' Neville had told Gabby. 'Would you ... would you like to see them?'

Neville and Gabrielle had been thrown together quite a bit. Not only because Gabby sought him out, but because they were both participants in the play. The lovely French girl had been cast as Helena, and by some stroke of luck...Neville hadn't decided yet if the luck was good or bad...George had coerced Neville into accepting the part of Demetrius. Now he strolled with her along the flagstone paths, pointing out the more unusual varieties of plant life and answering the questions she posed him about horticulture.

'Ah, Neville...you are so clever!' she breathed admiringly.

Neville squirmed inwardly. Half the time when Gabby said something to him, he couldn't work out whom she was talking about. 'You must be thinking of somebody else,' he muttered, half under his breath.

She stopped then and stepped in front of him, hands on her hips, pulling the narrow skirt of her long dress tight, showing her slender form. 'I have been very patient with you, but it is very upsetting that you do not accept the things I say to you!' she cried. 'Do you not want me to think you are a good, kind man?'

Neville darted a glance from side to side, hoping no one else was nearby to hear Gabby telling him off. She stomped her foot, and her voice rose another notch.

'Will you add rudeness to your list of ways to upset me?' she said. 'Can you not even look at me?'

She stepped closer and grasped the lapels of his blue Regency coat, her face lifted, her azure eyes glistening with unshed tears. Her little bow-shaped lips were parted as she gazed imploringly at him. Neville wanted to comfort her, so he put his arms around her, and she answered that by raising her arms to clasp about his neck. Neville had no idea what to do next. Higher brain function seemed to have ceased, so he was left to instinctive response: He kissed her.

Hermione was happy to be riding Firefly again, and the little mare seemed excited about the activity of all the riders mounting for the hunt...as if she knew what was coming, Hermione thought. One group moved off after Mr Black, who was in charge of the riders still not comfortable with riding at faster than a walk, whilst Draco had charge of the riders who were comfortable at a faster pace. Hermione, whose private tutoring with Severus had prepared her for a canter through the fields, was in Draco's group.

Preoccupied with arranging her skirts, holding her reins properly, and sitting as she had been instructed, it was some minutes before she had attention to spare for anything else. But at the cry of, 'Tally ho!' the hunt riders were off, and Hermione was riveted, just as before, by the sight of Severus Snape astride Apollyon. All thoughts of the morning's doubts fell away, and the familiar tug of visceral attraction was upon her again, overlain now by first-hand, intimate knowledge: the hard feel of his frame against hers, the strength of his arms, the smell of his sweat, the feel of his hair as it brushed her face, and most important, the press of his lips and the taste of his mouth.

She was, without warning, undone, naught but a pool of *yearning*. She could then think of nothing but when next she would see him and how she could engage his interest again.

The rain did not come at the first fence, but it did begin to fall less than an hour after they began. Draco directed his pupils back to the stables at once.

Harry didn't want to go back. 'I can cast a spell to keep dry!' he protested to Malfoy.

Malfoy laughed, the warm, knowing sound that Harry had come to ... like very well.

'You may be able to keep yourself dry,' he agreed, 'and you may even be able to keep Duds somewhat dry, but you can't do a thing about the ground getting wet. And slick conditions are more difficult for a horse...and therefore his rider...to manage.' Malfoy gave Harry a crooked grin. 'Don't make me have to tie you up and carry you in over my saddle!'

Harry, momentarily assailed by the notion of having Malfoy lay hands on him to perform such a feat, had a reaction that was entirely inconvenient and virtually impossible to conceal. The last thing he needed was for Malfoy to notice it. Urging Duds to a trot, he moved up to ride beside Hermione, instead.

Contingency plans had been made for an afternoon that would keep everyone indoors, and Hermione did all she could to make sure that all of the guests were occupied with something they found enjoyable.

Directly after lunch was dancing class, which had been postponed that morning due to the hunt. The country dance would be held the next night, so they practiced two of these. The couples had become accustomed to one another, the group as a whole had become very friendly, and it was a pleasant hour. Hermione was pleased to be dancing with Severus, who seemed to be going out of his way to amuse her. Memories of the night before, of his impassioned aggression, seemed like a distant dream when she was confronted with the urbane, pleasant, socially correct Headmaster. Even the constraint of the morning at breakfast was gone; it was as if it had never happened.

After dancing class, many alternatives were offered. Ghost stories...told by the resident ghosts...were being told in the small blue saloon. Some of the play participants were having an impromptu rehearsal in the antechamber. The gentlemen were invited to play at whist, piquet, vingt-et-un, or other games of chance in their clubroom. But oddly enough, it was the last offering to which most of the ladies and many of the gentlemen flocked: a game of Jane Austen trivia in the drawing room.

Miss Granger and Professor Mortelle were the presenters of the questions, and the participants were in good spirits as they vied for points. One point was awarded for each correct answer, and the winner would become the possessor of an authentic hand-painted fan, a trifle which had been donated by Professor Mortelle.

Severus sat on the very back row of chairs beside Lucius, both of them somewhat bored to be confined indoors.

'Ah, the things we endure for the happiness of our ladies,' Lucius said, his appreciative gaze fixed on Leticia Mortelle. The lady stood before them all in a Grecian-style robe of emerald green, a matching fan in one hand, as she read out the questions.

'Only the courting men...those in the wooing stage...administer so to their ladies' interests,' Severus commented sardonically. 'Do you see any married men here?' He made another survey of the room. 'The men whose hunt was successful...whose beds are already warmed...have availed themselves of the card room.'

Lucius nodded thoughtfully and said, 'The hunt may be postponed by rain, but the quarry's still in sight ... and there will be another day.'

Severus' bark of laughter was quickly quelled, and they only received a reproving glare from Professor Mortelle.

Leticia completed her set of questions and resumed her seat, whereupon she began to communicate with Lucius through the use of her fan.

'Do you know what she's saying?' Severus inquired curiously.

Lucius smiled slyly. 'If I didn't, would I admit it?'

Now Miss Granger stood and began to read her questions off from a parchment.

'Which two Jane Austen books are set partially in Bath?' she said.

'*Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*,' Severus murmured.

Some incorrect answers were given, answered by jests and laughter, and then Miss Clearwater said, *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*!

'Correct!' Miss Granger cried, and Leticia marked down a point for Penelope.

'In *Mansfield Park*, what is Fanny's chief form of exercise?'

'Horseback riding,' Severus muttered.

'Horseback riding!' one of the Misses Patil called out, and Leticia marked down her point.

Lucius stared at him. 'How do you know those answers?'

Severus smirked. 'Reading, Lucius. It's where a fellow sits down with a book and ...'

'Oh, don't be so superior,' his friend huffed. 'I am not illiterate.'

'I beg your pardon,' Severus replied mildly.

'What was *Northanger Abbey* originally called?' Miss Granger called out.

'Susan,' Severus muttered.

Several incorrect answers were supplied, some of them meant to be funny rather than serious, and there was much laughter.

At last, Lucius hissed at him, 'Give the answer, if you know it!'

Severus wondered if Miss Granger would be pleased that he knew the answer. Would it contribute favourably to the mending of fences he had begun with in dancing class?

'The answer is Susan,' he said in his carrying, classroom voice.

Miss Granger's face was wreathed in smiles. 'The Headmaster is correct!' she cried, and Leticia marked down his point.

Lucius turned a glare on him. 'Tell me the next answer,' he demanded.

'Whatever for?'

'I saw how the girl beamed at you for knowing the right answer,' he muttered. 'I could use with a bit of that from Leticia.'

Severus covered a yawn. 'What's in it for me? Shouldn't I profit ... in the Slytherin way?'

But the game ended with a round of applause for the participants, and Penelope Clearwater received the prize. As the room's inhabitants began to move around, Miss Granger came directly to Severus, still smiling for him.

'How did you know the answer to that question?' she asked.

He thrilled to the laughter he heard in her voice. Was he forgiven, then? Were they back to where they had been the day before...minus the five minutes of insane grappling outside her door?

He took her hand and pulled it through his arm. He did not know where he was going to walk with her, but he wanted to be away from all these people.

'I know the answer because I cheated,' he confided.

Miss Granger cried out. 'What?'

He gave her a sidelong glance. 'You see, I bother to read the forewords and historical notes included with the novel,' he said.

'I begin to think that Mr Malfoy is an unwholesome influence on you, Headmaster,' she said.

He chuckled. 'Undoubtedly, Miss Granger.'

She went with him willingly, but her next comment was quite business-like. 'We have to put our heads together and work out what to do for entertainment tonight,' she said quietly. 'The rain is not letting up, and we cannot do the moonlight al fresco picnic on the grounds if it's raining...or even if it's still wet everywhere. We need another scheme.'

And assistance came from a strange...an exceedingly strange...source.

'Headmaster?' Xenophilus Lovegood said. 'May I have a word with you, please? I have a suggestion ...'

Hermione was not happy about the notion...not even when Luna came to speak with her about it.

'It is very authentic entertainment, for the time,' Luna said.

Hermione threw up her hands. 'Who in their right mind would want Trelawney to tell their fortune?'

Luna's big grey eyes never moved from her face. 'Lots of people,' she replied simply. 'Daddy has been talking about it, and the guests are excited...well, the ladies are. I don't think gentlemen are as interested in their futures.'

Hermione closed her eyes and shook her head. 'The woman is a fraud,' she said.

Penny interceded then. 'How can you say so?' she cried. 'Why, she made the prediction about the Chosen One!'

But it was Lavender Brown who clinched the matter. 'What if the "gypsy fortune teller" charged for a reading?' she said, her shrewd eyes fixed on Hermione's face. 'What if the guests had to make a donation to the Hogwarts Scholarship Fund to have their fortune told?'

And when Hermione opened her eyes again, a smile accompanied the gleam. 'We'll suggest a minimum amount!' she crowed.

Severus endured Trelawney's visit to his office with the fortitude he had observed in Dumbledore's dealings with the woman. She had, apparently, made a correct prophecy or two in her career...the truth could not be gainsaid...but there was still that in her manner which got right up his nose.

'I am entirely at your disposal, Headmaster,' she said, reaching to straighten one of her scarves, the movement setting off a series of rattling clanks from her profusion of

chains and bangles.

Severus forced an expression of patience. 'Xeno Lovegood gave me to understand that you had volunteered for this, Professor.'

Her fingers trembled as she pulled her shawl tighter. 'I would do anything for Hogwarts,' she declared tremulously, as if on the brink of tears. 'Mr Lovegood is so kind ... such a gentleman ... such superior understanding ... feels just as he ought ...'

'I am gratified to hear it,' he said solemnly, wondering if the woman had been at the sherry bottles already, so early in the day. Usually she was morose, full of gloom, doom, and despair. This timorous effusiveness was quite unlike her.

'When Mr Lovegood suggested that I should donate my skills in this way ...' Glistening, insect-like eyes stared at Severus from behind her enormous spectacles. 'One feels the necessity of sharing ones talents with others in such circumstances, Headmaster. I am most happy to do it!'

Severus eyed Trelawney with a new suspicion in his mind. Was the old fraud falling for the charms of Xeno Lovegood? Lovegood was a world-class conspiracy theorist, and he believed in outrageous, made-up creatures no one else had ever heard of. Was his latest discovery of greatness Sybill Trelawney, who claimed descent from a Trojan prophethess? Did Xeno now believe all of Trelawney's stories about herself, with the same unquestioning fervour he brought to his belief in the Rotfang Conspiracy?

Severus stood from his desk and rounded it, courteously assisting his Divination teacher to stand. 'Hogwarts will benefit from your generosity, Professor,' he said, walking her towards the door.

'Do you have any instructions for me, Headmaster?' she inquired.

'None at all,' Severus said as she began her descent. 'Simply read the cards as they are dealt.'

Harry skived off the trivia game...he'd never read a book by Jane Austen...and he grew quickly bored with playing cards with Ron. His best friend could now talk of *nothing* but Romilda Vane. It was as if he'd swallowed another dose of love potion! Blimey, what was the world coming to when Harry preferred the company of Draco Malfoy to Ron Weasley?

He excused himself from another game of piquet after the third time Ron said, 'Isn't she the prettiest girl you ever saw, Harry?' With a vague excuse about having to do an errand for Hermione, he escaped the clubroom. The Ferret had returned to the Manor after lunch; the animal Healer was coming by to check on Perse, the pregnant mare, and Malfoy wanted to be there. Harry would have gone with him...he really liked being at the stables, now...but Malfoy hadn't invited him, and Harry didn't want to ask. It would be just too strange, asking to hang out with Malfoy. It was one thing when it just *happened*, but something else entirely if he were to openly ask.

It might be interpreted as liking ... as interest ... and Harry was unwilling to admit that, even to himself.

He looked into the antechamber to see if perhaps the Ferret had returned and joined the theatrical players for rehearsal. Malfoy was going to portray Puck in the play, which Harry remembered only vaguely from a performance he'd seen in Muggle primary school. But the antechamber was empty, so he wandered down the ground floor corridor and came across an empty classroom with a rather sloppy Notice-Me-Not Spell hovering in a corner. Beneath it was Neville, and he huddled there, reading.

'Who are you hiding from?' Harry asked, startling Neville into dropping his herbology book.

'Harry!' he cried, and looked nervously about the room, as if afraid Harry had brought an army with him.

Harry frowned down at his friend. 'Really, Neville...are you hiding?'

Neville looked ashamed of himself for a moment, and then he began to talk.

Severus was glad for the opportunity to stretch his legs after an uncomfortable hour with Trelawney. He descended to the Entrance Hall and hesitated. Where might he find Miss Granger at this time of the afternoon? It was too early to dress for dinner, but would she be sitting with the ladies, or off on some project of her own?

He paused at the head of the corridor and was surprised to hear voices coming from an empty classroom. Had Miss Granger commandeered the room for meeting with her helpers to plan the evening? But as he neared the room, he identified one of the voices as Potter's, and the other's was male, as well...but whose?

'Neville, why would you be afraid of Gabby?' Potter said, sounding a bit exasperated. 'You learned to duel in the DA...she couldn't take you in a fight.'

This bit of encouragement startled a snort from Severus, who stifled his laughter so as not to miss Longbottom's response to this.

'I would never pull my wand on Gabby!' Longbottom gasped, truly shocked. 'She's the sweetest ... the gentlest ...'

Longbottom seemed to founder into silence, for Potter chuckled and began to speak again.

'Oh, it's like that, huh?' Potter said. 'Look, Neville, everyone knows that Gabby fancies you...if you fancy her, what's the problem? You're both single and of age...go for it!'

Longbottom's voice was a bit muffled, and Severus had to strain to hear him. 'But she fancies the Serpent Slayer, Harry...some bloke she made up in her head after she read all that stuff about me in the newspapers. She doesn't know *me*.'

Severus shook his head. Would Longbottom never grow up? Would he always hear his grandmother's voice, telling him he'd never be the equal of his father, the Auror?

'Then let her get to know you, mate,' Potter said. 'Now's the perfect time, right? You're both in the play, she never wants to sit with anyone else at meals, and she always wants to dance with you.'

There was a rustling sound, as if someone had sat down, and Potter continued, sounding more serious than the playful tone he'd used before.

'Look, Neville. You've always done everything for other people. You tried to do well at school to please your gran. You tried to learn to duel so you could get revenge for your parents. You fought to protect the school and the people you cared about. But it's all right to do things for yourself, too. You've *earned* it.' His tone lightened up again. 'I hate to be the one to tell you, but you *are* the Serpent Slayer, just like I'm The Boy Who Lived. We know we're just blokes, nothing special, but that doesn't change the fact that those labels belong to us. So do this favour for yourself...let Gabby decide if she wants to be with you or not; don't make up her mind for her.'

Severus stood at the door, lost in thought as he mulled over Potter's words. He did not hear Longbottom's response, but when the young wizards' voices became louder, he realised they were leaving the room. He whisked out of sight, finding the next classroom to be empty as well. There he sat at the teacher's desk and continued his cogitations until it was time to dress for dinner.

The 'gypsy fortune teller' was a huge success, raking in a large additional donation for the school. A 'gypsy tent' of bright pink silk was erected in one corner of the drawing room, and Xeno Lovegood, dressed as a gypsy barker with bright silk scarves and a false golden tooth (though Hermione thought he looked more like a rather dissolute pirate), stood before the tent hawking the fortune teller's services. A few of the men sought out a visit with Trelawney, but mostly it was the women who flocked into the enclosure to sit with the Seer at her table and hear her pronouncements. Hermione, who remained close to keep an eye on things...to make sure Trelawney didn't start some sort of riot with predictions of death and destruction...was the recipient of many confidences from the ladies as they emerged.

'I *should* set up my own beauty consultancy!' Lavender Brown exclaimed. 'I will be a success!'

'The Cannons are going to be top of their division this season!' Ron said smugly, collapsing bonelessly onto a sofa with a complacent grin. He'd wanted his favourite team to win for years.

Romilda was next in line, and she floated from the tent looking ecstatic before snuggling up beside Ron.

'What did you ask her, Mil?' he inquired.

Romilda kissed his cheek. 'Oh, just one thing,' she said with a knowing smile.

Hermione watched this interplay with a strange lack of reaction. She knew that Harry was hovering nearby, ready to intervene if she should object to the Ron and Romilda Show, but there was no need. She hoped Ron would be happy, with Romilda or someone else...anyone but her.

And Romilda wasn't the only witch to emerge with murmurs about finding happiness in love. Parkinson came out from her encounter looking almost pleasant at the news she received, and Penny was just behind her, with a rather stunned look on her face. The two girls, who had been thick as thieves all day, passed just behind Hermione's chair, and she heard Penny whisper, '...not the Headmaster ... never my destiny ... a *flying* man!'

Draco bent over the back of Hermione's armchair and spoke softly. 'Isn't that odd ... the batty old girl told me the same thing. A flying man.'

Hermione darted a playful glance at him. 'Well, doesn't Blaise play Quidditch?' she teased.

Draco straightened abruptly, and Hermione twisted around to look up at him.

'No,' he replied shortly. 'No, Blaise doesn't particularly care for flying.' He glared ahead, his mouth set in a grim line, and Hermione turned back to see what he was looking at...but it was only Harry.

'Well, never mind,' she said soothingly. 'Trelawney is very seldom ever right about anything.'

Draco gave her a challenging look. 'Oh, is that right, Miss Know-It-All?'

Hermione frowned. 'Don't *you* call me that!'

Draco did not say sorry. 'If you're so smart, why don't you go have a chat with her, and see what she says...then come tell me how wrong she is.'

Go to Trelawney to have her fortune told? Not bloody likely!

At length, Severus found her and took up his place beside her chair. 'I'm hearing favourable reports of the fortune teller,' he said.

'Yes, the guests are enjoying themselves hugely,' Hermione replied. 'For some reason, Trelawney is playing completely against type...she hasn't predicted one death or calamity yet that I've heard of!'

He gave her an enigmatic look. 'Perhaps we have judged her too harshly,' he said. 'It's probable that Sybill's predictions have, heretofore, been coloured by her ... unfortunate personal circumstances. I would encourage you to experience her turnabout for yourself. It's remarkable.'

Hermione looked at him askance. 'I walked out of her classroom when I was fourteen years old, and I've never voluntarily subjected myself to her since then,' she informed him. 'I have no intention of beginning now.'

'Ah, well...I would be the last person to urge you to do something which frightens you, Miss Granger,' he replied silkily.

Hermione bristled. 'I'm not afraid of her!' she hissed.

His impossibly black eyes glittered a challenge, though his lips told another story. 'Of course not,' he murmured before walking away to speak to someone else.

Hermione held out until the tea tray was brought in. When the guests were occupied with selecting teacakes and sipping the soothing brew, Hermione slipped unseen into the tent.

Xenophilius Lovegood and Sybill Trelawney sprang apart like guilty students caught out on the Astronomy Tower.

'I was just bringing in a bit of refreshment for the Seer,' Mr Lovegood said, assisting Trelawney to her seat behind the crystal ball. 'But she'd be pleased to give you a reading, miss, for a donation to the school fund.' He smiled, revealing his fake gold tooth.

Hermione felt about in her reticule and dropped several Galleons into the pewter cauldron the Headmaster had donated for the occasion. Mr Lovegood bowed his way out of the enclosure, and Hermione was alone with Trelawney, whose 'gypsy' costume was not much different from her usual apparel; she was draped with a spangled shawl, and her thin fingers were crusted with large, ugly rings.

'Shall I gaze into the orb for you, my lady, or will you have a card reading?'

Hermione startled. 'What did you call me?' she demanded, thinking of Severus' pet name for her.

Pet name. She'd not considered it that way before, and the idea sent gooseflesh up her arms.

'I call all the fine ladies "my lady",' Trelawney informed her, sticking to her Regency script. 'Will it be the crystal ball, miss?' She raised her gem-studded fingers and waved them over the crystal ball, which promptly filled with crimson smoke.

'No!' Hermione said. She didn't really care how Trelawney told her fortune; it would all be a pack of lies. But she hated the crystal balls.

'A reading then,' Trelawney said agreeably, and she took up her cards. 'What questions shall we attempt to answer, my lady?'

Hermione wondered if she could walk out now. Would Severus know she hadn't been inside long enough to receive a proper reading?

'We'll answer the most important questions for a young lady then, shall we?' Trelawney continued. Obviously, she'd perfected her patter over the course of the evening.

'Fine,' Hermione said, feeling that a response was probably expected.

And without further ado, Trelawney began to lay the cards out upon the table, speaking quietly as she did so.

'Every young lady wishes to know what her luck in love will be,' Trelawney intoned mistily. 'I am here to answer that question as thoroughly as may be.'

Hermione rolled her eyes. How much longer was this going to take?

'Ah, the youthful suitor is sent away!' Trelawney said, almost in a whisper.

Oh, for heaven's sake! Everyone at the castle knew Hermione and Ron had broken up! There was no mystery there!

'Comes a dark man,' Trelawney continued, her focus all on the cards.

Hermione snorted. 'What, not a flying man?'

But Trelawney seemed not to hear her...seemed not to even know Hermione was still sitting across from her. The Seer was entirely absorbed in the cards she turned and the story they told to her.

'I see turmoil...conflict,' Trelawney murmured, and she sounded sad. 'The lovers will have obstacles to overcome, whether internal or external.'

Hermione frowned. This didn't sound like pie-in-the-sky cartomancy. Where was the promise of happiness? Of finding her destiny?

Trelawney turned another card, and for the first time since she had begun, she looked at Hermione. 'The dark man is full of conflict,' she said, her voice seeming to echo in Hermione's mind. 'The conflict is not definitive, but it must be overcome for lovers to reach their destiny.'

She replaced the remaining cards on the table top, and her unfocused gaze seemed to settle on Hermione again.

'Have you another question?' she inquired.

Hermione swallowed. She didn't like to admit it, but the Seer's words disturbed her. Everyone else had been given happy news, but she had received this ambiguous amalgam of indefinite aphorisms.

'How will it end?' she whispered, unable to prevent herself.

'The cards do not say,' the Seer answered. 'The ending will depend upon the actions of the lovers.'

Hermione was still unsatisfied. 'But surely you have a ... a feeling for how it might end?'

Trelawney's fingers closed over Hermione's hands, and for the first time ever, Hermione looked into the Seer's eyes and felt she was seeing and speaking with another woman.

'I am sorrier than I can say,' the Seer whispered, as if her throat was tight, and she was speaking through tears, 'but I fear that it will end in heartbreak.'

The moment he saw her flit into the fortune teller's tent, he moved forward. He hadn't truly thought she would take up his gauntlet; he knew how she despised Divination.

He was waiting for her when she emerged; he was prepared to gently tease her about her visit with Trelawney. He expected her to receive the same sort of fortune as had the other young ladies, and he meant to needle her about it for the rest of the evening.

But she looked ghastly when she emerged, rather ashen and possibly ill. He took her arm and steered her to the nearest armchair, summoning a house-elf with a word. She was obedient to his wishes, subsiding into the chair, and she even took the teacup he placed in her hands and drank from it.

'You need brandy,' he said decisively. 'I'll procure it. Don't move.'

She smiled at him wanly, and he strode from the room.

Draco had not missed her visit to the tent either. When Severus stepped away from her, Draco knelt at her side.

'Well?' he demanded. 'Are you to have a flying man, too?'

Hermione turned a look of reproach on him. 'Don't,' she said.

He looked grim, his grey eyes darkening like smoke. 'Did she ... say it would end badly?' he murmured.

She nodded, and he took her hand. 'She's an old fraud,' Draco said stoutly, as if wanting her to accept something he could not quite bring himself to believe.

Hermione knew her reaction was ridiculous, but the Seer's words had made her feel all hollow inside. 'It wasn't like talking to Trelawney,' she said softly. 'Not when she got into the reading. She was like someone else entirely.'

Draco nodded soberly. 'She was the same with me,' he said.

Severus arrived with a goblet of brandy, and Draco stood. Severus looked from Draco to Hermione and back again. 'Well?' he demanded.

Draco held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. 'I was just going.'

Severus crouched beside her. 'Drink,' he commanded, offering the goblet. 'Something Trelawney said shocked you. This is purely medicinal.'

Hermione shook her head. 'I don't want it,' she said. 'I just want to go to bed. It's been a long day.'

Severus sat in his favourite armchair, a tot of Firewhisky in his glass, untouched. She had been quiet all the way to her room, and as she had done the night before, she stretched to her tiptoes to kiss his cheek before she said goodnight.

True to his resolve, he had not embraced her; to do so would have been fatal.

Now he sat beside their wall, a hollow ache in the vicinity of his breastbone. He felt none of the various emotions of the last several nights...not the irritation, the pity, the annoyance, the passion...he felt only incomplete.

Desolate.

He closed his eyes and his forehead pressed against the wall. Perhaps if he sat here long enough, he could sort out the jumble of his thoughts.

He did not know how long he had sat thus when he heard her voice.

'Severus?'

His heart leapt. She had used *Murus Perlucidus*!

'Yes, Hermione?'

There was a sniffle, and he wondered if she'd been crying. If so, she must have done so quietly, because he had not heard her at all. What had that dratted woman told

her? Something bad about her cat? Her parents? What would make her so sad?

'I ... I couldn't sleep,' she admitted softly.

He smiled and nodded, his forehead sliding along the wall, feeling the immense relief of the void within filling in bits and dribbles.

'That's all right,' he said. 'Neither could I.'

A/N: This story is set in 2002. The ban on hunting foxes with hounds became law in Scotland in 2002 and in England and Wales in 2005. In addition, one does not ride to the hunt in the month of August, when this story is set; it is a sport for autumn and winter. This was a special hunt, set up specifically for the Regency Week event.

The Author apologises for the mangled Tarot card reading.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 17

Thursday, August 8, 2002

Was it coincidence that they left their rooms so nearly at the same time that they met at the head of stairs, or was it some sort of karmic providence? Hermione did not know, nor did she care for anything but the way her heart sped up when she saw him, his face hawkish and striking above his Regency cravat. They had murmured through the wall deep into the night watches, and she had confided in him things she had never spoken aloud to another soul. Even more endearing had been his quiet contributions, for though he had not said so, Hermione suspected that it had been decades...if ever...since he had had a confidante.

'Good morning,' she murmured, looking full into his eyes.

There was an odd fillip to the twist of his lips as he steadily returned her gaze. 'Surprisingly so,' he agreed, offering his arm.

Feeling as if her cup overflowed with contentment, Hermione tucked her hand in his arm and they descended through the levels of the castle in silence ... and perfect amity.

The rain of the day before was a thing of the past, and by mid-morning, the damp had burnt off in favour of a rather humid heat. Dance class had been extended to two hours to help the guests prepare for that night's country dance. Accordingly, they practiced the Sir Roger de Coverley and Mr Beveridge's Maggot until even McGonagall praised them for doing it without once having someone go in the wrong direction.

Full of self-confidence and satisfaction, the dancers then separated to their various other projects. Some Floo'd to Malfoy Manor for a pleasant ride, and some others to available classes. However, the play performers were set for a rehearsal that would dominate most the day, for on the morrow, they would perform excerpts from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the enjoyment of their fellow guests.

George Weasley spent a most unsatisfactory morning trying to persuade his players to work at their parts. The ones who had paired off, such as Ron and Romilda and Fin and Penny, seemed far more interested in whispering together than heeding his instructions, and even his own parents, who were playing the King and Queen of the Fairies, were not paying him much mind, gossiping as they were with Professor Mortelle.

His jaw set with frustration, George turned his back to the collected players and threw his script onto the table. Luna, ever sensitive to his moods, gently touched his arm.

'Why don't you take a turn outside?' she suggested, her grey eyes wide and concerned. 'It will clear the wrackspurts, you know, and you'll come back in feeling much better.'

George couldn't help the twisted grin her pronouncement brought. What the hell was a *wrackspurt*?

'Don't worry about rehearsal,' she urged, 'I'll direct everyone until you come back.'

George patted the hand on his arm. 'You're a great assistant,' he said sincerely and watched with some interest as the colour stained her cheeks bright pink.

'I'll look after things here,' she repeated, stepping away from him.

George needed no further encouragement. Walking out of the antechamber for a few minutes was the best possible suggestion and would probably prevent bloodshed.

Arthur didn't notice when his son departed the antechamber. He was listening to his Molly comparing notes with Leticia Mortelle on the best magical cleaning solution for draperies. Lucius Malfoy was listening to the witches as well. Arthur would never like the elder Malfoy; there was far too much water under that bridge for either of them to pretend friendship. Nevertheless, Malfoy's re-education had apparently made a vast difference in his attitudes toward people who did not share his worldview. There had not been a single disparaging word from the man these last four years, and Arthur had to admire the appearance of change, whether it had actually occurred or not.

It was, strangely enough, Luna Lovegood who interrupted Molly and Leticia's cosy exchange of home remedies. In a sweet, true soprano, she began to sing a nineteenth century love song. One by one, the players left off their personal conversations to turn their eyes onto the seemingly oblivious girl. She sang a full verse of the song, and when she was done, she looked into the now attentive group.

'Thank you,' she said, although no one had applauded her. It seemed, instead, to be gratitude for their attention. 'I understand that this is a holiday lark for everyone. We

want participation in the play to be a fun experience, too.' She stood before them, looking at each person in turn, making full eye contact with one before moving on to the next face. 'Practicing the same lines over and over can be boring...but if we don't practice, we won't do well at our performance, will we? And we want to do well, so that performing will be fun for us and fun for our audience...after all, they're on holiday too, and they want to have fun watching us perform the play.' She paused and drew breath before continuing, and her audience sat in respectful, attentive silence. 'George didn't have to take on this job, you know. He's on holiday too, but he wanted to do it, for Hogwarts. There's nothing George loves more than fun, and if we let him, he'll make our practices fun, too.' Her voice wavered a tiny bit as she said, 'He's the best person I know. I hope we can all pay more attention to what he asks us to do from now on, so we can all be proud of what we've done when the play is over.'

Molly turned her face to Arthur's, her eyes bright and speculative. Molly was a fond parent; she loved nothing more than to hear praise of her children. But Arthur recognised the glint in those brown eyes as she rose to go to the front of the room and to gather Luna into a hug.

Oh dear. Now his Molly had a *project*.

Severus retired to his office after lunch, for Hermione had a meeting with her helpers about arrangements for that night's country dance. She infested his every thought. He dined with her, danced with her, rode with her, and at night, whispered with her, in pillowless pillow-talk, through the wall, like a soppy schoolboy.

Clearly, he was suffering from an early onset of senile dementia if he imagined Hermione Granger to have an emotional attachment to him. He had once believed a female had an emotional attachment to him, and he had been proven spectacularly wrong. He had no intention of risking such folly again.

Restless, he crossed to his desk and seated himself. Surely there was paperwork that required the Headmaster's attention this close to the start of term...but no, his desk was bare, save for the deck of ancient playing cards, aged to a creamy ivory colour, which he had not put away after the poker game. He took these up and shuffled them a time or two, then laid out a hand of solitaire.

'You'll never draw a winning hand playing solitaire with *those* cards.'

Severus felt a spasm of pure irritation, and he did not bother attempting to hide it as he swung about to glare at Dumbledore's portrait.

'What are you talking about?' he snapped.

The portrait smirked. 'Magical cards, of course.'

Severus felt as if a sizable block of ice had been dropped into his belly from a great height, and the cold began to steal upward and outward. 'What have you done, old man?' he bit out, fighting off the creeping dread which spread like poison in the wake of the cold.

The portrait's jovial aspect did not falter. 'Nothing but provide cards when you needed them, Severus.'

Severus narrowed his eyes, his arms crossing uncompromisingly over his chest. 'You have never provided anything to anyone without an ulterior motive...not in all the years I've known you.'

The portrait nodded, the ridiculous poker hat slipping askew. 'Quite right! How else was I to obtain my chocolate cauldrons? Not to mention this excellent hat! He straightened the hat in question on his long white hair.

Severus jerked to his feet, his fists clenched at his sides. 'It is entirely impossible to take you seriously when you're wearing that preposterous hat!' he shouted. He took a menacing step forward and pushed his face within inches of the painting. 'If you ever want to receive another sweetie in your pigmented, two-dimensional life, you will tell me now, old man! What are the magical properties of those cards?'

The maddening old goat had the gall to *twinkle* at him. 'Certainly, Severus,' he said agreeably, dropping the hat into his lap. 'I've been dying for you to ask about the cards. You know, being a portrait provides a certain ... lack of depth in a wizard's existence.'

Severus drew back slightly, repulsed by the effusive, confiding tone. 'Get *on* with it!' he commanded.

Dumbledore nodded agreeably. 'The cards are enchanted, you see, so that upon occasion, the deserving player may receive the ... undisclosed desire of his heart.'

Severus ignored the clap of alarm at the back of his mind and sneered mightily. 'And what, pray tell, is this mysterious desire?'

Dumbledore smiled angelically. 'For you, dear boy, a soul mate. For Mr Weasley, the freedom to find his.'

Severus emitted a bark of rude laughter. 'That's the most preposterous pile of pixie shite I've ever encountered.' He leant closer and hissed, '*Tell the truth!*'

Dumbledore's smile faded, but for all that, his calm was unimpaired. 'You find my truth improbable, I see. Why don't you tell me yours?'

Severus inhaled a great draught of air, his nostrils flaring. 'I have no soul mate!' he spat. 'It has been made abundantly clear that I am meant to live a solitary life!'

Dumbledore shook his head. 'No, Severus. That is the decision *you* have made, not some immutable truth of nature.'

The old man spread his hands and leant forward, his voice taking on a persuasive tone Severus had heard many times before.

'The war is over. You have sacrificed the life other men of your generation have enjoyed these last twenty years by devoting yourself to the service of others...to the greater good, as it were. Now, it is time to claim the prize you have earned and so richly deserve!'

The clap of alarm at the back of Severus' mind began to peal like a warning bell. 'But ... HERMIONE GRANGER?' he squawked, hearing the note of panic in his voice and unable to disguise it. 'What have I done to deserve *that* misery?'

Dumbledore laughed aloud, and all the cunning seemed to fall away from him. 'I didn't choose Miss Granger, and you can scarcely blame the cards. She is *your* choice! ' He grinned unabashedly. 'Ah, Severus, you are a joy to me.'

Severus began to pace, but the old man continued to natter on, giving him no peace.

'You've been a spy, a teacher, a headmaster, a hero...now just be a man, dear boy. Do it for yourself. That's the way the cards were dealt, after all!'

The icy coldness seemed to have replaced the blood in Severus' veins, and now the dread flowed freely, permeating every vessel of his body. Enraged, he whirled and strode to the door, talking as he went.

'Put the damn hat back on, Albus...you made more sense *with* it.'

The office door slammed so hard the portrait frames rattled on their hooks. Dumbledore settled the poker hat upon his head and peeled the wrapper from a chocolate cauldron, popping it into his mouth with true enjoyment. 'I think that went rather well, don't you?' he said to no one in particular.

And from the other portraits lining the walls, there was a unanimous murmur of agreement.

Hermione dressed carefully for dinner, humming her now customary happy tune. She'd not seen Severus since lunch, which seemed like an eternity. She wanted to look her best for their first public dance together. She propped the photograph she'd found in the library against her dressing table mirror as she arranged her hair. It was a photograph of a Regency lady's portrait; she had her hair arranged like a piece of Greek statuary, and Hermione copied the style. When she was pleased with the effect, she fastened pearls about her throat, scarcely noticing anymore the very low, squared neckline of her evening gown.

She wore periwinkle blue crêpe over a white satin slip. The deep border at the bottom of the skirt was white tulle, embroidered with tiny lavender and blue garlands. Short, full sleeves were trimmed in delicate net lace, with corresponding trim repeated in rows about the edge of the neckline. She pulled on white kid gloves which reached above the elbow, and upon her feet she wore blue satin slippers. The dress was not so fine as the one she would wear to the formal ball on the last night of Regency Week, but it was very beautiful, and she felt like a princess in it.

She went to the head of the stairs, hoping to find Severus there as she had done that morning, but she did not see him. She was still undismayed; he would have dressed more quickly than she, and would be in the drawing room, waiting to fetch a glass of sherry for her. She descended, her mind happily occupied with warm memories of riding at his side through the summer green fields, no longer confined to the lunge line as a student, but riding with him as an equal. The feeling was like nothing she had experienced before, but it was something she wished very much to explore further.

To do so, she would have to see *himalone*.

But he was nowhere to be seen in the drawing room, and she began to wonder if he had been detained by some emergency. Ought she to send a house-elf to enquire after him? But guests were coming forward, smiling, talking, and she was soon engulfed.

He would surely appear at dinner.

Harry fidgeted through dinner, wishing he were somewhere else. Everyone around him was behaving strangely, and after dinner was the country dance. He had skived off nearly every dancing lesson, so he had no idea how to perform the steps. He had no intention of showing up to dance with girls he had no interest in.

He stared glumly at his roast beef. Ron was sitting beside him, but he and Romilda were attached at the hip now; Harry hadn't seen them apart in two days or more, and he was pretty sure Romilda was even sleeping in the room next to his, now. Severus, on the other hand, was behaving as if someone had shoved a frozen poker up his bum. He showed up just in time for dinner, and he was responding to every attempt at conversation with bored indifference. Had he quarrelled with Hermione or something? Even Draco had seemed preoccupied all day. He'd spent most of the afternoon cooped up in Violet's antechamber for play practice, and Harry had been condemned to an afternoon of playing at lawn sports with lesser competitors.

The dinner plates were cleared, and the ladies rose, to leave the gentlemen to their port. Harry considered his options. There was the clubroom, where he could find someone to play cards, or the billiards room, though he wasn't very good at the game. If he couldn't get away from people any other way, he could hide in his room. No one would be likely to bother him there.

Draco stood and moved down the table towards where his father and the Headmaster were in conversation. Harry's eyes followed the other wizard almost against his will. When had he started thinking of him as Draco instead of Malfoy or the Ferret? He shifted uncomfortably, his mind skittering away from the question.

An elf crept into the Great Hall, and Harry realised it was one of the grooms from the Manor. What in the world would a stable-elf be doing at Hogwarts? Draco saw the elf as well, and he walked to meet the tiny groom. After a moment of conversation, he glanced at Harry, and Harry immediately averted his eyes. Blimey, when Draco looked at him like that, it felt as if Harry's skin had been touched by fire.

'I see you've got your dancing shoes on,' Draco drawled from behind him.

Harry looked down and saw that they wore identical shoes. 'So do you,' he returned.

Draco bent over, resting his forearms on the table, and gave Harry a measuring look. 'So, do you want to stay here and dance with the ladies, or would you rather come with me to see Perse's foal being born?'

Harry was on his feet in an instant. 'What do you think, Ferret?'

Severus sat in thin-lipped silence as the gentlemen passed the decanters of port and brandy and smoked their cigars. The conversation ranged all around him, but he was in a dark mood, and Lucius parried every conversational gambit that came at Severus, smoothly diverting attention from the Headmaster's inattention.

Dumbledore's portrait was, without doubt, as barmy as the old man had ever been. Even so, the purported magical properties of the cards made a disturbing sort of sense, and Severus was inclined to believe what the old man had said about them. Dumbledore had, in life, told selective truths to his pawns, of which Severus had been one, but Dumbledore had never directly *lied* to Severus.

The babble about soul mates was still so much horseshit, but Dumbledore's words about doing something for himself...about accepting a good thing in his life...so closely echoed Potter's words to Longbottom on the same subject that Severus found it very disturbing. It seemed to him that, against his better judgement...against his will, even!...his unruly mind (*heart*, the adolescent within him insisted) was considering the possibility of a ... dalliance with Hermione Granger.

The very notion was laughable.

Yet when he had stepped into the Great Hall, just before the house-elves began to serve the food, her warm brown eyes had found his face instantly, and the smile she directed at him had only quickened his pace to her side. Dinner had been a quagmire of pushing her away with the appearance of disinterest, only to be drawn to her again, when his guard was down, by some small word or gesture. Could he live the next three days, until she was gone from his domain, constantly on his guard?

Did he want to?

He finally took up the goblet of port Lucius had placed at his hand and ingested a long swallow. He could *do* this thing...do whatever was required of him...for Hogwarts.

Harry knelt beside Draco in the fresh straw, watching the mare, Persephone. They had hung their fancy Regency coats in the tack room before moving into the large box stall. Perse had lain down, slightly to one side, and as Harry watched in amazement, a bulging greyish sac emerged from beneath her tail, amidst a gush of fluid. Harry felt a bit squeamish about it, but Draco seemed fine, so Harry did his best to mirror the other man's attitude.

The stable-elf groom, Groats, remained near the mare's head, one hand upon her halter, the other stroking her neck as he murmured to her. Draco gave Harry a low-voiced running commentary.

'That's the foal's leg, still inside the birth sac,' he said.

Harry looked nervously over his shoulder. 'Is the animal Healer coming?' he asked.

Draco shook his head. 'We can Floo the Healer if there's any trouble, but this isn't Perse's first foaling. The Healer usually comes to see the foal afterwards to give it a good looking-over.'

The muscles in the mare's flanks seemed to ripple, and the protrusion increased in size, accompanied by another wash of fluid. Harry wiped sweaty palms on his knee

breeches. 'Should we ... help her, somehow?' he asked.

The mare nickered, and fluid came from inside her. Draco stood and approached the sac. He pushed the membrane aside and Harry clearly saw a black, spindly horse's leg. His mouth dropped open...what had been a rather scary, disgusting protrusion from the insides of an animal suddenly became a recognisable body part. It was *amazing*.

'All right, Perse,' Draco said, grasping the slender leg. 'Let's get this little stranger on the outside.' And to Harry's mixed horror and admiration, Draco commenced to pull upon the appendage. Harry felt a flash of fear...what if Draco pulled the leg *off* the baby horse? Or somehow hurt the mother?...but with another gush of fluid, a mass of black fur was expelled from with the chestnut mare's womb, and Harry saw a tiny black horse on the straw.

'Damn, Draco,' he whispered, and the face the other wizard turned to Harry was so beautiful in the joy of the moment that Harry felt the shock of attraction like a Bludger blow to the mid-section.

'I know, right?' Draco said, falling back from his crouch to sit on the straw.

Harry crawled closer, drawn by the sudden *need* to be beside Draco. 'What will you name him?' Harry asked, torn between wanting to watch Groats check the foal over and wanting to wrestle Draco to a supine position.

'It's a filly, Master Draco,' Groats supplied.

Draco rested his somewhat soiled arms on top of his upraised knees and looked over to Harry. 'This little girl belongs to Severus,' Draco told him. 'He loaned Apollyon at stud for three of our broodmares, and in return, he gets his pick of the foals. He said he wanted Perse's, so he'll get to name her baby.'

Harry dragged his eyes away from Draco's face...had Draco noticed him staring?...and conjured a bucket of water.

'Wash your arms,' he said, conjuring a towel as well and resisting the urge to plunge his head in the bucket to bring himself back to his senses.

He wasn't sure he wanted his senses back. The way he felt was too good to let go of.

The ladies and gentlemen were a charming vision that night beneath the magically conjured chandeliers, dancing the complicated dances of the English country folk of the nineteenth century. The gentlemen were courtly, the ladies colourful and elegant, and the music entirely authentic for the time period. It was a sight to gladden the heart of any Regency romance lover, and Hermione was entranced.

Severus had behaved oddly at dinner, almost as if he wanted to distance himself from her, but after the gentlemen rejoined the ladies in the drawing room, their former understanding seemed to be restored. He danced with her, performing his part admirably, and when her hand was sought by another gentleman, he very correctly asked another lady to stand up with him.

Hermione, though, was looking very much forward to the final dance of the evening, which would be the waltz. She had not been in Severus' embrace in two full days, and she was eager to experience it again. She hoped he would not ask some other lady for the last dance.

Leticia Mortelle was stunning that night. The cunningly draped evening gown of iridescent silvery fabric was unlike that of any other lady present...in short, she looked like a Greek goddess, and Lucius could scarcely tear his eyes away from her. She had taunted him wickedly with ... promising banter with the riding crop...had granted him maddening kisses at seemingly random intervals in places both deliciously private and daringly public...and tonight, she was granting her favours to many other men for the country dance. But Leticia had promised the waltz to him, and he meant to have it.

When the time came, he led her onto the floor, and she quizzed him with brilliant sapphire blue eyes, teasing and flirtatious, yet with ever-present reserve. In spite of his resolve to keep calm, her tormenting drove him to impetuous speech.

'Leticia, I have made my heart an open book to you. Tell me now if I have reason to hope!'

Her gaze became focused at some point over his shoulder, and for a moment he thought she would not reply. But after a time, she said, 'I am looking very much forward to the hunt tomorrow.'

Lucius was nearly struck dumb with frustration. Had she not understood him? But then her eyes met his again, and he knew better.

'So you will answer me then?' he asked, gathering her closer, his voice deepening with emotion.

The hand upon his shoulder slid up beneath his hair, and when her fingers touched the back of his neck, he almost groaned aloud.

'It is all but impossible for me to consider a subject outside the frame of our hunt,' she explained, somehow making it all sound much more provocative than it ought to have done.

'What is the hunt in comparison to a lifetime together?' he asked huskily.

The hand beneath his hair gently squeezed the back of his neck. 'But my dear, how could I possibly refuse the man who catches the Hunt Snitch?'

Lucius swallowed. The Hunt Snitch was *not* the object of the hunt; it laid the scent for the hounds to follow, then found its way back to the box from which it had been released. Catching it was not an impossible feat, by any means. The purpose of the Hunt Snitch was to disperse a substance upon the ground, so it did not soar to the heights that a Quidditch Snitch would do. Nevertheless, it was tiny, fast, and notoriously difficult to snag upon horseback.

The dance ended, and as it did, certainty flowed through him, fuelled by determination to possess the prize he now held in his arms. He stared deeply into her eyes, which were almost questioning...did she doubt him?...and a gentle probe of Legilimency was met by solid Occlumency. Flush with an emotion that could only be love, he lifted the hand he held to his lips.

'But of course, my darling,' he purred and was delighted to see how her eyes widened. 'I would expect no less a challenge from my goddess. Consider it done.'

Hermione need not have worried, for Severus did not leave her side in the moments leading up to the waltz, and she even fancied he had warned off another man with a glare. He led her onto the floor, one hand at her waist, the other clasping her own, and she looked up guilelessly into his face. Did his eyes seem guarded? Or was she misreading him? It was so very difficult for her to be sure.

The music began and they moved together, just as they had practiced under the tutelage of Minerva McGonagall. Hermione imagined there were many different ways...wiles she had never bothered to learn...to let a man know you wanted to be alone with him, but she knew only one way to communicate it.

'Severus,' she said, and he inclined his head slightly, as if to indicate that he was listening to her. She couldn't help smiling, for he had also quirked an inquisitive eyebrow. A nerve jumped near the corner of his mouth, as if he had almost smiled but caught himself just in time. 'Would you care to come into my room tonight?'

His expression changed, indefinitely but definitely. 'No, Hermione, I would not.'

She felt slightly embarrassed. 'I just thought it would be simpler to talk in the same room, rather than through the wall,' she said studying his cravat now rather than his face.

'We should say all we wish to say before we say goodnight,' he replied neutrally.

She peeked at his face again, for he seemed slightly less distant than he had a moment before.

'We have the second hunt in the morning, as you'll recall,' he continued, 'and you'll want to be rested for that ride.'

Hermione bit her lip, and it seemed to her that he was particularly interested in the movement of her mouth. 'Will you ride with me for this hunt?' she inquired.

His dark eyes...*I can't tell the iris from the black of the pupil*...she thought hazily...travelled lazily from her mouth to her eyes. 'Perhaps I shall,' he said.

...If you're a good girl, she heard, though he certainly did not speak the words. No, but his hand tightened at her waist, and if possible, it seemed that his gaze became more intense. No coherent thought occurred to her by way of a reply, but she was quite sure he held her more closely for the remainder of their waltz, and they certainly never looked away from one another until the music ended.

Draco took another swig from the Firewhisky bottle he'd nicked from Horologium Black's office and passed it to Harry. They leant against the wall of the box stall, sitting in the straw, watching the tiny black filly on her wobbly, impossibly spindly legs nurse at her mother's teat. The little groom had made the horses comfortable and gone to bed.

'Groats is clever with the horses,' Draco told Harry. 'He's been raised in the stables, like the house-elves are raised in the house.' After a moment, he said, 'The stable-elves have it better, really.'

Harry nodded but didn't speak. He had some insider knowledge of the life of a Malfoy house-elf.

Draco accepted the bottle as Harry passed it back again. 'Father is almost never in a bad temper when he's in the stables,' Draco said with a faint touch of bitterness. 'Wouldn't want to disturb the horses now, would we?'

Harry didn't know what to say. He had always pictured Draco's life as one of comfort and ease. Draco's parents both loved him; Harry knew it for a fact...he'd seen their actions at the Battle of Hogwarts with his own eyes. But it had never occurred to him that Draco might not share his father's attitudes toward their servants.

Draco turned his head, and Harry felt the focus of Draco's eyes like warmth on his skin. He knew it was cowardly not to turn and face Draco, but he was afraid of what might happen if he looked in Draco's eyes. His heart was beating too fast already.

'The house-elves practically raised me,' Draco said quietly. 'Mother and Father were very busy socially, so when I was little, the elves were my companions and my playmates.' Draco chuckled, an earthy, sexy sound, and Harry felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. 'Dobby was the bravest of them, though...he was special. If ever I broke something or spoiled my clothes and Mother or Father found out before one of the house-elves could make it right, Dobby would take the blame.'

The last few words ended on a bit of a shaky tone, and Harry was moved to turn his face towards his companion...but Draco's attention was on his hands. Harry thought Draco's eyes looked a bit overly bright now.

'Dobby was great,' Harry said, rushing into speech, wanting to fill the silence. 'Of course, every time he tried to save me, he nearly killed me.'

Draco uttered another chuckle, this one rather thin and watery sounding. 'He thought you were great,' Draco said, his voice sounding scratchy. 'I saw him sometimes at Hogwarts...he talked about you more than anything else.'

Harry felt the confusion roiling in him: the pain of the boy who lost his most-loved caretaker, the grief of the man's remembrances, and Harry's sudden, overmastering desire to enfold the beautiful, tormenting Draco Malfoy in his arms and somehow comfort him. He bolted to his feet, and Draco looked up at him in some surprise.

'Come on,' Harry said, offering a hand to pull Draco up.

Draco allowed Harry to pull him to his feet. His lashes were damp from the tears he had not shed, and his eyes...those damnably seductive eyes...were the colour of billowing smoke. Even though he was taller than Harry, in that moment, Harry felt stronger...more powerful. Without an explanation, he wrapped his arms about Draco's torso and Disapparated.

Harry braced himself on arrival, prepared to steady Draco, who had not been expecting Side-Along Apparition. The air was tangy with salt, and beneath the moon...one night past the full...it was possible to see the spray of the ocean as it pounded unrelentingly against the rocky shore. Draco, gaining his balance, pushed away from Harry.

'What are you doing, Potter?' he demanded, and though Draco sounded angry, Harry heard the fear beneath the bluster...the uncertainty.

He reached out and took Draco's hand in his. 'Come with me,' he said.

And surprisingly, Draco did not pull away or argue with him; instead, he allowed Harry to lead him along the cliff edge, toward the silhouette of a cottage. Harry saw light in the upper storey, though the ground floor was dark. A man walked past the window, then turned walked past again from the other direction, a lump much like a sack of potatoes held against his shoulder.

'Who's that?' Draco asked.

'Bill Weasley,' Harry answered. 'He's walking the baby, Dominique.'

'Where are we?'

'Shell Cottage,' Harry told him, and they stopped at the end of the garden, between bushes. Harry released Draco's hand and crouched to pull the wild grass that grew about the large white rock there. '*Lumos*,' he murmured, and the writing on the rock became visible.

HERE LIES DOBBY, A FREE ELF

Draco uttered one choked sob, and Harry pulled the other man into his arms. Draco did not resist, but buried his face against Harry's neck, and Harry rocked Draco gently in his arms, much as Bill did with his daughter behind the cottage walls. Harry began to speak into Draco's ear, smoothing the white-blond hair away from Draco's face.

'He brought us here straight from your drawing room, me and Griphook, the goblin. I didn't realise at first there was anything wrong. But I asked him if we were at the right place, and he didn't answer me...that wasn't like him. Then I looked at him, and I saw the hilt of your aunt's knife sticking out of his chest.' Draco clutched at Harry, his grief shuddering through him. 'There was blood, and he was holding his arms out to me, like I could save him.' Harry felt his throat close at the remembered horror, but he forced himself to talk past the lump there. 'I laid him out on the ground and begged him not to die. He said my name, and then he died.'

Holding one another there on the edge of the world beside the sea, the two young wizards shared their sorrow, unashamed of their tears and their love for a creature whose heart had been ever so much larger than the frail body which housed it.

Harry drew two deep, gasping breaths, and Draco straightened a bit. 'I dug the grave with a spade,' Harry said. 'It seemed important, somehow, to do that for him. Ron came after a while and helped me. We wrapped him in my jacket, and Ron took off his shoes and socks and put them on Dobby. Luna closed his eyes, and we all said

something about him...thanking him, you know?"

Draco nodded his understanding, and pulling his handkerchief from his pocket, he began to dry Harry's cheeks. 'I never knew all that,' he said. 'Just that he died. I ... I'll have to be decent to Weasley now, damn him.'

Harry managed a weak smile, and taking the handkerchief from Draco's hand, he returned the favour, drying the cheeks above the pointed chin...the face that had, in just a few days, become impossibly dear to him.

Draco wrapped a fist around Harry's wrist, halting the drying activities, and he stepped closer to Harry, pulling Harry's captured arm about his waist. 'Brace yourself,' Draco said grimly, 'because I'm going to kiss you, whether you like it or not.'

Harry wasn't about to let Draco take the upper hand. With the finesse of the true competitor, he wrapped his free hand in sleek blond hair and pulled Draco into a terribly inept kiss.

They grappled as if a game of blindfolded badminton were at risk, and before long, they sorted out the mechanics.

Severus held off taking Hermione to her room until the staircase was all but empty of other guests. They stood at the door of the Great Hall and bid each guest adieu before starting the climb up to the eighth floor. He did not know what he wanted...what he thought...how he meant to end the evening. Cold reason had dictated his answer to her invitation into her room, but after holding her in his arms, having her wide, ingenuous eyes...the very colour of warm honey...looking up artlessly into his face, he wanted, at the very least, to pin her again to her chamber door and taste the sweetness of her mouth.

She was not talkative as they climbed, but when he glanced at her face, she met his gaze fearlessly, and the tension between them intensified.

Good God. He wanted to follow her through her bedchamber door, but he knew if he did, the likelihood of emerging again before morning was ... not good.

Before he was ready to make a decision, they stood once again before her door, and his resolve was leaking from him like water from a sprung valve. She tilted her chin, her provocative lips parting, her warm-honey eyes inviting any and everything that crossed his undisciplined mind.

'Hermione?'

Severus took a hasty step away from her even before he turned to see who was hailing her.

'Harry!'

She hastened down the corridor towards Potter, who was coatless, his clothes a rumpled, stained mess, his face reddened and blotched, as if he'd been crying. Severus was half a pace behind Hermione as she hurried to her friend.

'Are you all right?' she cried when she reached him.

Potter looked first at Severus, then at Hermione and nodded. 'Yeah, but ...' He looked at Severus again. 'I really need to talk to Hermione ...'

Severus nodded. 'Of course. I'll bid you good night, Miss Granger.'

She turned to him, and he thought she looked at him beseechingly. 'Good night, sir,' she said, as if quite conscious of Potter's eyes upon them. 'I hope you'll rest well, tonight.'

Severus bowed to her, then walked away from them, feeling sanity returning a bit more with every step he took away from Hermione Granger.

A/N: The author has arbitrarily chosen a birthdate for Dominique Weasley.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 18

Friday, August 9, 2002

Midnight to the End of the Hunt

Severus went the long way around to his room, descending to the seventh floor and entering the Headmaster's office. The portraits were snoring, for which he was thankful, but upon the desk, glaring like an accusation, were the thrice-damned playing cards. With lips pressed together in an uncompromising line, he pocketed the deck and retired to his chambers.

The ginger half-Kneazle was within, and upon his entry, the creature meowed a greeting and rubbed against his ankle, leaving cat fur in its wake. 'You are mistaken,' he informed the cat. 'You've proven yourself wrong before, you know...you thought Sirius Black was benign, didn't you?' He took a cat treat from a tin he had placed on the highboy and dropped it on the floor. The cat sauntered over and began to crunch it into crumbs upon the rug.

Severus emptied his pockets, placing the deck of cards amongst the detritus of Hermione Granger memorabilia: a ladies' handkerchief, a battered silver Celtic cross ring, the parchment schedule which now bore his name, and the pocketbook containing a dried yellow flower. The playing cards looked quite at home in the pathetic collection.

He was undoubtedly coming unhinged; before he knew what was happening, he would be packed off by the Ministry to some sort of rehabilitation destination for mad

Headmasters, and McGonagall, rather than Severus, would greet the students on the first of September. Unthinkable!

Divested of his Regency garments, he felt slightly more himself. Was it possible that this emotional muddle was more the product of Regency Week madness than true confusion about a ... possible attachment to a female? Could he hope that the week would end, the guests would leave, soon followed by Granger and her minions, and the memory of her would fade with the port, cigars, and endless repetitions of Mr Beveridge's Maggot?

Wrapped in his dressing gown, he looked longingly at his favourite armchair, but it was much too close to ~~the~~ *the wall*, through which it was ruinously easy to engage in inappropriately intimate conversation with Hermione. Instead, he took a seat across the room at his small writing desk, surprised to find that he held the playing cards. He didn't remember picking them up, yet even as he thought it, his hands began to shuffle the cards.

Impossible to win a game of solitaire with that deck? Well, Severus had enjoyed considerable success over many years of playing the (*not* lonely! Self-sufficient!) game. He bloody well *would* win a game of solitaire playing with Dumbledore's cards.

Shuffle. Deal. Lose. Shuffle. Deal. Lose. Shuffle. Deal. Lose.

'Shit!' he swore, and with grim determination, he began to cheat.

Cheat. Deal. Lose. Cheat. Deal. Lose. Cheat. Deal. Lose.

'What have you done, Albus?' he muttered, and taking up his wand, he began to cast Dark Detection Spells.

Hermione closed the door to Harry's room behind her and moved down the corridor, feeling fairly confident that he would sleep now. She wasn't sure how she felt about the idea of Harry and Draco as a couple, and clearly, Harry wasn't sure about it, either. But he was simultaneously terrified and electrified...an amalgam of emotions with which she was not entirely unfamiliar...and she had let him talk it out, providing feedback when asked.

Crooks was not in her room when she entered...out doing his rounds of the castle, no doubt. She shed her evening gown and performed her night-time routine hurriedly, then climbed into bed and took up her wand. She had been so hopeful tonight that she would have a chance to ... enjoy more time with Severus, *alone*. But Harry's need had been extreme, and Hermione was not one to neglect a friend in need. Still, it had been more than an hour since Severus had left her with Harry...would he still be awake? Would he think it presumptuous of her to interrupt whatever he was doing?

She lowered the wand, biting her lip. She had been existing on impulse, joy-seeking, and sheer *nerve*, ever since Draco had challenged her to 'unclench and enjoy' Regency Week. She was following her heart...or was it her libido?...without giving much thought to consequences, much less to what would come when Regency Week was at an end. Could she, in all good conscience, continue to careen her way through her Regency holiday without a thought for the morrow?

Would she see Severus again...socially speaking...when the event was over? Did she want to? He seemed as affected by their mutual attraction as she was, but he had declined the invitation to her room, so what was she to understand from that? And what if she let her screaming senses have their way...let her desires carry her to their logical conclusion...what then would be Severus' expectations of her? He was, after all, a product of the seventies, when such behaviour had been (according to what she'd *read*) not only acceptable but *admirable*. Would he be the sort of man to bed a woman and go on his merry way?

Did she care?

She lifted her wand again. She had come to no conclusions and made no definite decisions, but at least she could say she had given the consequences *some* thought. She didn't want to be sensible...she wanted to be immersed in the emotions that proximity to Severus Snape roused in her, and be damned to the cost!

'*Murus Perlucidus!* she said and laid back, listening for sounds from the other side of the wall. Did she hear rustling? Perhaps he was already in his bed. 'Severus?' she said, the hopeful anxiety making her heart beat faster.

He did not answer her. She knew from things he had said to her that his bed was not next to the wall, as hers was. The Headmaster's chambers were undoubtedly larger than the guests' rooms, so if he was already abed, he might be too far from the wall to hear her, even if he was awake.

'Severus?' she tried again.

'Meow?'

She drew back a bit. That was definitely a cat, and it might be silly, but she felt quite sure it was Crookshanks' voice.

'Crooks?'

There was a sound like a bump on the wall, and Hermione had the mental image of her cat trying to walk through the wall. But what would Crooks be doing in Severus' room?

She waited several minutes, but she did not hear Severus' voice, and at last, she spoke the counter spell. If he snored...or if she did!...she had no desire for them to learn such a thing about one another because of sloppy spell-casting. She put her wand aside and snuggled beneath her blanket, fondly stroking the wall and thinking of the man on the other side.

Severus glared at the playing cards. There were no Dark spells woven into their fibre, nor did he find that the deck had been jinxed in any Dark way. No, the enchantment knitted into the stuff of which the playing cards were formed was a variety of High Magick, of which little was known and none was practiced in this day and age. He recognised the imprint only because it was laced into the very mercury coating the back of the sixteenth-century Mirror of Erised, an Object that he had studied on and off for decades.

What the hell had he unleashed by dealing out these cards, as blithely as any fool who allowed himself to be entangled in one of Dumbledore's coils?

Sighing heavily, he aligned the deck and cut the cards...the queen of hearts. What were the words of the old song? *The queen of hearts is always your best bet*. The queen of hearts had been the card which finished his hand the night he won the right to be Hermione's escort...it was the card which had, in some recess of his brain, come to be forever linked with his bushy-haired tormentor.

Cutting the cards again, he drew the knave of spades. He smirked. Well, here was a character with whom he could identify...a cunning, untrustworthy man, with a soul as black as night. He laid the card beside the queen, the two figures facing one another, separated by the knave's halberd. It was as it should be, was it not? The purity of the queen was protected from the corruption of the knave by a well-honed blade.

The symbolism was clear, even to such a dolt as Severus Snape.

Even if she should invite him to her bed, it did not mean she was interested in anything more prolonged than the remainder of Regency Week, a period of time that had begun by seeming interminable and was now slipping through his fingers far too fast. Could he let her in and then let her go? Already, she knew too much of him to be counted amongst his mere one-night-stands. Those women, who wanted only to take a war hero to bed, had no interest in knowing the concerns of his heart, much less the workings of his mind...yet Hermione had coaxed these things from between his lips as easily as she had insinuated herself into that same mind ... that same heart.

Suddenly furious, he slapped the deck together, shuffled and cut the cards again.

Queen of hearts. Knave of spades.

Shuffle. Cut. Queen of hearts. Knave of spades.

Shuffle. Cut. Queen of hearts. Knave of spades.

He pushed the two offending cards to the far edge of the desk, where they hung like fate-crossed lovers upon a cliff, and he repeated the process.

Shuffle. Cut. Queen of hearts. Knave of spades.

The cat planted ginger paws upon his leg, stretching up with an interrogative, 'Meow?'

Severus glared down at the animal. 'You get in here on your own...why can you not leave the same way, without plaguing me?'

Nevertheless, he abandoned the cursed...no, *uncursed!* It would be so much easier to face if they *were* cursed!...cards and trod across the floor to open the door for the cat. He stood in the doorway, looking down the corridor, where Hermione, Weasley (and Miss Vane, no doubt), and Potter were sleeping in their separate rooms. With a weakening of will, he sagged against the doorjamb and stared at her door. Was she awake? If not, would she mind if he woke her? Would she welcome him into her bedchamber? For a riotous moment, he imagined crossing the threshold, taking her into his arms, devouring her mouth even as he coaxed her from her nightdress ...

No, she probably wears pink jim-jams with kitties on them, he thought.

He slammed the door on that fantasy, even as he soundlessly eased the door to his room closed. Even if she wanted him...wanted him for more than a holiday fling...such a union would never prosper. He was twenty years too old for her, and confined by his career to this castle in remote Scotland.

What are Floos for? his lovelorn inner adolescent demanded.

Having her name linked with that of a Death Eater...even one known as Dumbledore's spy, the recipient of the Order of Merlin, First Class...could do nothing to improve her likelihood of being selected for advancement in her career, which was of paramount importance to Hermione Granger. And what would such a liaison do for Severus' tenure as Headmaster of a secondary school? A Headmaster did not have a publicly-acknowledged sexual relationship with a woman who was not his wife. The Board of Governors would never stand for it, and frankly, neither would Severus, if it were one of his teachers. The Staff could sleep with anyone they wished, providing they kept it under wraps when they did so. Otherwise, what kind of example would be set for the students? And he would not ask Hermione to be his dirty little secret...not in this life.

Marry her, the babbling fool in his head suggested.

'Bugger off!' he snarled aloud and flung across to the drinks trolley, where he poured a measure of Firewhisky into a goblet. Thank Merlin he had long ago removed all sentient objects from his chambers to prevent portraits or mirrors from answering back or taking offence when he was moved to swear out loud.

He stared unseeing at the wall as he drank. He had seen first-hand what sort of abysmal girlfriend Hermione made...witness Weasley's misery!

She would not treat me so, he thought, narrowing his eyes. *I wouldn't stand for it.*

He slapped the goblet onto the tray again. There was no point in dwelling on things that would never happen. It was necessary instead to outline his plans for the rest of Regency Week and determine how to shore up his defences against Hermione's artless appeal.

It was going to be a long night.

Severus eschewed the Floo that morning and stole out of the castle just after six o'clock. Dew glistened on the grass as he walked down from the castle to the gates with the great winged boars upon them. When he was outside the protective enchantments that prevented Apparition within the boundaries of Hogwarts, he Disapparated.

Arriving within the gates of the Manor, Severus looked about at the parading white peacocks. He was quite sure the birds said something about Lucius, but he didn't like to think what it might be.

'Isn't it a glorious morning?'

Severus darted a glare at his host, who was already fully dressed for the hunt. 'It will do.'

Lucius smiled. 'Have you come to see Persephone's foal? I think you'll be pleased; the little filly is just like Apollyon.'

The two wizards began the walk to the stables. 'I received Draco's message, but I was ... unable to leave the castle last night,' Severus said.

Lucius gave him a knowing look. 'I am sure Miss Granger appreciated your presence,' he said.

Severus answered with a glare.

When they entered the box stall, the tiny foal moved behind her mother. Lucius took the mare's halter and spoke to her soothingly as Severus moved past her to see the filly.

'She is a beauty,' he murmured. 'You're right. She's the spit of her sire.'

They moved out of the stall and through the stable into the sunlight again, and as they did, Lucius favoured him with a long look. 'I hope you won't mind my saying so, Severus, but you look like hell this morning.'

Severus sneered at him. 'I'm surprised you noticed. Your head has been so taken up with my Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher that little else has registered with you.'

Lucius broke into a broad smile, his attention swiftly swinging to the more palatable subject. 'Well, Leticia's defences are crumbling,' he gloated, 'though I swear I have used no Dark Arts, of course.'

Severus answered that sally with nothing but a raised brow. Lucius was in exceptionally high spirits this morning; he was very nearly giddy. How annoying.

Leaning his blond head close, Lucius said, 'She implied to me last night that if I catch the Hunt Snitch today, she will consent to be my wife! I am one task away from victory!'

'She sounds to me remarkably like a cat, toying with a mouse,' Severus observed dryly.

'Oh, she's more like a tigress,' Lucius said reverently. 'But that's not what I wanted to say to you, Severus.' He looked soberly into Severus' face. 'This mouse would not be averse to any ... helpful spells you might have up your sleeve.'

'You want me to help you cheat?' Severus said, beginning to be truly amused. 'No, I'm afraid you're on your own there, old man. Far be it for me to interfere in the course of

true love and all that.'

Lucius made a noise between a laugh and a snort. 'You are being corrupted by the company you're keeping!'

Severus smiled. 'You know, that's precisely what she said about you.'

They walked in silence for a moment, and when Severus spoke again, it was in a sober tone. 'How to you think Draco will respond to the news of his new mummy?'

Lucius frowned. 'I'll admit, that has been a worry to me. One can never know how one's child will react.'

'Draco is not such a big mystery,' Severus disagreed. 'I've found him to be quite rational for such a young man.' Lucius had had his head in the sand over his son for years now, and Severus saw an opportunity to do a good turn. 'You know, Lucius, Draco will be more likely to respond to your news in an accepting manner if he feels he has been ... accepted by you.'

Lucius spread his hands in an expansive manner. 'Draco knows how important he is to me,' he exclaimed.

Severus chose not to respond to that remark.

Lucius looked uncomfortable. 'Perhaps Draco and I could be ... closer.'

'It's not too late,' Severus said quietly. You might make a special effort now so that your lady will find him more ... welcoming.'

They turned together and began to walk back to the house. Lucius said, 'So, what will you name your filly?'

'I haven't decided yet,' Severus told him.

'Speaking of fillies ... Have I been imagining things, or is there something developing between you and Miss Granger?'

Severus gave a terse shake of the head. He had no interest in going into that subject now.

'I only ask because, if you are not developing feelings for her, your performance thus far should earn you a place on the stage with the players tonight.'

'We have an understanding, Lucius. We will fulfil our roles in all of this for Hogwarts.' He did not mean to say it, but the next words escaped him all the same. 'Beyond that, I am ... at a loss.'

Lucius chuckled delightedly. 'Ah! You have flushed the fox from its cover and are in hot pursuit!'

But though Severus gave an abrupt shake of his head, he did not respond.

Harry sat up in bed with his heart hammering. He might just that moment have Disappeared from Draco at the seaside with a gasped, 'See you tomorrow!' But no, he'd come back to the castle...he'd talked to Hermione and told her all about it.

So what was the knocking? Was Hermione back? He put his glasses on and looked at the clock. Damn, it was nearly eight! He jumped up, grabbing the first breeches he saw and pulling them on before opening the door.

'I know I'm late, Hermi...' The words died in his throat because Draco was the culprit, not Hermione. Harry's mouth dried up and no further words seemed forthcoming.

'Lazy git,' Draco drawled, his cool grey eyes starting with Harry's rumpled bed-hair and travelling slowly down, pausing curiously on the lips he had bruised with his kisses, before having a nice leisurely stare at Harry's bare top half.

Draco was dressed for the hunt, impeccably groomed, and lounging in the doorway as if he had all morning to lurk and smirk. Self-consciously, Harry crossed his arms over his chest. He felt half like dragging Draco in to take up where they'd left off the night before and half like slamming the door in his smirking face.

Draco thrust a garment into Harry's hands.

'What's this?' Harry asked.

'It's a proper coat for the hunt,' Draco informed him. 'An improvement over the one you wore Wednesday.'

Harry held it up, seeing it was a red coat, like the ones worn by Draco and Severus. Some of the other riders had ordered special-made garments like this one from Madam Malkin. 'I didn't order a bespoke coat just for the hunt,' he said.

Draco rolled his eyes. 'I know that, Potter.' He straightened up from his indolent slouch. 'I want you to have this coat...just put it on.'

Harry felt embarrassed and pleased. 'Thanks, Draco.' He didn't know what else to say.

Draco briefly touched his hand, grey eyes seeking green. 'Hurry up,' he said. 'You'll be late for the hunt breakfast! And you need a good breakfast for the hunt. You know, breakfast is the most important ...'

Harry held up a hand to stop him. 'All right, I'm there, already. Go away.'

Then Draco turned to go, and Harry leant a bit to the side to watch him walk away.

'And no eyeing up my bum!' Draco called, turning to give Harry a wicked grin over one shoulder.

Harry shut the door with an inward groan. Things were becoming more complicated with every passing hour; navigating his life had suddenly become quite similar to swimming through treacle. Still, he was determined to struggle through, because he didn't know what came next, and he had to find out.

Hermione was a bit shocked when she saw the Headmaster at the hunt breakfast. He was pasty beneath his sallow complexion, his eyes were shadowed, and he seemed rather removed from the raillery going on at the table. Professor Mortelle and Mr Malfoy seemed almost incandescent with good spirits. It also seemed that there were some inside jokes between them of which Hermione was completely unaware, so a large part of their conversation went right over her head.

Draco and Harry had arrived for breakfast together, joking and insulting one another as they had done all week at their sports contests. Hermione couldn't help but note Harry's new coat. She knew he hadn't ordered one from Madam Malkin, because he hadn't thought he would care for horseback riding. Harry's red coat was almost a match for Draco's...she was fairly certain that when she saw Harry closer up, she would be able to distinguish on his brass buttons the imprint of a coiling snake. Harry probably hadn't noticed that little detail.

She glanced again at her companion, and his glance met hers.

'Are you ... unwell, sir?' she asked quietly.

He studied her face for a moment, then his expression softened. 'You look very well this morning, Milady,' he said.

Hermione wondered if there was another man on the planet whose voice, pitched just for her ears, could make her toes curl with pleasure.

'I passed an ... indifferent night,' he continued, returning his attention to the eggs upon his plate. 'No doubt a ride in the fresh air will do me a world of good.'

Would he ride with her, as he had hinted he might? She couldn't jump the course obstacles, but she could ride with him across the fields, and she longed to do so.

Leticia Mortelle adjusted the skirts of her riding dress, settling her right leg securely on the jumping horn. She had enjoyed the week of Regency playacting, but in truth, she would look forward to riding astride again in breeches. Now that she had enjoyed the delights of Lucius Malfoy's stables and his Wizard Hunt, she looked forward to continuing her participation in the future...for even if the man should shy away from the requirements she put in place for her paramours, she would make sure to retain his friendship.

One did one's best in life, and experience had taught her that one's highest expectations were seldom ever fulfilled...but then she had met Lucius, who was far more beautiful than she would ever be...and her heart had learnt to hope again.

They gathered in the stable yard, a few dozen on horseback, and house-elves moved into their midst, each carrying a wooden tray with six holes bored right through. In the holes reposed crystal cups with long stems and no pedestal to set it down upon a surface. The stems protruded through the bottom of the wooden tray, and each piece of crystal, etched in silver with scenes of the hunt, contained the tart stirrup cup mixture.

The riders took the glasses from the servants and at a sign from Lucius, they drank. Then they formed up to begin, and Leticia took her place at Lucius' side, atop his rangy white hunter.

She darted a sidelong look at him. 'Are you ... quite ready for the chase?' she inquired.

His white teeth gleamed in a rakish smile. 'Never more so,' he answered her.

Leticia smiled, her gaze directed between her horse's ears, in high anticipation of the run to come.

Hermione and Firefly gathered with the riders under supervision for their parallel run with the riders of the hunt. She watched Harry's interaction with Draco, watching for signs of what had happened between them, but beyond a certain warmth in Draco's eyes when they rested on Harry, she saw little difference between them.

The beginners group was not riding today, and Horologium Black took charge of the intermediate riders. Then there was a voice beside her, and Hermione completely lost the thread of Mr Black's instructions.

'I think we can dispense with your instructor today,' Severus said, riding up alongside her on his sleek black stallion. 'Come...ride with me.'

She urged Firefly to follow Apollyon, and as they passed Mr Black, Severus said, 'I'll take charge of this one today.'

The head groom nodded his agreement, and Severus spoke over his shoulder to her. 'Come alongside,' he said. 'Don't be shy. Neither Apollyon nor I ... bite.'

She drew up beside him, trying desperately to think of all her riding instructions instead of ... biting. Some biting could be quite nice, really ...

From a neighbouring field, they heard the baying of the hounds and the shout of the riders as they caught the scent. Severus turned his face to hers, his black eyes glittering. 'Here we go,' he said. 'We'll move into a canter, and if you do well enough, we may take it to a gallop.'

Hermione concentrated hard as Firefly transitioned from a walk to a trot, and at the touch of Hermione's booted heel, she eased into a canter. Severus remained at her side, holding his horse back, though the animal clearly wished for a faster pace. His eyes were as frequently focussed on her as on the terrain, which was very familiar to him.

As had happened for her before when riding the smooth-gaited Firefly, Hermione relaxed into pure enjoyment of the ride, feeling the wind in her face and watching the ground fly by beneath the horses' hooves. She gloried in the sight of her companion with his hair flying back behind him, his powerful thighs gripping the horse's barrel, his commands communicated by the slightest pressure of those legs, giving the distinct impression of oneness with his mount. Hermione could not explain her visceral reaction to Severus Snape on horseback, his streaming hair a match for his horse's rippling coat, but she suspected that if she sat astride her horse as he did, having the undulating muscles between her legs would be a distraction even more acute than what she suffered now.

'Are you ready?' he called to her, and she was not sure what he was asking about, but whatever he wanted of her, she was more than ready.

'Yes!' she answered, and the black stallion at her side moved forward faster, lengthening his stride until it seemed to her as if Apollyon were flying.

Firefly did not wish to be left behind, and Hermione felt the transition in her horse's gait. Even now, Severus held his great stallion in check, and Hermione and Firefly easily drew alongside, the two horses galloping neck and neck. Hermione was intoxicated with the heady euphoria of such speed in such company, and allowing her gaze to rest for a moment on the savage satisfaction on Severus' face, she wished they could ride on together forever.

The hunters had great sport that day, but Leticia Mortelle had her full attention on two things: the Hunt Snitch and the Hunt Master. She was delighted when they caught sight of the elusive Hunt Snitch, at which point Lucius directed the Field Master to take over his duties, as he had a task to complete. The field riders took this in good part, mostly, leaving Lucius to his odd pursuit, but Leticia kept close to him, watching carefully. She did, after all, have a terrific stake in the outcome of the day's sport.

Two of the younger men realised that the Hunt Master was chasing not the fox scent, but the Hunt Snitch, and they good naturedly set out to assist. Leticia did not feel it was her place to tell them to mind their own business, however strongly she wanted to communicate that to them. She simply followed along, keeping one eye on the man on the white horse and the other on the field riders.

Forty minutes into the chase, Lucius' horse sped up, and Leticia knew he had spotted the Hunt Snitch. His two followers seemed to realise it as well, and they laid their heels into their mounts to catch up to him. Leticia acted without hesitation. Bringing her best defence skills to bear, she sent a Confundus Charm streaking after the two young men, and in the next moment, Lucius' horse gathered himself and took to the air to clear a broad stream. In mid-flight, Lucius hurled himself sideways from the saddle, his arms stretched out like a bird in flight, and seconds later, he splashed into the stream.

The two Confunded young men were milling about the meadow, trying to recall why they were there. Leticia called out, 'Groats! Come to me!'

The stable-elf popped into place at her side.

'Please take these two gentlemen back to the stables,' she directed him. 'They seem to have become ... confused.'

Groats ran to take the trailing reins of the two young wizards, and Leticia hurried to the stream, dismounting and falling to her knees upon the bank. Lucius gained his feet, water streaming from his long blond hair, a fierce, victorious gleam in his grey eyes. In one hand, he held the fluttering Hunt Snitch.

Only the two horses witnessed the violence with which he laid hold of the red-haired lady, and they were indifferent to the devouring kiss the wet man imposed upon the wholly willing woman.

'You're mine now,' he informed her as he mangled her hat and disarranged her hair.

Leticia leaned her head back to meet his eyes. 'Or are you mine?' she said meaningfully.

His arms tightened about her until she feared she could not breathe. 'To my bedroom, I think,' he told her, running a possessive hand down her side. 'And bring the crop.'

She displayed the implement, stroking the leather loop down his cheek. 'I wouldn't dream of leaving it behind.'

A/N: You may view the Queen of Hearts and her Knave of Spades here:

<http://herpie-houseelf.livejournal.com/2063.html>

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 19

Friday, August 9, 2002

Afternoon and Evening

Harry and Draco took a leaf from Severus' book, galloping together through the fields until it was time to turn back. They rode in silence, but it was not an uncomfortable one. Harry watched Draco's fine features, stealing glances, feeling the understanding between them like a deep, quiet pool. There were delights in the depths, he believed, but there was no need to plunge in over his head before he could properly swim.

It was not as if anything would disrupt their shared peace.

As they rode into the stable yard, Harry saw a handsome black wizard wearing a dark blue Regency coat leaning against the paddock fencing. He seemed perfectly at home, but as Harry and Draco rode up, the handsome face assumed a scowl.

'What are you doing here?' Draco demanded, and the tone in his voice set Harry on high alert.

The handsome wizard wasn't a stranger...he was Blaise Zabini, and he and Harry had never liked each other.

'I decided to come after all,' Zabini replied. 'I was going to ride with the hunt...surprise you...but when I went to collect my coat, Madam Malkin said *you* had already claimed it.'

The roiling tension between the two former Slytherins was thick enough to make the air unbreathable, but that was the least of Harry's current problems. Now he stared down at his fancy, bespoke riding coat, and realised where it had come from.

'You want your coat, Zabini?' Harry asked, and he began to unbutton it.

'It's not his,' Draco said icily. 'It's mine. I paid for it.'

Harry didn't need Draco's gold. He had a vault full of it and scarcely knew what to do with what he had. Yet he rather liked having Draco take his part over Zabini. It gave him a warm feeling.

He removed his fingers from the buttons and instead rested his hand on his wand, waiting to see what would happen next.

Ron Weasley was footsore by the time he and his horse returned to the paddock. After stepping in a rabbit hole, his old bay gelding was limping. Mr Black had said the horse should be led back to the stables, and Ron was perfectly willing to do that. His mind was so full of Romilda, these days, that a stroll through the countryside was no hardship.

The paddocks were in sight when he stepped on the small black book. He bent to retrieve it, turning it over in his hands. It was moleskin, with creamy parchment pages, covered in handwriting. He frowned over it as he pondered...whom had he seen with just such a book this week? It was Creevey! Little Dennis Creevey, whom Ron did not recall as the studious type, had been jotting in his notebook all over the castle and grounds this week. His book must've fallen out of his pocket while he was riding.

The half-formed notion of returning the book to its owner flitted through the back of Ron's mind as he resumed his ambling trek to the stables with his limed horse, puzzling over a page in the notebook...a page with Ron's name on it. He flipped through the scribbled notations, his expression darkening with every step.

Ron Weasley challenged Headmaster Snape to a duel because of Hermione Granger!

Draco Malfoy fancies Harry Potter, but the Boy-Who-Lived doesn't notice!

The Serpent Slayer is stalked by the part-Veela sister of Triwizard Champion Fleur Delacour, Gabrielle!

Romilda Vane throws herself at Ron Weasley!

Ron slapped the book closed and pushed it into the pocket of his coat. Snape needed to see this.

When the hunt had ended, riders returned to the stable yard and handed their horses over to the stable-elves before departing for Hogwarts.

Hermione and Severus were amongst the last to arrive. Their return had been slower, but no less fraught with tension, than the ride out had been. In the yard, Severus dismounted, and Hermione watched the graceful economy of his movements with a dry mouth, aching for she knew not what. He looked up into her face, his expression shuttered, and his hands closed about her waist. She leant toward him, gloved hands pressed to his shoulders, and slipped to the ground, making no effort to prevent the slow, maddening slide down his long, lean frame. She mourned the end of their outing, but it seemed that it was not yet over. Severus handed the horses' reins off to a waiting groom and continued into the dimness of the stable, one hand wrapped firmly about Hermione's wrist.

She allowed herself to be led, anticipation racing through her veins. Why were they entering the stables? Where was he taking her? The question was scarcely formed in her mind before he ducked into a musty room filled with huge burlap bags of feed on wooden pallets stacked along the walls...and then her back was to the wall, and he was staring down into her face with wildly glittering, neverending black eyes.

Hermione allowed her head to fall back against the wall, and Severus plucked the plumed riding hat from her head, flinging it from him, never looking away from her face. His gaze was hot enough to liquefy metal, and she felt her internal systems closing down one by one in anticipation of the plundering his manner promised. Of what use was breathing, for instance, in the face of vaporising heat? When their essence was melded into one, what need would she have of a beating heart?

'It gets your blood up, riding with me,' he informed her, in case it had escaped her notice.

She made no effort to form words...such coherence was entirely beyond her. She communicated her agreement, instead, by clutching one wide lapel of his coat in her fist and thrusting upward to wrap the other arm about his neck. The kiss was neither soft nor tender, consisting as it did of superheated lips, questing tongues, and devouring teeth. This promising beginning was followed by peremptory caresses and bodies straining to unite through layers of restrictive clothing. Had she not been hampered by trailing velvet skirts, Hermione might have climbed him like a tree, seeking to unite thrust and parry.

She did what she could, then, to internalise him, absorbing his taste, inhaling his breath, saturating her senses with the smell and feel and essential *tightness* of him. This ... *this* ... was why she had longed to be alone with him.

Alone ... and *this*, sweet Circe.

She was insensible of every other reality save Severus Snape. It was, perhaps, fortuitous that he retained enough awareness to hear Ron when his voice called from elsewhere in the stable.

'Headmaster! You need to see this!'

Severus straightened from her embrace, his mouth held in a grimace. For a mere second, his impassioned eyes closed, and when they opened again, a different man altogether looked out from them. Still, the broad pad of his thumb passed over her lips, and then he was through the feed room door, closing it behind him.

Hermione blinked, gasping and abandoned, feeling disoriented. Trust Ron to ruin things for her, just when she felt as if she were ...

She bent and picked up her hat, settling it on her windblown, hand-mauled curls, and securing it with the faux pearl-tipped pin still nestled amongst the plumes. The voices, those of her former lover and the almost-lover she desperately wished to have, faded from hearing, and knowing herself to have been forsaken...good cause or no...she Disappeared to the gates of Hogwarts.

Lucius lay upon his back in the middle of his enormous bed, surveying the elaborately frescoed ceiling of his domed bedchamber. His witch dozed at his side, her Titian hair trailing upon his pillow, her soft, luscious curves pressed to his side. She stirred, stretched, and rolled away from him. He rolled with her, buying his face in her throat.

'You are mine forever...and I am your wizard. I will protect and defend you with my life.'

She stroked his hair, and he almost purred.

'Will it be sapphires to match your eyes, my darling? Or emeralds, perhaps, with a deep blue fire?'

'I am not the sort of woman to leave such an important decision to chance,' she said. 'I shall assist you in choosing.'

He drew up on an elbow. 'But I wanted to surprise you,' he explained.

She smiled. 'There are gifts that are appropriate for surprises, but not jewels. If I am to have them, I'll choose the ones I want...you have no objection, my love?'

He shivered, hearing the endearment and remembering the touch of the riding crop. 'Indeed I do not, my love,' he responded. 'We must go shopping soon, for we'll marry quickly.'

Leticia sat up on the edge of the bed, the creamy expanse of her back to him. 'We'll marry at Christmas,' she said, 'when we've had full opportunity to inform our families and plan our wedding.'

He moved behind her, pressing his lips to her shoulder. 'Draco may be ... surprised,' he murmured.

'Draco is taken up with concerns of his own just now,' she informed him. 'But your happiness will be as important to him as is his mother's ... and you said he readily accepted Narcissa's new partner, yes?'

Lucius nodded his answer against her back. He did not want to talk about Narcissa...did not want her memory to taint what had occurred between them just now.

Leticia turned to him, her expression serious. 'She's his mother...she was your wife and the mistress of this house for twenty years...she will always be a part of our lives. It is only sensible for us to agree now, at the beginning, that we will always speak our minds to one another about everything.'

Lucius did not know how to answer her; he had just shared lovemaking with this witch beyond anything he'd ever experienced before. Any failures in his past were just that: in the past.

'I agree,' he said. 'But Draco might have more difficulty accepting a new mistress of the home he grew up in.'

Leticia took his face between her hands. 'Draco will accept you if you accept him.'

He pulled away from her. 'I don't know what you...'

'Draco is gay, Lucius. You must acknowledge it.'

He pushed past her, rising to his feet, finding and donning his dressing gown. He did not want to discuss this subject...not now! Not when the barque of his life was on this serenely calm sea. Not when things were settled between them...when he'd finally got what he wanted...no turbulence to disturb this bliss.

Leticia remained serenely on the bedside, gloriously naked and unashamed. 'Come...you must know it's true...must've known it for years! What can be the harm of *telling* him you know? It will set his mind at ease, Lucius.'

Lucius began to pace. 'I don't know anything of the sort! It's just some phase! He'll get past it and...'

'And what? Marry some poor girl to make you happy and end by making his wife miserable?'

He stopped and turned his face to her. 'He's my heir...my only son! I have no brother...no family...I am the last of the Malfoy name!'

She rose gracefully and walked to him, taking his hands in her own. 'Don't fret, my darling. You are still a young, virile wizard. You may yet father another son.'

'Leticia! He embraced her. 'I never hoped...I know your views on...'

She pressed her cheek to his chest and soothed his back with firm, circular pressure of her hands. 'In many ways, I was raised from my cradle for this role...the lady wife of some great wizard. Until now, I never knew a wizard to whom I would grant so much power in my life.'

He swept her back to the bed, his sudden need for her overwhelming. 'It is because I gladly give it back to you, the moment the bedroom door closes,' he said, his lips at her throat.

She rolled him onto his back and untied the dressing gown, running a hand down his chest, fingertips trailing his ribcage, over the blade of his hipbone, to the golden curls below.

'You give it back to me,' she replied, as his eyes closed and an audible moan passed his lips, 'when I take it, my darling. You are the perfect wizard.'

Leticia watched the beautiful, finely chiselled face relax into the throes of abandon, thrilling to the power she wielded over so worthy a recipient of her love. Children had never been a great desire of hers, but she would do anything to satisfy the needs of the wizard she loved...up to and including providing an heir to carry on the Malfoy name.

But surely wizarding scholarship had arrived at a means for same sex partners to procreate by now. If so, Draco might yet do his duty, pleasing his father and taking Leticia off the hook.

She would look into it.

George was late to lunch, having spent a good bit of the time with Madam Malkin, looking over the costumes for that night's performance of excerpts from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Today was the dress rehearsal, and for it to qualify as 'dress', all the costumes had to be complete. He believed his players were ready to put their hearts into a final, serious rehearsal before their performance. Why, just the previous afternoon, he had returned from his walk to find them all attentive and serious at their work. He did not know what had got into them to bestir them from their joking about, but whatever it was, he could only be thankful.

When at last he made it to the Great Hall, his mother was hovering about, as if she were waiting for someone.

'Mum?' he said. 'Is anything wrong?'

And she drew him aside to tell him what was on her mind.

Hermione waited in vain for Severus to show up for lunch. She had no idea what Ron had wanted him for...Ron wasn't at lunch either, and Romilda looked none too happy about it. Hermione was reduced to forming a pile of mash into fork tine sculptures, waiting impatiently for Severus to appear. How would he behave? Would he be attentive or withdrawn? Could she convince him to skive off the afternoon socialising for a continuation of their ... 'blood up' discussion?

Small green peas adorned the artful pile of mash one by one as she considered the possibilities.

Luna was the first one to arrive in the antechamber after lunch. She had the scripts to organise and the costumes to check off against her clipboard. George hadn't shown up at lunch, but she couldn't worry about that, now. He probably had a good reason for not coming. She just needed to have everything prepared for him when he arrived to begin the dress rehearsal.

Running one finger down the cast of characters and their players, she saw that everyone was present, save for Professor Mortelle and Mr Malfoy. They hadn't been at lunch, either. Perhaps they had been detained by some complication from the hunt.

The antechamber doors both burst open, and Luna looked up, expecting to see a group enter, but it was only George. She smiled in greeting...it always made her so happy to see his face, even when he was looking as serious as he did now...but he did not smile in return. He also did not seem to hear the cheerful greetings from Fin and Neville. No, he never looked away from Luna, and she began to be a bit worried. Had she done something wrong? Was he angry with her?

Then he was on her, scarcely slowing before he put his arms around her and kissed her on the mouth, right in front of God and everybody. Even his parents were in the room! But his lips were pressed firmly to hers, and he held her against him with arms as strong as ...

He broke their kiss, his strangely serious blue eyes searching her face, and suddenly it made sense to Luna. He had found out about her little lecture to the players the day before. Of course, that was it!

'You're welcome,' she whispered, wondering what all their audience were thinking about this interlude.

'That *wasn't* a thank you,' he growled, and he kissed her again.

This kiss was fiercer, somehow, and in spite of her concern for their audience, Luna was moved to kiss him back. After all, he might come to his senses at any minute, and this might be her only opportunity to show him how deeply she cared for him...how completely he had stolen her heart.

She pressed herself against him, wrinkling the back of his fine Regency coat with her clutching hold upon it. At her response, his embrace became gentler, and when he broke the kiss again, he cupped her cheek with his hand.

'Now do you understand?' he asked her, and the room was suddenly full of foot-stomping and applause.

Luna's face felt as if it were on fire when George motioned his father to the front of the room. 'You lot find your costumes and get into them. Luna and I have things to discuss. We'll be back later.'

And he marched her outdoors into the August sun, where they walked and talked, and then found a bench and sat and kissed and whispered until more than an hour had passed.

Severus sat at his desk, the deck of playing cards pushed to one side, the sad little black book open before him. Reading through the hastily scribbled notes...misspelled words, improper grammar, and all...had not taken him very long. This was, indeed, a problem, but not in the way Ronald Weasley believed.

There was a knock at his door, and then Dennis Creevey was standing in his office, looking not much older than he'd been when Severus had been his teacher.

'You ... you wanted to see me, Headmaster?'

The boy sounded frightened, though Severus didn't remember him as craven. In fact, he remembered Dennis Creevey as a reckless Gryffindor, ready for any sport, as long as it was in the service of his idol, Harry Potter. The little fool had joined Dumbledore's Army and had shown up with his brother to fight at the Battle of Hogwarts.

No, Creevey was no coward.

'Have a seat, Mr Creevey,' Severus said.

Creevey came forward and sat down nervously in a chair before the Headmaster's desk. His eyes were riveted on the little black notebook.

'I...I knew I'd dropped it somewhere,' he muttered miserably.

Severus stared at the boy, and as he had hoped, Creevey looked back at him, trying desperately not to show fear. Severus slipped into his mind, and in a very short time, the matter was clear to him.

'Who paid for you to attend this event?' Severus asked.

Creevey's eyes slid away from his. 'I don't know,' he said. 'A man came to me...said he was employed by a newspaper group...offered to pay my way here and for pictures and stories, because no reporters were being allowed in.'

Severus rubbed one finger across his thin lips. 'And it didn't occur to you that if no reporters were allowed, then we didn't want our guests' activities to be reported in the newspapers?'

Creevey's eyes flashed. 'I needed the money,' he snapped.

Severus sat forward. 'You did not complete your education, did you, Mr Creevey?'

Creevey looked mutinous. 'Colin and I couldn't come that last year...we're Muggle-born!...and then Colin died, and ... it didn't seem important.'

The boy referred to the first year of Severus' headmastery...the horrible year when the Dark Lord dictated the school policy, when the Carrows taught and practiced the Dark Arts in these very halls of learning...the year when students of Muggle parentage had been driven into hiding to escape prison or some worse punishment at the hands of Death Eaters.

Creevey's shoulders hunched in, as if to protect himself from something. Severus frowned, watching him.

'Did you, perhaps, return to Muggle school? Or attend some sort of trade school for Muggles?'

Creevey gave a disgusted sigh. 'Muggle school? How could I go there? I didn't know anything more than I'd learnt in primary school, did I? And my mum and dad weren't too keen on me coming back here, after the war, and Colin dying and all.'

No, he couldn't have gone on to Muggle secondary school after spending four years at Hogwarts; he would not have been prepared for their subject matter. And who could blame the Creevey parents for loathing the very name of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?

'Mr Creevey,' Severus asked diffidently, 'are there other Muggle-borns from your year who didn't come back to Hogwarts?'

Creevey nodded vigorously. 'A fair few. Things were so unsettled after the war, with the rebuilding of the school, and loads of people had had to run, leave the country, because the Death Eaters were after them.' He sighed. 'It hasn't been an easy thing to be a Muggle-born wizard lately, Professor Snape.'

Ideas were popping in the back of Severus' mind, like bubbles in water coming to a slow boil. Severus stood, and nervously, Creevey stood as well.

'Are you going to throw me out?' Creevey asked.

'I am not,' Severus replied. 'However, I would like to speak with you again. May I send for you later?'

Creevey seemed quite confused. 'Yeah, of course, if you want to.' He looked around Severus at the black book on the desktop, but he seemed to think better of mentioning it.

As Creevey went out the door, Severus took up the deck of cards and shuffled. 'Herpie!'

The house-elf popped into the office.

'Fetch me Mr Arthur Weasley,' he said.

'Right away, Headmaster, sir!'

Severus cut the cards.

The queen of hearts.

Arthur, dressed in his fairy costume, was happy to discuss his position as the Head of Muggle Reparations. 'We've worked on repairing the structural damages caused during the war, to roads and bridges and buildings,' Arthur explained. 'And we've funnelled some gold into their Ministry for war orphans. But no, we haven't made any special provisions for the Muggle-born students who were pushed out of school the year of the war.' Arthur cocked his head to one side. 'You'll pardon me asking, Severus, but didn't the school follow up on that?'

Minerva came in next, directing a pile of heavy ledgers before her with her wand. 'No, Severus, I don't have the numbers in my head!' she snapped in irritation. 'You weren't well enough to come back to school until after Christmas, as you'll recall, and we had all the rebuilding going on, moving classes around to accommodate the renovations...we never had a formal accounting of how many Muggle-borns failed to return to school after the war.'

She allowed the ledgers to fall to a work table with a loud thud, raising a mighty cloud of dust.

'I'm sure, if you're not too worried about dirtying your hands, we can create a list quickly enough.'

Severus had his list when Xeno Lovegood came into his office. The older wizard wore his dinner clothes already, having smartened himself up by charming his Regency coat to canary yellow with matching shoes. Severus resisted the urge to shade his eyes from this sartorial magnificence.

'Xeno, who amongst the wizarding publishers would surreptitiously hire someone to come here and gather this sort of information for publication?'

He pushed Creevey's notebook to Xeno and shuffled his cards.

Cut. Queen of hearts. Cut. Knave of spades.

'The only one I can think of who would be sneaky about it is *Probe! Magazine*,' Xeno said, carefully replacing the moleskin book on Severus' desk. 'That Skeeter woman is not well-liked in the publishing community.'

Severus schooled himself not to respond to this pronouncement with the incredulity it might deserve. Lovegood of the *Quibbler* speaking of journalistic integrity? But that would be counter-productive to his purposes.

'Headmaster,' Xeno went on, 'I have been wishing to speak with you about Professor Trelawney.'

Severus nodded attentively, desperately hoping the old fellow was not about to ask for the Divination teacher's hand in marriage, as it was not Severus' to give away.

'Would you be willing to permit her to write a monthly column for the *Quibbler*?' Xeno continued, blissfully unaware of the Headmaster's inappropriately wandering mind.

Severus paused a moment. He could probably work this to his advantage. 'Perhaps we can strike a bargain,' he said.

Creevey returned to Severus' office when requested, his mousy brown hair severely disarranged, as if it had been clutched at repeatedly. Nervously, he sat in the indicated chair.

'Is this, by any chance, the man who offered you money to come here?' Severus asked, passing a fuzzy newspaper photograph to Creevey.

Wonder dawned on Creevey's face. 'Yeah! How did you *know*, sir?'

'It was not omniscience, Mr Creevey, I assure you,' he said smoothly. 'That man is called Bozo, and he works for Rita Skeeter of *Probe! Magazine*.'

Creevey placed the newspaper clipping on the desk. 'Will I ... have to return the gold they gave me?' he asked. 'I already spent most of it.'

Severus sat back, watching the young wizard closely. 'If you had the opportunity, Mr Creevey, would you return to school and complete your magical education?'

Creevey's face scrunched up as if he were in pain. 'I'm too old for that,' he said. 'I'm nineteen...older than the seventh years...and I still had three years to go when I left school.'

Severus ran a fingertip along his thin lips, giving the boy his whole attention. 'Yes, I understand your misgivings...but if you were able to return, not to live in a dormitory with the younger students, but to be quartered with the other returning Muggle-borns...if you were to have your school books and supplies provided for you, would you do it? To become a fully qualified wizard?'

Creevey blinked. 'Well yeah...who wouldn't? But ... that can't happen, can it?'

Severus nodded solemnly. 'I believe it can happen, Mr Creevey...in fact, I believe it must. There are some details yet to be organised, but I am quite determined on it. Make sure I have your contact information before you leave Hogwarts, won't you?'

The young wizard bore a look of wonder, as if a cancelled Christmas had just been reinstated. 'And the gold I took?' he asked, as if that were the only fly in his personal ointment.

'Don't give it another thought. In fact, further payment will be coming your way, from the magazine that will actually publish your material.'

Creevey brightened even further. 'Blimey!' he breathed. 'But what about that Bozo guy and Rita Skeeter?'

Severus smiled icily. 'Leave that to me.'

By the time Severus walked into the Great Hall for dinner, Hermione had all but given him up. She had spent the entire afternoon waiting for him to appear, agonizing over why he would stay away from her after the kiss they had shared in the stable. Had she offended him? Had he decided she wasn't worth the trouble?

He took his place, inquired civilly about her afternoon's entertainment, and continued on as if nothing untoward had occurred...as if he had not come close to ravaging her and then abandoned her without a word. She was so upset she could scarcely eat. And it did nothing to improve her state of mind to watch Lucius and Leticia carrying on as if they were alone. She resisted the urge to tell them to get a room.

The ladies left the gentlemen to their port, and Hermione could not loiter in the drawing room, admiring needlework and listening to indifferent playing upon the pianoforte. She went out into the rose garden and sat upon a bench, staring at the ground and trying to sort out her thoughts. It seemed a very short time before she saw stationary black boots upon the pathway. She looked up into Severus' face, and unwilling to have him standing over her, she stood.

'Tell me what you're unhappy about, Milady,' he said.

She turned her face away. 'Don't *call* me that!'

He did not answer her, so after a moment, she collected herself and spoke again.

'Where were you, this afternoon?'

'I was in my office.'

She darted a glance at his face. 'What could possibly have kept you all afternoon? Our guests were ...'

He cut across her. 'I was working. Why do you ask?'

This had seemed far more reasonable when it was simply rattling about in her mind. 'Because I was worried about you ... I didn't know where you'd gone off to. And you said we're partners! For Hogwarts, I mean.'

There was something in his eyes that bordered on mirth, but his tone was quite sober as he replied. 'Miss Granger, you of all people should understand what it is to stay focused and do something properly, no matter what others may be expecting of you.'

Hermione bit her lip, feeling mortified. Good heavens, she sounded like a neglected girlfriend! How many times had Ron whinged at her about her work...and how often had she replied to him in nearly the very same words Severus had just used?

He offered his arm. 'The players will put on their performance next. Shall we take our places?'

A golden stage, built especially for the occasion, was situated at one end of the Great Hall. Playbills were set out upon the chairs, which had been arranged in rows, just like a real theatre.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

by William Shakespeare

Cast of Characters

THESEUS, Duke of Athens Lucius Malfoy

HIPPOLYTA, Queen of the Amazons, betrothed to Theseus Leticia Mortelle

EGEUS, Father to Hermia Fortescue Parkinson

LYSANDER Finbar Quigley

PHILOSTRATE, Master of the Revels to Theseus Horace Slughorn

HERMIA, Daughter to Egeus Penelope Clearwater

HELENA Gabrielle Delacour

QUINCE, a Carpenter George Weasley

SNUG, a Joiner Luna Lovegood

BOTTOM, a Weaver Ronald Weasley

FLUTE, a Bellows-mender Romilda Vane

SNOUT, a Tinker Viktor Krum

STARVELING, a Tailor Pansy Parkinson

OBERON, King of the Fairies Arthur Weasley

TITANIA, Queen of the Fairies Molly Weasley

PUCK, or Robin Goodfellow Draco Malfoy

ATTENDANT FAIRIES Lavender Brown, Parvati Patel, Padma Patel

Harry slipped into the chair beside Hermione, acutely aware of Blaise Zabini lounging on the front row, looking tall and rich and handsome. Harry and Draco had played at badminton that afternoon just as they'd done all week, but having Zabini sitting around making obnoxious remarks took some of the fun out of it for Harry. Draco seemed to want Harry around, just like always, but Harry had spotted Zabini with Draco a couple of times, too, once in the Entrance Hall, and another time in the rose garden. Both times, they were standing close together, and Zabini was talking while Draco glared at the ground.

Harry didn't know what to do about it. Maybe Draco had just been joking around with him...maybe he hadn't meant it when he and Harry had kissed...maybe Draco had just been waiting for Zabini to come back to him.

Thinking that made Harry want to hit something.

The thousands of candles floating above the makeshift stage were illuminated all at once, and at the same time, the candles above the audience were extinguished. Lucius Malfoy, resplendent in Elizabethan garb, walked onto the stage with Leticia Mortelle and Pansy Parkinson's father. Harry tried to pay attention to the words they were saying, but it was ... well, it was *Shakespeare*.

He glanced over at Hermione, to see if she was experiencing the same primary school flashback, but something else altogether was going on with her. She was looking at Severus in a *soppy* way, and even though Severus wasn't looking back at her (Harry wasn't sure he could stomach a soppy look on Severus' sour face), ~~he~~*was* holding her hand, and Harry thought that was almost as bad.

He sighed. This was going to be a long bloody play.

But in spite of himself, his ear began to pick up the cadence of the speech patterns, so he could follow the story. It was sort of funny to see people he knew, like Neville and Fin, dressed up in tights...and then the fairy, Puck, made his entrance, and Harry's heart twisted in his chest. Draco shone like that constellation he'd been named for, and Harry couldn't take his eyes away from him.

The players acquitted themselves well, overall, and Harry was absorbed with the story. When Draco stepped forward to deliver Puck's last speech, Harry felt a mighty lump rising in his throat, not unlike he'd experienced at Dobby's grave the night before. But this emotion owed nothing to grief and everything to ...

The audience responded with thunderous applause, and when they had taken their curtain call, the players came into the audience to mingle and chat. Harry threaded through the throng, slipping with an athlete's grace through the crowd without having to resort to more physical tactics. Draco posed against the forest backdrop as Dennis Creevey snapped a photograph, but Draco seemed fully aware of Harry's advance, and by the time Harry leapt onto the stage, Draco had turned to face him.

'Well, Potter?' he said, uncertainty lurking behind the Malfoy arrogance.

'You were brilliant, you stupid git,' Harry said, but he didn't stop walking. 'You were brilliant, and I ...'

Then the words died on his tongue, and he stopped, staring helplessly at the beautiful, unobtainable man he wanted for his own.

Draco seemed to be right there, in his head with him, for he covered the rest of the distance, and they were in each other's arms.

'Yeah,' Draco said, one hand wrapped about the back of Harry's neck. 'Yeah, me too.'

Leticia, tricked out in her Queen of the Amazons costume, clung to Lucius' arm and received the congratulations of their fellow guests. She saw what was happening with Harry and Draco, and watched it with a speculative eye. There would never be a better day to engineer a resolution between her beloved and his son. With a nod and a smile to the well-wishers before them, she directed Lucius' attention to the embracing wizards on the stage.

Lucius seemed frozen in place. He murmured, 'Are they ...?'

'Kissing? Yes,' Leticia answered. 'Come along, darling.' She led him toward Draco, and he followed.

Blaise Zabini leapt onto the stage then and laid a hand on Harry's shoulder. 'I don't care how many Dark Lords you killed, Potter. Get your hands off my man.'

Draco didn't even look away from Harry's face as he pushed Blaise's hand away. 'Go away, Blaise. I told you: we're finished.'

Blaise gave Draco's green leotard a yank and thrust himself between Draco and Harry. He found himself looking down the famous phoenix-feather wand, the target of a very confident pair of green eyes.

Leticia, who had been quite prepared to give aid, relaxed the hold on her own wand; obviously, Harry needed no assistance.

But Lucius seemed to feel differently, for he took Blaise by the arm. 'I would very much dislike having to explain to your mother the reason for your demise,' he said quietly. 'I think you'd best spent the night at the Manor, and tomorrow you can Floo ... elsewhere.'

Blaise looked mutinous, but Lucius simply tightened his grip on the younger wizard's arm. Blaise looked to Draco for help, but Draco was paying him no mind, far too involved with stroking the hair out of Harry's eyes.

'You heard the man, Zabini,' Harry said, his wand still at the ready. 'Go away. It's over here.'

Lucius gave Leticia an apologetic smile as he began to escort Zabini from the room, but he need not have worried. She was immensely pleased with his public show of support for his son.

She would be there to tuck him in, tonight.

Severus took Hermione upstairs directly after the play ended. It had been a bloody long day, and he was shattered. He could not bear another moment of anyone's company, save hers.

Her pique at his neglect that afternoon had flattered him, and her objection to receiving the same treatment she had meted out to Weasley was little short of priceless. She *had* got the point when he explained it to her, though; he'd seen that clearly enough. Holding her hand when the lights went down had soothed her a bit...but it wasn't enough to satisfy either of them, and he knew it.

They stood before her door, and she placed her palms against his chest.

'Come in,' she said.

Down the corridor, Weasley and Romilda Vane approached, giggling together, and were quickly through their door.

Severus lightly touched Hermione's full lower lip, tracing it with the pad of his thumb, remembering its texture when he'd sucked it between his teeth and gently bitten down.

'You tasted of gooseberries,' he said, watching her pupils dilate, knowing she was aroused, and feeling an answering heat.

'I ... I ate them for breakfast, remember?' she said, her voice strained.

A sound of voices, almost angry in tone, came from the end of the corridor, and then Draco and Potter were at his door, grappling for dominance, all elbows and nose-bumping and desperation. Potter got the door open and grabbed Draco by the fairy costume, shoving him into the room and slamming the door behind him. Draco would have to borrow clothes from Potter if he wanted to creep back to his room in something besides torn fairy tights in the morning.

Hermione gripped his lapels and gave them a shake. 'Don't make me be the only one on this row to sleep alone tonight,' she whispered.

He pried her fingers from his coat and raised them to his face; she ran soft fingertips over his raspy cheek, in need of another shave. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to feel her touch. Then he opened his eyes again, looking down at her. She stroked his hair off his forehead.

'You'll not be the only one on this row to sleep alone,' he said tenderly. 'I sleep here too, remember?'

He kissed her hand, then her palm, and finally, the pulse at her wrist. 'Good night, Hermione,' he murmured. 'Please go in.'

She expelled breath, and he saw the hurt in her eyes. 'I don't understand you,' she said sadly.

'That makes two of us, Milady.'

He reached behind her and twisted the knob. The door opened, and he stepped back from her. With a bow, he turned from her and walked the few feet to his darkened bedchamber door.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 20

Saturday, August 10, 2002, Midnight to

Sunday, August 11, 2002, Dawn

'Severus?'

Hermione was curled into a tight ball on the far side of her bed, her forehead pressed to the wall. It had been nearly half an hour since he'd left her, and try as she might, she could not let go of her yearning to *be* with him. Feeling like a pool of humiliating need, she cast the spell and spoke his name.

'Yes, Milady?'

His response was immediate, almost as if he'd been waiting for her. If he was sitting in his room, wanting her as badly as she wanted him, why wasn't he *here*? It made no sense to her.

'I can't sleep,' she said.

'It would seem we share the affliction.'

His voice was deep and distinctive, warm and welcoming in a manner he could not seem to replicate when standing in the same room with her. The rich baritone was not like oil on troubled waters; it was like tinder for the raging fire of her want.

Hermione squeezed her eyes closed and thumped her forehead against the wall. 'You could have come in,' she said, so softly she wasn't sure if she had meant him to hear her or not.

But he retained the annoying habit of hearing the things one muttered under one's breath, just as any self-respecting secondary schoolteacher could do.

'Coming in is the easy part,' he replied, his words also pitched as if he only half wished for her to hear him. 'Leaving again...that is another issue entirely.'

Insensibly aroused and encouraged by his words, her inner ache increased. Eyes closed, she bathed in the timbre of his voice, slowly turning her head from side to side as she pushed against the wall, as if she could push through its solidity into his arms.

'You ... you wanted to stay with me?' she asked.

It took him so long to answer that she had all but given up hope of his reply. Had he walked away from their conversation? Gone to bed? Was this tenuous thread of connection so much less important to him than it was to her?

'Might we ... speak of something else?'

He sounded tentative...diffident, even...and she sensed that if she pushed the question, he would answer her. He was, in effect, asking for mercy, and the emotion that flooded her every synapse at this realization was like a sense-heightening drug. She held him in palm of her hand. How would she proceed?

'Tell me more about Apollyon,' she said.

There was a faint thump from the other side, and Hermione wondered if he had his head pressed against the wall, too.

'Apollyon became a proud papa this week ...'

Hermione donned her riding dress with a touch of nostalgia, for today would be the last time she would wear it...the last time she would ride beside Severus Snape. This day would be fraught with lasts, culminating with the grand ball, the last hurrah of Regency Week. Tomorrow, everyone would pack away their Regency costumes, don their modern day gear, and go back to their everyday lives.

The night before, she had talked with Severus until the satin smooth cadence of his voice lulled her into dreams...dreams in which he figured quite prominently. She might have felt embarrassed to have fallen asleep in the middle of their conversation, but she didn't. She knew he had wanted her to sleep. She had bone-deep confidence that she had made one of the most important friends of her life, this week, and she did not doubt his reciprocation of her feelings.

But did he ... want her, as she wanted him? *Not love*, she scolded the voice in her mind. *Far too soon for love*.

Not that the voice in her head paid her much mind.

She took up her riding hat...the one Severus had savaged the day before...and pinned it in place, murmuring a little spell to straighten the plume his rough handling had crumpled.

'Tally ho,' she murmured to her reflection, ignoring the mirror's answering, 'Tally ho to you, miss!'

Harry woke with another body in his bed, and for a moment, he was confused and alarmed. He was not accustomed to sharing his sleeping space with another person. But reconnaissance proved there was no cause for alarm. His bedfellow was Draco Malfoy, his improbably endearing lover.

Lover.

Harry swallowed. He had let his emotions get the better of him the night before, and now the word about gay Harry Potter would be all over the wizarding world. He had dreaded that possibility for years...had pretended to be someone he was not to avoid it...and now he found he didn't care. He was happy, and the price he paid for it, he found, was not too high.

'If you had a decent bone in your body, you'd go back to sleep,' Draco muttered without opening his eyes.

Harry rose on an elbow to look down into Draco's face. The angelic beauty had always disturbed him, and now he understood why. 'You had no complaints about my bones last night,' he murmured, lowering his face to Draco's throat and breathing deeply of the other man's scent.

Draco rolled over and pinned him, straddling his abdomen. 'I haven't had a chance to examine all of your bones satisfactorily yet,' he said. 'I'll let you know when I have done.'

Harry stared up at the toned, fit body. 'You're fucking beautiful,' he said, unable to help himself.

Draco grinned, the playful side Harry had never seen before this week, shining forth. 'Yeah, but I want you anyway,' he laughed.

Wrestling ensued, and like the night before, segued almost seamlessly into lovemaking. Afterwards, sweaty and spent, Harry lay upon his pillow, struggling to reclaim his breath. Draco stroked a finger down his cheek.

'We need to play Quidditch,' he said, his tone rather dreamy.

Harry shook his head. 'Hermione said we couldn't...said it'll spoil the atmosphere.'

Draco sat up abruptly. 'Twaddle,' he said. 'Wizards have been playing Quidditch since the fourteenth century. You can bet the Regency blokes played...and that they wagered on the games, too.'

The blond climbed from the bed and took up his mangled fairy costume. 'How am I supposed to get back to my room in this thing?'

Harry forced himself from his comfortable pillow and picked up his dressing gown, tossing it to Draco. 'Borrow that,' he said.

Draco looked the garment over disdainfully.

'It's not silk, all right?' Harry said irritably. 'I don't have your poncey tastes, Ferret.'

Draco shrugged into the dressing gown. 'That is apparent, Potter.'

Harry made a rude hand gesture, and Draco pounced on him for a vertical grappling match. Then they kissed, ending with their foreheads pressed together.

'When will we ever have another chance to play Quidditch with Krum and Fin?' Draco murmured.

Harry spun away, grabbing up his shower gear. 'I'll tell Ron,' he promised. 'Do you think we can scare up enough for two full teams?'

Draco smirked. 'You're smarter than you look, Potter. I knew you'd see it my way.'

Severus opened the stall door, allowing Hermione to precede him inside. Persephone nickered at them, and Severus took her halter, speaking soothingly. From her pocket, Hermione withdrew a carefully pared apple, offering it to the broodmare on the flat of her hand.

Severus chuckled. 'You cut out the apple core to feed it to a horse?' he said.

Hermione stroked the mare's shining chestnut neck. 'Don't think I can't tell when you're mocking me,' she said severely.

'Mea culpa,' he murmured, and she looked up at him with her melting brown eyes.

Kiss her, his inner voice urged.

Severus quashed the notion, stepping away from Hermione to crouch before the foal peeking from behind her mother. 'This is Apollyon's daughter,' he said, looking into the filly's eyes.

Hermione knelt beside him in the clean straw, rapt in admiration. 'She's perfect,' she whispered.

Severus watched the witch's face as she studied the filly, allowing himself to simply be in the moment, without trying to remain four or five steps ahead of his companion. She was not, after all, the enemy, strictly speaking. She was a friend...the first new friend he'd had in all his adult life...and the fact that she was a desirable woman was not her fault. He must not hold it against her that being beside her made him want to ...

'Severus?'

He shook himself from his reverie. 'Sorry,' he said. 'What did you say?'

'What's the filly's name?'

He straightened, believing that if he was not directly on Hermione's level...if they weren't eye to eye...he would not feel compelled to put his arms around her. To increase the safety zone, he moved around the foal, putting the small horse squarely between them.

'I haven't decided what to name her,' he said, crossing his arms over his chest and pondering. 'Tell me, who's your favourite female Jane Austen character?'

Hermione seemed taken aback. 'I ... I don't know. I'd have to think about it.'

He nodded sagely. 'Take your time. Mine is Colonel Brandon, and I can't name her that...perhaps when Apollyon sires a colt, I'll use the name.'

Hermione laughed. 'I see your dilemma,' she replied. 'But I can't name your horse...she must be quite valuable.'

He studied the woman and the tiny black filly. 'I am merely seeking your input,' he assured her. 'And I won't be selling this little girl...not until she's grown, and I can see if she'll be up to my weight. I have good hopes for her, since her dam and sire are both of a good size.' He stretched a hand to rest upon the filly's neck, and she looked up at him trustingly, already becoming accustomed to the sight and sound of this particular human. 'She'll be brought on slowly and trained as a hunter.'

Hermione smiled at him and held out a gloved hand, inviting his assistance. He helped her up, resisting the urge to dust away the straw clinging to her skirt.

'It's hard to imagine that something so tiny will someday be as large as this pretty lady,' she said, giving Persephone another pat. 'But we'd best go for our ride now,' she added, avoiding his eyes, 'if we mean to be back at the castle in time for breakfast.'

'As you say, Milady,' he responded, and she took his arm to stroll to the stable yard, where Apollyon and Firefly were saddled and ready for them.

The stable-elves were quite accustomed to the Headmaster's rides with the lady, for they made no effort to assist. Severus laced his hands to receive Hermione's booted foot and tossed her into the saddle, deeply satisfied to see how she settled herself on the horse. How would she do in breeches, like a modern day rider, sitting astride her mount? Would he have an opportunity to find out?

Almost, he thought he would never be happy in the saddle again without Hermione at his side, and the idea twisted in his gut like a malevolent worm.

No, he would not think about that...not now, when the dew was still wet upon the grass, the sky was the blue of childhood dreams, and the woman of his ... sickliest fantasies awaited his company.

Don't denigrate her! his inner lovesick adolescent raged at him.

Pushing the confusing thoughts away, he swung into his saddle, delighting as always to the dance of his Arabian beneath him. He took a moment to settle his mount, then turned to Hermione. The expression he saw on her face hit him like a bodily blow. Her visceral reaction was as powerful as the one she stirred in him.

Gods be damned to the woman...what right did she have to be so fucking perfect?

He did not speak again, but set off for the open space of the fields with his companion at his side, the understanding between them too profound for mere words.

Lucius and Leticia failed to show up for breakfast again on Saturday morning, and Severus could only surmise their location and probable activity. The assumption filled him with a certain amount of resentment. Leticia Mortelle had led Lucius on a long, tortuous chase, whereas Hermione had shown Severus nothing but acceptance...encouragement, even...so why should Lucius be enjoying the fruits of his labours when Severus simmered in such a pool of dissatisfaction?

After breakfast, most of the guests flocked to Minerva McGonagall's dancing class, in preparation for the night's grand ball, but Severus was at loose ends. Fortescue Parkinson had suffered a severe bout of dyspepsia after the play the previous night...the dunderhead ought to have known he couldn't drink an entire bottle of port on his own...and Hermione had insisted upon going to visit him in the hospital wing, where the older wizard languished under Poppy Pomfrey's no-nonsense care. Severus skived off the visit; he had no love for the man, who had been a surreptitious supporter of the Dark Lord. Too bad Pomfrey was not administering some true Regency remedies to Parkinson, such as bleeding...or maybe even leeches.

Instead, he strolled into Lucius' fencing classroom to find his friend fencing with...and no doubt admiring...his reflection in the long mirror on the far wall. Lucius turned when he saw Severus, taking up an épée and offering it to him. Severus accepted the weapon automatically, his fingers confirming the truth his eyes could see: the tip of the duelling sword was covered with a protective button.

'Good morning!' Lucius said, and Severus had to admit his friend looked very well indeed.

'How did you manage to tear yourself away from Professor Mortelle?' he inquired sardonically. 'Shouldn't you be modelling for the Language of Fans?'

Lucius smirked. 'We each have our last classes to teach, but we'll see one another again at lunch.' He assumed a duelling pose. 'It's been a year at least since we fenced, Severus. Would you care to try your hand?'

Severus shook his head and replaced the épée on the table amongst the other practice foils. 'Not today,' he answered.

Lucius turned again to his reflection, practicing a lunging thrust. 'I would make mincemeat of you today, my friend,' he said. 'She has accepted me, you know.'

Severus arched an eyebrow. 'When is the happy day?'

'We'll marry at Christmas. Leticia wants a formal wedding...and why should she not have it? It will be her first...her *only*...wedding.'

Lucius spun around again, lightness of heart making him light on his feet. Remembering how crushed his friend had been when Narcissa had left him, Severus could not begrudge him his happiness...but he could envy it, couldn't he?

'I do have a favour to ask of you, though,' Lucius said, setting his practice foil upon the table.

'No, I will not tell Draco for you,' Severus snapped.

'Draco already knows,' Lucius replied, looking slightly hurt. 'I met with him this morning to let him know young Zabini departed with a minimum of fuss. I told him then, and he was pleased for me.'

Severus had to be impressed by that bit of news. 'I applaud your daring,' he said dryly.

'The favour concerns Miss Granger,' Lucius continued, and Severus turned a black glare upon him.

'I am in no mood to hear your impertinent remarks about Hermione,' he warned.

Now it was Lucius' turn to arch brows over his curious grey eyes. 'You mistake me, Severus. Draco and young Potter are gathering the young people for a Quidditch match after lunch...he asks only that you find a way to keep Miss Granger busy indoors for a couple of hours.'

Severus continued his thin-lipped glare, waiting to hear what further suggestions Lucius would have for occupying Hermione's time, but Lucius was wise enough to refrain.

'Very well,' Severus said sourly. 'I will do what I can to occupy her time, but I make no promises. When she has the bit between her teeth, it would defy the skill of Merlin himself to turn her from what she has her mind set upon.'

Lucius spread his hands expansively. 'I could ask for no more of you, old man.' He took a step nearer, his manner sober. 'You know, Severus, it's apparent, even to a jaded old soul like me, that the girl adores you. You've admitted that you find her enchanting. What scruples are restraining you from enjoying her fully?'

Severus drew a deep breath. 'My jaded old soul has a conscience inconveniently attached to it, Lucius. For all her intelligence and maturity, she is an innocent. She has no idea who I am or what I've done.'

Lucius watched him with narrowed, shrewd eyes. After a moment of consideration, he said, 'Her soul, if you will, may be innocent, but you must give her credit for her life experience. No one who has lived in hiding from the Dark Lord for as long as she did...who has endured torture at the hands of the unmourned Bellatrix and lived to tell the tale...can be entirely unacquainted with the darker aspects of the world.'

He came a step closer and placed a hand on Severus' shoulder, and Severus saw their reflection, two Regency gentlemen in conversation.

'You've been ... alone for a long time, Severus. Stoic and self-sacrificing. I know you've been more generous with yourself since the end of the war, but don't you think it's time to take that next step? To allow someone who loves you to come close?' His grip tightened, and his voice betrayed his deepest emotion. 'It is worth the gamble, my best of friends. There is more to a prison than four walls...we can create our own, by building barriers between ourselves and those who would love us.'

Severus was acutely uncomfortable. He and Lucius had spoken freely with one another for years, so it wasn't the emotional content of the speech which bothered him. No, it was the echo of Dumbledore's words...of the thoughts which had plagued him for the last several days...that made him step away, his lip curling into a sneer.

'I will thank you to keep your mind on your own affairs,' he snapped.

Lucius looked regretful, but he executed a gentleman's bow of acceptance. Then, the sound of their conversation preceding them, the gentlemen fresh from McGonagall's clutches began to arrive for their last fencing lesson, and Severus slipped out when Lucius was otherwise occupied.

Harry had circulated amongst the guests that morning, passing on the news of the clandestine Quidditch match. George promptly agreed to play Beater for Harry's team, and immediately set out to begin the betting pool.

'Maybe I'll win back some of the gold I lost when Snape won the chess game!' he said.

The one person Harry hadn't been able to find was Neville. Where the devil had he got himself off to? Harry did, however, run across Gabrielle Delacour in the Entrance Hall. Gabby never let Neville get too far out of her sight. She had a warm shawl wrapped about her shoulders, and she was headed for the door.

'Gabby!' Harry called. 'Wait up!'

She turned, a smile lighting her pretty face. She and Harry had been friends for years...ever since he'd rescued her from the bottom of the lake, during the Triwizard Tournament.

'Hi, Harry!' she said, waiting for him.

He grinned at her. 'Listen, I was looking for Neville...do you know where he is?'

Gabby nodded solemnly. 'Oh yes! I'm going down to meet with him now. He's at the Whomping Willow.'

Harry blinked. 'What?' he said, thinking perhaps he'd misunderstood her.

'It's where he goes for quiet,' Gabby explained.

'You can't get quiet from the Whomping Willow,' Harry objected. 'The damn tree tries to kill anyone who gets close to it.' A thought occurred to him. 'Wait...does he use a

stick to push on that knot that makes it hold still? Is that how he...'

Gabby shook her head. 'Oh, no! It is not like that, Harry. The Willow never Whomps Neville. After all, he understands its beauty, doesn't he?'

Harry stared at the French girl, realising that she was so much in love with Neville that she probably thought he could defeat Snape in a duel, find the thirteenth use for dragon blood, and discover the cure for Lycanthropy, as well. All before dinner.

'Yeah,' he said vaguely. 'Yeah, that's probably true. Listen, Gabby, could you tell him we're having a secret Quidditch match after lunch? If he wants to watch, he should come down to the pitch. And you're welcome, too. But we aren't telling Hermione. All right?'

Gabby beamed at him. 'I'll tell him...I'm sure we'll be there!' She took a step closer to Harry then, putting a hand on his arm and lowering her voice. 'You're his best friend, Harry,' she said.

Harry blinked. He was Neville's best friend? Why didn't he know that?

Gabby continued, not knowing she had said something Harry would find odd. 'After Regency Week, I am going to ask him to come home with me to meet my parents.'

Harry felt some sympathy then for Neville. Meeting your girlfriend's parents was terrifying, even for so exalted a person as the Serpent Slayer.

'That's great, Gabby,' he said with as much enthusiasm as he could manage. 'Well, I've got to find Draco now.'

He began to back away, but the part-Veela would not let him go. 'You and Draco are so adorable together!' she gushed.

Harry pulled his arm away from her and turned to go. 'Erm, thanks,' he muttered as he bolted.

Hermione escaped from Mr Parkinson after an hour of listening to his health complaints. Her schedule said she was supposed to be riding at Malfoy Manor now, but she and Severus had taken their ride earlier. Their last ride. The idea made her terribly sad.

'But I still have him for one more day,' she murmured to herself as she marched out of the hospital wing. 'I have him for one more day, and I'm going to make the most of it.'

She was already nostalgic, as well, for the passing of Regency Week. Ever since she had been a little girl, she had wanted to visit Jane Austen's world, and this week was the closest she would ever come to that dream. She had ridden side saddle, danced the old dances with an enigmatic partner, attended the hunt breakfast and drunk the stirrup cup, played at bowls and badminton, done bad needlework, and worn her beloved Regency costumes, all just as a real Regency lady would have done. Moreover, this scheme of hers had brought in enough gold to satisfy the school's shortfall of funds.

And it had all been for Hogwarts, had it not?

She bit her lip, knowing it wasn't strictly true. It had also been for Hermione's wish to play at being in Regency times ... and for her budding penchant for the company of the unfathomable Headmaster.

She found him, at last, in Professor Binns' classroom. The ghost professor was lecturing on about the Muggle Parliament's attempts to pay the debts of the Regent, and the Headmaster was listening with a scowl on his face. As she entered the classroom, Binns looked up from his notes.

'Late to class, Miss Grangeworth?' he inquired in a disapproving wheeze.

Severus stood and swept across the room to her, black robes billowing. 'Do continue, Professor,' he said. 'I will deal with the ... student.'

'Very good, Headmaster,' Binns said and resumed his lecture at precisely the point he had left off.

Hermione could not resist a giggle as Severus followed her into the corridor. 'I'm a bit old for a student!' she pointed out.

Severus shrugged. 'To old men such as Binns and I are, you are a mere child,' he informed her.

Hermione let the taunt go by, for she had a far more urgent question to ask. 'Why are you in robes? Have you already left off your Regency clothes?' She tried not to let her disappointment show, but it was difficult.

He gave her half a smile. 'Do these look like my usual robes?' he asked her. 'Madam Malkin would be offended to hear you say so.'

Hermione looked him over more closely. The robes were of a fabric that appeared so soft she couldn't resist the urge to touch. 'It looks like suede,' she said, stroking his sleeve.

He smirked. 'Yes, it's quite soft to the touch. Feel free to ... pet the robes.'

She giggled again and inspected him more closely. What he actually wore was a cassock-like garment over black trousers and boots, with a detachable cape hanging from his shoulders...that would account for the billowing effect. The sleeves were richly trimmed with blacker braid on black fabric; even the multitude of buttons on the sleeves was covered in the soft material. The front of the cassock bore a deep, braid-trimmed vee, double-breasted buttons marching down the front of it in ever-narrowing formation.

'These are made from the specifications of Drooksmore Mirthwent, Headmaster of Hogwarts from 1796 to 1824,' he said. 'With the Governor's meeting this afternoon, I wished to be as headmasterly as possible. One's words carry more weight when backed up by a proper ... presence.'

Hermione ducked her head with a smile, remembering how he had ruled his classrooms with the very presence of which he spoke. Then she took his arm. 'Well, my afternoon gown doesn't do your robes justice, but will you still sit with me at lunch?'

He led her towards the staircase. 'My personalised schedule clearly says I am to be your escort at lunch, Milady,' he informed her.

She laughed again, loving his playfulness, and determined to enjoy every minute of her dwindling time with him.

After lunch, Severus dangled his invitation before his prey, hoping she would fall in with his plans.

'To your office?' Hermione reached into her reticule and withdrew the sheaf of notes for her presentation to the Board of Governors. 'But I need to work on my report!'

'I am aware,' Severus replied patiently, hoping she wouldn't notice the mass exodus of the guests from the castle. 'I thought, perhaps, you would have more privacy to prepare in my office.'

She studied him with a touch of suspicion. 'Will you be in your office with me?' she asked.

'You will have some time alone, and then I will join you there,' he answered.

She smiled happily. 'All right, then.'

He set her up at a table to the right of his desk, near Dumbledore's portrait, as she requested. He had already enchanted the windows. At eleven o'clock, there had been no Quidditch players in the air, and the windows were frozen to show what had been outside at that time. Hopefully, Hermione wouldn't be there long enough to wonder why the sun wasn't moving in the sky.

'That's a funny hat, sir,' she said to Dumbledore's portrait. 'I don't remember seeing you wear it before.'

Dumbledore twinkled at her. 'It was a gift from Severus,' he enthused. 'It *is* an excellent hat, isn't it?'

Hermione laughed and agreed quite gravely. Then she spread her paperwork out on the table and took up her quill, her brow furrowed with concentration.

'I'll be back soon,' Severus promised before slipping out the door.

Even though it was Saturday afternoon, the offices of *Probe! Magazine* were open, if lightly staffed. He was inside and down the corridor to the editor's office in a flash.

Skeeter looked much as she'd always done, her hair an improbable shade of platinum, her talon-like nails painted vermillion, her jewelled spectacles glinting in the light from her office window. Severus slipped into the room and stood before her, silent as a wraith.

'You!'

Her startled screech brought the faithful Bozo hurtling from another room, but when he saw who the visitor was, he skulked away.

Severus simply stared down at Skeeter, allowing his disgust to show on his face. His antipathy for her had meant she never obtained the interview with him she so badly wanted after the war. Why would he grant her one moment of his time, after the smear job she had done on Dumbledore's biography? The witch was untrustworthy in the extreme.

Skeeter jumped to her feet, pulling a short, thick wand from her sleeve and levelling it at him. 'What do you want? Go away!'

In a leisurely manner, Severus seated himself and crossed one leg over the other. Still, he did not speak.

Skeeter stood frozen behind her desk, her beetle-eyes darting to the door, then to Severus, and back again, as if trying to decide if she could get past him.

'I wouldn't try it, if I were you,' he drawled.

She exhaled noisily. 'Why won't you tell me why you're here?'

'I am here to thank you,' he replied.

She gaped at him.

'Hogwarts appreciates your generous donation to the scholarship fund for Muggle-born students displaced by the war.'

'I never made a donation to your dratted school!'

Stonily he returned her bug-eyed stare. Finally, she sat down. When she resumed her seat, he spoke again.

'You will be welcome to trumpet your scoop as the first donor to the fund in your ... publication.' He placed a parchment upon her desk. 'The plan is still in its infancy, and many of the details have yet to be determined, but your vision in investing in the future of wizarding education is a vote of confidence for our young people.' He spoke the words as if he were reading them from a press announcement.

She thrust the parchment back towards him. 'I have no intention of giving you a single Knut!'

He stood abruptly, towering over her, and Skeeter cowered back in her chair. 'But you already have done so,' he replied silkily, 'in the amount necessary to buy a spy to sneak into Regency Week and steal its secrets for you.' He gently pushed the parchment to her again. 'You may publish this in place of the exposé you won't be receiving.'

'You can't do that!' she cried.

Severus sneered. 'Tell me...have you ever bothered to register your Animagus form with the Ministry?'

Skeeter's flushed face paled to chalky white.

'I didn't think so,' he said smugly, sweeping out of the office with a swirl of his Regency robes.

He entered his office again quietly, seeing Hermione still hard at work. She gave him a distracted smile and immediately lowered her head to her Arithmantic equations again.

Severus sat behind his desk, adrenaline still pumping from his encounter with Rita Skeeter. He had prepared his reports for the Governors already; he had nothing further to do. Without thinking, he withdrew the old playing cards from his pocket and began to shuffle them.

Hermione looked up with a frown. 'What are you doing?' she asked with a hint of irritation in her tone.

Severus fanned the deck out. 'Pick a card.'

She laughed uncertainly. 'I never would have taken you for a man interested in parlour tricks,' she said. But she did as he asked and took a card.

'What is it?' he asked her curtly.

'It's the queen of hearts,' she said, turning it face up. 'Why?'

He shook his head once, ignoring Dumbledore's portrait, which chortled softly, drawing Hermione's attention.

'What's the joke?' she asked, looking from the portrait to Severus and back again.

'Draw another card,' Severus commanded. Would the bloody things continue to confound him?

Hermione sighed and took another card, placing it face up beside the queen of hearts. 'It's the jack of spades,' she said.

'The knave,' he corrected her grimly, glaring at the two offending face cards.

'All right, the knave,' she said. 'Do you mind if I work now?'

He ground his teeth together and shuffled the cards. What did it mean, if even she could draw nothing but those two blasted cards? He turned a glare on the portrait, where his old mentor watched him with indulgent affection. Severus resisted the urge to make a rude gesture at the old goat. Instead, he cut the deck.

Queen of hearts.

Knave of spades.

He swore.

'Excuse me?' Hermione said, turning startled eyes to his face.

Severus stood and slapped the cards onto the table in front of her. 'Humour me,' he said. 'Shuffle and cut the deck.'

Hermione put her quill down. 'Severus, you said I would have quiet to work if I came to your office,' she reminded him.

'You know your bloody report is already perfect,' he said. 'You don't need to add another foot of parchment to impress them...your results speak for themselves!'

Her cheeks turned pink at this backhanded compliment, and her lips parted as she drew breath. He wanted to devour that mouth.

'Shuffle,' he demanded, adding as an afterthought, 'please, Milady.'

Her gaze darted to the portrait. 'You've never called me that in front of anyone else,' she said, her voice almost a whisper. He couldn't tell if she was pleased or embarrassed.

'I still haven't,' he assured her. 'Portraits aren't people.'

She and Dumbledore turned nearly identical reproachful looks on him. Gritting his teeth in frustration, he took up the cards and placed them in her hand.

'Shuffle,' he said.

With a loud sigh, as if she were greatly put upon, Hermione shuffled the deck three times and cut the cards.

'The queen of hearts again!' she said, genuinely surprised.

'Cut again,' he instructed.

She did so, turning up that blackguard, the knave of spades.

'You see, Severus?' the portrait chided.

Severus snatched the cards up again and thrust them into his pocket. From outside, a loud roar rose from the Quidditch pitch.

Hermione looked around, startled. 'What in the world is that?' she asked, standing to look out the window.

'I didn't hear anything,' Severus lied. 'Come, let's go to the meeting room. We should be there to greet the Governors when they arrive.'

Hermione threw up her hands. 'You are behaving very strangely, Severus,' she informed him.

But she gathered her belongings into her reticule, and Severus swept her away before the portrait could say something he really didn't want her to hear.

Neville and Gabby climbed up into the stands to find a place to sit. Romilda Vane, Penny Clearwater, and Pansy Parkinson were sitting together on the front row, while Luna Lovegood sat alone on the row behind them. Neville led Gabby over to sit with Luna.

'Who's on the teams?' he asked.

Pansy looked very pleased with herself. 'Viktor and Fin are playing together, of course,' she said, as if that were the only thing that mattered.

Romilda looked around at them. 'Ron is playing Keeper on Harry's team,' she said. 'And George is going to be a Beater.'

Neville looked down on the ground, where the players were gathered on the outside perimeter of the maze he'd grown on the pitch. 'Who's playing Seeker against Krum?' he asked. 'Harry or Draco?'

Pansy laughed nastily. 'They're still working that out.'

Draco and Harry were standing together, apart from the other players, and they were arguing.

'You play Seeker, and I'll play Chaser,' Harry said, and Neville recognised that stubborn look on his face. Harry could teach obstinacy to a mule.

Draco thrust his face into Harry's. 'I want to *win* this game!' he snarled.

For a minute, it looked as if the two would drop their brooms and start throwing punches, but Viktor Krum chose that moment to speak up.

'It doesn't matter which one of you plays Seeker!' he called gaily. 'Either way, I will catch the Snitch!'

Draco gritted his teeth. 'You'll bloody well play Seeker, Scar Head!'

'Fine!' Harry snapped.

'Fine!' Draco replied, and the two of them exchanged simultaneous punches on the shoulder.

Neville was surprised to know that Harry would *eventhink* about letting Draco play Seeker instead of him. He'd seen their kiss at the end of the play the night before, but that didn't impress him nearly as much as Harry being willing to let Draco play his favourite position in the game. That must be some kind of true love.

Fin Quigley and Harry stepped forward and shook hands, and Professor Hooch, who had agreed to referee for them, blew her whistle.

Penny and Pansy held hands as their swains kicked off, both dressed in their Ballycastle Bats Quidditch uniforms. 'Aren't they *wonderful*?' Penny breathed.

Pansy nodded her head grimly. 'Bloody brilliant,' she agreed.

Neville concentrated on the players filling the air with swooping brooms, wishing there were some blokes he could sit with instead of all these girls.

All the Board of Governors, even those who had not taken advantage of the discount offered them to participate in Regency Week, would be in attendance at the grand ball that night. Accordingly, the meeting room was filled with ladies in ball gowns and men in knee breeches and stockings. Hermione gave the first report, taking her place before the charts she had created to show how the funds raised by Regency Week had more than satisfied the shortfall in school funding.

'... and the additional funds raised will be used to supplement the Hogwarts Scholarship Fund,' she ended. 'Are there any questions?'

Griselda Marchbanks spoke up. 'We have, of course, already received everyone's money, Miss Granger, but what is your sense of the level of ... customer satisfaction, as it were?'

'Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive,' Hermione said, 'but we will send a follow-up questionnaire by owl, in a week or ten days. Those responses will be compiled and presented to you at the next meeting.'

Marchbanks surprised Hermione greatly by beginning to applaud, and soon all the Board of Governors...as well as the Headmaster and his deputy...were joining in. Then Lucius Malfoy came forward to shake Hermione's hand and shepherd her to the door.

'We won't bore you with the remainder of our business, Miss Granger,' he said smoothly.

And before she knew what was happening, Hermione was on the other side of the closed door.

Severus rose as Lucius returned to the table, and all eyes turned to him.

'I would like to speak with you about a new problem which has come to light in just the last twenty-four hours,' he said gravely. 'It has come to my attention that we as an institution of learning have completely failed to provide satisfactory service to our Muggle-born students.'

Chatter broke out instantly, questions peppering the Headmaster, and he flipped open a leather folder and withdrew a stack of parchment. He took one and handed it to Minerva, who sat to his left. 'Take one and pass it on,' he said. 'You'll find all the pertinent data here...and once we have covered it, I will have a proposed solution to present to you, as well.'

Hermione went up directly after dinner to dress for the ball. Severus had been uncommunicative regarding the remainder of the Governors' meeting, but otherwise perfectly attentive.

In all the books she'd read, the balls had been fantastically romantic, and she'd long had a secret dream to attend one. Tonight, she would be granted her wish...and furthermore, she would have a partner whose very presence set her pulse to racing...provided he left his stupid card deck behind.

She combed her fringe forward, encouraging the natural curl into crimped waves. About her ears, she created corkscrew curls. The remaining length she coiled into a high, loose bun, allowing tendrils to curl above her nape. Then she took up a long scarf of cloth of gold and placed it on top of her head, just above her fringe. She crossed the scarf beneath the bun, creating a bandeau of gold on her brown hair, and wrapped the cloth around the bun, tucking in the ends and pinning them. There! A Grecian hairstyle of which any Regency lady would be proud. To finish her hair, she tucked a multitude of tiny, cut glass-tipped pins all around the bun, until it looked as if she had stars in her hair.

Her silk ball gown was simple but elegant. The white under dress was gathered just below her breasts and fell in a slim silhouette to her ankles. The sleeves were tiny puffs, edged in cloth of gold rosettes with white beading, and the same rosettes adorned the broad, square...and indecently low-cut...neckline. It was the overdress which satisfied her inner peacock. It was crimson silk with a short demi-train, embellished all the way down the front edges and all around the trailing hem with metallic, cloth of gold lace. The overdress tied closed beneath her breasts with a crimson satin ribbon. She completed her toilette with long gold evening gloves and crimson satin slippers.

'You're as pretty as a picture,' the mirror informed her as she slipped out the door.

Severus waited for her in the Entrance Hall, very correctly attired in knee breeches and stockings, and she felt his eyes upon her when she stepped onto the landing. She walked carefully down the broad marble staircase, taking in every detail of the world she had created.

There were other people milling about the Entrance Hall, talking and laughing together, but neither Severus nor Hermione were particularly aware of them. He never looked away from her face, and the force of his regard was such that she was unable to take her eyes from his. He met her at the foot of the stairs and lifted her gloved hand to his lips.

'Your beauty enchants me beyond reason, Milady,' he said quietly.

There was no sardonic twist to his lips, no trace of mockery in his tone: He seemed entirely in the moment, just as she was. Without waiting for a reply, he tucked her hand into his arm and led her into the dream.

The Great Hall had been transformed into a ballroom hung with ivory silk. Chandeliers full of candles hovered high overhead, and the musicians played tunelessly and well. The room was filled with ladies in colourful ball gowns and gentlemen, dressed precisely in black and white. The one exception was Xenophilius Lovegood, whose black coat and breeches had been charmed to shiny chartreuse, and his once-white shirt front was fuchsia beneath his unaltered white cravat. The lady clinging worshipfully to his arm was Professor Trelawney, who had matched her gown's colour exactly to her escort: Chartreuse tulle over chartreuse satin, trimmed in fuchsia lace.

The sets began forming for a country dance, and Severus raised an interrogatory brow. 'Shall we?' he asked.

'If you like,' Hermione said, feeling a bit awkward with him. He seemed different in a way she could not precisely pinpoint.

'I don't know what your intentions for this evening are, but mine is to dance with you until dawn,' he said firmly as they took their places, 'so do your duty dances now. Once the waltzing begins, you're all mine.'

Hermione stood up with several other men after Severus. She danced with George, with Neville, and with Draco, who danced divinely.

'Who won the Quidditch match?' she him asked idly.

Draco blanched. 'What are you talking about?'

She laughed softly. 'Don't forget who my closest friends are,' she reminded him. 'Did you really think you were pulling the wool over my eyes? I didn't mind, but I'm curious to know who won.'

'We won,' Draco said with smug satisfaction. 'Harry outflow Krum. I knew he would.'

Hermione was pleased to hear the pride in Draco's voice. 'Aren't you going to dance with Harry?' she teased him.

Draco rolled his eyes. 'If we can ever work out who's going to lead, we might.'

When eleven o'clock came, Hermione was glad of the opportunity to partake of supper. There were bowls of iced champagne punch, jellies and creams, fruits and compotes, and savoury dishes as well. Severus seated her at a table with her particular helpers and their partners, and he excused himself to her, strolling away to speak to

Kingsley Shacklebolt. Hermione was surprised to see the Minister present at the ball, but very glad he was there. It made it all seem very important.

But the happenings at her table were interesting enough to hold her attention whilst she sipped punch and nibbled sweets. It was illuminating to see all the couples who had paired up over the last week, and she felt a glimmer of pride. If she hadn't proposed Regency Week as a way to raise money for Hogwarts, would these people have found one another? It was the romantic atmosphere that turned one's thoughts to matters of the heart, and it did Hermione's heart good to see her friends and helpers coupled with likely...and unlikely!...partners.

For instance, she would never have imagined Viktor as a man who would be attracted to Pansy Parkinson, but they seemed enamoured of one another, and Pansy's parents even seemed to approve of the Bulgarian. She also would never have believed that Leticia Mortelle, with her reserved manner and scintillating wit, would give way to Lucius Malfoy's persistent attentions, but the enormous, glittering stone on Leticia's left hand seemed to tell a different story: Even scarily clever women could fall in love when the irresistible blond came along.

Mr Lovegood and Professor Trelawney defied comprehension, and she made no effort to categorise them. Perhaps, rather than an improbable couple, they were simply made for each other.

It made her particularly happy to see Penny with Finbar Quigley. Penny really *had* met her 'flying man', just as Trelawney had predicted, and from the way they looked at one another, it was a strong bet that their relationship was progressing nicely.

Even more gratifying was the happiness of her oldest, dearest friends. Harry and Draco were the most far-fetched couple ever, but they were obviously well on their way to falling in love. Ron, who had been her first lover...whom she might have married, if he'd ever bothered to ask her, a truly frightening thought!...had thrust her into Severus' arms, however unintentionally, and now he seemed to glow beneath the ardent, continuous attentions of Romilda Vane. Neville was firmly bound in the toils of his pretty, young Veela girl, and George was becoming more his old self every day, now that Luna had stepped in to fill the void in his life.

Severus was beside her again so quietly that it surprised her when he spoke.

'Will you walk with me in the garden?' he asked. 'Take a turn in the fresh air, before revisiting the dance floor?'

'That sounds wonderful,' she said, standing and going with him out into the velvet black night.

The air was cool but felt wonderful on her skin after her exertions. The stars glittered, the moon shone, and each breath she drew was redolent of roses.

Severus conjured a shawl, which he draped over her shoulders, and they strolled down the path. Hermione held his arm, resisting the urge to rub her face against his coat. How could she tell him that she wanted him? Not just for today, but for (*always* her unruly mind whispered) long enough for them to see if they were as good a match in truth as they felt in what very little practice they'd had.

'Hermione, I would like to ask you a question,' he said, and her heart began to race.

Was he thinking what she was thinking?

'Yes?' she said.

'What do you know of the plight of the Muggle-born students who were forced out of school the year of the war?' he asked.

Hermione blinked. That wasn't exactly what she had expected from him...not when the Regency lady and gentleman were walking alone in the garden beneath the moon on the night of the fancy dress ball ...

'Hermione?' he prompted.

Focus, she told herself.

'I know some of them were put back in Muggle school by their parents, who were understandably unimpressed with what they saw of the wizarding world,' Hermione said. 'I can't blame them, although it is sad that those wizards and witches will never learn to use their magic properly.'

'Dennis Creevey is the one who brought the problem to my attention,' Severus said. 'He was paid to come to this event and spy on us and take pictures for a tabloid...Rita Skeeter's rag.'

Hermione's indignation flared like Fiendfyre. 'That ... that *insect* had the nerve to do that?' she cried. 'And Dennis! How could he?'

'He needed the paid work,' Severus replied steadily. 'He didn't finish his schooling in either the Muggle or the wizarding schools, and he is not qualified to do very much at all. When I became aware of his dilemma, I asked Minerva to help me gather information. There are an appalling number of Muggle-born students who have slipped through the cracks of wizarding education.'

Hermione stopped in the path, her mind working. 'Term begins in less than a month!' she said. 'Do you have time to plan a remedial curriculum and contact the students' families to get their agreement to bring them back to Hogwarts?'

The moonlight did not fully illuminate his hawkish countenance, which appeared now as a series of long planes and jutting angles, but she could see the smile that curved his thin lips. 'I can see we are of the same mind,' he commented, turning and beginning to lead her back to the castle. 'Yes, I presented the problem to the Governors today, and they have voted unanimously to provide their full support of the Muggle-born Reclamation Project.'

Hermione squeezed his arm. 'That's wonderful! But you're going to need a better name than that. And where will the funds come from? How will you pay for it?'

He darted a sly, sidelong look at her. 'Do you imagine that I have not made a plan?' he teased.

Hermione laughed. 'I beg your pardon, sir!'

They entered the drawing room again, where the Minister for Magic was addressing everyone, praising the event, the funds it raised, and the people who made it all possible. This was met by thunderous applause from the assembled guests. Next, Lucius Malfoy took the floor and began to speak of the plan for contacting and correcting the educational deficits of the Muggle-born students left behind by the war.

'Clearly, you can perceive the urgent need to rectify this problem, which came upon the affected students due to no fault of their own,' Lucius said.

There was a general murmur of agreement from the crowd.

'Therefore, we are asking you, once again, to open your generous hearts to fund this program, which will be of short duration but incalculable value to the wizarding world at large. You may give a cheque drawn on your bank to any member of the Board of Governors, as well as the Headmaster or the Deputy Headmistress. If you prefer to make your donation in gold, we ask that you leave it with Professor McGonagall, who will be at a table in the Entrance Hall for the rest of this evening and again in the morning. Thank you for your support for Hogwarts!'

The gathered witches and wizards clapped again, and there was even some foot stomping as they congratulated themselves on their good works.

Lucius held out his hand to Professor Mortelle, and she, stunning in azure satin, moved to stand by his side. 'On a personal note,' the handsome blond continued, 'I would

like to announce my engagement to this incomparable lady, who will become my wife at Christmas.'

Hermione glanced at Severus, to share his joy for his friend, but she found him watching her, as if he weren't listening to Lucius at all. She cocked her head slightly to one side, wondering, but he neither spoke nor looked away.

'The musicians are tuning up again,' he said. 'Shall we return to the ballroom?'

It wasn't how she had imagined it...but it was everything she dreamed of.

He led her into the dance, declining to relinquish her to another gentleman for the rest of the evening. It would have been shocking and improper conduct for a true Regency lady, but Hermione made no objection. She was too busy losing herself in each moment.

Try as she might to remain completely cognizant of every aspect of the remainder of that night, Hermione found that much of the time passed in a blur of detail...which dance they performed, who spoke to them between sets, what the other ladies were wearing...whilst each expression on Severus' indecipherable face and every nuance of emotion she felt were engraved indelibly on her heart.

When he smiled at me so, I felt thus she thought, twirling in his embrace upon the dance floor, all the other people but a background upon which this, the most fantastical night of her life, played out. The hour grew late, and the couples dropped out two by two, murmuring of an early morning, of packing and leaving and going back home.

But Hermione shut them out of her mind. She wouldn't think about dismantling this dream...about packing away her beautiful Regency clothes and pulling on her jeans and tee-shirts...she couldn't think of those things, not when the music played and the candles burned and the wizard who had stolen her heart held her in his arms and danced.

There were four couples left, then three, and the only ones still on the floor were Lucius and Leticia and Severus and Hermione. The musicians continued to play...had Hermione imagined Lucius amongst them, and gold changing hands?...and Severus abandoned the proper distance of Regency times and gathered her closer, until her cheek was pressed to his shoulder and his face was buried in her hair.

If time could stop, she thought, breathing deeply of all the scents that would forevermore mean 'Severus Snape' to her *if I could live always, entirely in this moment, I could never want for more.*

But there *was* more. There were his half-mast lids above midnight eyes, which closed just before his mouth captured hers. There were his demanding lips, his insidious, searching tongue, and the strength of his crushing arms. There was his mind, as quick and sure as her own, his wit and intelligence and most of all, his honour. Oh yes, she knew there was more, and as sweet as this was...as sure as she was that *this* was all she would ever have of him...she ached for him in a way that was as elemental as fire and as old as time itself.

Still, time was a ruler as unbending as Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration. Despite her desperate desire to stop it, the minutes passed, and at half past five o'clock in the morning, dawn broke.

'That's it, folks!' the lead fiddler called out as the ceiling of the Great Hall reflected the rising sun. 'Thanks for having us! Good night...and good morning!'

Lucius raised a hand in farewell before escorting Leticia away, and Hermione stood alone with Severus in the ballroom, which the light of day was converting back to an oversized dining hall.

'It's so hard to let it go,' Hermione said softly.

'Not as hard as letting *you* go,' he told her.

She asked, knowing his answer.

'Will you come...' she began.

His lips twisted in a crooked smile, and he placed a finger over her lips. 'Bed chambers are for sleeping,' he told her. 'And already it's a new day...one in which there is much demanding my attention.'

House-elves flooded the hall, dervishing madly about the room to return it to its proper state for serving breakfast.

'We is sorry, Headmaster Snape, sir,' Herpie the house-elf squeaked, 'but work needs doing!'

Severus did not move from his place nor respond to the elf; he was looking into Hermione's face.

'You've done *this* for a year,' he said, indicating the Regency ballroom, 'and you've done it magnificently.'

Hermione stifled a sob and whispered, 'Thank you for saying so.'

'This is my question for you, Milady,' he continued, his voice caressing, his eyes searching her face for clues to she knew not what. 'What are you going to do tomorrow?'

And with a final caress of his fingertip across her cheek, he turned and left her standing alone in the swiftly disintegrating illusion of a ballroom.

A/N: You may see Hermione's ball gown here:

<http://herpie-houseelf.livejournal.com/2686.html>

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency

Chapter 21

Sunday, August 11, 2002

Breakfast to Dinner

She slept for two hours before a firm knock at her door woke her. She rose, bleary-eyed, to find Ron, looking wary but determined. Hermione opened the door to him and turned away to rummage in a drawer.

'Hello,' he said softly.

She shook out the jeans she'd found and stepped into them. When they were fastened beneath her tee-shirt, she turned to face him.

'Good morning,' she said.

He shuffled his feet, staring at the floor. His obvious discomfort might have been funny if she'd had the heart for amusement...but she didn't. She felt deeply sad, as if she'd never laugh again. Was it just the end-of-project let-down? She'd experienced that before...but she couldn't fool herself that this had anything to do with work.

This was about Severus.

She forced herself to focus on Ron, standing there in his rumpled jeans and Chudley Cannons tee-shirt. 'Where's Romilda?' she asked.

He answered cautiously. 'She went down to breakfast already, but I wanted to talk to you before I leave.'

Hermione nodded and sat on the edge of her bed, motioning to the desk chair.

'Thanks,' Ron muttered, and he sat down.

Hermione studied him curiously. It was strange to think that ten days ago they had considered themselves a couple. How long had it been since she had felt as if she were in love with him? Since she had felt butterflies in her stomach when he was near? Since the touch of his hand had set her blood afire? Had it ever?

"Mione," he began.

'I'm sorry, Ron,' she said before he could continue. 'I'm sorry that I've been such a rotten girlfriend for so long. I ignored you and wasn't interested in what was important to you.'

His dear, open face relaxed as his lips parted in a smile. 'That's what I was going to say,' he told her, sitting forward. 'Like maybe we grew up and ... sort of grew out of love.'

She nodded, sitting forward as well. 'I think that explains things,' she agreed.

Ron ran his palms along the legs of his jeans as if wiping off sweat. 'Still, I shouldn't have wagered the schedule like I did. That was wrong of me.'

Hermione smiled, the first time she could remember smiling at him in recent memory. 'I appreciate you saying so.'

'I want to make sure we're all right,' he said earnestly. 'I may not be the man for you, but you've been my best friend for half my life...I can't lose that, 'Mione.'

As they stood and hugged one another, Hermione fancied she heard the closing of a door while another, older door creaked fully open for the first time in a long while.

'I hope you'll be happy,' he murmured into her hair. 'And if ever some bloke needs a hexing for mistreating you ...'

Hermione emitted a watery chuckle. 'Yeah, you'll be at the top of that list.' She pulled away and looked into his face. 'I hope you'll be happy, too,' she declared.

'I am!' he enthused. 'Romilda is the...'

Hermione laughed and began to push him towards the door again. 'Yes, yes, but you have to go away now so I can get ready for breakfast!'

Throwing up his hands in comical surrender, Ron went into the corridor and closed the door behind him.

Hermione walked into the Great Hall thirty minutes later, and the sight of the milling guests in their casual, everyday clothing hit her like a blow.

Regency Week really was at an end.

The conversation was subdued, and there was a nostalgic mood overall. Hermione was happy to see some of the ladies who had bonded over needlework, and the gentlemen who had become friendly over glasses of port and games of cards, making plans to meet again away from Hogwarts and continue those friendships.

She took her place...the one she had occupied all throughout the week, beside the Headmaster's chair...but he was not there. She put food on her plate at random and glanced down the table at her friends and helpers. Penny Clearwater caught her eye, and Hermione smiled tentatively, mindful of her interactions with a jealous Penny. She was quite surprised when Penny rose and came down to her.

'I can't believe it's over,' Penny said, and the silly discord between them seemed to melt away.

'I know,' Hermione agreed. 'I feel ...'

'Rather empty inside?' Penny suggested. 'Well, something very special came of this week for a lot of people.' She allowed herself to look down the table to Fin Quigley. 'Pansy and I are going to watch the Ballycastle Bats play the Falmouth Falcons next Saturday.'

'But how will you bear to be apart from them for almost a week?' Hermione asked, gently teasing.

'Oh, we won't!' Penny assured her. 'Fin is going to come home with me for a couple of days, and Viktor is going home with the Parkinsons for a short visit, but both of them have to be at Quidditch practice in Ireland on Tuesday.' She tilted her head towards the empty chair at the head of the table. 'Do you and ... well, do *you* have any special plans?'

Hermione began to spread jam on her toast. 'Not really,' she said. 'I'm back at work tomorrow, you know, so I'll sort out some things here...taking apart the Regency Week changes and putting things back the way they were...and then I'll Floo home.'

Even speaking the words made her feel dreadfully sad. Where was Severus? How could it all have meant so little to him, when she felt as if she were leaving some vital

part of herself behind at Hogwarts? She imagined her beating heart in a potion-filled jar on the shelf behind the erstwhile Potions master's desk.

Penny laid her hand briefly upon Hermione's shoulder. 'Hermione, I might have been a bit ... well, less than kind to you this week ...'

Hermione looked up quickly. 'Don't waste another thought on it,' she said. 'We were all a bit stressed this week.'

She knew very well that Penny's behaviour had had nothing to do with Regency Week duties and everything to do with fancying the Headmaster, but for the sake of their future friendship, it was better to pretend.

Fin came up to Penny and took her hand. 'I'm ready to go when you are,' he told her. Then he smiled at Hermione. 'Terrific notion, this Regency thing,' he said. 'You did a bang-up job of it.'

'Bye, Hermione!' Penny said. 'I'll see you at work!'

The Headmaster entered the Great Hall as Fin and Penny were leaving; Hermione watched as he shook hands and exchanged farewells with them. Then he strode to his chair, his black robes billowing in his wake. His face was a bit pale, his eyes shadowed from lack of sleep, but he was freshly shaved; his long hair, combed back from his forehead, was still wet from the shower; and he wore the Regency Headmaster's robes. Of all the people Hermione had seen this morning, he was the only one in Regency garb.

The wave of gratitude she felt was a bittersweet surge of the emotion which had been brewing in her for the last ten days. She felt like weeping.

'Good morning,' he said as he sat down, his piercing black eyes surveying her closely. 'Did you ... rest well?'

Hermione shrugged. 'I slept a couple of hours. Did you?'

'No,' he replied, pouring tea into his cup. 'I have been in my office, working on the remedial curriculum for the returning Muggle-born students.' A house-elf appeared with a bowl of plain porridge and set it before the Headmaster. 'Later on today, Minerva and I will collaborate on a letter to send out to each of them as a first communication about our plans.'

He began to eat his spare, abstemious meal.

This is the last time I will sit at this table with him, sharing a meal Hermione thought sadly. Then she gave herself a hard mental shake. *Focus on what you can do, not what you can't have.*

'I was thinking this morning in the shower,' she began, and his attention was instantly fixated on her, as if he were imagining her there. She hurried on, 'The program should have a slogan. Something catchy, that will capture the attention of your contributors...something that will make the students want to be part of it.'

His breakfast apparently forgotten, he stared at her. 'And have you thought of something ... catchy?'

He spat the word, and his lip curled disdainfully...he hadn't been snide with her in days.

She drew breath, glad for the indignation which flooded her. 'I think it's catchy, but I don't need your sneers.'

She pushed her chair back from the table, but his hand shot out, closing around her wrist. 'I'm not sneering now,' he said flatly. 'Tell me.'

She jerked her hand away from him. 'If they don't return and finish their educations, their magical ability will just go to waste,' she muttered. 'The slogan is "Save the Magic".'

He withdrew his hand from her personal space. 'Save the magic?' he repeated.

She flushed. 'Don't use it if you don't like it!' she said, wishing she hadn't mentioned it to him.

His gaze shifted to someone behind her. 'Minerva,' he said, and Hermione turned to see McGonagall standing at her shoulder. 'We should have a banner behind the collection table in the Entrance Hall that says "Save the Magic".'

The old Scotswoman nodded. 'That will do very nicely,' she said. 'Yes, we ought to put it up immediately, before all the guests are gone...and we can add it to the letterhead for the communications we'll send out today.' A rare expression of pleasure touched her face. 'The donations have been most generous! But I was coming to see if Hermione could take my place at the collections table whilst I eat breakfast.'

Hermione rose immediately. Being away from Severus was going to be miserable, but she might as well begin to accustom herself to it. Obviously, the truce between them for the sake of presenting a harmonious front...*for Hogwarts*, she reminded herself...was at an end. Being with him when he was showing such disregard for her was far too difficult.

'At once, Professor,' she said. 'Please, take my seat. I know you have pressing business to discuss with the Headmaster.'

And without bidding him farewell, Hermione hurried out to the Entrance Hall, not permitting herself to think about anything but her immediate task. Pulling her wand, she conjured an enormous strip of parchment and magicked it onto the wall. With broad, sweeping slashes, she emblazoned *Save the MAGIC* in dramatic, bold black letters. A final flick of her wrist added random splotches of glitter...because she knew it would annoy *him*.

'What's this, Hermione?' Fortescue Parkinson inquired as he strolled into the Entrance Hall, followed by two house-elves laden with the Parkinsons' baggage.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione squared her shoulders and put on her S.P.E.W. face before beginning to explain. This was even more important than house-elf rights, and she would give it her all.

By noon, her collection box was filled with gold and cheques from wizarding banks all over the world. She had provided the information about the special project several times. Dennis Creevey had joined her soon after she hung the *Save the MAGIC* banner. He was as enthusiastic about the scheme as Hermione was, and he had the added cachet of being the first displaced student to be enrolled in the new program.

'I wonder,' he mused, 'if people would like to have their pictures taken in front of the banner?'

And photograph after photograph had been snapped of proud donors before the banner. The developed photographs would be owed to the recipients as soon as they were ready.

George Weasley, coming down the stairs hand-in-hand with Luna Lovegood, broke into a broad grin when he saw the banner. 'This is brilliant,' he said. 'Your idea, I reckon,' he added with a smirk at Hermione.

'I only thought of the slogan,' she said. 'The idea belongs entirely to the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress.' She took a step closer to the proprietor of the busiest business in Diagon Alley. 'George, would you like to contribute?'

Luna removed a cheque from her handbag and passed it to Hermione. It was slightly crumpled and smelled of Gurdyroots.

'George wrote it out last night before bed,' Luna said, 'after we cleared all the Gulping Plimpies from the toilet. He asked me to keep up with it until we saw you.'

Hermione bit her lip to hide her grin. 'I didn't know the castle was ... infested with, erm, Plimpies.'

George ran a hand down Luna's long, straggly blond hair. 'It's not, any more,' he said. 'Luna was prepared...she tries to be prepared for everything, don't you, love? It's how she survived in the dungeon, you know.'

Luna turned adoring eyes up to his face, and George gave her a swift kiss. Then the lovers said their farewells and departed, hands clasped. It wasn't until they went out the door that Hermione looked at the amount on the cheque.

The paper was snatched from her fingers as Draco reached over her shoulder. 'Weasley's Wizard Wheezes,' he read. 'Good God, he does all right for himself, doesn't he?'

Hermione reached for the cheque, which Draco lifted higher.

'Where's your donation, Malfoy?' she demanded.

Draco laughed. 'I'm not the rich one in this relationship,' he informed her, warm eyes resting on Harry. 'Tap Potter, here.'

Harry took the cheque from Draco with a severe look and returned it to Hermione. 'I can't believe I never thought about the Muggle-born students before now,' he said, his green eyes serious behind the round frames of his glasses. 'Four years it's been, and it never occurred to me to ...'

Hermione pressed his hand. 'None of us thought of it,' she said. 'Don't blame yourself...but support the effort, if you can afford it.'

'I don't carry my chequebook with me, but I'll give you a cheque at work tomorrow,' he promised her.

Hermione turned away from him to place George's check in the collection box. 'You can just owl it to the Headmaster,' she said dully.

Harry turned her until she faced him again. 'Won't you be seeing Severus?' he asked, concerned.

Draco watched them with narrowed eyes. 'Of course she will,' he said.

Hermione looked away from them. She didn't need kindness and caring, because those things would make her cry. She needed to be irritated and angry. 'I have no plans to see him after today,' she said, pulling away from them. 'Don't you have someone else you can annoy?'

'But you're right here and available,' Draco pointed out reasonably. Then he put an arm about Harry's shoulders. 'I'm going to my dead Great-Aunt Walburga's house with him,' Draco informed her. 'That ghoulish elf, Kreacher, still lives there. It will be like a family reunion...only without the family, of course. Those are the best sort.'

Harry still looked concerned. 'You should come and stay at Grimmauld Place with us,' he urged her. 'Don't be alone at that tiny flat of yours.'

Hermione managed a laugh then. 'Stay at Grimmauld Place with you, Ron, and your new significant others? Wouldn't that cheer me up?'

Harry enfolded her in a hug. 'Okay, maybe it's a shit idea...but you know my home is always your home.'

Hermione returned his hug before giving him a shove. 'Would you please go home?' she said.

Draco bent forward to drop a kiss on her cheek, then he frog-marched Harry out of the castle. Hermione smiled mistily at the backs of their heads, silky blond and messy black. Then she was distracted from them by a noisy group that came down the marble staircase carrying their own bags. Lavender, Parvati, and Padma had Dennis in tow.

'You're taking him with you?' she blurted.

Dennis grinned, looking quite pleased to be in the midst of a group of older women. 'I'm going to interview them for the *Quibbler* piece,' he enthused. 'And I'm going to sleep on their sofa until school starts!'

Hermione followed them into the noonday sun to see them off, reflecting that only Dennis Creevey could make kipping on a sofa sound like such an exciting prospect.

She remained in place for a time, breathing deeply of the fresh air. She felt, rather than heard, Severus come up behind her.

'That's the lot,' he said quietly. 'All your guests have departed, Milady.'

Tears pricked her eyes at this use of his pet name for her. 'Don't,' she said thickly, moving past him to the doors.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

'I have rooms to put right,' she said without looking back at him. '*That's* what I'm going to do today, Severus.'

She heard his sharp intake of breath, as if the reminder of his words from the night before had pricked him. She hoped they had.

She entered the castle and marched to the men's clubroom. There were so many pieces of furniture to be moved back to their proper places, and two walls to put in place again ... house-elves could do the work under her direction, but for now, she wanted to do it herself.

Work was the very best remedy for an aching heart.

Severus frowned at the spidery handwriting covering the parchment, then added a final line. On the desktop were four crumpled parchment sheets attesting to his previous attempts.

'All right, how's this?' he said and began to read aloud.

Portrait Dumbledore listened gravely, and at the end, nodded his head decisively. 'That's the ticket, Headmaster!'

Severus took up his quill again and signed his name, printing beneath it *Severus Snape, Headmaster*.

'Herpie!'

The house-elf popped into the Headmaster's office and immediately bowed deeply. 'Yes, Headmaster Snape, sir?'

'Deliver this to Professor McGonagall.'

Minerva would perform the duplication spells, with the assistance of the other Heads of House, and before nightfall, the letters would be owled to every Muggle-born student who had failed to return to Hogwarts, after the war had made the school a lethal place for them to be. Severus had been Headmaster then, that year of his shame...of his worst, walking nightmare, when Death Eaters freely roamed the halls of Hogwarts, preying on students. He, personally, owed the missing Muggle-born students these amends, and if necessary, he would make a private appeal to each of them, face to face.

For now, the letter might be the best, quickest way to get the word out to them and to receive their replies. *We await your answer by return of the delivering owl, at the earliest possible opportunity*, his letter read.

His restless gaze moved to the other two sheets upon his desk; one was a to-do list, the other was a ... personal missive. The first must be completed before the second could be contemplated.

Don't dawdle! he cautioned himself. *She might depart at any moment. She is none too happy.*

He dragged the list of necessary tasks before him. The curriculum had been cobbled together, the list of course books compiled (students in need of financial assistance would be provided their schoolbooks and other supplies by the school), and housing arrangements had been made. Last on the list was the letter he had just finished. He put a tick mark beside it. The to-do list was complete.

He rubbed a hand over his face. The morning shower had served to wake him up a bit, but that had been hours ago, and he was feeling his lack of sleep now.

He pushed himself to his feet and went to the window, looking out toward the Quidditch pitch. Longbottom had Vanished the maze and its interior garden before he had left with his besotted Gabrielle. Potter was enamoured of Draco, and Weasley was all taken up with the Vane woman...even Krum had found a love interest in Pansy Parkinson. All of Hermione's closest friends were accounted for...all of the possible rivals for her attention of which he was aware...but was there some detail had he forgotten? Was there aught he had failed to take into account in all his plans?

The castle was strangely quiet now, minus the guests...much as it usually was when the students were gone. But Hermione still remained, somewhere below; he could feel her spark inside of himself, a warm, pulsating presence. Involuntarily, he pressed a hand to his chest, as if to hold her in place.

That's your heart, you fool! he thought. But it wasn't his, not any longer. She had slipped through the walls he had built to keep others out and taken his heart from him, and she had done it with such ease ...

But she was prickly now. At breakfast, she had been quick to take offence, and later, she had flounced away from him as if she was somehow upset with him...but he had given her no reason for it.

No, she is unhappy only because Regency Week is over. It has nothing to do with me, he thought.

He looked over at the incomplete missive upon his desk, but did not leave the window. She had been unafraid from the start, going where her heart led her, thinking he would follow her. How many times had she invited him to her room? What did that invitation mean, coming from a woman such as she was? And he had declined each time. There were a thousand reasons why he ought to continue saying 'no' to her...to *himself*...and only one reason not to.

Because he *wanted* her.

Love her! his adolescent self insisted, but he pushed that notion firmly aside. Love was for schoolchildren, but desire, admiration, respect, true liking...these were the blocks upon which adults built relationships, and he felt them all for Hermione Granger.

The cards say she's your soul mate...of course you love her! the inner voice whispered.

'I need to sleep,' he said aloud, to drown out the bleating of his inner adolescent.

'Then have a nap, Severus,' Dumbledore's portrait suggested.

He stalked over to glare at the portrait. 'I'll be having a meeting here later. I expect you and all of your confederates to keep your traps shut and sleep all the way through it. Not a peep out of the lot of you!'

Dumbledore twinkled at him, looking dotty in the stupid, garish poker hat. 'Of course, Headmaster. I shall spread the word.' And he disappeared, hurrying into the frame of his nearest neighbour.

Severus seated himself at the desk and pulled the incomplete letter to him. It was time to give up his pointless dithering and write the damn thing. Nothing he could do would alter her response, providing his phrasing was adequate. She would say either 'yes' or 'no'.

He dipped his quill in the ink and wrote.

Hermione found her unfinished sampler, stretched upon its tambour frame, abandoned on a round occasional table in the ladies' drawing room. It was very badly done; she had never bothered to learn needlepoint, and it seemed to require more attention to detail than she'd been willing to devote to it. She traced the uneven line of French knots meant to denote the petals of a bluebell. She'd sewn these with her mind full of schemes to lure Severus into her room...*into your bed*, her mind insisted...but no appeal of hers had been sufficient to tempt him into acceptance. He wanted her, of that she was sure...his kisses told her that quite clearly. Something else was holding him back from her, and she had no clue what to do about it.

Suddenly, words came back to her...words that had been spoken in this very room.

'The dark man is full of conflict ... The conflict is not definitive, but it must be overcome for the lovers to reach their destiny.'

Trelawney in her gypsy costume, with her ridiculous shawls and bangles...with her curious intensity as she performed Hermione's card reading. Could the words have been true, one of the rare occasions when the Seer actually *Saw*?

Conflict ... if the conflict was within *him*, there was nothing Hermione could do to resolve it; she could only make her feelings and desires as clear as possible.

The distinctive *pop!* of Apparition heralded the arrival of Herpie, who bore a folded parchment upon a silver salver.

'For you, Miss!' Herpie proclaimed, bowing low.

Hermione's heart lurched. Dear God...was it from Severus? She had dallied about, hoping he would ...

She snatched the parchment and with trembling hands, broke the plain wax seal to get at the contents.

Milady,

Perhaps you can appreciate my reluctance to allow our Regency idyll to come to end. I beg the indulgence of your company for one last evening of Regency-style revels. I wish to share with you a celebratory meal to mark the great success of your plan, which exceeded every expectation. I pray you will accept and allow me to attempt to convey my deepest gratitude to you.

Dinner will be served at seven o'clock in the Headmaster's Office. I await your response.

Your most obedient Servant,

Severus

P.S. If you would be so kind as to wear the gown you wore at the ball, I would be in your debt.

She read it three times, jubilation singing within her. She had taken the battle to him time and again with her invitations, and here, finally, was a move on *his* part. Sweet Circe, she had hoped he would give her some sign of his interest before she left the castle, and here it was.

'Is the Headmaster in his office now, Herpie?'

The elf looked slightly alarmed. 'The Headmaster is sleeping in his bed, Miss...Herpie is only to wake him if Miss declines his invitation.'

Severus was sleeping? Then, so should she. Neither of them had enjoyed a very restful night.

'Miss accepts the invitation, Herpie. I'll be in his office at seven.'

The elf bowed and disappeared, and Hermione hurried to her room, clutching the unfinished embroidery in one hand, her billet-doux in the other.

After a four hour nap, she dressed her hair in twists and ringlets, leaving off the bandeau and the sparkling pins. The silk gown, which a silent house-elf had cleaned and returned while she slept, slipped over her shift with a whisper. She added slippers and gloves, and she was ready to go.

She rode the revolving stone staircase up until she stood before the polished oak door, but before she could take the brass knocker in hand, the door was opened, and Severus was there.

She didn't know why she was filled with a wash of euphoria at the sight of him, for it felt as if a box of freshly caught Cornish Pixies had been released in her chest. Her lips parted as she drew in a deep breath, trying to calm herself, and instantly, his gaze was upon her mouth, an unhurried, sultry expression in his impossibly dark eyes.

He wore the Regency Headmaster's robes, all suede-like softness and buttons galore. She dragged her gaze from his torso, trying to force wild ideas about stroking the coat or unfastening all those buttons from her mind, but when she looked into his enigmatic face, she feared he knew exactly what she had been thinking.

The shadows were gone from his eyes, so he had slept, she thought. He had apparently showered and shaved again as well, because his hair was damp, and she caught a whiff of his aftershave as she slipped past him into the office.

'Thank you for coming, Milady,' he murmured, raising her gloved hand to his lips.

'Thank you for inviting me,' she replied.

There were yet two hours until the August sunset, so there was sunlight in the room, but in an alcove to one side of the great, circular room, a small dining table was set with candles...perhaps for atmosphere. She glanced about at the previous Headmasters' portraits, but they all appeared to be sleeping. Had he given them all sweeties laced with Dreamless Sleep?

'Would you care for an aperitif?' Severus inquired. 'There will be wine with dinner.'

'I didn't eat lunch, so I'm rather hungry now,' she confessed.

Keeping the hand he had kissed, he led her to the table. 'When we're ready to eat, simply say "dinner" and your plate will fill,' he told her, with a quirk of his lips. 'I thought it would be best to ... dispense with the house-elves tonight.'

No house-elves? With all the portraits sleeping, then they were quite alone.

'But before we eat, let us have a toast.'

Severus took a bottle from a wine bucket and poured sparkling champagne into the waiting fluted crystal goblets. He lifted his glass, and she lifted hers in response.

'For Hogwarts?' she asked, wondering why her voice sounded so small and quavering.

'No, Milady,' he replied gravely, and there was something in his tone which sent a shiver of anticipation rippling along her spine. 'Not for Hogwarts...not tonight.' He touched his goblet to hers, and the crystal sang a high, sweet note. 'To us.'

Hermione felt as if she'd been struck mute with the import and significance packed into the two words he had spoken. Her gaze rose from the goblets to his face, and instantly, she was captured by the intensity of his gaze. After a moment, she found her voice.

'To us,' she responded, and they drank, never looking away from one another.

As suddenly as he had introduced breathless seriousness to the moment, he took it away, gesturing for her to sit and seating himself across from her.

'Speak to the plate,' he prompted her.

Hermione drew off her gloves and set them aside. 'Dinner,' she said, and her plate filled with roast chicken, potatoes, and crispy runner beans. After a week of fancy...and sometimes very odd...Regency foods, it was lovely to see a plate of plain, homey fare. 'Oh...this is wonderful!'

'Yes, I thought you might enjoy a simpler meal, tonight,' he said, taking up his fork. 'I know I wanted one.'

They spoke of many things over their meal, and Hermione was pleased by the comfortable way they conversed together. She saw many instances of Severus' dry humour, but he was free of derision and mockery.

'Yes, Professor McGonagall reported that all owls were sent to the missing Muggle-born students,' he said, when she asked about the project. 'I hope to receive some responses by owl post in the morning.'

She watched him as he spoke, free to indulge herself in this, with no one else to distract them from one another. The champagne warmed her responses, she thought, and possibly loosened her tongue a bit, making the interaction easier for her.

'No, I haven't thought of a name for the little filly,' she admitted when he inquired about it. 'You know, I never thought I would enjoy horseback riding as much as I do! The horses are intelligent creatures and seem as if they enjoy the rides...as if it's a joint venture.'

He nodded. 'You took to it quickly, for a novice. You'll find many things much easier to do, when you ride astride in breeches, as a twenty-first century rider does...even when she's a lady.'

She frowned then, remembering. She had no horses available for riding. Oh, you could rent a horse to ride in the park for an hour, but job horses probably were not of the same quality and temperament as those in a private stable. 'I don't suppose I'll be doing much riding,' she murmured, devoting her attention to the tricky task of cutting her very tender chicken into tiny bites.

'You needn't resign yourself to that,' he replied.

Severus leant forward to pour more champagne into her glass. She was lovely in the relaxed glow of the wine, the food, and...dare he hope?...the company. Her honey brown eyes shone when they rested upon him, a reaction he had noticed in her before but had made excuses about. It was not him exciting that warm look, he had reasoned then; it was someone else, or some topic of conversation. Women did not look thus at Severus Snape...not in his experience of life. But he was alone with her now, with no other people to take her attention from him, and still, her eyes gleamed.

She had done her hair in the fussy Regency style again...how might he convince her he liked it hanging down her back, wild and untamed? Would she care about his preferences? The gown, though, gave him a fine display of her impressive charms...that favourite part of a woman's body that provided endless fascination for a man...and he well remembered the feel of her breasts pressed to his chest, her hands clutching at him, her mouth open to him, warm, wet, and inviting.

He shifted in his chair. He was getting ahead of himself. She had been eager to lure him into her bed in the rush of Regency atmosphere...when all around them, others were giving in to those impulses...but he did not want her for a holiday fling. He wanted her, wanted to see her often, wanted her in his life ... had to be sure she wanted it, too, before he turned that particular table upon her.

She took up her serviette and touched it to her lips; her plate was still half-full, but she had slowed in her eating.

'Would you care for more?' he inquired, the solicitous host.

'Thank you, no,' she said. 'Though it is quite delicious, I am very full.'

He stood and offered a hand to her. 'Then perhaps you'll grant me a dance.'

She laughed softly, disbelieving. 'And where is this orchestra hidden?' she asked playfully, looking about expectantly.

He quirked an eyebrow at her. 'It is the Wizarding Wireless Network, and by my watch, we are in the middle of the Witching Hour.'

He had set the dial earlier and was relieved to turn the radio on and find it still tuned properly. Some vocalist was singing a song from his parents' generation, but he didn't care...as long as there was music, he could dance with her.

As he drew her to him, she raised her face to his, her eyes wide and wondering...but clearly trusting. He gathered her closer, until her cheek rested upon his chest.

How could she trust him? Had she forgotten who he was...what he'd done?

He moved with her, and it was as if the previous night were upon them again, and they were dancing the night away...only this time, they were quite alone, with his bed but a door away.

'We dance well together,' he murmured into the shell of her ear, and he saw her eyes close very slowly, as if in response to his breath upon her cheek.

She stroked the softness of his coat. 'We ride well together, too.'

She flushed then, as if remembering the physical response she had experienced when riding with him, and he tightened his arm about her waist. 'It appears that we are a good ... team.'

Match! A good match! his inner voice insisted, but he was too caught up in her, in the natural magic she wove about him when they were together. Ensnared by the bewitching Hermione Granger, his mind was helpless to repress the lovesick adolescent lurking in his subconscious.

One old-fashioned love song blended into the next, and the one after, as the sun set outside the windows and the shadows in the Headmaster's office deepened, until it was full dark. It was the time when lovers might murmur sweet nothings to one another, but nothing was decided between them. All was possibility...the air was fraught with it...and the silence they shared was too perfect a bubble to be burst. They clung and danced and breathed as one, until the last strains of the music ended, and Severus twirled her to a halt before the candlelit arch framing his bedroom door.

When she realised they had stopped, she stepped away from him, as if she were caught up still in the circling dance, and it would take a moment for her to learn again to be still. She was very beautiful to him in the flickering candlelight, and the emotion thrumming through him was such as he had never experienced before.

'Milady,' he began, and the hoarseness of his voice sounded strange to his ears. Even so, the hazy look in her eyes disappeared as she fastened her gaze upon his face. He continued then, his voice low-pitched, for her ears alone.

'I realised today that my distress was not the product of the end of Regency Week. I felt unsettled because I have grown accustomed to the part I assumed this week, as your daily partner and companion, and I am loath to relinquish that role.'

Her response was in the complete stillness of her entire being...as if she dared not draw breath, for fear of missing one word of what he was communicating to her. Then her lips parted, and she moved forward as if to embrace him, but he forestalled her by clasping her hands in his and continuing.

'I do not want this night to be the end, Milady, but the beginning. I know I have no reason, but dare I hope you feel the same way?'

Her eyes were more brilliant yet, filled with unshed tears as she nodded. When she spoke, her voice was small and husky. 'Yes,' she breathed. 'Yes, you dare...and yes, I do.'

He kissed her hand. 'Then may I suggest that we adjourn our discussion elsewhere? The portraits may wake up at any time, and I would not care to share your company with anyone else tonight.'

She shocked him by behaving as a Regency lady would never have done and retaliated. Taking his hand, she pressed an open-mouthed kiss to his wrist. 'That's an excellent suggestion,' she murmured, her lips moving against his flesh.

They were now at the sticking point. Severus had always been a courageous wizard and a practised fighter, but as a lover, he felt both craven and inexperienced. Forcefully hurling himself into the unknown, he opened the door, placing a hand at the small of her back to urge her inside.

When she took the step over the threshold, his flush of triumph was heady stuff, indeed.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 of 22

After the war, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in a financial bind. Special Ministry worker Hermione Granger is on site with a team of helpers, full of fundraising ideas, and it seems that Headmaster Snape objects to her very presence there. What prizes will be carried away by all those who embark on Miss Granger's madbrained Regency gamble?

Chapter 22

Sunday, August 11, 2002, After Dinner to

Monday, August 12, 2002, Afternoon

Hermione passed into his room as if she were entering a dream. She had often sensed this reality on the other side of the barriers he had erected between them, those both physical and emotional. She had tried to breach those barricades in every way she knew. Now he willingly opened to her, and standing in his space, surrounded by his things, she felt as if she were inside the man, himself.

The first thing she noticed was the enormous bed on a raised dais in the middle of the room, and she felt a flutter of panic. This was no drunken visit to a schoolmate's flat after a night at the pub. She was allowing herself to be seduced by a man twenty years her senior. Would she be found wanting?

'May I offer you a nightcap?' he inquired, moving past the bed as if it were just another piece of furniture. He paused at a chest of drawers to empty his pockets. 'Dumbledore added some superb cognac to the cellars during his tenure, and there is Firewhisky...or I can procure something more to your taste.'

He stood at the drinks trolley, at some distance from her, waiting to hear her answer. There was no mad, pressing rush to his bed. She relaxed.

'I'd like the cognac, please,' she said, inspecting the spacious room. To her left were floor-to-ceiling, bulging bookcases, separated only by doors...one surely led to an ensuite bathroom. She longed to explore and peruse the book titles, but the pull of the man, his physical presence and her longing to be near him, was the stronger yearning.

That was a first, wanting a man more than books.

She approached him, only to be distracted by a familiar object on the top of the tallboy. Investigating, she took up the deck of old playing cards. She cut the deck, and the queen of hearts appeared. A second cut produced the jack...*no, the knave*, she reminded herself...of spades. It must be some trick deck, though she couldn't imagine why he would carry it with him.

She replaced the cards and realised she was looking at some other familiar items. There was her old ring, the one she had thrown at Ron! And her handkerchief...she had given it to Severus as a good luck token, telling him to win everything at the poker game. And beneath the handkerchief was his personalised schedule...which had once been Ron's...proof that her good luck token had brought him success.

'There's more,' he said, holding out a cut glass tumbler of cognac.

She took the glass, cocking her head curiously. He picked up a small pocketbook and fanned through the pages, past notes scribbled in his spiky hand, until he came to a flattened, dried up flower. It was yellow, like the daisies she'd worn in her riding dress buttonhole.

'Is that ... one of mine?' she asked.

He quirked an eyebrow at her, and rather than answering, he clinked his glass against hers. 'To us,' he said and sipped.

Hermione felt as if an avalanche of information...of proof that he not only desired her, but *cared* for her...had been spilt into her lap, like an embarrassment of riches. She was too moved to speak, so she didn't try, but gazed in stupefaction at the precious collection of odds and ends.

'Meow?'

Startled, Hermione stared down at Crookshanks. 'Why are you here?' she said softly.

From a tin pushed to the far back corner of the chest-top, Severus plucked a cat treat and dropped it on the rug, where Crookshanks began to crunch it.

'I don't know how he gets in, but he *will* keep coming back,' Severus said in a bored tone.

Probably because you keep feeding him treats she thought, but what she said aloud was, 'Is this where he's been disappearing to?'

Crookshanks didn't like many people, but the way he rubbed against Severus' booted ankles, leaving a trail of ginger fur on the black fabric of his trousers, was proof that Severus was one of the chosen.

Severus bent and scooped the cat up, taking him to the door on the wall...*the* wall...and depositing him in the corridor. 'Go chase a rat...make yourself useful,' he advised Crookshanks before closing the door on him.

Hermione gravitated to the wall, seeing the chair drawn so close, and she stroked the wood. 'My bed was right on the other side,' she said, darting a sideways glance at him.

He advanced on her, depositing his glass on a small table in passing. Her glass, however, he disregarded entirely as he took her rather roughly in his arms, and cognac spilt on his rug. 'Do you think I was unaware of that fact?' he said. 'That I failed to imagine you there?'

He kissed her none too gently, but Hermione made no objection to his show of passion; she wished she could Vanish the dratted glass of cognac so she could use both arms to participate in the embrace, but her wand was out of reach and she was too distracted to manage a spell without it.

He held her shoulders and glared down into her eyes. 'Are you quite sure you wish to take this step?' he demanded. 'There is much you don't know about me. I am not a ... nice man.'

He sneered contemptuously when he said the word 'nice', but she recognised that the derision was directed at himself. Hermione twisted away from him and took a few steps away to rid herself of the unwanted glass.

'Do you have any idea the things I've done?' she said, turning to face him. 'Does the fact that I did dreadful things without the benefit of a Dark Mark on my arm make them any less despicable?'

'You did nothing you didn't have to do to protect Potter and further the job given him by Dumbledore,' he said, approaching her slowly.

'You did nothing you didn't have to do to further the job given you by Dumbledore,' she responded stubbornly. 'So, you made some stupid mistakes when you were eighteen? I don't care.'

He stopped before her, glaring, and she glared back, saying, 'I've seen your true colours, Severus. Everyone has. You're brave and honourable, which outstrips nice every time. So forget about it; you can't impress me with your lack of niceness. I have no use for nice men.'

He drew a deep breath, his nostrils flaring, as if her words relieved him. But the emergence of his self-doubts had roused hers, and she crossed arms over her inadequately covered chest.

'You love Lily Potter,' she said, staring at one of his many black buttons, avoiding his eyes. 'It's hard to ... compete with a dead woman.'

He cupped her cheek, resolutely tilting her face until she looked at him. 'Loved,' he corrected her quietly. 'It was a long time ago, Milady. It is in my past.' His thumb passed slowly over her lower lip, his eyes following the journey. 'Tonight is the beginning of my...of *our*...future.'

He swallowed, and Hermione, riveted by his touch, soothed and persuaded by his words, swayed towards him. He crushed her against him, his voice hoarse in her ear.

'I do not wish to speak through the wall tonight. I want to be beside you, close enough to hear every breath...every sigh...every sound you make when I touch you.'

He kissed her again, with less violence, but no less passion than before. Buoyed by her words of acceptance...by his words of the future...he held her with an overwhelming confidence, his lips moving over hers hungrily as her mouth opened to him.

She inhaled him, taste, scent, and sensation, releasing, one by one, every physical law that bound her to life as she'd always known it. She was in a reverie, an existence apart, where a wizard could bewitch her senses...and she, his...in such a way that they would cross to another plane of reality altogether. She yielded to his dominating tongue, to his possessing hands, until her senses were heightened to the point of exquisite agony: her heart racing, breath gasping, skin hyper-sensitive to the least of his touches.

He tugged peremptorily at the satin tie fastening the overdress beneath her breasts, his mouth held in a twist of inchoate sensuality so fierce it bereft her of words. The silken garment was pushed from her shoulders to the floor, and he swung her up in his arms as if she weighed nothing to move the few strides to his bed. He laid her there and stood for a moment absorbing the sight of her before he was beside her, his face buried in her throat, his teeth against her skin and a hand cupping her breast, his groaned words barely reaching her ears.

'... where you belong, Milady ...'

And his responses! She slowly released the buttons of the divinely pettable coat, stroking the gradually exposed flesh. She scarcely noticed the pale skin or the smattering of dark hair about the flat discs crowning his pectorals, for she was wholly taken up with watching his eyes close and his lips part in panting breaths, as she realised her ambition of exploring his naked torso. She spread the coat wide to feast upon the revealed splendour of his ribcage, where she trailed her fingers from rib to rib, followed by her lips, down the lightly defined furrows of his abdomen, until her cheek lay just above his darkly furred navel, her eyes following the dense trail of hair disappearing into his trousers ... to other glories.

His retaliatory efforts were much impeded by the extensive number and admittedly strange construction of her Regency costume components, yet there was neither awkwardness nor frustration attendant upon his labours. He simply Vanished them, one by one, deaf to her first gasped protest, after which she was too far gone to object. The exquisite languor of his process...breath upon a furled peak, followed by lips, then tongue, fingers discovering a slick cleft, eyes as invasive as ever his hands could be, delving into her very soul...the exacting attention he gave to every millimetre of bared flesh guaranteed that she would be beyond thought or reason as their exertions neared fruition.

Hermione was possessed of the body consciousness deeply ingrained in most of her sex, and she was shy to be revealed in all her imperfections to the eyes of the man she craved. But his slow, worshipful appreciation of her nakedness calmed her every misgiving.

He rested upon an elbow, nude and visibly aroused, the flat of one hand stroking reverently up the curve of her hip to the dip of her waist. 'I've never seen a sight more enticing,' he murmured, the hand continuing upward to caress a breast. 'The first time I saw you outside the window, hurrying down the path with your hair stuffed up in that silly hat, I didn't know who you were, but I wanted you...right where you are now.'

Hermione arched into his touch, drunk on her arousal. 'Naked in your bed?' she asked breathily, thinking her voice had never sounded odder.

And he shifted over her, the fascinating movement of muscle in his upper body further reducing her to incoherence. He found his place in the cradle of her body, the natural sheathe for the parts designed for such ideal confluence. She cried out at the perfection of this thrust, piercing at once her body and her soul, her fingers scrabbling for purchase against the mobile sinew of his back.

He rocked once, his head falling forward, as if he felt the impossible perfection as strongly as she did, and she gasped aloud.

'Naked in my bed,' he agreed, 'in a long, slow ...'

He rocked again and she moved with him much as she had done when they danced, her body seeming to know its métier without prior instruction. Hermione turned her head upon the pillow, the flash-fire of passion they had forged singing through her in a mad rush she had neither the means nor the will to slow.

'Not slow,' he gasped, fingers of one hand gripping her shoulder, and she gently sank her teeth into the fleshy side of that hand, straining to absorb all of him, flesh and bone and striving, fiery soul. 'Hermione!'

Craving gave way to union, then to sweet, seamless transcendence.

He fell onto his pillow, pulling her with him until she sprawled half atop him, sweat-slick and breathless, looking down at his face, completion ringing through every cell of her body. She stroked his cheek, her heart full to bursting. Had she once thought him ugly? Unprepossessing? She now held dear every plane and angle of his countenance, undistracted and undismayed by his large, hooked nose. His looks were arresting, and having seen the lean length of his legs, the supple musculature of his back, the sleek curve of his bum, she was completely enamoured of his person, which rated another thorough examination ... very soon.

He laced his fingers into her severely disarranged hair and regarded her with languid eyes. 'I hope you found that ... satisfactory, Milady.'

Hermione laughed and flushed fierily. Severus watched this process with clinical interest.

'Ah, observing your blushes is far more enjoyable with you in this state,' he said, stroking a fingertip down her throat into the cleft between her breasts. 'See how far it goes?'

He rolled her onto her back, looming over her again, hawkish and deliciously predatory. 'Tell me you don't have to be at work tomorrow.'

She tucked a hank of sweat-damp hair behind his ear. 'I could probably delay going in until afternoon,' she said dubiously. 'But you're going to be terribly busy saving the magic ...'

He scowled. 'It's a bloody inconvenient time to have an educational crisis in the wizarding world...just when I would vastly prefer to be ... otherwise engaged.'

He gazed into her face, allowing his eyes to wander her naked body with a possessive assurance that bordered on insolence, as if she were his to plunder at will...as if there were no doubt of her welcoming his attentions. The fact that she was putty in his hands...that she found his outrageous cockiness unbearably sexy...was slightly

appalling to a young woman of her sensibilities. Taking some control of the situation, she pulled him down into a kiss, amazed to discover how swiftly the passion...smouldering, rather than extinguished...reignited.

'Hungry wench,' Severus rumbled into her ear just before she felt his teeth upon her neck. 'You have to give a man time to catch his breath, you know.'

Hermione might have been abashed in other circumstances...when had she ever wanted one tumble immediately upon the heels of another?...but she felt no shame. Instead, she was filled with a lovely confidence of her own. Had he made her beg...seen her in extremity...heard her cry out? Well, she had observed no less from him. They were in mutual thrall, and she was as sure of her power over him as she was of her own helpless desire.

'What we need,' he said, rolling away from her, 'is a bath.'

Hermione allowed herself to be pulled to her feet, and inexplicably unembarrassed by her nakedness, she followed him into the Headmaster's bathroom. There were the usual fixtures...a basin, a toilet, a marble-tiled shower...but there was also a smaller model of the tub in the prefects' bathroom that brought a broad smile to her face.

'I thought you'd like it,' he said.

She giggled. 'Such sybaritic pleasures for the Headmaster!'

There were only four faucets on this spa-sized tub, one on each side, as opposed to the hundred in the swimming pool-sized prefect's bath, but each golden faucet was marked by a different coloured jewel in its handle. Graduated steps led into the depths, where a man might stand in water up to his neck. Severus bent, his movements drawing her rapt attention to the ripple of sinew and muscle beneath his pale skin, and as he twisted one of the faucets, steamy, scented water foamed into the tub.

'Did you think the prefects would outrank the Headmaster in comforts?' he asked. 'We'll let the tub fill, and while it does, you can take the pins from your hair.' His hand closed over the back of her neck. 'I would like to wash it for you.'

The bath led into a dressing room, a manly space smelling so totally of him that she paused for a moment in the doorway just to breathe. All about the walls, his robes, shirts, trousers, and cloaks hung on rails above highly polished black boots. There was no chair in this room, but there was a stool before an old-fashioned boot jack, and he compelled her to sit there, while his long fingers probed for her hairpins.

Hermione was acutely aware of his presence at her back. Surrounded by his clothes, inundated by the essence of him, she was in lovers' paradise. What would the witches who had so eagerly pursued him have given to be in her place at this moment? The idea gave her a shiver of pleasure so acute that she was covered in gooseflesh.

He removed the hairpins, unwound the braids, and took up a broad hairbrush from a shelf to smooth the tangled, disordered mess. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him not to bother, but his hands in her hair were pure heaven; she surrendered to the bliss.

'Next weekend, you must visit for another riding lesson,' he said. 'One thing I will very much miss about Regency Week...though not as much as I will miss being at your side every waking moment...is daily rides. Life does not afford as much leisure time to men in this age as in that one.'

Something in his words sparked a connection in her mind, and she tilted her head back to see his total relaxation as he brushed her hair, his focus on the brush he wielded, as if there was nothing in the world now of more importance than the task he performed.

'I know what to call Apollyon and Persephone's foal,' she said excitedly. 'Not after a book character, but after this week...she could be called Regency!'

He replaced the brush on its shelf and led her to the tub. 'It's perfect,' he told her. 'Regency she shall be.'

They dawdled in the bath, washing one another at times playfully, at other times erotically, with many interruptions for kisses and caresses. He submitted to her massaging shampoo through his black hair, and she luxuriated in the same treatment from him. Then they held one another until the bathwater grew cool.

Climbing from the tub, Hermione took the towel Severus gave her, then noticed a low shelf with several bottles of Savoir Smith's Sore Muscle Reliever. She took one, turning to him curiously.

'It's marvellous stuff for saddle soreness, but why do you need so many bottles?'

He stretched the towel taut behind him, rubbing the water from his back. 'I brewed them,' he informed her smugly. 'Giving them out to the guests was my field test...the product is ready to be licensed for sale in apothecary shops.'

Hermione grinned in delight. 'You're Savoir Smith?'

He bared his teeth in answer, taking her towel from her hands and dropping it to the floor. 'Only when I am in your bath, relieving your aching muscles. I supplement my income as I can,' he said, bending to kiss her mouth.

When they emerged from the bath, tea and a napkin covered tray full of sandwiches had appeared near the drinks trolley. Severus wore a silky dressing gown and had loaned her a jumper of soft, dark cotton, which she wore with the sleeves turned up.

'I'm ravenous,' she said.

'As am I,' he replied, directing her to sit upon the chintz covered sofa. He regarded her there with lascivious pleasure. 'You must recruit your strength, for the night is long, and you are entirely at my mercy.'

Hermione sniffed, her chin in the air. 'I am young and resilient,' she informed him, accepting a cup of tea and a sandwich piled with roast beef. 'Eat up ... sir.'

His laughing black eyes belied his command for her to be still and drink her tea. They sat close upon the sofa, eating and chatting, until Hermione spied the stack of books upon the table at his elbow.

'Jane Austen!' she said. 'And you behaved as if you'd never read her!'

He returned his teacup to the tray and slipped an arm about her shoulders. 'I read the books in self-defence,' he replied. 'Some wizards need defence against the Dark arts; others need defence against the Granger arts, which are far more powerful.'

Rejuvenated by bath and food, it was only natural for such a proclamation to result in Hermione straddling his lap, wrapping her fingers in his damp hair, assaulting him with kisses to which he submitted with indolent delight. It seemed that he enjoyed her high-handed demands as much as he did his own predatory incursions, and he made free of the loose-fitting jumper she wore, his wandering hands acquainting him fully with the topography of her body. At length she was curled up in his lap, cradled against his shoulder. She gazed breathlessly into his face, loving the strength of the arms that held her, loving the fierce possessiveness of his expression, loving ...

His jaw set in a stubborn line, he ran a hand over her hip and down her bare leg. 'I am older than you, but not experienced with dealing with the opposite sex...perhaps even less experienced than you, when it comes to ...'

He stopped and looked at her almost angrily, she thought. Tenderly, she feathered her fingertips over his cheek.

'It's all right,' she murmured. 'You can say anything you like to me.'

He tightened the arm that held her to him, his mouth twisting in the self-derisive moue she was coming to know very well.

'I tried to make myself clear before I brought you to my bed,' he ground out, his tone harsh. 'I believe I understand your ... feelings in the matter.' His teeth gritted, as if against the very notion of having or understanding anyone else's *feelings*, much less speaking of them aloud.

She struggled to sit straighter and kissed him, wanting to relieve his obvious distress at putting emotions into words. Severus Snape had *always* spoken most clearly with actions. She was perfectly content to allow him to go on doing so.

His hands framed her face, and he pulled back from her, ending the kiss. 'Hermione,' he said, 'I have to be sure you know I ... love you.'

'Oh!' she gasped. Her jaw dropped, her eyes filled with tears, and she felt the impulse to hide her face against his neck, but he held her in place, his eyes boring into hers, his tension palpable.

She loved him so fiercely she could not immediately formulate a response, and tears of happiness began to roll down her cheeks.

His lips pressed together in a straight line. 'Perhaps you are unaware that it is customary to make some response to such a declaration!' he snapped.

Hermione dragged his hands from her cheeks and held them to her lips, kissing first one and then the other.

'Oh, Severus, only you could make a declaration of love as if you were challenging me to a duel!' she said, between a sob and a laugh. 'Of course I love you...love you like mad...and I thought you were going to send me away today with nothing!'

Relief washed over his expression like sunlight breaking through storm clouds, and she saw clearly how desperately he wanted to believe her, and how difficult it was for him to do so.

'Oh, my darling,' she said, sliding from his lap to stand before him upon the rug. She pulled the jumper over her head, standing naked for him beneath the candle-filled chandelier. 'I don't have the words for this, and neither do you. Come to bed, where I can show you exactly how I feel.'

She took his hand, and he followed her willingly, as she had known he would. She climbed onto the bed, feeling like some ancient goddess, her wild hair tumbling about her shoulders, followed by her exalted mate, potent and primal in his glory as he pinned her to the sheets.

Their communication was exceptional, if protracted, and possessed of a crystalline clarity seldom achieved between a wizard and a witch. When they lay tangled together, spent, they drifted to sleep on one pillow, each exhale of the one greedily absorbed by the other; synthesis complete.

Severus stood at the window, watching the dawn come to the most sublime day of his existence. The days when he had been dogged by Darkness were finally, indisputably at an end. Hermione Granger had exploded into his life like a meteor from a distant universe, bringing light he had not known he had been without until she shined it upon him. Now, he needed it...needed *her*...as a flowering plant needs the sun and continually turns its face to the source.

He was in a state of awe and freely acknowledged it to himself, giddy as ever Lucius had been at his most annoying. Things with Hermione were progressing perfectly...he could ask for nothing more...and he was wholly unused to getting what he wanted. He had long ago given up hope of ever receiving the deepest desire of his heart. His heart! That organ, which he had believed to be dead long since, useless and disregarded, had been brought back to thundering life by the smile of his brown-eyed witch.

He wasn't so foolish as to think there would be no challenges...distance alone would be a bugger...but he was confident that they could find a way through any problems. Hermione was not blind to his faults...she had made that perfectly clear...but knowing he was possessed of them, she accepted him anyway.

The edge of the rising sun surmounted the treetops of the Forbidden Forest, and the distant mist over the lake began to diminish. He looked down at the deck of cards he held and felt a foolish rush of affection for them. After a lifetime of the ill-luck inherited from Tobias Snape along with his ugly, hooked nose, Severus had finally been dealt a winning hand. The cards had said Hermione was his to win if he was man enough to take the risk.

He had gambled everything, and the gamble had paid off ... in hearts.

'Severus?'

His reverie was broken by her voice, which sounded sleepy and wistful and stirred his blood powerfully. She sat up in the bed, the sheet falling from her shoulders to reveal her beautiful breasts, limned irresistibly golden by the early morning sun.

Ah...life was calling his name, and the promise it held was beyond anything he had ever imagined.

Abandoning the deck of ancient playing cards upon the window ledge, he started quickly towards her, saying the words he knew she needed to hear as badly as he needed to say them.

'Coming, Milady.'

Hermione Granger sat at her desk in her cupboard sized office at the Ministry of Magic. The Senior Assistant to the Minister for Special Projects rated her own office, but not a large one.

Her desktop was covered with a light film of dust...she had, after all, been away for more than a week...but her workspace, which was ordinarily ruthlessly organised, was in some disarray this afternoon. In place of pride, directly in front of her and absorbing all of her dreamy-eyed attention, was an enormous bouquet of red roses, interspersed with the occasional yellow daisy. '*in case you should find yourself in need of a buttonhole*' the card had proclaimed. The imprint was that of the florist in Hogsmeade, and the card bore the spiky script of the one and only Severus Snape...he had walked into the village, then, to send her flowers, which had been delivered less than an hour after she had Disapparated from the gates of Hogwarts. Had he gone directly from their goodbye kiss to send them?

Against the rounded base of the vase, two photographs were propped. The first had been taken by Dennis Creevey the night of the Grand Ball...had it been only two days ago?...and in it, she twirled in Severus' arms around the dance floor. In the photograph, they looked like something right out of a Jane Austen novel, the gentleman and lady in their Regency garb, wooing in the only socially acceptable way.

The second was of a frisky black foal, prancing across the green grass; across the top of the photograph, in silvery ink, Severus had scrawled 'Regency'.

'We'll school her for you from the beginning,' he had told her after making love to her at daybreak. 'By the time she's ready to begin training, you will be as familiar to her as the stable-elf who tends her. She'll make you a fine hunter, and the two of you will learn to jump together.'

Hermione allowed her mind to wander to the fantasy of riding across the fields beside Severus, their black steeds neck and neck, soaring over fences. The idea produced a surprising ache, considering how many times she had satisfied that craving in the last twenty-four hours.

Also on the desktop, now abandoned and disregarded by her, were newspapers and a periodical. The *Daily Prophet* bore the headline, '*Save the Magic!*' above a photograph of Kingsley Shacklebolt and Headmaster Snape shaking hands. The *Quibbler* was folded to show the heading, '*Behind the Walls at Hogwarts' Regency Week!*', beside which was an amusing photograph of Harry and Draco, playing blindfolded badminton. And the cover of *Probe!Magazine's* special edition proclaimed, '*Publisher and Editor-in-Chief Launches Educational Reform at Hogwarts!*', Rita Skeeter's face superimposed over a stock photograph of Hogwarts.

A dark purple paper airplane zoomed into her office to hover above the middle of her desk. It was not the first memo she had received since she arrived at the office today; all the others she had sent to her overstuffed inbox with the flick of her wrist. But this airplane was not the lavender of the Ministry underlings; it was the vivid purple of Kingsley Shacklebolt's office, and as such, merited Hermione's immediate attention.

She plucked the paper from the air and smoothed it open on her desk, forcing her mind to a somewhat disciplined state for the business of the Ministry.

Hermione,

Excellent job on the Regency Week Project. I have read your Report to the Governors of Hogwarts, and already today, my office has received a number of effusive comments from those who attended. A suitable commendation will be added to your file to mark your outstanding achievement.

I know that you have scarcely had time to catch your breath since the end of Regency Week, but I also know that you detest having time on your hands. Accordingly, I have a new project for you .

A shivering flutter of anticipation rippled up her spine, and she felt the hair on the back of her neck standing on end. Could it be ...? She continued to read.

'Save the Magic' is the program Headmaster Snape has instituted for the Muggle-born students displaced by the war. It is a project with a limited timeline, because it will end when the last of those students completes their magical education, but it is a very important one. I need my right hand witch on the job, to spearhead this venture and be the Ministry contact on the ground. You will work in close conjunction with Headmaster Snape, and your title will be Director of the Displaced Students Alliance. You will report to me on a weekly basis, and as usual, you will function with the full authority of the Ministry of Magic.

This project will require you to be housed at Hogwarts, to live in the castle and eat your meals with the students under your direction. In many ways, you will function as the Head of House for the displaced students and the Deputy Headmistress for their academic affairs. Because of the urgency of this undertaking, I need you on site immediately...today, if possible.

Headmaster Snape has agreed to this arrangement, pursuant to your acceptance of the assignment. I feel confident, after observing your collaboration for Hogwarts in the matter of Regency Week, that you and he will make a successful partnership in this venture, as well.

You have my full confidence, Hermione.

The Minister's signature was written at the bottom of the page, below which his Seal was pressed into the paper.

Hermione looked blankly around her cramped office. There were a million things to do! What was she waiting for? She didn't belong here. Her job...her place...her *life* was with Severus. Why had he not mentioned this to her before she left? For the blackguard he claimed to be, Severus Snape was hemmed in by scruples on all sides.

She took up her quill and scribbled a quick acknowledgement beneath the Minister's Seal. *I'm on my way, to begin consultations with the Headmaster today. Owls for me can be directed to Hogwarts.*

She was going back ... to Hogwarts. She was going back ... to Severus. And they could be together ... for Hogwarts.

'For us,' Hermione said aloud, pocketing her photographs. Then she took up her vase of flowers and walked out of her office without a backward glance.

Most people would regard it as chancy, throwing in her lot with Severus Snape, but she knew, with utter certainty, that it was no gamble.

It was a sure thing.

A/N: This story was written to the prompt below, which was submitted by sshg316 for the Summer 2010 SSHG Exchange on Live Journal, but was not chosen by her author. I used the prompt to write for swythv in the 2011 Exchange:

Prompt Used: Ron and Hermione are engaged. Stay with me a sec. Harry, Ron, Severus, Neville, Arthur, and Dumbledore's portrait have a monthly poker night where they play cards, lose a ton of money (always to the same person -- you decide who), and get rip-roaring drunk. The drinking starts early one night, and drunken Ron is convinced he can win back his money with his current hand. Only problem is, he doesn't have enough to wager. So instead of money, he raises the stakes... by wagering one fiancée! Snape wins the hand, the pot, and a fiancée. Hermione is FURIOUS, and Snape isn't exactly happy. Unfortunately, magical bets have serious repercussions. They're stuck together unless they can figure a way out. Like another bet, perhaps? Let the games begin! Humor and fun, with our couple together at the end.