

The Fairy God-Jarvey's Apprentice

by *dracontia*

Third installment in the 'Fairy God-Jarvey Chronicles.' (For the record, I, too, cringe at the pretentiousness of calling them that.) As a Master Fairy God-Jarvey, Regina Fletcher gets an apprentice. However, it's going to take more than two Fairy God-Thingies to rescue Severus' and Hermione's wedding. So, if said thingies needed reinforcements... whom would they deputize?

Prologue: Situation Normal, All--Well, You Get the Picture...

Chapter 1 of 12

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Disclaimer: I don't own the characters (except the wee beastie with the big gob and her apprentice) nor do I make one nickel off this balderdash. My recompense comes from the reports of spit takes as a result of reading it.

Author's Note: Many thanks to Tempest of Dreams for beta-reading this. I've yet to meet anyone whose screen name more strongly suggests a run-in with Reggie.

Prologue: Situation Normal, All--Well, You Get the Picture...

Regina P. Fletcher, Master Fairy God-Jarvey.

Reggie lovingly polished the gold nameplate on her desk with her tail as she adjusted the equally gilt band around the waist of her tutu, her title forming a happy chant inside her fuzzy little head. Never mind that she'd had to correct the nameplate to add her middle initial, which still didn't appear in her personnel file after nearly a decade of paperwork protesting the omission. There would be no more Journeywoman silver for her. She was a *Master Fairy God-Jarvey*, thanks very much, and Madam fucking Mab couldn't do a damn thing about it except assign her a proper desk and all the accoutrements of her new station. That, and bitch a lot. With Mab, that didn't constitute a significant deviation from the status quo, so Reggie paid it no mind.

This unfortunately included the worst apprentice in the history of Fairy Godmothering, but the Jarvey preferred not to think about that so near to quitting time. Dinner tended not to go down quite as smoothly if she did.

Her conscience, being the incredibly well developed area of her psyche that it was, pointed out that such thoughts about Motoyoshi probably weren't entirely fair or

accurate. The fact that she could spin progress reports in his favor was no doubt evidence that there had been worse trainees—all of whom had probably been drummed out of the International Fellowship of Fairy Godmothers and Related Do-Gooding Beings before they could become some hapless Master's major headache. But she'd just finished yet another assignment-cum-Apprentice-training-mission, whose outcome forced her to spend copious free time creatively interpreting his shortcomings in her report. Therefore, the rest of her being felt bloody damned drained.

Having finished work for the day, Reggie was hanging up her tutu when she sensed a new appointment writing itself into her Fairy Date Book. Her cute silver snout lit up with a toothy grin as she danced over to the little pink volume and commanded it to open to the proper page. Unlike a call to the office for a new assignment or response to the occasional alarm, the Appointments in her book were invariably agreeable surprises. Whenever one of her godchildren had a wedding forthcoming or a baby due, the date of the event would magically pen its way into her FDB, letting her know when she might show up to offer a Fairy Blessing and seriously party down. It was, paws down, her favorite part of the job.

She let out a whoop at the sight of the new names on the 'Weddings' page. "Hot damn! 'Bout time those two stubborn-arsed wand-jobs got hitched. When's the big event, again?" She found herself asking that question several times over the next few months and through several grueling assignments.

One more postponement and she'd had it, slamming the book shut and giving it a frustrated kick. "What the fuck? What can be so damned hard about picking the date for a wedding?" Since no answer was forthcoming from either the book or the universe at large, Reggie continued muttering to herself. "That tears it. Obviously the daft buggers need my help yet again. I'll just have to start packing me little bag."

Upon turning from her desk, she almost cried in despair to find her little bag already packed, in the hands of her apprentice.

"I am ready to depart when you are, Reggie-san," he said, polite to a fault as usual. (If Reggie ever found out whose fault, she'd turn herself invisible and hide under that person's bed, singing 'I'm Henry the Eighth, I Am' until said person started to scream.)

"Um, Moto, this is a social call—not part of your training, honey. Why don't you take a week off, maybe visit the family back in Japan?"

"As you know, Reggie-san, I am no longer welcome amongst my family. Nor would the family of my former wizard master wish me to return, as I interfere with their attempts to blend in with Muggles. Besides, Mab-san has decreed that I must accompany you to learn the proper procedures for socializing with humans in an off-duty situation."

Reggie ran through every profanity she knew... in three languages... twice... before she finally ran out of breath. Her loathing for her boss would likely never run out, so dearth of breath at least gave her a place to stop the tirade. Her apprentice stood waiting in respectful silence. He was bound and determined to absorb all that his master had to teach him.

Finally, she slumped to the floor with a sigh, forming a narrow silver puddle of profound resignation. "Pack your furoshiki and hishaku, Moto babe. We're going to visit my godchild Hermione and her Snarky Squeeze. And we're not leaving until they get married."

Author's Notes:

Furoshiki: a large square of cloth. Historically, Japanese peasants and wanderers used them to contain their belongings on journeys and they were employed across classes to wrap gifts or carry lunches. They are still used for the two latter purposes today, and can be bought in a variety of colors and patterns at Japanese markets.

Hishaku: A long-handled dipper made entirely of bamboo. Traditionally, hishaku in various sizes were used to scoop water in assorted sanitary and kitchen situations. Today they appear mainly in the tea ceremony. A large one is used for ceremonial hand washing in the stone basin outside the tearoom and a smaller one for transferring cold water to, and hot water from, the kettle in the tearoom. Moto's hishaku is the focal point for wielding his powers, as Reggie's tail is hers.

My sincerest apologies for the number of (cringe) months it took to finish this story and start posting it. I'll not bore you with my woeful tales of personal issues, computer crashes, and beta-seeking, but proceed directly to the opening chapter—so you can learn what has been giving Severus and Hermione so much trouble setting a date for their wedding, and what manner of critter Motoyoshi is...

1: If You're Happy and You Know It, You Obviously Aren't Planning a Wedding

Chapter 2 of 12

The title is the best summary I could ever devise. It even serves to underscore the point that this will all make a lot more sense if you read the first two stories in the series (and the companion piece, 'The Ring on Her Finger') first. At least, inasmuch as the series makes sense at all.

Disclaimer: If they were mine, they'd have a hell of a lot more fun in canon. Or not.

Continuing thanks to Tempest of Dreams for her excellent suggestions and corrections. Sometimes I'm even clever enough to follow them.

Six and a half months ago...

The Saturday afternoon air in late spring had a cool, languid feel as it caressed Severus' naked back, feathering lightly over a few faint, slightly ridged scars on his shoulder blades to stroke the dip along his spine. As if luxuriating in bed at two o'clock in the afternoon were not sufficiently hedonistic, a set of warmer, more substantial fingers joined the slight breeze in fondling his undraped skin. He sighed. There was nothing like a little threesome as a reward for renovating the house all morning...just the breeze, Hermione, and himself.

Even with magic, fixing up the architectural disaster that was the house on Spinner's End was a tedious, strenuous task. Still, he was willing to accept it as the price of moving in together (a process which was almost complete now). It meant that Hermione would have to Apparate long distance to work and Snape would be stuck in the house that held so many charming memories of his uninspiring childhood, but they simply couldn't afford a flat in the London area that would accommodate all their books and his lab, even with the availability of magical additions. Not that his house was in any sense spacious, but at least it was possible to affix additional bookcases to the walls of the staircase. His gaze fell on the two simple little black leather boxes on the dresser that held their wedding rings, a pleasant reminder that soon it would all be

official. It was almost as if the boxes radiated the magic-rich serenity of cold stones and warm metals that permeated the humble premises of Moore and Mraz, Magical Jewelers.

Suddenly, Hermione squawked and pulled away from him. So much for the relaxed mood.

"What's wrong, love?" he asked, the pillow swallowing most of the question as he turned one half-opened black eye towards her. He couldn't bring himself to become too alarmed. There was nothing more threatening in his house than the odd spider, and none of those were venomous.

"My stomach!" Her voice was the epitome of dismay as she gazed down woefully at the soft little curve above the juncture of her thighs. "It's back!"

He schooled his expression to mild interest to cover an internal sigh. Over the past few months he noted approvingly that Hermione was back in what he considered her ideal shape...namely soft and snuggly. In the course of their usual dimly lit romantic encounters and her hurried bathing before and after shifts at the hospital, she had failed to notice the return of the cute little poochiness of her tummy. This was not an unwelcome side effect (in his estimation) of restoring the rest of her lovely curves, but he had always known he would eventually have to deal with her reaction to the plan.

"So it is," Severus said. It rather hurt that she seemed not to notice he'd adopted his silkiest purr for her. He pulled himself up to his hands and knees and began stalking across the bed to her. "As are your squeezably soft breasts... your lusciously shapely hips... and let's see..." He suddenly pounced, pulling her to him and across his lap so he could inspect her backside, causing her to shriek in protest. "Ahh, yes... that delectable little peach of a bum, as round and tempting as ever," he said approvingly, caressing said anatomical feature with undisguised appreciation. He was definitely purring now. Were he a cat, his claws would be flexing in and out.

She sat up and glared at him. "You've been fattening me up!" she said, angrily jabbing the slight curve of her tummy as if to punish it.

There was no use denying it, so he simply ignored the accusation and continued to study her nude body admiringly. "And as perfect as your ribs are, I much prefer them neatly tucked away behind a proper degree of padding. Yes, I would say that I have my Hermione back." He reached for her, but she pulled away, sulking.

"I wanted to buy a new wardrobe when we were done fixing up the house. And what about my wedding dress? I had my heart set on fitting into a size ten!"

Severus was losing patience fast. "Are you listening to yourself? Would you really spoil our honeymoon just to wear a smaller dress?" he asked *As if a dress of any note were really necessary, considering we're just nipping down to the Registrar's Office in a month to get it all squared away. The paperwork will likely take longer than the ceremony.*

"What do you mean, 'spoil our honeymoon'?" She was absolutely flummoxed.

There was nothing for it. He was going to have to explain to her about his mother. "I can't stand to see outlines of your bones, Hermione. My Mother was always thin and miserable. This house is not going to belong to another sad, thin woman. Do you know how depressed I felt every time your hipbones poked me during the last few months?"

"No, because you never bothered to **tell** me," she answered in sheer exasperation. "I am not proficient in Legilimency! You have to TELL me things if you want me to know them!"

Now *he* was exasperated. "I **did** tell you, the night I proposed. And as usual, you simply argued with me. So I took matters into my own hands and made certain you started eating properly. And now, if you'll stop berating me, I would like to enjoy the fruits of my labors," he finished, dropping his voice down to a suggestive whisper and pulling her close.

She yielded to his embrace grudgingly. "So, my appearance matters so much to you that it would ruin our honeymoon if it's not to your liking?" she asked, pinning him with a sharp look.

Snape was beginning to strongly suspect there was no winning for him in this situation. "If you're trying to imply that I wouldn't love you skinny, you've gone 'round the bend. However, if you are positing that my enjoyment of our sexual liaisons is vastly enhanced by having a bit more of you to love, as it were, and somewhat diminished if I am obliged to acquaint myself too closely with your skeletal features, you are correct." He prevented any immediate reply on her part by taking her tongue hostage.

"You honestly prefer this *flab* to a nice, flat stomach?" she asked...once he let her up for air. Her venom at being fed back into squishiness was rapidly draining away. In fact, it was quite possibly being sucked out her earlobe.

"Mm hmm." His hands and lips roamed over every sumptuous curve as he hummed affirmatively against her neck. "So soft... so warm and inviting." These muffled remarks were addressed to the hollow between her breasts.

"So much more of a pillow for your nose," she couldn't resist interrupting with a giggle.

He pulled back to glare at her, but she followed and kissed the aforementioned appendage. "I'll concede that you truly prefer a chubby wife," she said, "if you promise you'll believe me when I say I find my husband-to-be dangerously sexy and incredibly manly... in every feature."

After a good hour of mutual persuasion along those lines, Hermione was fairly well convinced that Severus did, indeed, prefer her soft and curvy. And if Severus had any lingering doubts about how manly his wife-to-be considered him, well... she put those to bed quite handily. It went so well they decided to hold the debate all over again, until enough time had elapsed that some dinner was in order. Severus' stomach was about to insist on it when Hermione beat him to it.

"I suppose if we're going through with this whole marriage thing, I should eat something...otherwise you won't find me appealing anymore."

"As much as I would like to oblige your feeble attempt at provoking yet another argument and more make-up sex, I'm too hungry to do a proper job of it."

"I wonder, at what point will you decide I'm **too** fat and start trying to change me again?"

"You are **not** fat! Quit talking absolute rubbish. I am not attracted to stick figures. I have never had the desire to court a Bowtruckle...or Trelawney," he said irritably.

"Ah. Professor Sprout was more your type?" She couldn't resist teasing.

Severus shot her a pained look. "There is such a thing as too much of a good thing."

Hermione laughed. "All right, I give up. Come to the kitchen and we'll figure out what to make for dinner. Oh, and while we're at it, we need to decide when we're going to visit my parents. They're quite keen to meet you, and we can start planning the wedding and reception!" Hermione practically skipped downstairs, her dressing gown fluttering beckoningly behind her.

Severus flopped back against the pillow and gazed after her in dismay, ignoring her flirty summons in the face of that unfortunate reminder. Suddenly, he wasn't very hungry any more.

Five months ago...

On the walk from the Apparition point to her parents' home, Hermione almost convinced herself that she did not want to grab Severus' hand, Apparate home with him, and call her parents to tell them she had been exposed to some contagious magical malady at work and wouldn't be able to visit them. She wondered if she could devise

something that necessitated quarantine and would allow her to postpone this meeting until the marriage was a fait accompli.

She wasn't afraid of what Mum and Dad would think or say, exactly. Her carefully written letters were sufficient preparation that they might deal with the age difference (there was a bit of a gap in their ages, after all). The 'used to be my professor' matter had been mentioned in passing, so it wouldn't be a total shock. (School had been years ago...nothing untoward there.) They were open-minded and sensible people. Hermione knew this, because her mother hadn't screamed, or fainted and dropped the phone, during the call in which she further explained the profoundly awkward 'my fiancé was almost convicted of murder' thing. And her father hadn't tried to kidnap her from work for her own good once this information had been relayed to him.

If only there were some way to ensure Severus' 'charming' side made an appearance. Unfortunately that part of him only showed its distinguished face when he felt comfortable, and judging by his closed expression, he definitely wasn't comfortable at the moment. Maybe they should have invited her parents to his...their...place, so he wouldn't feel at a disadvantage. Feeling at a disadvantage made Severus insecure, and an insecure Severus was just plain Snape. Even Hermione had trouble denying that *Snape* was an abrasive pain in the arse.

"Here we are," she said, trying to sound cheerful, but only achieving less strained. She could feel her smile verging on a grimace as her eyebrows made an involuntary 'for the love of God, please don't provoke anyone' expression.

This probably wasn't helping Severus in his efforts to smooth out his scowl. She *hoped* he was making the effort. It sort of looked like he trying to appear less grim. Then again, she was well versed in reading his facial expressions. Anyone less conversant in Snape-speak might still deem that a full-on scowl.

"Mum and Dad will like you, I promise." They were almost at the door.

"That would put them in a very select group."

Hermione, there's no need to start sweating. Or keep sweating. That was sarcastic, and dry enough to mix a martini, but not bitter. There's hope for this evening yet.

"Well, they are *my* parents. Don't you think that might make them rather select people?" She smiled hopefully at Severus. She dimly recalled a time when that smile seemed to have an almost magical influence on his mood.

"Possibly." His tone was neutral, but she noted with relief that his face was a little more relaxed. In the Snape-speak lexicon, that expression passed for pleasant. Maybe her smile still had a little power after all.

She tried to recall if her parents were good with foreign languages.

Mum opened the door, pleasantly handling the introductions with warmth that thawed Severus sufficiently that no residual stiffness was evident in his demeanor. Though Hermione did think he was perhaps laying it on a trifle thick by employing his best silky voice, so the simple greeting, "So nice to finally meet you, Jane," morphed into something verging on indecently smooth. It was shortly thereafter that she learned just how fierce her father could look.

In retrospect, she'd seen hints of it throughout her childhood. When the occasion demanded, there would be a subtle hardening of his hazel eyes, like ice forming on a mossy pool, his already firm voice acquiring a steel edge. But this was something new, the look of a challenge being issued or answered. Severus had obviously caught it as well, his eyes going cold in response.

"Alexander." Severus was definitely not using his 'nice' silky voice now.

"Severus." Her father bit out the name as if it tasted rather unpleasant. They were shaking hands, but it reminded Hermione alarmingly of a couple of alpha male Hippogriffs circling each other.

"Dinner's almost ready, so why don't we all sit down?" Jane's voice flickered between the men, bright and ever so slightly brittle, just enough to break that dangerous eye contact. Hermione wasn't sure whether she was taking Severus' hand to keep him from reaching for his wand, herself from running away, or (as the part of her that had asked to be sorted into Gryffindor fervently hoped) that she was doing so to bravely demonstrate their unwavering depth of their affection for each other.

Hermione decided that Mum really surpassed herself that night. Dinner was exceptional, and she managed to keep the atmosphere from succumbing to oppressive awkwardness by insisting Hermione update them on all the latest news, breakthroughs, and gossip from St. Mungo's. Jane even managed to draw Alexander and Severus into the conversation without having either of them bite the other's head off. It was civil, intelligent, and cordial. It lasted until she started serving up a lovely strawberry trifle.

"So... at what point did you notice what an exceptional young woman Hermione is?" Alexander Granger asked Snape very casually. So casually that it was quite pointedly meant to come across as, 'Did you start perving on my precious little girl while she was still in school?'

The alarm bells in Hermione's head were not nearly loud enough to drown out the pounding of her heart, especially when she saw Severus' face ice over. Except for that vein. Uh-oh.

"I assure you, my romantic interest in Hermione did not begin until we met again a little over a year ago. During the time she was a student in my care, I would never have considered her an adult and potential lover...regardless of her age." Severus' expression was downright balmy compared to his voice. The Antarctic was downright balmy compared to his voice, and it suddenly struck Hermione that his fork was poised very menacingly over that innocent little strawberry, and she thought now would be a very good time to **do something**.

"Dad..." she began.

"Alex, don't you think it's about time we mentioned some things about *our* courtship?"

Mum interrupted in the voice she'd always used just before sending Hermione up to her room and 'discussing' something with Dad. He didn't say anything but there was something oddly familiar about the closed look on his face.

Hermione had a feeling this was going to be interesting.

"Hermione, dear... did I ever tell you exactly how your father and I met?"

"You've always told me you were both at dental school."

"Yes, well... You know that there is ten years' difference in our ages. And your father was far, far from being a slow student. Nor did he decide to enter the profession later in life."

Hermione didn't dare sneak a look at Severus. But somehow she sensed he, too, was blinking owlishly at Jane.

"Mum... Are you trying to tell me...?"

"When we met, I was a student. He was an assistant professor. Essentially, I married my teacher."

And that put paid to *that* topic.

From there on, most of the conversation took place between Hermione and Jane. Severus and Alexander tossed out wittily dry observations on occasion and watched each

other as if waiting for a sign of weakness. Inevitably, wedding details came up.

"Our wedding was small. Quiet. Just a Registry Office affair, you know. I've always hoped for something a little better for you...more special, more memorable."

Hermione choked on the words that a quiet visit to the Registry Office was exactly what they had in mind. Her mother's yearning tone of voice had her tongue-tied even as Severus' hand, which was applying increasing pressure on hers, was insisting she speak. She was fairly certain the pressure meant '*Better* means **expensive**. Special and memorable mean fussy, replete with people I'd rather not deal with, and did I mention much, much more expensive?"

Sometimes, Hermione thought, it might be nice if Severus had slightly less expressive hands.

"I mean, it needn't be a huge affair...but a church wedding would be ever so nice, and you could wear your grandmother's wedding dress!"

Alex felt the need to comment at this point. "If she's going to wear your mother's dress, she'll certainly need magic. The woman was a good head shorter than our Hermione and built like a brick sh..."

Jane's exclamation of 'Alex!' vied with Hermione's 'Dad!' to drown out the last bit of the sentence while Severus stifled a laugh.

That brief detour aside, Jane Granger did not falter in her pursuit of this hypothetical wedding that 'needn't be a huge affair'. It was quite obvious to anyone within hearing distance from which parent Hermione had gotten her tendency to target an issue and cling to it with the tenacity of a bulldog.

Hermione cleared her throat. "Mum, I don't think we really want to go to all that expense."

"Oh, it won't be so bad, my dear. Besides, your father and I will be happy to pay for it."

It was as if the pained crinkle forming in the middle of Severus' forehead magically transferred to Alexander's.

"Just how 'special' are we talking about?" Plainly, the Alexander Granger Lexicon possessed several terms in common with the Severus Snape Lexicon.

It was also quite obvious that the date of the wedding was being pushed back to allow for something substantially more involved than a quick trip to the registrar.

By the time she and Severus took their leave, two things were established: this was going to be a much bigger deal than originally intended, and Jane Granger was the only person inclined to pay for it. Hermione was expecting an argument about the wedding as soon as they got home. Before they Apparated, she wondered if they'd make it past the kitchen before Severus pitched a wobbly.

Nope. They'd barely finished whirling when his voice shivered the tile. "Did it not occur to you that I might feel...shall we say, 'awkward'...upon discovering that your father is a tall, thin chap with a largish nose and a rather acerbic sense of humor?"

This was *not* the argument she expected. "No! I mean, aside from that, you're nothing alike!"

"Only if you neglect to take into account courting younger women over whom we once held a position of authority." That was all he said, but his expression spoke volumes.

Hermione could feel her face purpling. "I DO NOT have an Electra complex!"

She continued to protest all the way to bed. Where they only slept. This condition persisted for the rest of that week, until the wedding planning began in earnest and Severus exchanged *that* bee in his bonnet for the one she'd expected, pertaining to the fuss and expense of having a 'real' wedding.

Oh, well. At least they were having sex again.

Four months ago...

Snape had taken to hiding in his lab when wedding plans were discussed.

Once again, baby spiders had taken up residence in the mouth of the cauldron he planned to use. Snape collected their tentative little webs for use in potions with one spell, and carefully floated the spiders themselves out the basement window with another. He would have been embarrassed for anyone to discover that he never killed the little buggers. They weren't ingredients in anything he commonly made, and his mother had always had a sort of 'live and let kill the more noxious multi-legged beasties' policy towards spiders. He saw no cause to discontinue it.

He didn't really think Hermione had an Electra complex. He hoped not. It was common knowledge that women tend to subconsciously look for men who remind them of their fathers on some level... right? Besides, he was certain he'd never be quite as annoying as Alexander Granger. One hoped the man was less of a sarcastic bastard around his patients.

More worrisome was the fact that planning the wedding seemed to be turning his fiancée into someone who actually cared about the color of flowers that were not being used in a potion. Since Snape couldn't bring himself to care about such things even under threat of Cruciatius, he decided that staying out of it altogether would mean less stress on Hermione, whose face was beginning to look as frazzled as her hair. He did not want a repeat of her final exam meltdown. Once it was established that he and Hermione, having already purchased their rings, were only paying for their wedding robes (or Muggle formal clothes...the choice changed about every other week), he stepped back and resolved to find out the rest when he arrived at the ceremony.

However, with Jane, Luna, and Ginny acting as 'consultants' (why Hermione had let those last two in on it he would never figure out) it was a little *hardot* to hear about it. Did women suddenly lose all volume control when planning a social event?

"It's going to take at least two months before those are in bloom. Maybe you should push the date back, just a little."

"But that caterer you liked won't be available then."

"What about this one?"

"They have house elves working for them!"

"Oh, no, not THAT again."

"Okay, push it back about one week more and everything should work."

"What about the venue?"

"Uh-oh... this doesn't look good."

"Bloody hell. I think we need to re-book everything... again."

He decided that the next time the Wedding Planning Committee met, he'd spell the door to his lab so that not even that much information would filter through.

Three Months Ago...

Hermione was starting to miss Severus. He seemed to disappear so frequently that she was sure a careful survey of their dating patterns would reveal they'd spent more time together when they lived in separate homes, with no plans on getting married and the better part of the island between them.

At least she didn't have to feel she was chasing him out of the house or into his basement lab to escape wedding talk today. Instead, she was desperately wishing she could escape the bridal shower Mum had insisted on hosting for her. Hermione was exhausted with the unsuccessful effort to include Severus in the wedding plans, to the point where she'd actually enlisted Ginny and Luna to grant her two extra chances to veto her mother's more excessive suggestions. (It helped that Ginny's presence made her the 'Official Weasley Involved With This Project' and thus kept Molly at bay.) It had backfired like one of Seamus' experimental Charms. It turned out that Ginny's apparent nonchalance towards long-term relationships and Luna's apparent contentment with the non-married, non-engaged status quo between her and Harry were just façades covering a deep well of desire to orchestrate The Perfect Wedding.

And for some reason...perhaps a combination of actually *wanting* a bit more than just the quick trip to the Registrar's Office, **not** wanting to turn into her parents altogether, and just plain wanting to finally be married, whatever that took...Hermione couldn't bring herself to say no to any of it.

The inanities were winding down and Hermione had to admit, a couple of hours of playing some of the most ridiculous party games known to human kind was a small price to pay for such nice gifts. She was preparing to bid the guests goodbye and gratefully escape back home (amazing how that gloomy hole by the river felt like home, knowing it was where her fiancé and her familiar were both waiting for her) when the phone rang.

Jane Granger answered, and after only a few words exchanged, caught Hermione's eye. She clearly mouthed, 'Don't let anyone leave until I'm done,' and went back to the conversation.

Hermione wondered why she was suddenly filled with a sense of impending doom. When the receiver finally clicked back into place, the apologetic smile from her mother only confirmed the premonition.

"Dear, your Father and I are going to a conference in Austria in July, and a friend has offered the use of their home for the full two weeks after. I hate to ask you to push the date of the wedding back, but it's been so long since we've had a proper holiday..."

It would have been very cathartic to scream just then. For an entire laundry list of reasons, Hermione refrained from doing so, apologized to the guests, and asked them to please wait just a few minutes so she could update them on the revised wedding date. It was a good thing she couldn't hear her unofficial wedding planners checking their schedules and making changes.

Ginny nudged Luna and whispered out the corner of her mouth, "If it's *that* weekend, we might be stuck with the business that uses house-elves."

Luna sighed and gave Ginny an unusually readable look. "I'm not telling her that."

"Me, neither."

One Month Ago...

It was a mercy that magical tailoring took so little time. After three months of mind-changing and a lost deposit that still had Severus fuming, they'd finally decided to go to Patil Sisters Couture for wedding clothes that followed the latest trend...combining features of traditional robes with current wedding fashions in the Muggle world.

To be accurate, *she* had decided. Severus still had his head in his...cauldron...when it came to making decisions about the wedding.

"Hermione!" Padma hugged her before she quite got in the door and shook Severus' hand in an almost equally effusive greeting. "Come right in; I'll set up a space for you."

Severus gave Hermione a questioning look, to which she responded by mouthing 'later'. Flora Randolph was a good friend and colleague, but she'd let slip (while administering Parvati's physical therapy) that Hermione had been deeply involved in the research that had led to the breakthrough in her twin's treatment. Padma had concluded Hermione was responsible for her beloved sister finally recovering enough from her war injuries to participate in the business in more than name. Hence, they were being granted the full 'auditioning for the Royal Warrant treatment' (which Hermione felt they didn't quite deserve considering the price range they were shopping in).

Of course, that level of deference made Severus happy...okay, more agreeably resigned, but she'd take what she could get...so she smiled weakly at Padma and didn't object. With elegant gestures, Padma performed the Charms that partitioned a bit of the store into a soundproof fitting room.

Considering how particular he was being about their robes, Hermione wondered if Severus' voluntary exile from wedding planning wasn't for the best.

"Why can't your robes be the turquoise color you wore on our first date?"

"I'm using it in the decorations," she said. "Um, what about this?" She held an ivory robe to her front. Her mother could deal with her marrying her older ex-professor but it would be an uphill battle explaining a wedding gown that wasn't some permutation of white. Even if the symbolism was utterly inappropriate, considering she and Severus were living together (and then some) well before the wedding.

Snape acquired his 'closed' look. "It's not like you'll blend in with them and disappear."

"What about these?" Padma Summoned a variety of very pale pastels. She was far more diplomatic than Parvati had ever been, but her fleeting expression hinted ever so gently that unmitigated white did nothing for Hermione's complexion. The newly summoned range also suggested her comprehension of mother-of-the-bride psychology, evoking white.

The choice was narrowed to a range of styles in blue shades when the door chimed. Padma Charmed the robes to parade themselves through the fitting area before excusing herself to greet other customers.

Severus immediately slipped an arm around Hermione. "The room is soundproof." He raised an eyebrow seductively.

"Are you out of your mind?" Hermione imagined she looked fish-like at the moment, but she simply couldn't get her mouth closed.

"Miss Patil will knock before re-entering." She assumed he meant that figuratively, since the room was comprised entirely of Charmed drapes. In no time he had her up against the one solid wall and was taking full advantage of her open mouth.

Eventually, they had to come up for air. "You **are** out of your mind! We're supposed to be choosing robes!"

Severus glanced at a quite nice if slightly conservative set, earthy dark turquoise for him and the complementary pastel shade thereof for her, and marked them with his wand. "Robes chosen. Tell me you don't want this, and I'll stop." He curled his hands just so under her backside and lifted her into the perfect position for a quick shag against the wall.

"No fair," she whimpered, before kissing him back...hard...and cooperating fully with his efforts to slide her skirt up. It had been double shifts at the hospital the past week, and damn, she'd missed this.

Obviously Severus felt the same way. Within minutes, they were both very glad of the soundproofing on the curtains. "Just a bit more, love," she panted, willing him to stay

hard long enough that she could reach that moment when the earth moved. With a sharp gasp and an even sharper bite to his shoulder, she did.

Then, with a massive crash, the earth really did move. Or at least, the curtain hiding them did.

It may have been some time since he'd dueled, but there was nothing wrong with Severus' reflexes. He had his wand out and both of them behind one of the still-floating robes (to hide anything that might be, er, left hanging) before either of their breathing could return to normal.

Hermione recognized the fabric-covered human missile first.

"Tonks!"

"Watcher, Hermione!" More sounds of fabric ripping

"What are you doing here?" It came out a little more accusing than Hermione would have liked, but she was a little put out at having a tulle-and-curtain swaddled Tonks sprawled at her feet while she was still completely flushed and perfumed with the smell of sex.

"Demolishing the establishment, by the look of things." It didn't take a Ravenclaw to conclude that Snape was less than thrilled. Hermione only hoped that no one else had figured out it was because he was being forced to furtively tuck himself back in with only a floating formal garment to hide behind and simply assumed it was all due to the presence of Tonks and Lupin.

"It's good to see you too, Severus." Hermione had the awful feeling that Remus had figured out exactly what had been going on, and that it had very little to do with deciding the cut of their robes.

This did nothing for Snape's mood. "Lupin. Tonks, taking your pet for his walksies, are you?"

"Mmmph...!" Tonks' indignant response was muffled in the curtain, which had apparently launched a counteroffensive as she attempted to squirm free.

"Severus..." Hermione kept her voice soft so only he could hear the warning note in it. She didn't need for them to have a public row.

"Actually, Dora and I are shopping for our wedding robes," Remus explained, patiently untangling Tonks from the much-abused curtain. He seemed to have the obscure spell that accomplished this task down pat.

"Oh Remus! What a wonderful coincidence!" For the first time in a while, Hermione felt a bit excited about her own upcoming nuptials. "That's why we're here!"

"So I see. Thanks very much for the invitation, by the way. We might be just a bit late, though...our appointment at the Registry Office is earlier the same morning."

"Any particular reason for that date?" Severus definitely sounded accusing, and he wasn't bothering to hide it.

"We don't have a great deal of leeway with regards to where and how. Between regulations regarding civil marriages and Dangerous Magical Creature legislation, we're just grateful we can be married at all." Tonks had finally gotten upright. Clearly this was a sore topic for her; she didn't sound anything like her usual cheerful self.

Severus muttered something uncomplimentary. Hermione nudged him none too gently and whispered, "What's wrong with you? Usually you're in a better mood after we..."

"Hermione!" His glare put the exclamation mark on the end of her name, though it barely escaped from between his clenched teeth.

Obviously neither of them was quiet enough.

Tonks' face acquired an expression of comprehension. "I always wondered about that."

"Dora!" Remus sounded scandalized.

"It's okay for you to smirk knowingly, but not okay for me to mention it outright?"

All the while, Padma flicked and swished with a vengeance, putting to rights the carnage Tonks had caused. She was simultaneously trying desperately to cover her blush and to avoid hearing ANY of this discussion. Her professional aplomb badly eroded by the incident, she refrained from offering any further advice or suggestions as she accepted the robes Severus had selected offhandedly and set them aside with the proper tailoring notations. The deposit was paid hastily and the goodbyes were hurried.

"Well. At least you finally made some input into our wedding."

Severus shot her his patented death glare by way of reply, and went into a profound sulk for the next few weeks. Hermione was so exhausted that she couldn't quite bring herself to cry. Or care.

Earlier that day...

"They can change their wedding date."

"You know very well they can't. The wedding and the honeymoon have to be timed to avoid the full moon, and asking them to put it off again would just be cruel, considering how long they've had to fight all manner of petty legal obstacles to get married."

"I will NOT be upstaged by the werewolf!"

"It's not upstaging, Severus! Theirs is in the morning, ours in the afternoon so guests who are invited to both can come to both."

"No. I am not sharing our anniversary with those two. Let's have our wedding a week earlier."

"I told you, that won't work. My parents won't be back from holiday until two days before the wedding. We can't have it before then, we simply can't move up all the preparations. There is, however, a perfectly good week AFTER that in which we may have a DELIGHTFUL wedding. Problem solved!" Her sarcasm was impressive. She was, after all, an apt pupil...privately tutored by an all-time master of the art.

"**He** doesn't get to be married before I do!"

Hermione flung her hands up in a furious gesture of dismissal. "I give up...on this entire enterprise! Evidently you're not of age to be married, since YOU ARE ACTING LIKE A THREE-YEAR-OLD!"

Severus did not appreciate criticism at the best of times, and this was not the best of times. So much so that the most mature response he could manage was, "I AM NOT!"

Clearly, it was not the response the witch in front of him wanted to hear. Snape reflected that whomever claimed that women are beautiful when they are angry must have been raised in a remote monastery somewhere far from any female, much less a shouting fiancée. Of course, he still loved Hermione, but she definitely wasn't beautiful when she was angry. Splotchy, yes; disturbing, a little; impressive, only if she wasn't angry with **him**. But not beautiful.

And suddenly, she was shaking and looking that odd combination of furious, scary, and vulnerable he remembered from the night he finally proposed. It disturbed him

terribly to think how close they'd come to losing it all that night.

Evidently it showed in his face, because she went from mostly furious to mostly vulnerable as she looked at him. "Severus, I don't want to give up."

"Neither do I, Hermione." He was half-past caring how needy that sounded. Hermione was the only person on earth who made it difficult for him to be sulky and obstinate, no matter how her propensity for being hot-tempered and obstinate provoked him. "Why don't you relax in the bath a bit, and we'll talk about this in our room?"

"Sitting up or lying down?" she asked, her eyes slightly wary.

"Sitting to start with, but I wouldn't be averse to ending up the other way if the discussion proceeds well."

She snorted at him. "Prat."

"Silly witch."

"I never knew anyone could sneer affectionately until I met you."

"Oh, shut up and kiss me."

She gave him a little shove when he tried to deepen it past a peck on the lips, but softened it with a forgiving smile. "Let me bathe and get in a better mood, first."

He wasn't about to argue with anything that put her in a better mood.

Snape made himself comfortable on the bed, pretending to lounge and read while he was actually watching Hermione change into her dressing gown and gather up towels. The water was already running by magical command in the tiny bathroom, and he decided one of their goals should be to acquire a house with a nice, luxurious bathroom adjoining their bedroom. That way Hermione would feel comfortable dispensing with that tatty old gown. He much preferred seeing her in her nice young skin, a thought which made his eyelids droop in an agreeably drowsy fashion as he fashioned it into a daydream.

His reverie was interrupted by an oddly quavering cry. "Severus?"

"What is it, love?"

"What is a Kappa doing in our bathtub?"

Snape was exceedingly tired, which was his only defense for his subsequent remark when Hermione hearkened back to the incident in later years. "Isn't the classic answer something along the lines of 'the backstroke?'" he asked hazily.

"Seriously, Severus...THERE IS A KAPPA IN OUR BATHTUB!"

There were more dangerous creatures abroad in the world than Kappas, and Hermione was more than capable of dealing with one. But there should not have been one in their bathtub, and it occurred to Severus that his love might not be carrying her wand. It took very little time to think this and even less time to grab his own wand and come charging to her rescue.

What he found was a creature, which could only be characterized as the sad sack of all Kappa-dom. Even its ashy-bluish scales, stringy greenish hair, muddy greenish shell, and assorted yellow snaggly teeth protruding from its beak-like mouth couldn't detract from the forlorn earnestness in those rather ghastly glowing eyes. The soap bubbles in the water-filled depression on the top of its head only added to the sheer absurdity of the creature's appearance. Which was most likely why Hermione was staring at it, her dressing gown clutched shut with one hand and her wand tentatively raised at the pitiful creature with the other, instead of just Stunning it.

A shriek from downstairs rent the silence.

"MOTO! Moto, you crazy fucker, where the hell are you? I said we were 'poof'-ing into the parlor!"

Snape groaned. He knew that voice.

The creature in the tub called out in response, "I am upstairs, O-Reggie-San. I believe I have met your godchild." With that, he turned his attention to Severus and Hermione again, bowed, dumped water from the top of his head, wobbled weakly, and quickly replaced it by scooping up bubbly bathwater with a little bamboo ladle.

"Please do not be alarmed, Hermione-san. I am Motoyoshi, humble apprentice to the honorable Regina Fletcher. I solemnly assure you, my diet consists entirely of cucumbers and other vegetable matter. I have no desire whatsoever to consume small children or human body parts. Truly, rumors of vampirism can be terribly injurious."

"You don't say," Snape muttered. He was really trying to be shocked that the rude little silver and pink menace had brought this sickeningly polite monstrosity into his house. He failed miserably; for some reason, it made an awful sort of ironic sense.

Hermione was evidently still having too much trouble processing the presence of the interloper in their tub to address it directly, so she turned to the panting silvery Jarvey who had just darted into the room.

"Your apprentice is a *Kappa*?"

Reggie sighed. "Long story, mija."

"Since I imagine there's no way to avoid hearing it, shall we move this discussion to the parlor? I want somewhere comfortable to sit, and my experiences with you and plumbing have been less than unmitigated pleasures, to say the least." Snape and Reggie exchanged dour looks, but to his surprise, she didn't offer a single word of dissent. Or profanity.

With that, everyone went downstairs to explain to Reggie what had been causing the wedding date to fluctuate so wildly over the past half a year. Reggie had a few things to say as well; but she never got around to explaining what, exactly, the Kappa was doing in the bathtub.

Author's Notes:

Reggie's Spanish Vocabulary:

Mija: A contraction of 'mi hija' = 'my daughter'

For those curious to learn more about Moore and Mraz, Magical Jewelers, see the tale 'The Ring On Her Finger', a companion piece to the Fairy God-Jarvey series. In fact, that might be an excellent contribution to your enjoyment of this story.

Thanks to Azrael, whose artwork entitled 'Fantasy Snape' inspired the awkward little scene with Hermione's parents! Cryptic little comment, isn't it?

Ravenclaw can thank MilleGigi for ten points--she did the research and make a very educated guess that little Moto-chan is, in fact, a Kappa.

As you can probably tell, I don't bother much about J.K. Rowling's image of Jarveys or Kappas. Reggie is capable of true conversation rather than rote repetition of rude

phrases, never mind her magical powers. Motoyoshi is adapted from Japanese folklore, in which Kappas are usually dangerous but also fundamentally honorable, profoundly polite, and just as capable of befriending and aiding a human as they are of sucking out their life essence. The 'friendly' Kappa appears in modern Japanese cartoons, drawn to appear cute and turtle-like; however, in some parts of Japan, the existence of dangerous Kappas is still taken seriously, and warning signs are posted near 'Kappa-occupied' bodies of water.

Also missing from Potterverse facts on Kappas is the bit of traditional information that Kappas are prone to flatulence and are thus the source of the disagreeable odor of the swampy places in which they live. The expression *'Kappa no he'* is used in Japan to refer to something very common or prevalent. It literally translates as 'A Kappa's fart.'

Moto means 'origin' or 'source' (when used in Japanese male names). Yoshi is a wonderful word with numerous potential meanings, including 'courageous', 'happy', 'good to others', variations on 'fine/splendid/good', 'fortunate', and last but not least, 'fragrant'...depending upon which kanji character is used to write it. Feel free to interpret the Kappa's name in whatever fashion brings you optimal amusement!

And while you're at it, feel free to come up with a punch line explaining what a Kappa would be doing in a bathtub.

2: Just Call Us the 'Road to Hell Paving Crew'

Chapter 3 of 12

And the chaos continues... Ginny has had some great ideas in her lifetime. What follows is not one of them. Worse still, Draco seems to be tuning in to the same mental wavelength. Throw in Ron, and you have a recipe for complete disaster. Good luck fishing this one out of the flusher, Reggie. Does anyone besides me hear an annoying buzzing sound?

Disclaimer: Definitely not by J.K. Rowling or any affiliated entity. The author of this bit of lunacy lives somewhere about the intersection of Douglas Adams Drive and Albus Dumbledore Avenue, which if you check Yahoo! Maps, is located in a nice little suburb of The Twilight Zone. You can see Rod Serling's house from there. Now that I've profaned the names of geniuses both real and imaginary by chucking them into this disclaimer, on with the yarn.

Chapter 2: Just Call Us the 'Road to Hell Paving Crew'

Within half an hour, Reggie was fully apprised of the wedding situation, full of tea (Hermione-style, not Severus' 'Attack of the Killer Tannins' version), and overflowing with determination to make sure her charges didn't back out of the wedding, which was now less than two weeks away.

"Sounds like we got here just in time, hinnies. I think it's for the best if Moto and I stay within shouting distance for the duration, just to make sure nothing gets fucked up."

"**You** are going to stay around to ensure everything goes smoothly. I've probably heard more profound contradictions in terms, but offhand, I can't think of when."

"Same Snarkyarse I remember so fondly, I see." Reggie shook her head at him and turned to Hermione. "How are you holding up, mi brujita? Not letting all this chingando wedding stuff get you down, are you?"

"Well, I've held out this long. It's less than two weeks to go, so I think I can hold out a little longer."

Not exactly the cheerleading enthusiasm Reg was hoping for, but it was a start. "We'll go with that for the moment, mija. Anything you want to discuss with your Godmum?"

Hermione stood up...barely. She was slumping listlessly, which Reg found most alarming (considering Hermione). She hoped it was just due to fatigue.

"Maybe in the morning, Reggie." She straightened, apparently with the assistance of the tension in her jaw. "Right now I am going to bed with a headache."

The Jarvey really couldn't help herself. "No, you're not...he's still on the couch. HEY!"

Her reflexes, as usual, were perfect. Where Reggie had been perched on the arm of the chair, there was now a nasty scorch mark. "One of these days, you'll appreciate my sense of humor, Prince Snarking."

"One of these days, your luck will run out and my aim will catch up with you, you insufferable stoat."

Hermione had other concerns. "Severus! I just re-upholstered that last month!"

Reggie hastily waved her tail over the offending spot and hurried to placate her godchild. "It's okay now, good as new. Why don't you go upstairs and let Moto fix you a new bath? If there's one thing he knows backwards and forwards, it's bathing." She did not mention how very literally she believed there was only **one** thing he knew well.

Moto bowed, managing not to lose quite all of the water from the reservoir on his head this time. The bathtub no longer at hand, he made a gesture with his hishaku that caused the dipper to fill with swamp water for replenishing the lost fluid. "Thank you, Reggie-san. Describing my humble skills in such a fashion is too kind of you."

"I guess that might be a good idea." Hermione still looked rather dubious about Motoyoshi, but allowed the Kappa to follow her upstairs.

They made quite a picture, Moto in his little loincloth looking like the world's ugliest toddler trailing behind his nanny. The raggedy garment worn by her apprentice was a puzzle to Reggie. Why did he need it, with his bits hidden under his ventral shell? It looked even more absurd when he was on duty and his waterlogged tutu clung to it, limp and translucent.

As soon as they were out of sight, Snape turned his attention to Reggie. "Wasn't it bad enough for *you* to blunder around in my life like a furry bludger? Did you really have to bring along your little helper?"

"A helper? Help? You're barking up the wrong tree, hombron. If I'd known what a pain in the arse an apprentice was, I might have decided to stay a bleeding Provisional instead of becoming a full Master. Do you know how much trouble this Moto character caused, accidentally Transfiguring some poor little skirt's kitten into a Blast-ended Skrewt?"

Snape smirked and gave an amused snort.

"It's not all that funny, you sadistic bastard!" she howled. "We were stuck for over a fucking month, wandering all over the wilds of America, on a job that should have taken a fortnight on the outside!"

Snape's shoulders twitched, and he emitted a sound that bore a suspicious resemblance to a chuckle.

"We ended up in Los Angeles. Ever heard of it? It's the place where people come from all over the world to continue observing the driving customs of their country of origin. Somehow, we got on a bloody damned sightseeing tour, and the crazy mofo got his ass stuck in the Tar Pits. I had to jaywalk Wilshire Boulevard, for fuck's sake! I'm lucky I didn't end up a smear on the asphalt!"

Regina stared. Her tiny pointed jaw dropped.

Snape was laughing.

Not just a sarcastic snort. Not a sardonic chuckle. Not even a demented giggle of some sort. This was a full-blown belly laugh. In fact, he was doubled over, arms folded over said anatomical feature (or over the place it would have been, had he an ounce of fat on his body), and laughing.

"What the hell?" she asked, dazed.

Wiping tears of laughter from his eyes, he finally managed to gasp, "Now... now you know," before dissolving in glee again.

"Know what, you giggling git?"

"Now... you... you have to teach..." he continued, leaning on the arm of the couch for support. "Now you know what it's like... your very own dunderhead to train..." he choked out, before dissolving into hysterics again.

She glared at him fiercely. "To top it all off, the daft brush hit me with a botched translation spell, so for the last few weeks I've been periodically lapsing into a wanking Texas accent...*fuck*, there it goes again!...that I can't shed fer shit!"

Severus sank to the seat of the couch, panting. He would have laughed harder, but it was physiologically impossible.

"Weirdly enough, I think I like you better in 'Male PMS Mode' than convulsed with hysterics."

Oh, good. That brought back the Patented Snape Death Glare. Reggie had rather missed that look, especially considering she was naturally immune to it.

"I assume you realize that I would employ you as a source of ingredients for experimental potions if you weren't assigned to Hermione. Speaking of assignments, where's that hideous poof of tulle you normally wear?"

"Flattery will get you nowhere, you stuffy old bastard, nor will insulting that bloody useless powder puff I have to wear on duty. This is purely a social visit...no tutu. So, is there anything I should know about in order to better ensure the success of your lil' gettin' hitched party?" She cringed as the accent popped up again.

"The location of the front door, so you can leave?"

"I still live in hope that I'll figure out why you're always so damned difficult when I'm only trying to help you. Does it come naturally, or do you take potions and practice?"

Snape got up and headed for the stairs. "The only potion I take routinely is for headaches...such as the one you've so thoughtfully provided. I am going to bed now. Since I'm sure it would be quite pointless to ask that you leave, I insist that you keep your smelly little sidekick well clear of the kitchen. And if you truly want to help Hermione, remind her how to say 'no.'"

"Watch it, you Greater Large-Nosed Wanker. Moto has his faults, but he's not going to wander around farting indiscriminately. There are some very good spells out there for controlling flatulence...even in Kappas. I happen to know he's conscientious about using them."

This bit of information didn't stop Snape from wrinkling his nose as he passed the Kappa on the stairs.

"Goodnight to you, too!" Reggie yelled after him.

Motoyoshi sat cross-legged on the floor before his master, waiting for further updates and orders. Regina sighed and draped her snout over the arm of the chair.

"It's going to be tough this time around, Moto my friend. The ancient Romans said, 'Never fight the same opponent too many times,' and they weren't thinking with their arses when they said it. Now ol' Snapey's got my number... he knows I'm not officially his, and he knows my usual tactics...hurrying him, keeping him off guard, surprising him at every turn, to beat down his defenses. And Hermione is acting like we're the enemy, too, this time. Must be his bad influence. We've got to come up with some new strategies."

"How do you know so much that is not taught in Fairy Godmother classes, Reggie-san?" Moto asked.

"I have a checkered past, mijo," she replied. With that cryptic remark, she curled up to have a snooze in the wingback chair. There would be time to strategize later, when she was properly rested.

Moto conjured more swamp water and made himself comfortable for the night. In the absence of instructions to the contrary, he did so in the kitchen sink. It would have been difficult to express how very *delighted* Snape was to find him there the following morning.

Harry couldn't sleep.

This wasn't unusual for him. Sometimes, despite Luna's comforting presence, he succumbed to nightmares; other times, his body simply kept him awake to circumvent that possibility altogether.

Then there were times like this, when he couldn't sleep because he had the strangest feeling he was on the brink of doing something stupid.

He couldn't identify a logical reason for this feeling. The plan sounded good in theory. If anyone needed some relaxation and peace, it was Remus and Tonks. Ginny had discovered an Italian spa that sounded like the perfect place for them to shed some of the pre-wedding tension and prepare to really appreciate the day itself and the honeymoon. When Remus and Tonks happened to be absent from one of their periodic get-togethers (the twins had nicknamed them 'DA Reunions,' though not everyone who met to talk over old times was an alumnus of that organization), she suggested sending the couple there as a surprise pre-wedding gift. Everyone had oohed and aahed at the brochure, the hat had been passed with great enthusiasm, and (with the aid of a few subtle inquiries into Tonks' schedule) the reservations made. It seemed like one of those ideas that couldn't possibly go wrong.

Which could very well be why Harry felt so worried.

Of course, it might very well have to do with the fact that Ron had added his own little spin to the plan.

"Remus hasn't had a proper fling in *ages*, assuming he ever has. As his friends, we owe it to him to make sure he gets in a bit of a good time before settling down, and not at some awful low strip club, either." With that, Ron had proceeded to outline his plan for kidnapping Remus a little ahead of schedule, and taking him to what was reputed

to be the classiest, sexiest, wildest exotic dancing venue in Wizarding Europe, the night before the spa getaway. It sort of bothered Harry that Ron seemed to be so well acquainted with the degrees of quality of various adult entertainment venues, but he decided to stay well away from that line of inquiry.

If Hermione had been there, she probably would have launched the counteroffensive by arguing that 'proper fling' was an oxymoron.

Hermione hadn't been there, so it had been up to Harry to put the brakes on Ron. And he couldn't bring himself to do it. Ron's argument was rather convincing, in an alarmingly Fred-and-George sort of way. Remus hadn't had an extensive social life before Tonks. As much fun as Tonks was, Harry suspected there would always be an element of 'what might have been' in Remus' thinking if he got married without having done something a bit off the deep end. That was why Harry was taking an earlier shift than usual tomorrow, dropping by Remus' place to secretly pack his bags and forward them to the spa while Ron kept him distracted with a long, leisurely lunch. They would top it off by whisking their victim off by unofficial Portkey to Amsterdam.

Harry had to admit to a little personal curiosity about their intended destination. He was pretty sure that nothing compared to being with Luna...the thought made him smile goofily without being aware of it...but it might be nice to see one of these places so that his smug belief that he was leading the best of all possible lives with the best of all possible witches could be confirmed once and for all.

That led to the thought that was increasingly the prime suspect in his sleepless nights; namely, the thought of marrying Luna.

Harry wasn't afraid of commitment. There wasn't even a question of it. Luna owned his heart completely; he knew it, and as he didn't care to go anywhere without it, he figured he was already committed. Thinking about it, he could even identify the exact moment she'd captured his love and loyalty permanently.

It was while he was in the hospital, still recovering from his physical wounds and from the emotional shock of having to live with his artificial arm. Molly and Remus visited frequently to cluck over him sympathetically, which drove him barking. The rest of the Weasleys (excepting Percy but including Ginny, to the terminal detriment of their relationship) and most of his other friends tried to pretend nothing was different, which made him irritable and depressed. Hermione tried to distract him, which he really wasn't in any mood for, especially as her distraction techniques were not a significant improvement over her motivational techniques. The memory of that talking homework planner still irritated the living hell out of him.

Luna had walked into his hospital room, greeted him, smiled in her incomparably misty manner (though with a degree of enthusiasm he'd come to discover, to his delight, was reserved solely for him) and asked, "So, how does your new arm work?" No pity, no changing the subject, no ignoring the elephant in the room. He finally started to feel normal after that.

The day he and Ginny finally couldn't pretend things were working any longer, it fell out that Luna wasn't anywhere to be found. Harry had been frantic, without quite realizing why. He'd gone to Hermione, well past three sheets to the wind, and...well, he hadn't the first clue what he'd said or done, but in the end, she'd directed him back to Luna. That was all it took. She became the island of peace at the center of his turbulent existence, and he couldn't live without her. Which was precisely why he was afraid to marry her, even though they'd been together for four years, living in the same house for most of it.

Should anyone be tactless enough to ask (and many often were), he put them off. Had Luna asked, he would have told her in a heartbeat. But with her uncanny knowledge of what made him happy and unhappy, she very seldom asked him about anything upsetting unless she deemed it essential to his well being. The truth was he had the worst fear that making her his wife would be her death sentence.

Immediately after the war, that was not an idle or superstitious fear. To be intimately acquainted with Harry Potter was to be a walking target in the eyes of the remaining Death Eaters at large. But even with that ilk rounded up or killed in the attempt, he couldn't shake the memory of the people who'd died in his presence, every one of them someone who had cared about him. His parents. Sirius. Dumbledore. He deliberately blurred the images of the many who'd fallen in various skirmishes protecting him. If he didn't allow the memories to coalesce, he could half convince himself they were still alive somewhere, injured permanently like Parvati and Neville, but alive.

"Harry."

He turned, taking in the glowing picture his love made in the light of her namesake, her pale hair, luminous eyes, and trailing blue silk nightgown melding into the soft nuances of silver radiance. As always, he would do anything she asked of him, and gladly, including overcoming the fear that giving her his name would somehow doom her.

"Come to bed."

Harry forgot his worries as, once again, Luna spared him having to do anything he didn't truly wish to do already.

Ginevra Weasley left the meeting feeling an incredible sense of relief. Being the financial and technical brains behind Quicksilver Communications didn't make her automatically at ease during business negotiations. Having Draco Malfoy as a business partner wasn't exactly soothing, though experience had shown that he would keep things within the boundaries of her legal advice (out of enlightened self-interest, if nothing else) without audible prompting. In light of how well the deal had gone, Ginny was glad she'd been able to restrain herself from interrupting the smooth flow of his presentation. Malfoy may not have been able to calculate compound interest worth crap, but he could sell fireworks to Bowtruckles. If he'd shown half as much charm during his school days, he could have been penniless and still been able to amass an entourage.

That didn't mean that he'd been able to sell her on the 'M' coming first in their company logo, which ultimately took the compromise form of an M and W so intertwined it was impossible to tell which was in the primary position. Nor did he seem to feel the need to favor *her* with any of that silver-tongued smoothness, once they were back at the office.

"I'm really impressed. You have remarkable impulse control for a Weasley," he said with a smirk.

Ginny decided to exercise said impulse control to keep her mouth shut as she advanced on him. When they were close enough for his increasing nervousness to force him a step back, she leaned in and glanced behind him. She gave him just enough time to acquire a confused expression before turning to look at him with a slight smile.

"I'm really impressed. You're a Malfoy, yet you manage not to leave a slime trail," she said.

Seeing his cheeks begin to color, she felt a pang of guilt. "Just kidding." She tried to pass it off lightly, smiling and tipping her head a little sheepishly as she brushed her hand down his arm, giving his elbow a quick squeeze.

Gack! Did I check out Malfoy's arse, then feel sorry for insulting him? she thought, aghast as she quickly turned to fuss blindly with a page in the ledger.

"Of course..." he replied, suddenly finding a set of charts on the wall exceedingly interesting. She didn't dare try to interpret his odd tone of voice.

As they busied themselves for the next five minutes with trying not to make eye contact, both were thinking something along the lines of *Were we flirting just now? And if so, how can this be prevented in the future?* Ginny didn't spare much time thinking about this (not that she ever did, when such incidents occurred between them) because she had a plan.

It all came down to Hermione needing to relax. Ginny could tell the poor thing was as tense as a Gnome at a Kneazle family reunion. Who wouldn't be, contemplating marriage to a wizard who could easily be *Witch Weekly's* Most Intractable Misanthrope of All Time, should that publication ever choose to take such a poll? One of these days, when business matters weren't quite so pressing, she'd corner Hermione and interrogate her until she figured out what exactly it was she saw in Snape. Maybe she could bring Mum in as a consultant on the project.

Then of course, there was the fact that Tonks needed to relax as well. It was almost scary how well those two facts added up to one excellent plan. After all, how better to keep Tonks from realizing she was being sent on a surprise trip to that lovely spa with Remus than by convincing her she was actually tricking Hermione into having a

slightly wild hen party? And what better way to lure Hermione into said party than by convincing her that all they were doing was preparing to spirit Tonks away on her surprise trip?

Generally speaking, Ginny didn't take time to pat herself on the back too enthusiastically. This time, she felt it was well-deserved. Then again, she shouldn't expect anything less from the witch who had gotten her hands on Draco Malfoy's money without having to put out. Speaking of whom, it was laughable how easy it was to get her business partner out of the way for the afternoon. All she had to do was wait until his instinct for skiving off kicked in, then uncharacteristically indulge it.

Yes, all was going smoothly. For once, even Harry and Ron didn't seem to want to butt in to her business. Ginny really should have worried about this, but neglected that sensible precaution in favor of feeling relieved that her plan to relax Hermione and kidnap Tonks would be unimpeded. Even the timing was perfect. Who expects anyone to do devious plotting on a Thursday night?

Draco Malfoy was on his way back up. Lucius Malfoy's survival instincts might have failed him fatally, leaving his wife and son at the mercy of unscrupulous minions; Draco vowed that his instincts would not. Soon, it wouldn't matter that he couldn't keep Mother from pursuing shopping as a vocation. The annoyance of having Ginevra Weasley as his business partner (why he had fleetingly *wanted* her to be checking out his arse was beyond him) was far outweighed by the advantage her financial knowledge and inventions provided.

It was neither his recent business successes nor that awkward dance he seemed to be engaging in with his financial better half that were foremost in his mind at the moment, however. He had a plan, and it was a brilliant one, if he did say so himself.

Severus needed to get out and *do* something. Something fun. Offhand, he couldn't think of anyone who needed to loosen up more than one Severus Snape. The man could at least benefit from doing something besides working and constantly mooning about after that frizzy-haired bundle of hostility he still seemed bent on marrying. So Draco had made a few contacts, done a little investigating, paid a bribe or two, and made some rather pricey reservations. Convincing Severus to get over his reservations would have been substantially more work than all the rest put together, so Draco also included a spot of kidnapping in the plan. Well, it was more like voluntary traveling under false pretenses. It was probably for the best that no amount of negotiation could get them into the club on a Friday. Who would expect to be kidnapped on a Thursday?

Though he did this on a regular basis, Draco took a moment to bask in self-satisfaction and grant himself yet another well-deserved pat on the back. He really felt he warranted this at least once a day, considering how he'd gotten Weasley to cut him into her incredibly sound and lucrative business without having to resort to seducing her. Though, as the appraising voice in the back of his mind noted whenever they had one of those quasi-flirtatious moments (that seemed to occur with increasing regularity), it probably wouldn't have constituted a hardship on his part.

"I don't suppose you'll be needing me for anything this afternoon?" he asked Ginny, flipping through the report she'd just finished. Not that he'd have understood more than two-thirds of it, even if he spent all night studying it diligently, but he thought it would help his case to look as if he'd been doing something besides supplying the necessary capital and charm that this venture couldn't manage without. She seemed to think it was important for him to understand how it actually *worked*, for some reason.

"Not that I can think of. Just remember, we need to meet to sign those contracts with our distributor at one tomorrow."

That would be easy enough, even if they indulged quite thoroughly and stayed out so late it got early. After all, that's what wake-up calls and Hangover Relief potions were for.

Draco didn't question why his normally strict partner was so amenable to him taking the entire afternoon off. It was about bleeding time one of his plans went entirely smoothly. Now, to get Severus into Wizarding Amsterdam and delay him there until evening.

"Great evening, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know, Harry. I never have gotten the hang of Thursdays."

Remus was tired and sore. It had only been two days since his transformation, and he still wasn't at his best. He certainly wasn't suspecting anything untoward from Ron and Harry, who had evolved through the years from children in his care into upstanding adults and good friends. Good friends who had just treated him to a very nice dinner and were now walking him back home through Diagon Alley.

Not to mention it was Thursday. Who does any plotting on a Thursday?

"What's wrong with Thursdays?" Ron seemed amused at the idea.

"I keep forgetting...as a Quidditch player, your schedule of practices and games is such that you're immune to the terror of Mondays and the elation of Friday afternoons."

"Wouldn't that make Tuesday the difficult one?"

Remus shook his head. "It's always been Thursday. Don't ask why, but Thursday has never worked properly for me, for some reason."

Oddly enough, Remus had the feeling Ron and Harry were waiting for just such an opening.

"I think today might change that." Harry had a wonderfully ingenuous look on his face that would have scared the life out of him had he seen it on the Weasley twins. Come to that, it was fairly frightening on Harry. "Dinner has been nice, but I think there's still room for improvement."

"What are you two..."

In a voice that could have graced an irritating program on the Wizarding Wireless, Ron interrupted. "Congratulations, Remus Lupin...courtesy of any number of your good friends, you've just won a little weekend getaway with Tonks at the Nova Herculaneum Spa in Naples. And as a special added bonus, you'll spend the evening before that little getaway at one of the premier entertainment spots on the continent...starting right about now."

Remus didn't have time to question, object, or interject profanity. Ron grabbed a perfectly innocent looking matchbox, Harry put his own hand over it, and together they shoved it into his hand. The sensation of Portkey travel overwhelmed him...though not quite enough to drown out the idea that Thursday had, once again, decided to bite him in the arse.

None of them noticed a brightly colored splotch on Remus' shoe, which close inspection would have revealed to be a very uniquely marked beetle.

"More errands, mija? Is there anything I can help with?"

Hermione gave Reggie the same slightly strained smile she'd been sporting all week. "Ginny and I are doing a little shopping. Oh, and we're going to meet Tonks to see her off on a little trip."

Reggie didn't see Hermione as the type who would thrive under retail therapy, but at this point, she was willing to try anything to get that crease out from between her godchild's eyes. Although there was something a little odd about this that she couldn't quite put her paw on. "Want me to come along?"

Hermione declined, which only exacerbated the Jarvey's suspicions. When the little Weasley brujita arrived, it was so plain she was up to something that an Apprentice could have figured it out. But Reggie would be damned if she knew exactly what. It behooved her to tag along, just in case 'a little shopping' meant one more thing that

would endanger the wedding. With a flick of her tail, she was invisible and trailing after Hermione at a distance calculated to keep wee silver paws safe from big human feet.

"I was thinking we'd have dinner out while we're at it...why don't you wear something a little nicer...robes, maybe?"

Fucking shite. There WAS something going on here. No one sounded that casual without an ulterior motive.

Hermione Accio'd something with a satiny collar to put on over her regular clothes and yelled back through the house. "I'm going out with Ginny for a bit, love...if I'm not back, have dinner without me." Severus made some sort of affirmative noise from the vicinity of the kitchen.

"Did you get Tonks' bags packed?" Hermione whispered to Ginny on their way to the front door.

Reg strained to catch more and heard another sound altogether. Evidently there was a visitor at the back door, as well. A quick glance at Hermione showed she was upgrading her trainers to a slightly nicer class of shoes at Ginny's prompting, so Reggie risked a trip to the kitchen to see who was there.

"Bloody fucking hell!" This time she swore audibly, though softly enough that she wouldn't alert the subjects of her reconnaissance. She was successful. There was no sign that the Malfoy twerp, who was apparently trying to convince Snape to go somewhere with him, had heard anything amiss. If Snape had heard anything, he chose to ignore it.

"I know you've been wanting to try some of the experimental variations on that particular brew, and I know of an apothecary in Amsterdam that's authorized to sell the ingredients you needed. I have to sign some papers there this evening anyway, so..."

This was all far too convenient for coincidence. Fuck, fuck, fuck... this couldn't mean anything good, either. She experienced a moment of panic as Snape hastily scrawled out the list of items he wanted at one end of the house, and Hermione finally got her shoes in order and collected her purse at the other. Someone should keep an eye on both of them, but Reggie couldn't be in two places at once. Crap! How... Oh, right. That's what apprentices were for.

She dashed into the basement lab, where Moto was soaking in a nice cauldron of swamp water (in deference to Hermione's desire that he not put said liquid in her bathtub). "Moto! No time to explain, but make yourself invisible and go with Snape and the little blond prat. No matter what, you need to follow wherever they go, observe all secrecy protocols, and do what you have to do to keep them out of trouble. Got all that?"

"Hai! Yes, Reggie-san! Right away! Do I need my tutu?"

"Just GO!" she yelled.

With an excited wave of his Hishaku, Moto became invisible. The only sign of him was a series of damp footprints trailing up the steps. Reggie followed to make certain he successfully caught up with his targets.

In retrospect, she realized she should have sent Moto with Hermione and gone after Snarkyarse herself. It would have been a less painful insight if it had waited until the next day to occur to her, instead of flaring up the instant the unlikely trio Disappeared from the kitchen.

With a deep sense of foreboding, Reggie dashed to the front entry just in time to follow Hermione and Ginny.

Author's Notes:

Reggie's Spanish Vocabulary:

chingando= fucking (I know, I'm shocked, too)

mi brujita= My little witch

hombron= big man; connotation is somewhat negative (implies an intimidating person or a bully)

Moto's Japanese Vocabulary:

Hai= Yes

The remark about observing the driving customs of one's native country was adapted from a comedy routine by Will Durst, whose special ('The Durst Amendment') I had the great pleasure of watching on PBS in my university days. I took notes.

My mother and grandfather introduced me to the most wonderful phrase: 'Are you this difficult naturally, or do you take pills and practice?' Yes, I admit I earned the introduction. I couldn't resist tossing in a magical variant of it.

If you've done your homework and read the first two entries in this series, you know why Remus had to assert that he has trouble getting the hang of Thursdays. Once again, I apologize to Douglas Adams and sincerely hope that, wherever his comedic spirit has gone to rest, it isn't too peeved that I keep attempting to channel it.

Up next: Stags vs. Hens. Who comes out on top? (I promise not to wring any more fairly stupid innuendoes from that statement.)

3: You Look Good When I'm Drunk

Chapter 4 of 12

As the country song says, 'Beauty Is In The Eyes Of The Beer-holder'. And our boys (and girls) are drinking things an awful lot stronger than beer tonight. Somehow, I just don't think Reggie, Moto, nor all the Fairy Godmothers in the world would be enough to keep Severus and Hermione out of trouble this time. Let's just hope they can rescue what's left of them.

Disclaimer: Go ahead. Try to sue me. Unless you want blood, or a four-year-old who runs around 'protecting' her baby sister by throwing her toy locomotive at hanging bedsheets yelling "Expecto Patrain!" you'll be getting squat...which is exactly what I get for playing around with these characters.

Chapter 3: You Look Good When I'm Drunk

It took about five minutes to Apparate to the Portkey Station, catch the Portkey to Amsterdam, and arrive to Draco's steady stream of patter about where they were going. That was exactly how much time it took Snape to figure out how much of what Draco had said was truth and how much was bullshit. It helped to start with the assumption that, this being Draco, the balance would automatically be tipped in favor of a large proportion of bullshit. He didn't need to use even a tenth of his interrogation skills to get at the truth.

"I cannot BELIEVE that you actually think I'm going to go along with this absurd farce."

"Merlin's arse, Severus, your witch is a healer...hasn't she managed to convince you of the virtues of **ofelaxing** once in a while? Piano wires have less tension in them than you do."

"I wouldn't mention piano wire just now, if I were you."

"That would be a lot more frightening if you hadn't saved my life so many times previously that it would gall you to undo all that work. We're here, and the reservations are made. I mean, Circe's girdle, we have a table near the stage!" His voice was rising slightly, threatening to become the third 'Patented Malfoy Communication Medium' (after the 'Condescending Sneer' and the 'Smug Smirk'): the Whine.

The look with which Snape pinned Draco was one of the best in his repertoire, guaranteed to produce twitchiness, paranoia, and, at the extreme end of the spectrum, abject terror. He kept it trained on the younger wizard until he was satisfied that he'd made an impression. He really, really hated when Draco began whining, which still happened obnoxiously often, as far as Snape was concerned.

Which made it all the more important that the brat not think his actions were remotely acceptable, much less that Snape was actually a bit curious about this place. After all, Le Miroir was the most famous...or infamous...club of that nature in all of Wizarding Europe.

"Considering your instincts for self-preservation, I'll assume you weren't lying about having found a source for those ingredients I wanted." He trotted out his best 'you'd best not have brought embarrassment to Slytherin' voice to say it and felt better immediately. Sweet Salazar, but he'd missed using that voice.

"Absolutely...I mean, the place is nearby. In fact, I knew exactly what you needed, and it's all pre-ordered; we just need to pick it up." Draco was talking faster than usual, the only outward sign that he was thinking of the consequences of failure in the face of that particular tone.

Snape could still look down at Draco...barely. He used that inch or two to full advantage.

"You will pick up the purchases while I have a drink." His eyes flickered towards a café nearby, and Draco nodded. "I will consent to remain not more than one hour in this place you seem so hell-bent on inflicting upon me. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal."

"Good."

When Ron saw who else was approaching Le Miroir, he wondered if Remus wasn't right about Thursdays after all.

"Of all the rotten, stinking, miserable luck..." he muttered under his breath, hoping he could slip everyone into the club before those two noticed. It occurred to him about half a second too late that he should also have taken steps to ensure *Harry* didn't notice.

"What are *you* doing here?"

"What do you think? This is a stag party." With that tone of voice to deal with, Ron wondered how Ginny managed to work with Malfoy without kneeing him in the groin at least once a week.

"Not much of one, from where I'm standing."

"It would pick up, I'm sure, if you would leave."

"Look, this is a good-sized place. I'm sure we can all manage to stay civil, or at least clear of each other, for a few hours."

"Oh, give it a rest, Remus." Bad sign, when Harry got irritable with Remus.

"Yes, after thirty years, NOW you start trying to make peace?" Oh, he could have happily lived the rest of his life without hearing Snape use *that* voice again.

"What did I do?"

"It's more like what you didn't do."

"For Merlin's sake, can't this wait for another day? One where we don't have expensive front table reservations slipping through our fingers due to wasted time?" Whoa. Malfoy as the 'Voice of Reason'? He'd have to make a note of the date.

"Certainly. Just as soon as Potter gets his arse out of the way."

"My arse was here first, thank you very much."

"I had to call in two favors to get us seats up front. Let's drop it, Harry, so Remus can have his party!" Ron could have added that it was Harry's fault they were having this conversation; had he kept quiet, the glamour that rendered them all nondescript would have prevented them being recognized. He could have mentioned it, but he didn't fancy a fight out on the pavement when there were exceedingly talented witches with nothing better to do than entertain them just inside the building.

Ron noticed Draco glaring at him, trying to get his attention before jerking an annoyed eyebrow at Harry. "You're his friend...can't you sit on him or something?"

"Like you're doing such a brilliant job of keeping Snape under control. At this rate, we'll end up as seconds in a duel."

"Sod that. If you agree to keep Potter out of our sight, I'll keep Severus out of yours."

"Fine by me. And if we end up anywhere near each other, Remus will sit in between."

Draco sneered. "Well, you'll have to slouch then. It's not as if the werewolf is tall enough to block the sight of you otherwise."

"Malfoy, his wand hand is twitching! Look sharp!" Ron hissed, nudging his way in front of Harry and saying loudly, "C'mon Harry, let the bastards go in and get well out of our way."

"Let's go, Severus, before we have to see any more of this ilk," Draco said, using his loftiest tone of voice.

They made their way into the place still under an almost palpable cloud of antagonism. Ron elbowed Harry. "Remember, civil? For Hermione's sake?" Harry still didn't look

entirely convinced. "Besides, this party is for Remus...if it doesn't bother him, we shouldn't bother about it."

Meanwhile, Draco was having his own murmured argument with Snape. "Look, *you're* the one who wants to marry the female head of that red-and-gold hellhound that won't die. You can forget about domestic tranquility if you can't at least keep from dueling with those two every time you cross paths." Snape must have been at least moderately impressed with this advice, as he refrained from cursing Draco (either magically or verbally).

Ron took advantage of the moment to order a round of drinks. He noticed Malfoy buttonholed the same waitress (a very generously endowed witch dressed in nothing but an artistic arrangement of charmed soap bubbles, which periodically disappeared with alluringly audible pops) and also placed an order.

What with the distraction of the girl's costume, it wasn't too surprising that neither he nor anyone else noticed the slight splashing of the alcohol on the tray just before it was delivered.

Snape wasn't certain whom he wanted to hex more...Draco or the bloody damned Gryffindors at the next table. *Of course* the place was packed, and they had to be seated near each other. He eyed his drink balefully. Not having touched alcohol since the rough night during which he finally got around to proposing to Hermione, he wasn't keen to do so again. Still, it was just one glass... and it might make this hour more bearable... and the longer he glared at the glass, the more whiny Draco looked (sodding pest was right about Snape not really wanting to kill him after all the work he'd done in the opposite vein)... so perhaps it behooved him to take just one drink.

Hmm. Quite good, actually. Perhaps the club's reputation for class was warranted.

He could say the same for the dancer who had just come onstage. No lowbrow bumping and grinding here. My. Why hadn't Hermione ever thought of using 'Wingardium Leviosa' in that fashion? And what would be the best way to sneakily introduce the idea without her realizing its origins?

"Let me order you another," Draco said, enthusiastically flagging down the waitress again.

Must have been very smooth liquor, indeed. He almost didn't remember finishing it. He really didn't need another. But it seemed too much trouble to tell that to Draco, who was obviously so very happy to be of assistance. Something didn't feel right about this... Snape was sure he was supposed to be angry. He tried, and failed. Even the knowledge that Potter was less than fifteen feet away (a fact that was impossible to ignore, considering the racket Weasley was making) just wasn't impacting his pleasant mood in the slightest.

Severus wanted to become alarmed at this, but couldn't.

He also wanted to keep track of when their hour was up, but time seemed to have gotten sort of slippery and kept running through his fingers. It didn't help that those beautiful young ladies (twins, if he wasn't mistaken) were doing fascinating things with a flock of butterflies. They were... quite flexible. But he'd be willing to bet a month's worth of his contract pay that they had access to an excellent source of Swelling Solution. Not that there was anything wrong with that.

"I'm sure Hermione could figure out that spell... but I think she'd have to take yoga lessons for the rest." Severus hadn't realized he'd spoken aloud until a hand fell lightly on his shoulder.

"Sev'rus... would it be okay if you didn't mention things like that before we eat?" This was a new wrinkle. Draco was asking for something nicely, his expression of earnestness positively Hufflepuff in magnitude. Something was very, very wrong here. He'd ordered something for them to eat without asking leave, to which Severus should have responded with a good hexing. Instead he said, 'Thank you.' Worse still, Draco hugged him by way of reply. Severus decided he could have lived his whole life without knowing Draco was a friendly drunk.

He also didn't really need to know when Draco needed to use the loo, but was obliged to suffer through receiving that information at a later point in the evening. Not that he was feeling anything remotely like suffering at the moment, particularly with... Wow.

Severus completely forgot that he had anything he should be worrying about, including the inability to worry. He was pretty certain the maneuver the redhead on stage had just accomplished was impossible without the aid of magic. It was also, unfortunately, something he was positive Hermione wouldn't do, even under Imperio.

Speaking of Imperio... Lupin had taken Draco's vacated seat and was greeting him warmly. What in the name of Merlin's moth eaten robes had brought that on? "I really am glad you're here tonight, Severus."

"Lupin, what do you want?" That wasn't nearly hostile enough. Severus couldn't even feel himself frowning.

"Severus... about all that stuff... back in school... you were right. I've so wanted to apologize. It's been too long in coming. You can't possibly know how sorry I am."

"I've always thought you were quite sorry," he retorted, then blinked in surprise. Huh... wait a minute... why was Lupin putting a hand on his shoulder? And why the hell wasn't he pulling his wand on the mangy beast, or possibly strangling him the good old-fashioned Muggle way?

"Lupin, what the bloody hell are you doing?" Snape managed to ask. He wanted to yell, but it came out amazingly mildly.

"Please call me Remus. I really think it's time we buried the hatchet... made up for the past... got to know each other better..." he said softly, looking at Snape with an almost misty expression. What the fuck? And... good gods, the werewolf was holding hands with him!

"I'm not sure which is making me feel stranger...you offering to get to know me better whilst placing unwelcome hands upon my person, or the fact that I seem strangely unable to become properly alarmed about it. But rest assured, if you do not discontinue this line of conversation and unwelcome physical contact, I will see that what is left of you is returned to Tonks in a shoebox...once I get over whatever the hell it is that is making me too mellow for my own good."

As Lupin sniffled his way back to his own table, Severus wondered at what point he would once again become properly capable of panic. Perhaps he should use the loo, in the event that moment arrived abruptly.

"Oh, Harry," Remus sniffed, "Severus just doesn't like me."

Remus was one odd drunk. Harry felt rather glad he hadn't gone drinking with him before, and was beginning to think that perhaps Thursdays weren't a great day for this sort of thing after all. He took another drink. He wasn't sure what it was (after the first one, he really couldn't be arsed to remember), but it seemed to make everything better. "He doesn't really like anybody, except possibly Hermione," Harry said, hoping that would be of some comfort to his sodden friend. "Don't take it personally."

"You know, sometimes you remind me so much of James... it's really wonderful... and so sad..." Remus was sniffing a little less and leaning in closer.

Ron was getting quite raucous...with Malfoy, no less... that was bizarre...and Harry was busy wondering if he could convince their waitress to teach him the charm that made her bubble bikini possible (it would look brilliant on Luna). This was no doubt why it took him a while to notice something odd going on at the other end of the arm Remus had put around his shoulders. Specifically, that the hand at that end was caressing his shoulder in a rather more friendly fashion than he was entirely comfortable with. What the...?

"Um, Remus?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"I know I have a bit of a reputation for being sensitive..."

"I love that about you."

"Er, yes, well, I don't know how to break this to you...but I'm...I'm *not*that sensitive."

As Remus shrank miserably back into his chair, Harry wondered how much, if any of this, Tonks should know about. Or maybe with the Metamorphmagus thing...

Nope. Not going there. Not even under the influence of whatever this lovely drink might be.

Neither shuffling shoes, nor spilled drinks, nor music at volumes that made normal conversation and accurate eavesdropping impossible, would stay Rita Skeeter from her self-appointed mission to find a story that would put her byline back on the front page of the Daily Prophet. Since Harry Potter was always grist for the mill but wore powerful bug repellent charms at all times, she had finally taken to staking out his less wary acquaintances, waiting for such a time when he would happen across her path and provide her with something she could sink her quill into.

It was finally working. In fact, it was better than she'd ever dreamed. The Boy Who Lived and his sidekick had kidnapped a dangerous magical creature and were entertaining him in a sex club, with a couple of kinky ex-Death Eaters, and they were all as bent as a tin Knut. Yes, that was the way to write it up. There was no need to stay until the last dog was hung; it was pretty clear where this party was going, and she wanted to hurry home and write all about it. She was so happy, she began to click her wings as she scurried away across the floor. She never realized she was doing it; it was a sort of nervous tic peculiar to her bug form. It was as if the heavens had opened up on Skeeter, showering her with the exposé of a lifetime.

Then, the heavens really **did** seem to open up. She was being addressed from somewhere up above, but a terrified glance about revealed no one she could see. The next thing she knew, she was unable to move, yet flying into a dark tunnel with a light at the end of it. She felt a sensation of floating. A strong fragrance permeated the air.

The voice came again from the light at the end of the tunnel, telling her she would be safe. The floating sensation grew more pronounced, and her senses became cloudy. It was as if she were losing touch with her body.

Within minutes, she was blasted with cold air and was falling. It seemed as if she fell forever through the cold and wet, with that voice echoing in her ears, until she mercifully lost consciousness.

Motoyoshi finally felt free to stop wielding his hishaku for the moment. Reggie-san would be quite proud of the unobtrusive way in which he had successfully suppressed the hostilities between his temporary godchildren (as he considered them, being assigned to ensure their happiness and well-being for at least the evening) and the friends of his Master's godchild. With everyone safe and happy, Motoyoshi took note of the rest of the room. He wondered if these humans suffered from difficulties regulating their body temperatures. Most of the males seemed rather red in the face, and most of the females were wearing very little clothing.

Being under the table, anything happening down low was most noticeable to him. It was thus that he observed a small colorful insect creeping across the floor. His compassionate little heart skipped a beat.

"Poor thing, lost among so many feet. Let me help you, little bug." The beetle began crawling quickly, almost as if it could hear and understand the voice of the invisible Kappa. With a handy spell, he immobilized it. "That was very foolish, poor lost little bug. What if a waitress had walked by in those dangerous shoes with the pointy bottoms?" He scooped it up with his hishaku, unaware that there was about a quarter inch of alcohol remaining in the little bamboo cup at the end of the handle.

"I cannot leave this table, as these wizards are my responsibility. I wonder where I could put you so that you will be safe?" Moto looked around, still oblivious to the fact that the bug was steadily absorbing intoxicants. "This place isn't suitable at all. I recall some palms by the entrance; perhaps those would be acceptable. But how can I protect those in my care if I leave the table?"

Motoyoshi pondered this for long moments while the insect marinated. "Well... perhaps it would not hurt to step away from them for a minute or two." Checking to see that everyone's drinks were topped off, he carefully made his way around the edge of the room so as to avoid tripping anyone or being trampled upon in his invisible state. The door he found wasn't the entrance, but it opened to reveal a bit of outdoors with a patch of dirt. It would have to do.

"Farewell, bug," he said, feeling cheerful about his good deed well done. He dumped the colorful creature into the dirt beside a small weed and returned to his charges.

Just in time. Or not quite in time, if you believe in preventative medicine.

Draco felt better and better about his plan as the evening went on. Every time he thought about how brilliant he was, he took another drink. Mmm. Whatever this stuff was, it was heavenly. It would be another fine plan to pour a bit into his self-replenishing flask for later.

Pretty soon, he just felt better and better, though he couldn't quite remember why. Maybe it had something to do with all those lovely girls. Oooh, they were pretty. Talented. And not at all shy. That leggy brunette was looking right at him. Well, she wasn't going to get him that easily; anyone who wanted a taste of Draco Malfoy had to earn it. Especially one who was so plainly not the sort he could bring to meet Mother. He sniffed and looked away. Playing hard to get was a bitch, but honestly, he'd have to carry around a beater's bat to keep them off otherwise.

Come to think of it, Ginny was pretty, and talented, and not at all shy. Though not in the same way as that shameless flirt on the stage. Still, she was much more the 'bring home to Mother' type. That was a major point in her favor. Would it kill her to wear something more fitted to the office once in a while? Maybe something low cut. He was pretty sure she was stacked, but it wouldn't hurt to have explicit visual confirmation. Until then, it probably wouldn't hurt to use his imagination...

That line of thought directed his attention southward, causing him to become aware of a certain degree of discomfort.

"I'm going to the loo," he said quite solemnly. It wouldn't do for Severus to worry about him, no, not at all.

"Don't fall in."

Severus *would* pick this moment to be funny. Giggling wasn't helping Draco walk a straight line any more than it was contributing to the comfort of his bladder. It must be the giggling that was giving him trouble, since he'd only had... how many drinks? Three? Five? Something like that.

Whoa...what was that crash? And why did the carpet seem so close? He couldn't have fallen. Malfoys weren't clumsy. It must be someone else lying on the ground saying, "Ow," in that annoyingly whiny voice.

"Are you 'kay...oh, 'syou, Malfoy." That voice sounded familiar. "Hey. Whyrn't you gettinup?"

"I'm...Hey. How'd I end up down here?" Draco was puzzled to find himself looking up at Weasley, of all people. Not the nice, curvy Weasley who kept his company's accounts in the black, but that annoyingly more-famous-than-he-was Quidditch star. He would have frowned, but all he managed was an expression of mild consternation.

"Dunno, but you'll probly get stepped on if you stay there." Looked like Weasley was thinking about something. Draco considered lying down, thinking this might take a while. He was surprised when the other grasped him by the hand and yanked him to a more-or-less standing position. "Need to get you out of the way if I'm gonna get to the loo."

"What a co-cowin-quince-um, I'm going that way myself." The room was so wobbly, it might be a very good strategy to keep hanging on to Weasley until he got there.

By the time they had safely accomplished the round trip, Draco decided there were at least two Weasleys he could stand. Particularly since this one was so kind as to keep him from being injured by that very aggressive sink, and was now confiding such important information to him.

"Y'know, that gorgeous lil' blonde has been giving me th'eye for quitesome time now."

Draco nodded vigorously, since the room seemed to be going that direction anyhow. "Quite. Oh, I can see it plainly."

See, that was the sort of thing you told someone you trusted. Why wouldn't Ginny share things like that with him?

"I'm gonna invite her over here."

"Sounds good." Something clicked in Draco's mind that perhaps that wasn't the best idea almost as soon as he said it, but he couldn't think of why. Oh, well. Weasley was yelling across the room at the girl by then, so it was a bit late for that.

"She's smilin' but she won't come over. Wonder why?"

Draco found this quite mystifying, himself. Why wouldn't she come over, with two such incredibly eligible wizards to choose from? "Maybe she's busy."

"That mus'be it. Well, I guess I'll hav' to meet 'er halfway, then." With such long legs, it didn't take Weasley long to get all the way to the witch in question and proceed to better make her acquaintance.

Several things happened all at once. Potter yelled, Severus yelled (apparently in response to something Lupin was saying), and it penetrated the prettily colored fog wreathing Draco's brain that two very large and unfriendly wizards were charging towards his newly-minted bezzy mate. And they didn't mean to congratulate him on the obvious good impression he'd made on the lady.

"Lookout, Weasley!" For good measure, he drew his wand and aimed a Tripping Jinx at one of the charging gorilla types. Draco really liked Tripping Jinxes. The victim always had just enough time to acquire a wonderful 'What the fuck?' expression on his face before crashing to the ground.

Maybe not such a good idea, after all... Now *he* seemed to have attracted the attention of the big uglies. People who'd thought Crabbe and Goyle were scary brutes had clearly never seen these guys.

"That was obscenely stupid." Severus grabbed his arm and addressed him with some very unkind words, but his voice was pretty mild. It must not be that bad, then.

Suddenly, the air was full of pretty shiny things. Waitresses, dancers, and patrons were all scrambling on the floor for falling money. Why was Potter hustling Weasley and the werewolf out when there were all those lovely Galleons to pick up?

"Harry, we can't leave Malfoy here, not when 'e kep' that ugly slug offa me."

Weasley was sticking up for him. Draco was touched. So naturally he insisted to Severus that they couldn't abandon Weasley.

"You've got to be joking." They were out the door now, and Severus was looking around frantically. Oh, right. They had to find the Portkey station.

Potter interrupted with very bad grace, but Draco was willing to forgive him in light of what he said. "Unless I miss my guess, the management will be alerting the authorities shortly...so if you want to get out of here without facing charges, a fact about which I wouldn't give two shits if not for Hermione being attached to your sorry self, you'd better come with us."

Which was how they came to be running like mad down the streets of Amsterdam, hoping flying Galleons had knocked the ugly bouncers unconscious.

Harry didn't know why Ron had done what he'd done. He didn't know why Malfoy had done what he'd done. He didn't WANT to know why Remus had done what he'd done. And how he felt about Snape had about been done to death, so he didn't bother rehashing it at the moment. He was too busy doing what *needed* to be done, which was to get all of them the hell out of there, and he wasn't going to look a gift Leprechaun gold shower in the mouth if that provided the necessary diversion.

"Charlie arranged with a friend of his from Bratislava to have a flying carpet ready nearby, since we'd likely miss the late Portkey to Naples and would likely be too..."

"...wasted"...

"...blitzed..."

"...pissed stupid..."

"...to Apparate based on a photo."

"Where is it?"

"Two streets over...there!" Ron's long legs brought him to it first, and he quickly unrolled the carpet.

"Budge up!"

"There's no room to spread out. It was picked with only three in mind."

Harry was frantically looking for something that should have been attached to the front, near the hexagonal shape in the pattern where the pilot was to sit. "Shite! It's supposed to have an automatic pilot spell. Where's the goddamn scroll?"

"Anyone know how to fly this thing manually?"

"Um, I did... once," Remus said. Harry scooted back and shoved him into the pilot's area.

Draco was practically crying. "Hurry up! I think I hear those bouncers!"

With a massive shudder, the carpet bounced into the air, knocking its occupants against each other. Another lurch, and they were rippling awkwardly out of the city under heavy Disillusionment spells.

"Harry?"

"What now, Remus?"

"I **really** don't like Thursdays."

Harry buried his face in his hands. "I don't either, anymore."

Hermione enjoyed walking around with Ginny for a while, not having to discuss the wedding. They were so busy plotting Tonks' kidnapping that the redhead seemed to have forgotten the big event for the moment.

"You know, I think it will be easier to convince Tonks than to kidnap her. We'll just take her out to eat, have a few laughs and get her drinking a bit. Then we'll tell her we'll see her to the Portkey station. When we show her her packed bags and say Remus is waiting for her, she might even think it just slipped her mind. She'll probably thank us for the reminder."

As far as Ginny's plans went, that sounded pretty safe. The original idea of slipping Tonks a Portkey to 'kidnap' her, no matter how well intentioned, had never quite sat well with Hermione.

"All right. Where should we go?"

"I was thinking of trying a new place called The Hippogriff Stable."

"That's a strange name for a restaurant."

Tonks showed up just then, and Ginny was too busy hugging and greeting her to answer.

"Wotcher, Hermione! Done any robe shopping lately?" Tonks was winking and Hermione could feel her face getting hot. Ginny gave them both a strange look.

"Let's eat, shall we?" She hadn't shared that particular embarrassing moment with Ginny (nor with anyone else who hadn't witnessed it) and would rather not change that state of affairs. Still frowning at them a little oddly, Ginny led the way.

"Awfully close to Knockturn Alley, isn't it?" Hermione began to feel a little uneasy about the whole venture. Just because Tonks was an Auror and all three of them were war heroes didn't mean she felt comfortable strolling around the rougher edges with evening fast approaching.

"Eh, well, isn't it a new place just starting out? Probably can't afford the rents in the tonier neighborhoods." Tonks' offhand remark was reassuring, so she kept any further reservations to herself as they entered and took their seats. My... the wait staff seemed to be all male. And well-built males, at that. Somewhat embarrassed, Hermione kept stealing glances at them around the edge of her menu.

"Luna couldn't make it. Said she was feeling a bit under the weather. So, do you see anything you fancy yet?"

Tonks giggled as Hermione felt her face heating again, then realized Ginny was talking about food. "This place doesn't have much of a menu."

"It's more of a club than a restaurant...hence the stage. I thought we could just have a bit of a girls' night out...eat the sort of things we normally don't allow in our diets, get a little buzzed, enjoy the show. That sort of thing."

"Well... I guess that's okay, saving the buzzed part." Hermione still couldn't remember what had happened that time she'd been consoling Harry and they'd had quite a few too many.

Tonks shook an admonishing finger at her. "We're not asking you to get loaded, just a drink or two to relax on. Be a sport."

"Yes, you'll want to have at least one or two drinks, just to **trythese** out." Ginny grinned. The glint in her eyes made Hermione wonder if she was looking at a Polyjuiced Fred or George.

"I snagged samples from one of Fred and George's latest product lines. They haven't gone into large-scale production yet, since this is a pretty complex bit of potions work. But the bugs have been worked out, and let me tell you, this is their most brilliant idea ever." Ginny was positively gushing. She opened the case to reveal a range of small vials.

Bother. Just thinking about Fred and George evidently was dangerous. Tonks looked interested. Hermione felt very, very apprehensive and fingered her wand as she took a closer look.

"Acapulco... Grand Passion... Affair... Angel's Kiss... Monte Carlo... Blue Hawaiian... Casablanca... Golden Daze... Honeymoon... Golden Dream... Kiss in the Dark... Lover's Delight ... Climax? Orgasm?" She looked at Ginny incredulously, unable to finish reading off the labels.

"There's also Sex on the Beach, Sex on the Beach in Winter, Tango, Sloe Comfortable Screw, Snuggler, Wild Fling, and a couple of other travel ones. They're mixers named after Muggle drinks...only instead of just tasting like the drink, they give you a two-to-four-minute daydream based on the drink's name. Just pour a bit into the alcohol of your choice, and bottoms up!"

"Well..." Hermione still hesitated.

"We won't all drink at once, just in case someone needs to perform a counterspell or some such. Like I said, they've already been tested, so they should be quite safe. Sort of like the daydream candies." Ginny added a wink to her suggestive grin.

Tonks laughed, enthusiastically waving the waiter over to order drinks. "Let's not waste any more time, then!"

Hermione decided to play it safe, pouring a vial of 'Tango' into a glass of gillywater. She hesitantly drank a bit of it down.

Severus entwined his fingers with hers and wrapped one arm possessively around her. He almost seemed to push her backwards across the smooth floor with his chest and hips, their feet weaving intricately around each other in a pattern Hermione didn't recognize but which they both seemed to execute flawlessly. He had that gleam in his eye that said, 'Just wait until I get you home, my dear,' and she knew she was answering it with a look of her own. The air was warm, the music more so, and a delicious rose fragrance permeated the air, evoking tropical nights as their faces came closer and closer together...

"Well, don't hold out on us! How was it?"

Tonks and Ginny were gazing at her expectantly from across the table.

She blinked rapidly, wondering where Severus and the orchestra and all those roses had gone. Oh, right...the drink. The daydream.

"Wow. I think Fred and George really have outdone themselves this time. I wonder if Severus would be willing to take tango lessons?"

Ginny managed an amused snort, probably at the thought of Snape dancing. Tonks laughed hysterically. "Me next!" Her hair flickered through several bright, excited color changes as she selected a 'Wild Fling'.

Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all. Hermione staked her claim on 'Blue Hawaii' for her next drink, trying to see which vial Ginny had palmed (fairly certain it must be one of the more risqué selections). She was so busy watching Tonks' face for indications of how she was enjoying her drink that she failed to notice the lights subtly dimming and the activity in the vicinity of the stage.

Ginny knew she was brilliant.

There was no other logical conclusion. Tonks was so happy at this point, they could have told her they were taking her to catch a Portkey to Antarctica and she probably wouldn't have objected. Hermione had freaked out a little when the first dancer came on the stage, but Ginny switched drinks with her (trading the fairly tame 'Golden Daze' in gillywater for 'Grand Passion' in a very strong Russian Tea), which seemed to put her in a much more accepting mood.

Such brilliance deserved another drink. In fact, she might go so far as to say it warranted a nice 'Orgasm'. Ginny was fairly uninhibited, but she didn't quite fancy having Tonks watch her face possibly scrunch up and then laugh at her all night afterwards. Waiting until Tonks was openly ogling and Hermione was covertly studying the second dancer, she dumped the vial in her glass and slugged it down.

"Oh, yeah... so good... Whatever you want, Mistress, just say the word."

"Just lay there and make sure you keep it up, slave." Gods, it felt good to say that! About time she found a man who would get beneath her, where he belonged, and wear that black silk blindfold she'd been saving for a special occasion.

"Yes! Oh, yes, Mistress! Whatever you say!"

Yes... he would give her what she wanted. Or he'd suffer the consequences.

"Mm... You've...pleased me...so...uhh...far. Oh, oh, yes!" Nice body on this one, and he knew how to use it...if his face matched, she'd have to ditch the blindfold before they were through.

"Please, please let me see you, Mistress!" No problem, she thought, panting, ripping the silk away...

"YES! OH, DRACO!"

Ginny didn't need a mirror to know her face was redder than her hair at the moment, for multiple reasons. Terrified, she glanced at her companions. Praise Merlin, they were both still looking at the stage. That settled it. She seriously needed to get out of the office once in a while and get a boyfriend, if her mind couldn't come up with anyone better than her annoying business partner as the object of a potion-induced fantasy.

It was a damned good thing Fred and George hadn't made one of their mixers a 'Screaming Orgasm'.

Then the door opened on some very familiar voices.

Ginny knew her mouth was still open, but she couldn't manage to get control of her jaw. That couldn't be...please, PLEASE, don't let that be...Minerva? Bustling in with...holy Hecate...not Pomona and...

"MUM?"

Tonks and Hermione whipped their heads around in Ginny's direction, then followed her gape-mouthed gaze to the door.

Hermione all but ducked under the table, pretending to do something with her purse. Tonks almost waved them over, but Ginny snagged her arm.

"What's wrong with you?" She kept her voice low only with great effort. It was oh so tempting to shriek at the cheerful, pink-haired maniac just then.

"The more the merrier, right?" Tonks gave her an expansive, deeply inebriated grin.

"Have you lost your Gobstones? We're talking about professors here, not to mention my mum! Would you want *your* mum at a strip club with you?"

Tonks' face went serious right away. "Oh, crap... I can just hear it... 'Nymphadora, what is the fascination here? Don't you think that's really just a bundled-up sock he's thrusting about?'"

Actually, that sounded quite funny to Ginny, but she was trying to make a point about her own mum here, so she restrained her amusement. "Exactly! So, let's try to avoid catching their notice, shall we? In fact, perhaps we'd best go."

Tonks' face got stubborn. "We've only seen two acts, and I haven't finished eating. Plus, there's at least two more drinks I want to try."

Hermione came up from under the table, looking equal parts annoyed, anxious, and slightly resigned. "We should be good for a while longer. There's a spell on the table now that should keep them from recognizing us." It must have been a measure of how much she cared about Tonks taking the Portkey in a good mood that she agreed to stay any longer...covertly enjoying the show or not.

Ginny sighed. She still didn't really want to be in the same space as her mother for this, but if Mum never knew she was there, she could pretend Mum wasn't there, either. She tried to focus on the stage (which wasn't too difficult) and ignore the catcalls from the older witches at the table across the room (which was a bit harder, especially since they seemed on such good terms with their waiter and were keeping him quite busy, bringing a steady stream of drinks).

The current dancer was a tad bit on the short side. Really, he would have only come up to Minerva's nose had they been standing side by side. But he had one heck of a body, for all his modest height, and he was using it to advantage. Until he got a good look at the excited Scotswoman in the corner, that is...

"Mon Dieu! Professor McGonagall!" he exclaimed, in a throaty Parisian accent. He leapt from the stage and strode over to her, going down on one knee to dashingly kiss the back of her hand. "Forgive me, ma belle. My 'eart 'as run away with my 'ead, upon seeing you again."

Minerva blushed slightly and tilted her glasses for a better look. "Do I know ye, laddie?" she asked, with a gesture that looked as if she were trying to still her fluttering heart. It wasn't every day a pocket-sized Adonis in a g-string fell at her feet in worship.

"Would that you did, ma cherie," he moaned feelingly. "My 'eart 'as been longing for you seence I first zaw you during zee Triwizard Tournament. I say to myself, 'Etienne, there is a witch of both great power and great substance.'"

Pomona snorted, and was self-chastised by the burn of the firewhisky exiting her nose. Minerva glared at her, trying to ignore the stares (both incredulous and jealous) of her companions at the table.

"Forgive me, laddie, if I am a little leery of your sincerity... after all, there are younger, prettier birdies in the tree," she said, her voice pleasant but with a crisp edge of skepticism.

He turned soulfully injured looking eyes to her face. "At zee Beauxbatons, I see many beautiful witches... but none with zee grace, zee inner strength, zee commanding presence, of la belle professor of 'Ogwarts. Were I a grown man then, I would have declared my intent to pursue you. But I knew such a dignified and ethical lady as yourself would never deign to notice a mere student in such a way."

The expression on Minerva's face looked dangerously like it meant 'dignity and ethics be damned'.

He leaned in closer and murmured throatily, "I change my focus of study to Transfiguration, in hopes I will impress you someday. But my chance never comes. I try to find a witch to make me forget, but still I dream of those wonderful lips whose every quirk brooks no nonsense..."

Minerva was a nice, practical Scotswoman. A witch with needs, in fact. She wasn't THAT old. So really, who was she to deny such a decent lad his heartfelt request?

"Well...I suppose that means ye can have this dance."

"Go for it, Minerva!" Molly shouted, looking a bit red in the face and decidedly uninhibited.

"Bloody hell," Ginny swore. "Mum's utterly pissed... the world's coming to an end!"

A/N:

'Le Miroir' is my pathetic attempt at a French-ish pun. It means 'the Mirror'. Seeing as how this club is full of desirable witches, I'm sure you can all guess which mirror is being referenced. (Don't look at me like that. I admitted it was pathetic.)

Sorry, Snupin fans...Remus and Tonks are still on. So are Severus and Hermione, what's left of them. Explanations, coming right up!

The bundled-up sock comment was inspired by memories of an episode of 'Designing Women'. My parents used to subject me to the weirdest television programs back when I was young and impressionable.

For those of you familiar with the complete works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle...it was no coincidence that Minerva's new toy-boy is named Etienne Gerard. If you want to know more (and to test for yourself my assertion that Gerard could potentially have inspired Inspector Clouseau) try to scare up a copy of 'The Complete Brigadier Gerard' by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who would doubtless shoot me for nicking the name for this purpose, were he still alive to do so. Especially since I laced the character with a liberal dose of Pepe le Pew.

For the record, I have absolutely nothing against Thursdays. C'mon, really, what can be so bad about the night the Film Week segment airs on 'Life and Times'? (Of course, this only redeems Thursdays for those living within broadcast range of KCET.)

4: Send My Mail to the Barcelona Jail

Chapter 5 of 12

Older witches getting their groove on... young purebloods bonding... oh yes, and speaking of bond--there is a warning for drug abuse. But it's not really abuse--more like annoyance. No actual drugs were harmed in the writing of this chapter. Are we having fun yet?

Disclaimer: I don't make one nickel off this balderdash. My recompense comes from the reports of spit takes as a result of reading it.

Chapter 4: Send My Mail to the Barcelona Jail

Snape realized there were more than five passengers on the carpet when something poked him in the back. Something... bamboo-like.

"Moto?" he whispered.

"Here, Snape-san. I hope I did not cause undue harm with the leprechaun gold, but I was given instructions to see that you and your companion were safe, and it was all I could think of at the time."

The knowledge that he probably owed his meager good luck during that bizarre event to Fletcher's smelly little apprentice was rather galling. "It was adequate. If you could get me home, that would be more than adequate."

"That is not possible until you part company with Hermione-san's friends. I cannot reveal my presence to anyone else unless authorized by my Master. Malfoy-san must be unconscious or unaware that I am transporting you."

Snape figured that wouldn't be difficult, what with the state Draco was in. Speaking of which...

"Did you add something to our drinks?" Snape knew that **two**normal drinks were definitely not enough to render him this placid.

"Just a substance used by fairies to ensure harmonious interactions."

This was not particularly reassuring. He would have inquired further, but Potter was looking at him oddly. Snape retaliated with criticism. When in doubt, fall back on reflexes. "I hope you have something with which to sober Lupin up. I'd hate to add falling from an unhealthy altitude to my list of recreational activities tonight."

Potter gave him an exceedingly evil look, but managed to find a vial in one of his pockets. He took a small sip and then gave the rest to Lupin, who managed to spill most of it.

"Hey, Harry, got any more of that?" Weasley sounded the worse for wear...looked it, too. Green face and red hair are not a flattering combination, no matter what the color wheel might suggest.

"You were the one who said you didn't want anything interfering with your 'buzz.'" Under other circumstances, Snape would have regarded Potter's hostile tone towards Weasley with malicious glee. At the moment, it just made him worry that Weasley might vomit on all of them, which was a layer of charm this expedition truly did not need.

The polite little whisper met his ears again. "Do not be concerned about falling, Snape-san. I have made the carpet safe for all of you."

He huffed and resigned himself to clinging to this flying bit of upholstery until they reached wherever the hell those three were going. He was so tired that he took Moto at his word, to the point of dozing slightly. Snape wasn't sure how long he was out, but Potter's yell jerked him back to awareness.

"What the hell? We're in France!"

"Um, are you sure?"

Snape looked out over the countryside to confirm Potter's annoyed assessment of their situation. "That's Avignon. Last I checked, Avignon was in France. Bloody hell, why don't we just turn around and head home?"

"Brilliant idea...just what we need to finish off the night, being arrested by the Department of Magical Transportation for flying a carpet into British airspace. Look, we'll turn and head for Italy, then you'll be free to Portkey back."

Snape didn't need Potter to actually be right about something, on top of everything else. He decided to take his annoyance out on Lupin. "I thought you said you could fly this thing!"

"Actually, I said I flew one once. It was years ago, and, erm, the landing bit didn't go as best it might have..."

"Hecate's tits! I'm going to end up in pieces over Provence! Who will take care of Mother?" Draco sobbed loudly and messily.

"Hey, a little less emoting from the Slytherin Drama Queen club...the man's trying to fly! Snape, will you get that flask away from him before he drinks himself into oblivion? Unless you'd rather be in charge of keeping him from rolling off the carpet?" Harry yelled in his best 'I'm an Auror, damn it, and I'm handling this emergency' voice.

The fact that Potter had been the first to notice that Draco was in possession of Lucius' self-replenishing flask irked Snape no end, even as he sensibly followed the suggestion. "The damage has been done, Potter! I suggest you see to your sodden sidekick to make certain anything he needs to regurgitate goes over the fringe instead of into our faces!"

"Harry, I f-feel like crap." Weasley was whimpering.

"Join the club, Ron. At least you're still pissed out of your mind."

The redhead's expression of misery apparently affected Draco on a deep emotional level. Or maybe it was the loss of the flask. He cried harder and buried his face in Snape's shirt.

Severus was having none of that...all the 'Scourgifys' in the world would not efface his fury at this point if the record pest puked on him. "Get off me, you huge crybaby. Some days, I swear I only refrain from hexing you out of sheer force of habit."

Draco cringed away and wailed miserably.

"It's-it's okay, Malfoy. Don' know why's 'e's gotta be such a git to you," Weasley slurred, shooting a dirty look over his shoulder at Snape. He patted the sniffing Slytherin's shoulder in an uncharacteristic show of sympathy.

Draco raised his pale, watery eyes to Ron's face in surprise and gratitude. "They jusht don't undershtand. It's different, being a pureblood."

"Tell me 'bout it. Sometimes they talk 'bout us like we're just comic relief: 'Oh, lookit the clueless wizard don' know what a fellytone, erm, tellyfone, is.'"

"S'damn right. You know, you're all right, Weashley old chap," Draco sniffed as he wrapped his arm appreciatively around Ron's shoulder.

After a moment of inebriated surprise, Weasley decided to accept his new confidant's gesture graciously. "Thanks, Malfoy. Guess I see why Gin can stan' you."

Draco sighed mistily. "Oh, Ginny! Sheez so nische... so priddy. You're lucky, Weashley... having a lil shister. Being an only shild's a bitsch... Can't blame anyone elsh' anything..."

"Never thought of it that way. But bein' the 'most youngest sucks cock. Ever'body else's done ever'thing better, and first...I'd bloody well have to become Minister of Magic to compete."

"But...but you're *famous!* Quidditch, and all that."

This was getting saccharine. Moderate alcohol consumption or not, Snape was going to vomit if he had to listen to any more of this.

"For the love of Merlin, could you two please cease and desist on the inter-house love fest?"

Potter shot Snape an ironic look across the carpet. "YOU started it."

Snape opened his mouth to argue when he realized what, exactly, Potter was referencing with that remark. "Shite," he said, shaking his head, eyes squashed shut. *Perhaps if I avoid looking at them, I can pretend they aren't there.*

Lupin started giggling uncontrollably. "You blokes are funny," he said between snickers.

"SHUT UP AND FLY!" Severus and Harry both yelled, just in time for Remus to avoid a bell tower.

Snape wondered why he kept opening his eyes. Every time he did, he found an excellent reason to close them again, as he did now*Do not lose it, Severus*, he silently lectured himself. *One Slytherin having a breakdown in front of the bloody damned Gryffindors is enough of an embarrassment for one night.*

Judging by the fact that he hadn't been able to entirely understand the orders being shouted to them with the aid of 'Sonorus,' they were in Catalonia. Not terribly deep into Spain, but also a long, long way from having corrected their course and being on the way to Italy. Understanding the exact words was completely unnecessary, in light of that fact that the orders were obviously being shouted by some form of law enforcement, and the intention was clearly for them to land immediately and drop their wands. And he wished fervently that he knew what Spanish law had to say about flying carpets... and possession of certain potion ingredients.

"Draco, please tell me you didn't keep all the purchases on your person?"

"Why, 'course I did, Sev'rus. I jus' Reducio'd 'em nischelee down into my pockets."

"You didn't get everything on the list, did you?" he pleaded.

"But I shurtainly did, oh yessir! Wormwood, check, essence of Ab-abi-something, check, Cannabis sattiva, check, 'cept they din' have nuff sativa so I got indica, too..."

"Oh..."

"...SHITE!!!"

"Exactly!"

"How do you use that stuff and still manage to be so uptight?" Harry couldn't stop himself from asking.

"It's a bloody potion ingredient, you fool!" Snape hissed. Addressing Draco, he asked, "You still have the apothecary's receipt, haven't you? Please, Draco?"

"Umm. Was it that lil' slip of paper or that one?"

"Will you HURRY?"

Lupin, finally having landed the carpet without killing any of them (miracle of miracles) whispered, "Slip it to me, Draco. I'll tell them it's mine. I have a prescription."

The whole night was almost worthwhile to see that expression on Potter's face. Almost.

"What? Remus, you...you use drugs?"

"Why am I not surprised? That much mellowness could never be achieved by chocolate alone."

Lupin ignored Snape's remarks. "It's not like that, Harry. It's just now and then for the pain from the transformation."

"Likely story..." Snape couldn't help himself. Something in him insisted on muttering over Potter's continued expressions of disbelief.

"I can't BELIEVE this!"

"Actually, I can't, either. I'm sure I would have smelled something..."

"I never said I smoked it."

"HA! The chocolate! Oh, if only I had known!" Snape sounded like a maniac about now, and didn't care. He was probably having hysterics. Oh, what fun.

"Remus?!"

"It wasn't exactly in the chocolate. It was in the brownies I made with the chocolate. Severus, you're being ridiculous! I'd never have given it to the children!"

"Sev'rus? You okay? You're soundin' kinna funny..."

Potter was making a show of laying down his wand for the benefit of the border patrol or whomever it was that was approaching them. "My world is turning inside out. One of my best friends uses drugs, and I'm being subjected to a giggling Snape. Can this get any stranger?"

Weasley turned to him with an expression that managed to be both cross-eyed and patronizing. "And people accuse ME of being less than bright. NEVER ask that question, Harry."

As they were taken into custody, Snape heard that little whisper again. "I will handle it, Snape-san. Please do not worry."

It took a tremendous effort on his part. But Severus managed not to cry.

Lupin shook his head and remarked, with far too much seriousness, "We really should have just smoked it."

In short order, they were in a holding cell in a Spanish jail, apparently being held on suspicion of smuggling potentially hazardous potions ingredients, flying a carpet without a license or proper clearances, and possession of an improperly registered flying carpet. Remus had a vague awareness of all of this, but the next thing he perceived clearly was Harry's voice, arguing.

"You can't make bad things happen just by asking if..."

"DON'T, Potter. Just don't. It flies in the face of logic. But it really happens. Don't make this any worse."

Remus dimly recalled some pretty girls on a stage of some sort, but then he drank something and it was all quite blurry thereafter. All he knew was he was sitting in what appeared to be a jail cell. Harry and Severus were looking at him oddly, Draco and Ron were acting like some sort of badly enunciating mutual admiration society, and he would be happy if his head would fall off his shoulders about now; once it hit the floor and quit rolling, it might stop pounding. It would also save him wondering how this particular combination of wizards all ended up in one place.

"Um... can anyone tell me what happened?"

"You mean, you don't remember? The club? The flying carpet?"

Flying carpet? Now Remus was really confused. "Afraid not. Where are we?"

"Guests of the magistrate in charge of the wizarding enclave of Barcelona, Spain at the moment. I imagine our Consulate has been contacted by now, so hopefully we'll get out of here without anyone we know having to find out about this little adventure." This last was from Snape, who was hunched in a corner and looking more Snape-ish than usual.

"I still want to know how you're so sure that they'll contact the Consulate tonight." Harry was pacing now. Never a good sign.

"Not that I would expect you to be paying attention, Potter...but the jailer did say something to that effect. He may speak Catalan, but with an adequate knowledge of Spanish, it's possible to understand the thrust of what he's saying."

Harry gave Snape a dark look that expressed his doubt that anything about Snape was adequate. Remus reflected on the irony of the fact that Harry had probably learned it from Snape, and wished he could share his insight without either (or both) of them exacting retribution.

The sound of footsteps interrupted his musings. The source of said sound rounded the corner.

"Oh no. Lugh's nuts, no. Please don't tell me the British Wizarding Consul is..."

Harry interrupted Snape. "Okay. I won't tell you. You can see him for yourself, if you'll take your hands off your face."

Remus managed a weak smile, not sure if he was pleased or otherwise that it didn't cause his head to fall off. "Hello, Neville. How are Lola and Alicia?" He really would have liked to visit the young man under more auspicious circumstances.

"Hello, Remus. They're quite well, thanks. And Harry, Ron...Malfoy?! SNAPE?!!!!" The expression on his face as he looked from one occupant of the cell to another was quite hilarious, as shock warred with amusement. He finally settled his gaze on Harry, the one person in the cell apparently not confused (or, in Snape's case, overtly hostile).

Harry sighed very deeply. His expression looked like twenty miles of bad road on a rainy night. "Long story, Neville. Very, very long."

"What's Longbottom doing here? Damn... you're bigger'n Goyle. More mus-muk-you got more muscles, too. Quite 'mazing, really."

Neville spared Draco an amused glance and shook his head. "Hello, Malfoy. You know, I think you just might be bearable when you are utterly pissed."

"Same to you, Longbottom," Draco said, his head listing to one side and an amiable expression flitting across his face.

"If only we'd known, we would have found a way to keep you thoroughly blitzed starting first year. It would have saved a lot of people a lot of aggravation." He grinned towards Harry, who snorted. At least Neville was bringing Harry out of full-blown sulk into mere irritation. Too bad there was no known way, short of judicious application of Hermione's company, to do the same with Severus.

Snape fumed. "Oh, get on with it, Longbottom!"

Remus would forever treasure the shocked expression on Severus' face when he realized Neville (now as tall as Snape) wasn't backing down. "Respectfully, sir," he said quietly, "you'll not be getting back to Hermione any time soon unless you calm down."

Severus continued to stare in shock, with most of the other occupants of the cell accompanying him in the expression. Draco looked confused...and maybe a little mournful at the vague realization he seemed to be missing something. "When did you become resistant to intimidation?" Snape finally asked.

Neville straightened, looked Snape in the eye, and said, "I survived the war. I avenged my parents. I adjusted to life without my leg, and without many of the people and things I used to hold dear. But above all, neither you nor anyone else can frighten me anymore, because..." he paused for breath, producing unintentional dramatic effect..."I have a two-year-old."

Remus didn't realize he was missing what Neville had to say about the magistrate. He didn't care that Severus was going into death glare mode. That was damned funny, and he was going to laugh at it.

Even if his head failed to thank him for it later.

Neville Longbottom winced a little as he stood. The old-fashioned prosthetic leg still twinged at the joint now and then. Perhaps one day, he'd allow it to be replaced with a fancy modern one that was indistinguishable from the real thing. For now, he'd keep it in memory of old Mad-Eye.

It wasn't unusual to be dragged out of his comfortable bed at all sorts of odd hours, either by his child or his job. As a legal consultant for the Foreign Office in Magical Barcelona, he'd lost count of the number of times he'd sent drunken countrymen home after helping them make amends for accidents, insults, and incidents of disturbing the peace. But the look on the night secretary's face told him that he was in for a definite variation on the theme this time.

Awaiting him in the conference room, looking for all the world like a well-mannered but exceedingly ugly toddler, was... something. It vaguely resembled a house-elf, with a rag around its waist and a handkerchief on its head. The body looked blurry somehow, almost as if it were Disillusioned. It started to bow, evidently thought better of it, then gazed at him beseechingly.

"Sir, I am Moto the... house-elf. My Master asked that I look after two wizards, S...Mr. Snape and Mr. Malfoy. They made a journey tonight, which went badly awry, and are now in jail with several friends of Hermione-san. I will be in ever so much trouble if I cannot get them all home safely by morning, since this would interfere with Mr. Snape marrying Hermione. My Master is very keen that this should happen on schedule."

If this thing was a house-elf, Neville was the Minister of Magic. Unless he very much missed his guess, the faint swampy odor, manner of address, and attempt to bow meant it was a Kappa, of all things. Still, he'd never met such a polite little creature, and the story was worth checking on, even if it proved to be an involved practical joke.

"I think I can manage to help your friends. But I'd like you to repeat the names...for the record." The small being complied cheerfully.

This was better than Neville could have imagined. It was obvious from the moment he reached the jail that Moto spoke true...and it was so amazing, he really didn't need to feign shock, despite having been told whom to expect beforehand. He was so amused that he refrained from baiting them at all. No shame in keeping them in mild suspense, though; he also refrained from telling them that his father-in-law was the magistrate-on-call that night and there was, therefore, no real chance of them being detained any longer than was necessary to pay a few fines.

It also didn't bother him that, shows of gratitude aside, even as good a friend as Ron still underestimated him once in a while. "You realize we're never going to live this down. We've all just been rescued... by Neville."

"Oh, I'll be discreet. I can empathize... I have a lady witch to whom I must answer. The records will be sealed, and the magistrate was kind enough to authorize minor Obliviates for the officers who booked you tonight. Nice glamour, by the way, Harry. But, gentlemen...you DO owe me." And with a beaming smile, he led them to the Floo so they could reach the Consulate's Portkey room.

"Legally speaking, I'm only supposed to send you home. But Merlin knows, poor Remus could use a break, and from what you've told me, this certainly wasn't his fault. I think I can talk the transportation clerk into making an extra Portkey to Naples and then going on a long coffee break until you're all well away. But please...try not to do this again, okay?" Neville smiled benevolently at everyone, especially at Snape. He couldn't help himself. It wasn't his fault that said smile caused Snape to acquire the expression of someone who had just sniffed a pitcher of bad cream. Briefly, Neville wondered what passed for domestic tranquility in a house with two people who always needed to be right. Hermione had never taken kindly to events not going precisely her way, either.

He knew he'd be borrowing his father-in-law's Pensieve. The sheepish looks on Harry, Ron, and Remus' faces alone were priceless. Draco looking like a lost little boy who's just been told his Mummy is on the way, and Snape looking as if he might die of sheer embarrassment at any second, were simply the icing on a very rich cake. He saw them off, then made his way back to the Floo and home.

Lola snuggled against Neville as he climbed back into bed. "More of your countrymen getting into mischief?"

"Not just countrymen... Some old friends and schoolmates." He paused quite a while before continuing, long enough that she almost fell asleep again. "Remember the 'clumsy' Death Eater from the attack on St. Mungo's? The tall, thin one who bumped into the other, so that the Slicing Hex aimed at me took my leg instead of my life?"

"Por supeusto. I always wondered who it could have been, and if he had some sort of forgiveness for his other deeds because he saved you, however unintentionally."

"It wasn't unintentional, querida. I know who it was... and I happen to know that he was rewarded. *Or will be, by next Saturday*, Neville thought as he drifted off to sleep.

Hermione thought that things were getting just a tad bit out of hand, and wasn't shy about saying so.

Reggie had to admit she had something of a point. Whoever had developed the idea of group participation or had coined the phrase 'let it all hang out' certainly did not have Minerva in mind. Or Molly. Definitely not Pomona. It didn't matter that they were in the back of the room and theoretically out of sight if one kept one's eyes carefully riveted to the stage. Ginny didn't dare exercise that sensible option for fear her mother was doing something vaguely adulterous back there. Reg understood her motivation, but for fuck's sake, why did she feel the need to report what she saw to the rest of her table? And why didn't witches' clubs have similar 'hands-off' policies as wizards' clubs?

This caused the Jarvey to ponder the whole mystery of why humans created and patronized such establishments in the first place. It was like going to a restaurant where you could only smell and look at the food.

Hermione dived for her purse under the table again. Ever since she'd discovered Reggie was hiding down there, she'd been checking in for moral support every few minutes.

"Reggie, do something!" she hissed.

"What the fuck am I supposed to do? They aren't in danger of hurting anything but their dignity, which by my estimates hurtled out the door like it was kicked by a buggered Centaur about twenty minutes ago or more. Despite Ginny's shit fit, her mum ain't even *bending* any wedding vows. And they aren't hurting anyone else. Injured

sensibilities don't count," she added at the look on Hermione's face.

"What about extreme psychological trauma?" Hermione moaned.

"Have another drink, mija," Reggie said. "And get you and yours out of here as fast as you can." Hermione grimaced and sat up again. Reg hoped she would heed the advice, as it was obvious things were going further south based on the conversation filtering down through the tablecloth.

"Mione, I need to go to the loo."

"I'm not stopping you, Tonks."

"I feel a lil' wobbly. I'm not sure I'll make it on my own. Please?"

"Ginny?"

"I don't know the spell you're using to keep them from noticing us. Unless you want to blow our cover or chance Disillusionment being enough to keep Wobbly Wilma here out of sight, you're nominated."

"Okay, but after this, we're LEAVING. You've eaten, tried *five* more of those bloody drink mixers, and this stopped being fun as soon as Minerva and her Gallic Romeo started playing Tonsil Quidditch back there."

Tonks whined a little. Reggie couldn't tell if this was from extreme intoxication, petulance, or painful images evoked by the words 'Minerva' and 'Tonsil Quidditch.'"

Hermione ducked under the table for her purse. "Don't worry, I've got you and the klutzy bint covered. As long as you can avoid crashing into their table, you should be fine," Reggie tried to reassure her.

Apparently, that reassurance was insufficient. "Considering Tonks, that's going to require a miracle."

Reggie growled. "Okay, I'll escort both of you. So long as you're willing to take the chance of a run-in with my seriously fucked plumbing karma, that is."

Tonks apparently also had some karmic issues regarding plumbing. All those drinks probably hadn't helped. Reggie and Hermione had to shore her up with various stabilizing spells just to keep her from falling in.

By the time they exited the lav, angry feminine yells could be heard from the main room. One of the voices was readily identifiable as Ginny's.

"Crap," Hermione muttered, utterly out of character for her and symptomatic of just how out-of-sorts she was at this point. She tried to hustle Tonks along faster, but only succeeded in tripping them both to the floor and ripping her robe. "Fuck!"

Reggie went into super-protective mode. If Hermione was stealing her lines, this party was ever-so-fucking over. With a flick of her tail, she set them both safely on their feet and steadied them all the way back to the main room.

Ginny was confronting Molly, Minerva was having some exceedingly sharp words with a witch who appeared to be the manager, and her toy-boy was trying to talk over all of their voices in a rant consisting partially of heavily accented English and partially of very profane French. Pomona was clearly enjoying both shows.

"Mum, I can't BELIEVE this!"

"Ginny, sweetheart, it's the thing to do here."

"You're a married woman, for Merlin's sake!"

"So are a lot of women in here!"

"Yes, but none of *them* is my Mum!"

"What happened?" Reggie spared a worried glance for Hermione, whose voice sounded rather traumatized. She'd turned pale, no doubt imagining that Ginny was raking Molly over the coals for engaging in some permutation on a lap dance.

Molly turned towards the sound of the question...albeit unsteadily. "Oh... hello, Hermione! And... Nymphadora, so nice to see you!" The words came out fairly clearly, but from the glazed look on her face, there was no doubt about it...Molly Weasley was stinking drunk. "I was... just tipping the waiter."

"Did you have to put the tip **there**?"

Tonks started giggling. "You know, you're sounding like Ron about now, Ginny."

Molly was escorted out, still complaining. Hermione waved halfheartedly at Sprout who had the audacity to wink at her. Minerva continued arguing the apparent termination of Monsieur Gerard's employment, too deeply buried in righteous indignation to notice anyone or anything else.

'Bloody hell' was the least of the expletives Ginny employed. Reggie was impressed.

"Shite...shite...FUCKING shite...got to get Mum home... wash her up... sober her up... maybe see if I can get her bright enough to 'Oblivate' me... make sure Dad never, ever, EVER hears about this massive pile of steaming centaur crap... and still fucking well have to go to the office in the morning... no Oblivate then, sodding, bloody, arse-fucking hell..."

They hustled their way towards The Leaky Cauldron, one of the few places that would still have an open Floo at this hour. No way they were going to try to Apparate to the station. Ginny started making hesitant noises about this. Hermione waved her off. "Do what you have to do. I'll get Tonks to the Portkey station."

Ginny sagged with relief. "I owe you."

"No kidding."

"Can we meet Saturday? I think I'll need someone to help me get over tonight. I can never, EVER talk about this with any of my brothers. Oh, and don't forget, the rehearsal is Tuesday."

Hermione sighed. "I'm working all weekend. How about tomorrow afternoon? If I'm still alive, I might have coffee with you instead of killing you."

"Fair enough. I should be free after two." Ginny slunk in, trying to hide the fact that she was holding Molly up. With a little silent help from Reggie, Hermione did the same for Tonks. Knowing how little Hermione liked Floo travel, Reggie discreetly 'poofed' the three of them to their destination just before the network kicked in.

Not that it seemed to help. 'Poofing' didn't cause nausea, yet Tonks still looked like she was on the verge of losing whatever residue was left in her stomach. Hermione escorted her to the proper key, trying to hold her at arm's length and tuck her bag safely into her hands, all under the quizzical eye of the Station Master. Ginny had been right about one thing...enough drinks, and Tonks had no clue that she hadn't been planning on going anywhere.

"Thanks Hermione... you're a real mate... don't know how I can repay you..."

Tonks proceeded to make the first installment by keeling over and vomiting on the hem of Hermione's robes, just before the Portkey hauled her off to Italy.

Snape was idly debating with himself whether viewing Potter's trauma from a front row seat outweighed the utter mortification of being bailed out by Neville Longbottom. The fact that he could consider this so calmly was further impetus for finding out what the Kappa had spiked their drinks with. Say what he might about Motoyoshi (and, Snape being Snape, he would), at least he was good for transportation. Snape doubted he could have Apparated on his own.

The substance was even powerful enough to impede him from feeling properly cranky about having to nursemaid Draco yet again. The little prat was the one hosting the party... he ought to have been carrying a thoroughly drunk Snape home and tucking him safely into bed, instead of the other way around.

It made Snape feel perfectly fine about the fact that there was no Hangover Relief Potion around for Draco to take in the morning. He'd carefully gone over the suite to make certain. (Why the little ponce needed that much room just to sleep was beyond Severus.) After all, it would be dreadfully unfair to leave the lad without any souvenir whatsoever of their expedition. Said expedition was finally coming to an end with the help of the polite little swamp menace. Snape might have been happier to see his miserable house before, but he couldn't think of when. That happiness vanished with a painful crash.

"Fuck!" he yelled, tripping and landing face-first on the stoop. He'd managed to go all night, across most of a continent without getting anything worse than ripped clothing (and getting rather ripped, himself), and he gave himself a black eye on his own front step.

"May I help you up, Snape-san?" Motoyoshi asked solicitously.

"I think I'll just play it safe from here." Snape crawled cautiously up the steps and fumbled with the wards. Moto intervened and let him in. He grunted a sort of thank you and pulled himself across the threshold, simply sitting by the door because he lacked the energy at the moment to do anything else.

Moto sat beside him, feeling he must make some positive contribution to his temporary charge's peace of mind. "Well, you know what Reggie-san says..."

Snape lowered his head to his hands. *Oh, the joy...more gems from the Fairy God-Jarvey trove of wisdom* "The Quotable Jarvey says many things. Is this one repeatable?" he asked, voice muffled.

"Any party you can walk away from...wasn't much of a party."

Severus never had a chance to respond to that, for Hermione tripped over his legs in the dark and fell to the floor with a resounding crash that made Tonks look like a prima ballerina.

Hermione pulled herself into a sitting position on the opposite side of the entry. She looked at Severus' developing shiner; his dirty, ripped shirt; and scruffy traces of facial hair. He, in turn, took in her torn and stained robes; cut lip; and haggard, circles-under-the-eyes mien.

Hermione broke the silence first.

In a very small voice, she said, "I promise I'll never ask...if you promise the same."

"Fine. I'm hoping I won't remember this by morning. I mean, tomorrow...whenever," he replied. His voice was as ragged as the rest of him at the moment.

The Fairy God-Creatures said nothing. They thought it prudent not to remind their charges of any role they themselves may have played in the night's festivities.

"Nice how well we agree on these things." Leaning on each other, they managed to gain their feet and stagger upstairs to bed. A decent bath would have to wait. A couple of halfhearted 'Scourgify's' and they both fell into bed fully dressed, without so much as turning down the blanket.

Motoyoshi and Reggie gazed up after them, then looked at each other.

"I am thinking, Reggie-san, that few people involved in tonight's festivities will be making eye contact with each other tomorrow."

"I'm thinking, Moto, that that's a bloody understatement. Do I dare ask what the hell happened on your end?"

"I think it really went rather well, all things considered. Snape-San and his pale young friend Malfoy-san wished to visit a place of entertainment in the red-light district of Wizarding Amsterdam. I accompanied them, invisible as per regulations. I resolved to heed your instructions regarding their happiness, safety, and reasonably good behavior. So when Potter-san and his friends arrived at the same establishment, I took steps to ensure that they would interact harmoniously."

"Ohh, crap. I think I see where this is going..."

"They ordered alcoholic beverages, which I supplemented with a few special ingredients of my own."

"PLEASE tell me you used a nice, safe, Calming Draught, I'm begging you."

"But, Reggie-san, that would be untruthful. I must report my activities!"

"Bloody hell. I knew it couldn't just be a Calming Draught. Report away, and may God and Mab have mercy on our souls."

"I simply added a mixer. Veela wine, leprechaun whisky, some of that saké from the never-ending keg my grandfather got from O-Jurojin-Sama..."

"You didn't give them Faerie Good Will Punch!" Reggie shrieked. "Oh, with *that* saké, no less! Of course it wouldn't be shirosaké, oh, no..."

"Shirosaké is for children, Reggie-san. They were all of age."

"Only chronologically. Do I dare ask what happened next?"

"Well, they were all quite peaceful, and actually getting along rather well. Lupin-san was, unfortunately, getting along a little too well with Snape-san, or at least trying to."

"Holy crap! Lupin was there? You gave Good Will Punch to a werewolf? Do you know what sort of effect it has on lycanthropes?"

"Yes, I am aware that this combination of magical liquors temporarily reverses a lycanthrope's sexual orientation. But I was not aware at the time that Lupin-san was a lycanthrope. In light of the fact that Snape-san seemed less than sanguine about Lupin-san's display of affections..."

"You are plainly bucking for the Big Fat Fucking Understatement of the Year award, my young protégé."

"...I thought it prudent to continue administering the mixture until the party broke up and everyone went their separate ways. After all, it did seem to be preventing any unseemly outbreaks of violence. I was briefly distracted by a wayward bug..."

"Crap, crap, crap," Reggie kept murmuring, like a mantra against nervous breakdown.

"...and returned to find the elixir prompted remarkable boldness in the young flame-headed wizard. He mounted the stage and became extremely friendly with the dancer. While she did not seem averse to his attentions, it was quite against club policy to do such things outside the private rooms."

"No shite," Reggie said dazedly, fighting avidly to avoid picturing Ronald Weasley trying to convert vertical mambo to horizontal in front of a live audience.

"Malfoy-san seemed to find this quite entertaining and intervened on the flame-haired one's behalf. The werewolf was by then declaring his undying devotion to Snape-san."

"Wish to hell I'd seen that," Reggie said, her eyes glazing at the thought of missed mischief.

"At which point Snape-san and Potter-san mutually agreed to defer hostilities in the interest of getting themselves and their compatriots out of the establishment intact. I thought it prudent to create a small diversion towards that end."

Reggie simply buried her face in her paws.

"Oh, no, Reggie-san. I did well this time. Leprechaun gold shower, with Bludger effect. The bouncers were quite occupied attempting to beat coins away from their faces, and Snape-san and Potter-san were able to escort their friends out the door whilst the rest of the patrons and entertainers were picking up coins."

Reg looked up in amazement. "That wasn't half bad, Moto. It may even make up for the fact that you used a mind-altering substance on a whole mess of wizards."

"Oh, dear. Does Good Will Punch count as a mind-altering substance?"

"Do Grindylows piss in a pond? There are some wizards who would sell their firstborn to have a trip on that particular broom, Moto, baby."

"There were no brooms involved; however, Lupin-san did attempt to pilot a flying carpet. Sadly, he was not as proficient in that skill as he believed or perhaps he simply has a very poor sense of direction. Ultimately we ended up in Spain, where the authorities looked askance at the registration of our vehicle and, under the circumstances, were rather suspicious of the intended use of certain potions ingredients on Malfoy-san's person."

"Which ingredients would have... Oh, no... Don't tell me you wankers were arrested for non-Potions use of marijuana!"

"Just Malfoy-san and Lupin-san. And it was suspicion of sale for clandestine purposes."

Reggie was about to sigh in relief when he added, "The rest were arrested for aiding and abetting. Lupin-san was likewise cited for operating an improperly registered flying carpet. I was unable to provide assistance in the form of diversionary effects at that time, owing to the fact that the Spanish authorities employ anti-Dangerous Magical Creature detectors at the border. Lupin-san set them off by piloting the carpet. Had I performed any magic at that moment, my cover would have been, as you say, blown."

"It just boggles the mind how they could consider a nice little Kappa like you a dangerous magical creature."

"Fortunately, I was able to remain invisible and undetected throughout the incarceration process, and managed to reach the British Wizarding Consulate. You will be pleased to know that I was able to quickly secure their release due to the intervention of a fairly well placed official named Longbottom. I regret to say the carpet and cannabis were retained by the authorities, but the fines have been paid, and once the owners of the carpet are recompensed, there should be no further repercussions from the matter."

The Jarvey stared at her apprentice. "Moto, you are one crazy wanker. But plainly, all hope is not lost. I think I can pass off the Punch as a 'mood enhancer' in my report."

The Kappa bowed, managing to remember just in time not to bend low enough to dump all of his vital supply of swamp water from the depression on top of his head. He only had to top it off with a splash from his enchanted hishaku rather than replenish the lot. "Arigato, Reggie-san. I am most grateful, as always."

"As always?" she asked.

"Of course. I am aware that I am, as you say, 'a major fuck-up.' I feel quite certain that I only remain in the service because of your carefully worded progress reports. My gratitude is most profound. I really am a disgraceful Kappa, so I do not know what will become of me if I fail to become a Fairy Godfather."

Reggie cleared her throat and shuffled her silvery paws. "You're a good kid, Moto. You just... just need to work on control, that's all. And judgment, and... well, it takes a while. All I know is, you can't go back to being a regular Kappa. They'd eat you alive in the swamp."

"An unfortunately apt assessment, Reggie-san," Motoyoshi said in agreement.

Rita Skeeter shrieked, certain her eyes were being gouged out.

It took her a few moments to realize that her eyes were undamaged and were not, in fact, leaving her skull. The piercing pain was the result of the morning sun striking her half-opened eyelids with merciless intensity. She flung one arm up to shield herself, only to discover said arm was cold, stiff, and smelling badly of ill-kept back alley.

"Wha...?" Her attempt to question the universe at large as to where she was and how she got there was cut off at the insistence of her larynx, which apparently contained a quantity of sticky sand at the moment. She settled for easing her sore body and woozy head up into a more or less sitting position. It was kind of the wall to help.

Something was very wrong about all of this. Last she remembered, she'd been in insect form, and she hadn't been eating sand. In fact, she'd been hot on the trail of a big story. Something to do with that werewolf that Harry Potter was friends with. At least, she thought that was it. If she wasn't mistaken, the word wedding had come up. But it was all too vague for even someone with her talents to forge into a story.

No matter...she could fix that. She wasn't the most famous investigative reporter in the wizarding world for nothing. Well, maybe she wasn't the most famous this exact second, but she had been, and would be again! The wedding thing must be a clue. The first thing she needed to do was poke around the Records Office to see if any familiar names came up.

It finally dawned on her that she could hear people speaking near the mouth of the alley. She squinted around looking for the speakers and realized two things: one, she had no clue where she was; and two, wherever this place might be, no one was speaking English.

Okay... perhaps the first thing she needed to do was find Britain.

Author's Notes:

Spanish Vocabulary:

Por supuesto: of course

Querida: dear

(I imagine Neville speaks Spanish with a very cute accent. I also imagine Lola had a lot of fun teaching him. Did I mention I'm in love with Neville?)

Japanese Vocabulary:

Saké: I know this is usually called rice 'wine', but would be more accurate to call it 'rice beer', since it is brewed from grain with the aid of yeast and other microorganisms (koji).

Shirosaké: literally, "white saké". Very low alcohol content. Children are allowed a tiny cup of it on certain holidays.

O-Jurojin-Sama: A kind old man who bribed his way across an infamous marsh by giving the chief Kappa a little never-emptying keg of saké. Little did the Kappas in question know that Jurojin was better known as one of the Seven Gods of Good Luck. Note that both 'O' and 'sama' are designations of great honor, as opposed to 'san,' which is just polite.

Arigato: Thank you (just in case there was someone out there who hadn't heard it before)

I thought Remus and Tonks might enjoy releasing their 'inner goofballs' for a little romp. Did we all have fun, or what?

I know Lugh is not pronounced 'lug', but I solemnly swear I cannot resist atrocious word play.

Arigato to Reuters, for putting the article on the internet about how the FCO (UK Foreign Office) was no longer amused at having to bail out and send home (gratis) ill-behaved British bachelors who got into trouble at stag parties on the continent. That article sent a vague idea into really high gear, and gave me the golden opening for Neville to charge in and save the day. (We will now pause while dracontia has another Neville-adoration moment.)

Do you have any idea how tactful Tempest of Dreams is? Some of my paragraphs are the verbal equivalent of 'find Waldo,' yet she manages to point me in the direction of clarity without ever once calling me any bad names. Though Reggie loves suggesting a few fitting ones.

5: Can We Just Skip the Morning After?

Chapter 6 of 12

The morning after has arrived, with assorted revelations. Ginny gets an eyeful, then an earful. A peaceful interlude is interrupted, a heinous plot is hatched, and dinner is served.

Disclaimer: Cor! You've discovered my secret. It's all a fiendish plot to take over the Potterverse by insidious laughing spells. You don't mind, do you?

Chapter 5: Can We Just Skip the Morning After?

Ginny woke up at ten thirty on Friday morning, and it was still far too bloody early as far as she was concerned. She debated taking a potion of some sort, but decided the furry feeling in her mouth and head was insufficient to demand going out and buying such a thing. After showering, eating enough to convince herself she was fine without testing the tolerances of her stomach, and dressing in something appropriately crisp, she felt relatively human again. It was eleven sharp...time to set out for the office. Even her morning-allergic partner should be there by now.

She was saying the same thing to herself at ten minutes after eleven, then again (with profane embellishments) at twenty minutes after. By half past eleven, she had almost paced a hole in the rug and was viciously jabbing at the keypad on her mobile phone. By twenty to noon, three very terse and commanding messages had been left on the voicemail of one Draco Malfoy's phone, and one Ginny Weasley's phone was sailing across the room, propelled by extreme frustration.

Which was how, by quarter of noon, Ginny was climbing out of the Floo into the Floo-Parlor at Malfoy Manor. Time to find Draco in this giant maze to which she had not yet been invited.

"Is Miss here for lunch? Please to follow Sniffy to the dining room, Miss."

Ginny was on her hands and knees on the hearth, face-to-face with a house-elf. It was rather cute, as such creatures went...a discarded doily draped on its knobby little head offset its pointy ears, and its massive, misty eyes matched the bluish-gray monogram on its little tea-towel toga.

"No, I'm here to..."

Not noticing whether the unannounced guest was following or not, the elf began to wander off. Ginny hastened to follow. For a creature with such short legs, it managed to get ahead of her and into the corridor remarkably quickly.

"Sniffy, I'm here for Mr. Malfoy." Ginny wondered if she needed to wave her hand in front of the elf's face to get its attention. She'd prefer not to yell. This didn't strike her as a yelling sort of place.

"Oh. Sniffy is sorry! Will have to punish Sniffy later." This did not seem to bother the elf. Ginny had the distinct impression Sniffy would forget Sniffy's head if it weren't attached, much less remember self-punishment.

The house-elf gestured vaguely, and a narrow door appeared in response. "Miss is finding Master Draco at the top of the stairs," Sniffy said. "Miss is much nicer Miss than usually comes for Master Draco," the house-elf added, smiling blankly.

Ginny deduced that she had just met the Luna Lovegood of house-elves, and it had mistaken her for Draco's flavor-of-the-minute. Last night's surreal quality was evidently carrying over into the morning. She ascended the dark and narrow, but clean, staircase and opened the door at the top.

Whereupon she was confronted with Draco's very pale, very toned, very, very naked arse.

Well... 'confronted' might have been too strong a word. After all, he was face down on the approximately one acre square bed in the middle of the room, legs tangled in silvery-blue silk sheets in a way that suggested he'd been covered at some point during the night. And she was all the way on the other side of said room, taking in a pile of clothes on a gilt chair in a vain but valiant effort to look at something other than the lean body on the bed. Just when she thought it couldn't get any more awkward, he turned over.

Oh. My.

Morning erection, anyone?

Ginny closed her eyes. Deciding that wasn't enough, she canted her head towards the ceiling. Not that she was squeamish about such things; having six brothers meant that she had inadvertently seen an awful lot of male appendages in various stages of use. (What was it with boys and not bothering about going into the house to use the loo?) And of course, with a boyfriend or two to her record, she was intimately acquainted with such organs in their other practical application.

But she had never seen one quite so... aesthetically pleasing. Another embarrassed glance confirmed her initial assessment. In fact, everything on that alabaster body was perfect. Even the faint dusting of translucent hairs was symmetrical. His aristocratic face was delineated by elegant lines, which couldn't quite be spoiled by hair splayed over the pillow like dandelion fluff or a partially open mouth emitting an artistic trail of drool and mild snores.

Ginny couldn't decide between tossing a blanket over all that delicious symmetry and yelling for him to wake up, jamming one hand under her bra and the other down her knickers to relieve the tension caused by viewing said body before doing so, or simply adding her clothes to the discard pile and covering him with herself.

Therefore, she continued to stare at the ceiling as he rolled over again. Perhaps he needed that large a bed. Either that, or he needed to be tied down to keep from rolling out. *Bad Ginny! No going there!*

Why was there no rule of business etiquette to cover such situations? Had there never, ever, in the history of the world been an instance of walking into the bedroom of your business partner and finding him bare-arse skyward on silk sheets?

A deafening 'crack!' spared her the need to agonize further, causing both her and sleeping beauty to jump about a foot in the air. In Draco's case, it brought him to the floor with a resounding crash and a shrill string of profanity.

"Sniffy is sorry for interrupting Master Draco's visit, but Sniffy is remembering instructions to wake Master."

"Uhhh... Visit? What time is it?"

Ginny didn't have any more time to waste with this nonsense. "Time you were at the office!"

Draco sat up quickly, yelled upon seeing Ginny (quite unnecessarily...after all, she'd pretty obviously seen it all already) and clutched the sheets around as much of himself as possible.

"What are you doing here? Owwww..." he whimpered, pain overtaking indignation for the moment.

"Making sure we don't miss our very important appointment, which is in about an hour!" She glanced around the room, looking for clothing and avoiding looking at Draco. Or avoid looking as if she were looking at him. Something like that.

Sniffy dragged a silky, green dressing gown over to Draco, who, interestingly enough, blushed quite far down his body. Not that Ginny was interested. Looking. Looking interested. "Is visit with Miss over? Is Master Draco needing this?"

He snatched the garment and tried to squirm into it as discreetly as was possible while seated on the floor half-tangled in bed sheets. "Damn it, *get out!*"

"As Master wishes," Sniffy said amiably, vanishing with another glass-shivering explosion.

"Not you!" he yelled, then grabbed his head again. "Why am I stuck with the world's daftest living house-elf?"

"Sounds like divine retribution," Ginny answered, unable to resist. She identified what appeared to be a closet and yanked open the door. "We don't have time for this! You need to get dressed and get bright, now."

As if she needed another eye-opener, there was now Draco's wardrobe to contend with. "Merlin's..." Ginny hastily bit off her remark, deciding against mentioning arses just now. "Walk-in closet" didn't do this compact yet complete haberdashery justice.

"Oh, fine. First you barge into my bedroom and ogle me, now you're pawing my clothing." Drawers were being opened and shut somewhere behind her. Draco's tone of voice left Ginny with the odd feeling that there was actually some doubt as to which he considered more invasive.

"You make it sound as if I'd been standing there studying your arse," she retorted, hiding her flaming face amongst the shirts and hoping said feature would subside to a color less livid than her hair soon. After all, she wasn't lying; she was just challenging his very accurate assertion. Ginny tossed out a shirt and tie, then reached for trousers, only to find...

"Leather?" 'Disbelief' didn't quite adequately describe her tone.

"It was a phase, okay?" Now they were both blushing furiously, not that either would notice what with their concerted efforts to look elsewhere.

"Leather trousers," Ginny repeated, dazed.

"Will you come off it?" Draco realized how that sounded the split second it left his mouth. Between the blush, the green dressing gown, and the all-but-white hair, he resembled an unwieldy Christmas decoration as he snatched the shirt and tie and darted into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

Ginny silently made another selection and waited an appropriate amount of time before knocking lightly on the door. It opened just enough to admit her partner's slim hand, which grasped the trousers she thrust smartly at it before jerking back into the room and slamming the door again.

The dramatic effect would have been significantly greater had he not caught one trouser leg in the door, obliging him to open it a fraction again.

Draco finally stumbled out looking decidedly sullen and substantially less polished than usual, though no one who didn't know him well would have noticed. Ginny touched up the glamour that was covering the circles under his eyes as he struggled to get the shoes and belt thing right, and they left via the secret stairway again.

In the intimidating corridor leading to the parlor, Ginny again felt the need to speak quietly. "You must have had one hell of a night. Would it kill you to..."

Draco flinched even at her low tone of voice. "Don't mention last night, okay?"

"Draco!"

For the second time in twenty minutes, they both jumped about a foot. Draco spun like a top, a cornered expression on his face. Ginny grabbed at her wand and turned quickly to see what could have him so utterly ashen, imagining escaped horrors from secret rooms beneath the Manor.

All she saw was Narcissa Malfoy, looking surprised, but smiling. It may have been rather a self-satisfied, nose-in-the-air smile, but it wasn't derisive.

"Draco, darling, you should have told me that you are seeing someone." She tipped her head slightly towards Ginny, giving the distinct impression that Narcissa would have considered it vulgar to actually employ her neck in the maneuver. "Miss... Weasley, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mrs. Malfoy, but Draco and I aren't..."

Ginny broke off with a squawk of surprise as Draco grabbed her around the waist and pulled her against him. "Well, it's rather recent, Mother. In fact, I was going to suggest that Ginevra have dinner with us, ah, soon."

Funny, how Draco squeaked when elbowed in the ribs. Ginny would have thought he'd have devised a more masculine sound to cover such situations by now. "Have you lost your Gobstones? We are **not** seeing each other and we are going to be late!"

Narcissa had the oddest look on her face. Judging by the way Draco appeared to be restraining an urge to squirm, it was analogous to Mum screaming at Ron at the top of her voice. Ginny was impressed. It seemed effective, and it had the added benefit that Narcissa's face never had to become scrunched and red. "Darling, you know how distressed I become when you keep things from me."

"Mother, I...we'll talk later. There just isn't time." They took their leave of Narcissa very awkwardly and made it to their appointment with no more than five minutes to spare.

Snape felt like something akin to crap. This was admittedly not a new sensation. It was not, however, a sensation he'd felt recently, so it was more disagreeable than his previous experiences of the kind. He opened one eye cautiously, knowing that any sudden moves might result in extreme provocation of the Bludger ricocheting around in his skull. There, sitting on the edge of the bed, was a vision more heavenly than any he'd ever beheld...Hermione with a vial of Hangover Relief potion in her hand.

"I love you." Even through the very large wad of hay that was apparently occupying his mouth, he managed to invest a great deal of passion in those words.

Hermione's expression flickered soft for a few seconds before becoming stiffly blank. This alerted Snape to the fact that all was not well in places other than the unhappy recesses of his head.

"Pet?"

"Were you addressing the vial, or me?"

He frowned, found it painful, and settled for looking depressed. It required very little effort. "If you loved me, you'd give it to me."

Hermione's face went very odd. Then it went a little odder, and a choked giggle slipped out. Finally, she was laughing out loud, and Snape pulled a pillow over his head in self-defense. She slipped the vial into his hand, and he managed to drink it without emerging from under the bedding. Feeling the effects kick in, he sat up and glared at her interrogatively.

"I'm sorry, love, but I couldn't help it. The last time I heard that..."

With clarity and immediacy almost as painful as his recent hangover, Severus saw where this was going. "If you tell me who said that to you before, I'm asking for the ring back."

She gave him a sour look. He studied the disparaging expression, wondering if it was one of his or one of hers before finally deciding it was a sort of a hybrid. "After you obliged that poor witch at Moore and Mraz to show us nearly every ring in the shop before we decided on these? That wouldn't be very sporting." Her expression smoothed as her eyes drifted over to the black boxes on the dresser.

Severus followed her gaze, feeling something begin to unknot inside him. "If you think those were hard to choose, you should have seen what it was like the day I went to buy your betrothal band. The jeweler had to give me a lecture on gems and metals so I wouldn't be an absolute dunderhead selecting the ring."

Hermione scooted closer to him on the bed. "I can't imagine you ~~ever~~ being an absolute dunderhead. Though I admit you came quite close the night you proposed." He applied one of his sharpest admonishing glares. By now he knew that, far from intimidating his beloved, it might well net him a kiss. His expectations were met, though he was hoping for something more passionate than a quick peck on the nose. Oh, well. At least she followed it up with a nice, soothing healing charm for his black eye. "I don't recall that nice, motherly witch seeming the lecturing type," she said.

"She wasn't the one who sold me your ring. It was a younger witch, one of the jewelers. Durmstrang-trained, if the way she handled her wand was any indication." Both his eyes and hers darted to the beautiful sapphire on her finger. "It almost seems like it happened in another lifetime."

"This might sound silly... but it was nice, being in the shop amidst the gems and gold and such. Almost like going to an apothecary."

"I know what you mean. Everything in the shop feels...almost smells...a bit like pure magical potential."

"It's even peaceful there, Knockturn Alley outside the front door notwithstanding."

Their eyes met. "What are you thinking, pet?"

"What would it take to have that sort of peace here? Between us?"

Snape knew he was dodging the question. But he couldn't really help himself, not with her luscious, chocolaty eyes on him. Not to mention it was a rather sore topic. "I can think of a sure way to make everything good between us." He slipped one hand around her back and the other into her riotously messy hair.

She melted against him, even as she fixed him with a calculating look. "As good as you unquestionably are, you can't use sex to evade discussions."

Severus figured their relationship was strong enough to withstand a little white lie now and again. "I wasn't thinking of evading discussions. I was thinking of diffusing arguments." He nibbled his way down her neck, beginning to feel a little hungry...though not for food just yet.

"Uh-huh... How does actually having the **discussion** first sound? Then we can figure out whether we need make-up sex."

He must be losing his touch. She was still painfully articulate, even though he was pretty sure he'd managed to leave love bites with at least a few of those kisses. "I take it you wish to discuss something... but do you think it can wait until after we..."

"Sorry to interrupt you two randy little Kneazles, but..."

Severus... do not hex the Jarvey. It may feel oh-so-satisfying in the short term, but your fiancée will likely revoke your shagging privileges for so long, you will begin to wish the spell had rebounded on you. "If you really wanted to help, you would GO AWAY."

"Silky to sulky in one second flat...a new record," Reggie said dryly.

Snape was decidedly put out at the lack of effect his death glare had on the beast, so he tried the expression Hermione had been practicing.

"It's a good thing I'm not cream, you bastarding wanker...otherwise that look might have spoilt me. As much as you two need to have this conversation, I'm afraid Hermione has company."

"I'm sorry, love...but I did tell Ginny she could come over today."

"Not half as sorry as I am." Her face crumpled with a cascade of negative emotions, and he quickly pulled her ring-bedecked hand up between them as if the sapphire were a talisman against strife. Quite deliberately, he kissed the ring, then the finger, then her lips. "I promise, we'll finish this later."

She smiled, but her eyes challenged him. "Yes. We'll discuss this later. **Discuss**, Severus."

He hmphed. "If the 'discussion' doesn't go as best it might, I reserve the right to distract you by any means necessary."

"I may hold you to that, love."

Hermione waved her wand at the kettle distractedly, realizing a little late it was only sheer luck that she hadn't spilled boiling water everywhere. So distracted was she, in fact, that she didn't notice that Ginny was too distracted to remark on the near miss. Hermione's mind was entirely occupied with the effort of seeming to pay attention to Ginny while wondering what, precisely, made Severus so reluctant to address the topic of domestic tranquility. She had a feeling that it was a little more involved than just his instinct for evasion.

They drank tea more or less automatically, went over a few last-minute details, including the rehearsal set for Tuesday night, and finally got to last night. This was a topic Hermione would cheerfully have left alone. She therefore rushed it along as subtly as possible.

Had she known that talk of last night was leading up to talk of the morning after, she would have opted to relive every last second of the tipsy, embarrassing, entirely too memorable evening.

"Hermione, if I don't tell someone about this, I think I'll burst," Ginny babbled. "I went to collect Draco this morning, and the house-elf sent me to his room, and I saw... um... Draco... he was..." She faltered, hesitated, then rushed right on. "He was completely starkers in the middle of a bed about half the size of a Quidditch pitch, with absolutely yards of silk sheets framing the most gorgeous arse known to wizardkind!"

"Ginny," Hermione said slowly, no longer grateful for Hangover Relief potion since it was enabling her to listen to this, "I want to make this as clear as I possibly can. The instrument has not yet been devised that is sensitive enough to measure how little I wish to know *anything* about Draco Malfoy's arse."

"You don't understand," Ginny said plaintively, clutching at Hermione's arm as if she were desperately trying to convince her of one of Luna's stories. "He's GORGEOUS! He couldn't be more perfect if he were a marble statue charmed alive!"

Hermione was feeling unaccountably irritated, and for the oddest reasons. There was nothing odd in the fact that she'd rather peel Shrivelfigs than hear about any part of Draco Malfoy. There was nothing out of line in feeling that she didn't especially need to know what Ginny found gorgeous in any man. But what seemed to push her over the edge was a feeling that Ginny was shoving it in her face that *she* had Draco the Dreamy whilst Hermione was stuck with Severus the Skinny and Snarky. Which was so deeply incorrect, on so many levels, that her subsequent outburst was even more embarrassing.

"I DON'T GIVE A PYGMY PUFF'S ARSE ABOUT ANY PART OF DRACO! AND AS FOR ARSES, I'LL HAVE YOU KNOW THAT SEVERUS' IS SPECTACULAR!"

The yelling would have been quite sufficient to make this a dramatic display. Hermione's purpling face was really a bit of overkill, and the cup slipping from Ginny's unexpectedly nerveless fingers and smashing to bits on the floor was simply anticlimactic.

"Hermione," Ginny finally managed to respond in a strangled, mortified whisper, "I think there were a few kelpies on the shores of the Orkneys that didn't quite catch all of that."

By the time Severus slammed his way into the room, badly abusing the kitchen door and pushing the swirling potential of his work coat to its uttermost limits, the drama level in the room had quite gone off the scale. In lieu of panicking, Hermione idly wondered whether such a device as a drama-meter was magically feasible. If the kitchen were equipped with one, would it now have a gauge with a broken needle, or would the reactive liquid therein have exploded from the top of the tube?

"I want to know why in the bloody hell my arse is the topic of conversation?" he asked in his icy-cold, silky voice. The one that suggested he was strongly inclined to tempt fate by testing an experimental potion on someone.

"Dear, that's not strictly accurate. The conversation was about...someone else's. Yours just... came up."

"My backside is not up for discussion in any way, shape or form! Wait... whose arse were you talking about?"

"I'll just be going," Ginny said hastily and retreated even faster.

"Would this be a bad time to laugh?" Motoyoshi whispered to Reggie, invisibility having enabled them to view the entire performance.

"Very bad. Come on, let's go to the parlor so our arses don't end up in a sling." Before the door could smack her tail, the Jarvey yelled back, "And have that fucking discussion already!"

"This isn't about arses, and you know it! Unless you're referencing your instances of acting like one!"

Severus sat down and glared at her through narrowed eyes.

"I *knew* you were going to do that because you only have four reactions in your repertoire when it comes to criticism or challenges: the silent sulk, the angry tirade, the snide rejoinder, and...I hope this one is reserved for me...trying to change the subject by way of another oral activity." She knew this statement was liable to provoke option two, but at the moment, she would accept that as better than no communication at all.

"That last is my own invention. The rest I inherited from my parents."

Closed expression or not, this was an unusually open remark. Hermione was determined not to let it go. "I wish you would tell me something about them." She brushed a strand of hair away from his face, luxuriating in the silkiness of it and once again wondering why in the world it had ever looked greasy.

He pulled her into his lap, and she almost resisted...but his sigh hinted that it was a prelude rather than a dodge. "What is there to say? My parents were difficult people. I assume they loved each other once but they certainly weren't in love within my memory. They routinely managed to provoke each other into furious arguments that resolved nothing. Then they lapsed into hostile silence until something happened to set them off again, or one of them let slip a sarcastic remark."

"I'm fairly well inured to your sarcastic remarks by now."

"Oh, certainly. That's why you give me one of *those* looks when I make one."

"I give you one of 'those looks' because it's no more than your remarks deserve. It doesn't mean I'm falling out of love with you." She nestled in close to him. "I don't plan on ever falling out of love with you."

"And if all does not go according to plan?" His voice was a little sad.

"Then I guess we'll have to try to fall in love with each other all over again."

"How do you propose we do that?"

"Well, talking over tea worked last time."

He Summoned another cup from the cupboard. She poured for him, then picked up her own neglected cup and saucer, casting a quick warming charm. The cup didn't quite reach her lips before she concluded it wasn't worth saving and banished the dregs in favor of a fresh pour.

"Speaking of proposals, love, the rehearsal is..."

"Hermione?"

Brilliant timing, Flora. Hermione sighed, kissed Severus quickly, and hurried into the parlor. Her fellow Healer's face glowed green from the hearth.

"Problem, Flora?"

"That's one way of putting it. The entire Cornish Pixie Preservation Society came down with food poisoning after their annual tramp-and-tipple. Seems that someone who didn't know their Herbology put the wrong mushroom in...something. We're still working that out. Don't bother with your robes, just get over here!" She disappeared.

It must be serious. For Flora Randolph, consummate Sweet Hufflepuff, to break off a Floo-call without a proper farewell (or a polite acknowledgement of Severus, plainly visible over Hermione's shoulder), the Plant Poisoning Ward must be in utter chaos. "Duty calls, love." With another quick kiss, she hurried through the Floo.

Reggie had, of course, been listening to the entire exchange. Until her charges were lawfully wed, anything that threatened their domestic tranquility was her business. Whether they liked it or not.

Snape returned to the kitchen and his tea. Reggie scampered up to the table to finish Hermione's abandoned tea and biscuit, and Moto waited patiently while she summoned hot water from the kettle so that he could mix his own little bowl of matcha. Snape rolled his eyes at them, but otherwise refrained from commenting.

"Stay of execution, eh, Snarkypants?" she asked knowingly around a mouthful of crumbs.

He glanced at her over his teacup, his eyebrows adding punctuation to his reply. "Indeed. I plan to savor every minute of it."

Back in London, Rita Skeeter's search through marriage license applications turned up a name that was bitterly familiar and undeniably connected to Potter...that self-important, jar-wielding, little-goody-two-shoes Hermione Granger. The fact that said name shared the application with that of Severus Snape was promising. Potter probably wasn't thrilled about that. Hmm. 'Granger Chooses War Criminal Over Best Friend/Former Love?' Well, it was a good working headline until she could come up with something better. She'd have to strike the war criminal bit, for certain; considering the outcome of the trial, that way lay a libel suit. Some heated confrontations between the wizards had made a blip in the gossip columns a year or so ago, but it had been quiet since then. Maybe she could spin it as a cold war?

Skeeter was idly flipping through files, so busy inventing tearful confrontations and angry ultimatums that she almost missed an application that was specially tabbed. It, too, bore a familiar name. Lupin. Remus Lupin, upon whose shoe she had hitched a ride to Amsterdam... Bloody hell! She was sure Lupin and Snape were connected somehow. In Amsterdam. Last night. Maybe.

Somewhere in her brain was a career-saving story. If only she could remember it.

She all but smacked herself in the forehead. If a werewolf was getting married, there would be a duplicate application in the new department that tracked dangerous magical creatures other than beasts. That department might well be interested in... whatever it was that happened last night. Time to visit the Daily Prophet Foreign News Office and see if anyone had picked up anything on Amsterdam.

This had to be her lucky day. Rita found a police blotter item that was so exciting, she Flooed back to the Ministry. She didn't dare Apparate for fear she'd splinch.

The Department for International Monitoring of Potentially Dangerous Magical Beings had been built from several sections of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, particularly the three poorly organized branches pertaining to werewolves. Its offices had a look to them that could only be described as *crisp*, especially compared to the vague sense of disorder that pervaded most areas of the Ministry. One got the feeling that the paper airplane memos were starched before flying out in charmed formation.

Reluctantly, the secretary allowed her access to the wizard in charge. Rita was surprised at his appearance. She could have sworn that the bespectacled Weasley fellow working for the Ministry of Magic was much older.

"I don't appreciate having my secretary annoyed, Miss Skeeter. You had best be bringing me a serious and legitimate concern, not fishing for one of your absurd stories. Otherwise I will be quite pleased to summon Security to help you find the exit."

Rita fixed her best 'confiding interviewer's smile' on her face. "Oh, this is serious, Mr. Weasley. I have evidence that Remus Lupin is not, as per the conditions of the approval of his petition to marry, keeping to the right side of the law. I happen to know that yesterday evening there was an incident in the Red Light district of WIZARDING Amsterdam, involving several wizards accosting a lady of the evening, with the connivance of Leprechauns and other Magical Creatures. Among those wizards," she continued, "were Severus Snape and one Remus Lupin, registered werewolf."

"I would need evidence of this, of course." No gasping at the momentous revelation, no eagerness to grasp the parchment she waggled so temptingly? This man plainly had no appreciation for her hard-hitting investigative reporting style.

She was finally obliged to drop her bargaining chip on the desk, whereupon he adjusted his glasses and gave it a quick read.

"A blip on a police blotter about a reported leprechaun gold shower at a gentlemen's club...which does not contain the names you mention, nor any indication of criminal mischief, I might add...is what you consider 'evidence?' I'm afraid I find it difficult to be overly concerned about two persons who haven't so much as had a citation for jaywalking in five years, on the assumption they might have been at said club having a clandestine meeting with faerie creatures."

Rita had the oddest feeling that he wasn't taking this seriously.

"This was a genuine incident, and if these two known disreputable characters are..."

He cut her off coldly. "Indeed. Has the Department of Magical Law Enforcement already laughed you away from their offices? Or does it require more gall than even you possess to take such accusations before a lot of wizards who are constantly armed and authorized to use force?"

It was at times like this that Rita Skeeter missed the good old days, when Voldemort-inspired paranoia was rampant, and officials of the Ministry were dying to arrest people and give out quotes that could provide the foundation for paragraphs of lovely innuendo.

"I should have thought you would have appreciated any information from a concerned citizen, considering the great need for your department to prove the value of its new approach to dealing with potentially dangerous magical beings." That had to have struck a chord. It was well known that the proposal to try 'tighter monitoring' of werewolves and similar creatures had only beaten out the 'automatic imprisonment' solution by a narrow margin.

His already tightly clenched jaw seemed to reddens somewhat. "In light of the potential seriousness of the allegations... if time permits... I will make a private inquiry. However, don't think for a moment that I owe you any sort of consideration with regards to the information I may uncover."

"What if I can find additional information? Wouldn't that be worthy of a little... consideration?"

"Then I would expect you to report it immediately. After all, it's no more than your duty as a *concerned citizen*."

Even for someone as apparently immune to hostility as Rita Skeeter, this last bit impressed her as being particularly unfriendly. It was also obviously the signal that if she failed to leave the office under her own power, she might find herself leaving with the aid of a 'Mobilicorpus' spell. She smiled winningly and left one of her business cards so that he wouldn't forget that consideration he'd almost promised. Or would have, if she hadn't been too busy to continue their little talk.

Friday turned into Saturday, then Sunday, and the Floo was quiet. Rita was getting antsy. By now, the trail was getting cold, and whatever those two were plotting, someone else might find out about it and scoop *her* story!

Sunday night, Rita sat down with her quill and parchment before her, muttering out the beginnings of an article. Well, maybe it was more of a small gossip piece...she took what she could get these days, but that would change soon enough. At least it would be easy to slip it into the Monday morning edition of the 'Daily Prophet.' She couldn't wait for the day to come when editors would be drooling over her front-page-worthy exposés again.

'Inquiries are being made as we speak.' Absolutely true. After all, that Weasley in charge had said he'd make a private inquiry. Perhaps this little nudge would serve to help make it public. At the very least, it would start the buzz going and possibly shake something or someone loose.

Draco knew he was in for it.

Once the paperwork was squared away, Ginny had gone into 'cut the crap' mode. He'd managed to dodge her temporarily. He also managed to dodge his mother all weekend, an equally impressive feat. It was easy to forget, viewing Narcissa through the cloud of expensive perfume, tailored robes, and receipts from her latest shopping expedition, that she was a Slytherin through and through. Draco wondered if Mother deliberately cultivated a fashionably flaky impression to keep people off guard.

He knew his chances of escaping either of them altogether were nonexistent, considering he still lived at the Manor with Mother (he shuddered to think of what she might get up to if he moved into a place of his own) and he and Ginny ran a company together. He just hadn't expected Ginny to catch up with him by stepping out of the Floo Parlor at twenty minutes before dinnertime on Sunday night. She grabbed him by the arm and yanked him into the room without so much as a 'Good evening.'

"Good thing you happened by. I'm guessing your mother will be down here to greet me in roughly ten minutes, so you'll have that much time to tell me precisely what the hell is going on here."

Since he had at least ten minutes, Draco elected to stall. "What are you doing here?"

"Your mother invited me for dinner...which is more than you've done, I might add, in all the time we've been in business together. We will be covering that point later in the agenda. Item number one, why did you try to pass me off as your girlfriend on Friday morning?"

"Technically, it was afternoon."

"Don't make me ask at wandpoint."

"By the time we started the business, I was at my wit's end. Mother has been spending Galleons like they were water, trying to take her mind off... everything, I guess."

"Well, that's simple enough. Tell her how much discretionary spending the household budget allows and let her know she'll have to stay within those limits."

"Ah, the household budget isn't all it could be."

"In other words, it's nonexistent." Ginny sighed. "I suppose I can organize that, too, once I'm done helping Hermione with her wedding."

"The other half is telling her to stay within the limits. She's been through so much...losing Father and almost losing me. A lot of that money went to trying to free my father, for all the good it did. A great deal more disappeared with our son-of-a-bitch accountant almost before Father's body was even cold. Nearly all of our family is gone, at least all she was still in contact with, and most of her friends as well. I figured that was enough for her to adjust to, without... this."

"Do you honestly think telling her to buy a few less scarves would be traumatic?"

Draco felt his grip on his temper slipping. He could feel himself glaring, but couldn't stop, despite the threat of wrinkles. "Look, Mother doesn't know about ANY of this. I haven't told her that I'm in business, never mind that we're partners. She trusts me with everything, and she doesn't know how precarious our financial situation actually is. Hell, she doesn't even know I have a mobile phone. I assume that answers more than one of your questions."

Ginny sat down in one of the decorative chairs that was as uncomfortable as it looked. Draco elected to remain standing.

Watching the play of expressions over Ginny's face was quite interesting. *Watching her face is quite interesting* part of his mind suggested none-too-innocently. What a shame she finally settled on exasperation.

"As admirable as some of that reasoning is, she has to find out sometime. And since I'm here, and still not willing to pretend to be dating you, 'sometime' just became 'tonight.'"

Draco sat down in the opposite chair. It was as bad as he remembered, but at least it facilitated burying his face in his hands. He didn't bother looking up when he heard shoes against carpet and was thus surprised to feel Ginny's hand come to rest on his shoulder, light and warm through his robes.

"It's been almost five years since most of this happened. I think she'll be able to handle it. After all, she still has you."

CRACK!

"Mistress wanted to know something." Sniffy stared around the room, evidently groping for the memory of what, exactly, Mistress had wanted to know.

Draco didn't know what life without house-elves would be like. But he was sorely tempted to find out sometime. "Let me guess. She asked you to find out if Miss Weasley had arrived yet."

Sniffy's face brightened. "Oh, yes! Master Draco is right, as usual." The elf disappeared again.

Ginny opened her mouth, and Draco held up his hand to forestall any speech on her part. "Wait about...fifteen seconds."

Sure enough. *CRACK!* "Is Miss Weasley here?"

"Over here, Sniffy."

"Oh! So nice to see Miss again. Is Miss here for dinner?"

Draco interrupted, fearing they'd go round in circles all night, otherwise. "Sniffy, tell Mistress that Miss Weasley is here for dinner."

"Very good. Right away, Master Draco!" Sniffy vanished with another earsplitting explosion.

"If ever a house-elf needed socks..." Ginny began, trailing off in giggles.

"We've tried. She just forgets that we've given her clothes and comes back the next morning in a clean towel and a fresh doily. We finally gave up...after all, she cooks well and more or less keeps the place clean."

"She makes Dobby seem helpful."

"Welcome, Ginevra. I do hope Draco wasn't boring you, discussing the state of our household servants." Narcissa waltzed in grandly, wearing her best company smile. Draco found this very worrying.

He wasn't reassured by the amiable interactions between the two witches as dinner proceeded, though he couldn't decide if he was relieved or disappointed that Ginny's table manners were more than up to par. His fears were realized when Mother turned to him and asked, in a deceptively mild tone of voice, "Draco... how is it that you and Ginevra don't seem to agree on the purpose of her visit on Friday?"

Looking at those unyielding-as-sapphire eyes, Draco was rather forcibly reminded that, as scary and downright mean as Auntie Bella had been, she wasn't the most dangerous of the Black sisters. Trying not to squirm too obviously, he glanced at Ginny. No way out there, but at least she was giving him a good approximation of an encouraging look.

"Mother, there's no easy way to tell you this. Our fortune simply isn't what it used to be. That Tinker prat embezzled quite a lot, and the efforts to get it back had their cost as well...without any success." He opted not to mention legal fees, fearing she might break down at the thought of Father. "We can't afford to spend quite as freely as you like to. In fact, I'm going to have to ask that you keep to a strict budget from now on."

"Budget?" Narcissa looked at him a little blankly. At least she wasn't having hysterics. Yet. "It's rather bad, then?"

"Ginevra will help set it up, Mother, no need to worry about that. Which, ah, brings me to the next thing I need to tell you." He glanced at Ginny, who nodded encouragingly. "...Mother...um, Ginevra, that is, Miss Weasley...oh, sod it, we're business partners. We're going to make some really excellent changes to the way the Floo is used, and it promises to be quite lucrative. We... our company... has to deal with Muggles, and I've even learned to use some of their devices...and it's all going rather well, actually."

Narcissa's eyes were like huge drops of sky in her pale face, and her lips were slightly parted in amazement.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, but I didn't want to worry you. I wanted you to be proud of me. You trusted me to manage things, and... I am." He watched anxiously for her reaction.

Narcissa's eyes fluttered closed. She heaved a huge sigh. "Thanks be to any saint, god, or shade that might be listening! What with that bizarre charade in the corridor Friday, I was afraid you were going to tell me that you've only been pretending to fancy witches all these years!"

It took a moment for the exact meaning of this statement to register. Some part of his awareness that was not entirely gobsmacked heard Ginny squeak over to his left...a sound that suspiciously resembled hilarity.

"How? What? Mother, how could you possibly think I'm gay? What about all that time I was dating Pansy, or..." Draco managed to put the brakes on his mouth before saying anything about the purpose for which he occasionally used the private stairs to his room.

Narcissa's voice was gentle, but her expression was patronizing. "Dearest, any wizard who spends as much time on his hair as you do is bound to make a mother worry that she'll never have any grandchildren."

Draco shot a pained look at his mother, then turned to Ginny for support...only to find her head bent over her plate, eyes scrunched shut with tears leaking out of the corners, her shoulders trembling violently in an effort to suppress her laughter. He felt a sulk coming on.

"Please, darling, don't pout so hard. Wrinkles!"

Draco instantly smoothed his expression.

"You see, precious? When you respond to such admonishments, it just encourages people like Marcia Flint...terribly original names in that family, by the way...to call you the 'token girl' on the Slytherin Quidditch Team." Narcissa sniffed. "Of course, ninety-nine percent of that was ignorance and jealousy. Just because HER muscle-headed puppy couldn't break 'Troll' on a single O.W.L... The only 'newt' that pillock ever had was spawned in his ill-kept cauldron."

Ginny was gripping the seat of her chair to keep from falling off, she was giggling so hard.

"Oh, do go ahead and laugh," Narcissa said. "It's quite amusing, after all."

She accepted the invitation and laughed aloud.

Draco was not the least bit amused. "I don't BELIEVE this! Everyone knows that Pansy and I were together from the Yule Ball, fourth year!"

It was truly, deeply annoying to be pinned down by patronizing looks from both your mother and business partner at the same time, Draco decided.

Ginny spoke first. "You've got to be joking. She just fueled the rumors. After all, why would you be going out with someone like her..."

"Dense as a cauldron bottom, with a personality to match," Narcissa clarified helpfully.

"...unless it was either arranged, or you didn't particularly care what she was like because she was, oh, what's the term... a 'beard.'"

My own mother thought I was a ponce, as well as half the school, evidently. Oh, gods! It was enough to make him forget to be upset that she kept calling him pet names in front of Ginny. "Mother, I thought you *liked* Pansy."

"Your father liked Pansy...because considering her unimaginative little nouveau riche family, she was unlikely to be a gold digger./I thought she was annoyance on a stick."

"Oh, Narcissa, that's a perfect description of her." Draco was somewhat horrified to note that the two witches were now smiling across the table at each other. "Her voice alone could make a magic mirror stop its ears."

Narcissa put one hand to her bosom in a delicate gesture of long-suffering. "I can still hear her calling through the house like a fishwife on that last visit." She modulated her voice to a whiny falsetto. "Draaaaaaaycooooo!" she warbled, fluttering her eyelashes.

Draco cringed. "Don't remind me!"

Which sent the witches off into gales of giggles again. Draco had never been quite so glad to see dessert arrive while having so little appetite for it. At least he was saved from chatting with them...or between them...late into the night. Ginny excused herself, citing work the next morning. A crash from the kitchen sent Narcissa gliding with graceful alacrity to survey the latest Sniffy disaster, taking a moment first to exchange valedictions with Ginny.

They walked to the Floo-Parlor in more or less amiable silence.

"Well, goodnight."

"Till tomorrow, then." Draco didn't feel like dragging out their goodbyes. The stress reaction from coming clean to Mother had set in, leaving him run down.

"I meant what I said to your mother...this really has been a lovely evening."

"At least we've established I'm not gay," he grumbled.

"I don't recall that happening...precious." Ginny grinned cheekily at him and ducked into the fireplace.

Mother walked in just then, denying him the satisfaction of subjecting one or more of those god-awful chairs to a 'Reducto.' This just wasn't his night.

"I am sorry I missed taking leave of dear Ginevra. She's quite the clever little thing, isn't she?" Narcissa smiled brilliantly up at him and touched his cheek, signaling him to lean closer. "Goodnight, my precious dragon," she whispered, and they exchanged their customary pecks on the cheek.

"Goodnight, Mother." He managed not to sigh. *One of these days, she'll stop calling me 'precious' in front of company.*

It wasn't until he was climbing into bed that it occurred to him to wonder when Ginny had become 'dear Ginevra.'

It was rather late by the time Severus got up on Monday morning. 'Not a morning person' didn't begin to encompass his antipathy towards rising early. To compound the problem, Hermione had been doing back-to-back night shifts at St. Mungo's over the weekend. He had discovered that he no longer slept particularly well when he was alone, opting instead to read or organize his supplies late into the night. Brewing while exhausted was Recipe for Disaster #2 (after 'brewing while intoxicated') so he saved actual potions-making for a time when he was rested.

He brightened slightly at the well-loved sight of Hermione's crown of fluff peeping up over the top edge of the 'Daily Prophet.'*Just five more days and a silly party, and we can go back to normal*, he thought, feeling uncharacteristically optimistic. "Good morning, love." He managed to deliver it in a fairly silky purr, no mean feat for before noon on a Monday.

He was rewarded with a hard stare over the top of the newspaper. The pages lowered to reveal a face as unyielding as her eyes.

"Severus... we need to talk about Thursday."

Snape really had to learn to stop letting himself feel optimistic.

Japanese Vocabulary:

Matcha: pulverized green tea. In Japan, green tea ground to a fine powder is whisked into hot water with a bamboo whisk (chasen) to create a very strong, aromatic drink. The powdered tea is stored in a little caddy called a natsume (for its resemblance to a jujube; usually made of lacquered wood) or a ceramic jar called a cha-ire (literally, 'tea put-in.')

Motoyoshi carries his chasen, natsume, and tea bowl (chawan) everywhere with him in his furoshiki so as to be able to center himself with a Tea Ceremony as the occasion requires. He is a remarkably refined Kappa.

Author's Notes:

No, Draco and Ginny have NOT hijacked this story (though they gave it a damn good try). Fortunately, I have Reggie for backup, and in the case of any draws, the win goes to the one who has the Jarvey on their side.

Up next: Reggie and Moto pull off the gloves and put on the tutus! (I suspect that, besides the wedding, this is the moment you've all been waiting for!)

Before I forget--Happy New Year, y'all! (That goes double for the incomparable Tempest of Dreams, who actually read this during the course of her holiday festivities!)

6: The Incurrigibles

Chapter 7 of 12

There comes a moment in the life of every Fairy God-Jarvey when the situation is such that reinforcements are needed--whether ANYONE likes it or not. When you see whom, you'll know why.

Disclaimer: You're barmier that I am if you think I own this stuff. Even I don't think I'm J.K. Rowling.

Chapter 6: The Incurrigibles

Uh-oh.

Severus instinctively fell back on the first rule in the unwritten Universal Code of Double Agents (and incidentally, of men the world over): When cornered... stall.

"What about Thursday, my love?"

"Stalling isn't going to help you, Severus Snape."

Oh, crap. Not only was Hermione apparently aware, at least on an instinctive level, of the playbook...she was using both his names. One of the first things every human being learns is that unless they're graduating, getting married, or being awarded an Order of Merlin, being addressed by all of one's names means absolutely nothing good.

This goes double for males being addressed by females.

"I could have sworn we decided we weren't going to ask each other about this."

"That was before former featured reporter and current major pain in the neck of the universe Rita Skeeter apparently wrote a piece on your little expedition Thursday night." He grabbed for the paper almost exactly as she thrust it in his direction. "I'm guessing that, as per usual, she's made up most of it and distorted the remainder. But the timing is a little too convenient for her to have Summoned it from thin air."

Snape could feel his eyebrows doing all sorts of gymnastics as each new absurdity met his eyes. "Well... she spelled 'Amsterdam' correctly."

"Severus..."

"What am I supposed to say about this? Yes, in a moment of either madness or extraordinarily poor judgment, I actually believed that Draco had nothing more in mind than to help me purchase potions ingredients that are quite difficult to obtain locally. Believe me, the moment passed quickly...but by then, we were already arguing on a street corner in Amsterdam with reservations waiting. It was either listen to him whine until I could hex him somewhere not in public view and make good my escape, or acquire the ingredients with the comparatively minor inconvenience of having to spend an hour in the establishment in question, at his expense."

"So, Remus wasn't there?"

He wondered when those pretty little pools of chocolate that used to be Hermione's eyes had turned into cold, murky diamonds. *Could have been born female and been spared the need to learn Legilimency*, he thought.

"By a vast, disgustingly unfortunate coincidence, your two most *delightful* friends had the brilliant idea to bring Lupin to the exact same establishment as Draco had selected for *our* misguided excursion...which supports my hypothesis that had those three dunderheads somehow become friends during their tenure at Hogwarts, the school would no longer stand."

Hermione snorted. He would rather she didn't do that. It was not a flattering sound for her at all. Of course, his opinion may have been influenced by the fact that she seemed to produce it primarily in response to something he had done or was alleged to have done. "Nice try, but you aren't distracting me with humor."

"Who's joking?"

"Assault on a prostitute? Conspiring with leprechauns? Care to elaborate upon the acorns from which she grew those particular oaks?"

Snape sighed. "Your idiot friend Weasley had a few too many and made a pass at a **waitress**. No one was assaulted. The club's security personnel overreacted, and a leprechaun gold shower came out of nowhere, allowing us to leave the club without further repercussions."

"Wait... There really was leprechaun gold? And Ron and Harry were there... but that didn't find its way into the article?" Hermione's expression at trying to wrap her mind around the juxtaposition of leprechauns, the wizards in question, and a gentlemen's club would have been amusing if the whole situation weren't so damned uncomfortable.

"*That* is the one detail that puzzles me more than the fact that someone was fool enough to print this. She couldn't have been present... I can't imagine her being able to identify Lupin and myself and somehow managing to miss everyone else. Potter used his little Auror tricks to make sure they weren't readily recognizable, but if you knew who to look for, it was possible to spot him. And Draco made no attempt to disguise himself."

Confused or not, Hermione still looked mad enough to spit tacks. "I should have turned her in to the authorities when I had her in a jar."

Upon hearing that apparent non-sequitur, Severus' concern shifted from the fate of his hide to the state of his beloved's mind. "Care to explain that, my love?"

As succinctly as possible, Hermione outlined her capture of Rita Skeeter, unregistered Animagus.

"Hey, Moto! Get your arse in here...I think your mystery bug might have something to do with this." Reggie materialized on the seat of one of the kitchen chairs, popping her head over the edge of the table and yelling for all she was worth.

Snape glared tiredly at the Jarvey (or, as he liked to think of her, the living embodiment of the essence of vexation). There was no point putting any teeth in it. It was utterly wasted on her. "How long have you been lurking there?"

"You mean, watching you try to squirm your way out of this? Maybe ten minutes. Figured you deserved something like this for being fuckwitted enough to wander off with the little blond pain in the arse."

Snape wasn't sure which was more irksome... the fact that Reggie had been enjoying his discomfort, or the fact that he hadn't thought to call upon the paragon of naïve earnestness that was her Apprentice to confirm his story immediately.

One naïvely earnest Apprentice, coming right up. "Here, Reggie-san! Is something the matter? Was I remiss in my actions regarding the small insect at the dining establishment?"

"Just give Hermione and Snarky your report on the Thursday night mission."

Any relief Snape might have felt at having his blamelessness in the affair confirmed was negated when Motoyoshi blithely recounted ALL of the events of Thursday's adventure. Including their sojourn with the authorities in Barcelona...and his deliverance from said situation. Complete with all pertinent names.

It wouldn't have been so bad if Hermione had been upset. Angry even. Perhaps mad enough to do wandless magic, thus necessitating 'Reparos' for assorted cracked dishes. But having her *giggle* about it was more than a man should have to stand.

Severus slapped the newspaper down on the kitchen table and gathered his injured dignity about him. "At least now I know what to do the next time you need cheering up. All it takes to restore your good humor is having me risk my neck riding a Charmed doormat across half of Europe. In very poor company, I might add."

Hermione shook her head at him, her expression affectionate rather than otherwise, despite the residual giggles. However, he did not deign to hope that all was well. He was quite through with optimism for at least a week.

Sure enough...she looked at the article again and sobered up a bit. "It seems she got rather scarily near the truth in places. Do you think there's anything to the bit about 'inquiries being made at the Ministry of Magic?'"

Snape was about to dismiss the notion when an awful thought crossed his mind. "Damned Potter! He probably had an attack of guilt or some such and started poking around to make certain we didn't damage anything at the club, or something equally asinine."

"Assuming it's true that there's an investigation, what on earth would possess you to think Harry was involved?"

"It's *always* him! Ever since he entered my classroom as a miserable little ball-ache, his grubby fingerprints have been somewhere on each lump of misery that falls into my life!"

"You know, the parallels between your negative opinions of each other are quite eerie at times."

That deserved a very black look indeed, and Snape did not hesitate to provide one.

Hermione reciprocated the expression wholeheartedly. "I'm going to call him at work and prove it to you!"

Severus took the opportunity to fume inwardly at the entire concept of mobile phones. He knew better than to fume outwardly. They'd been down this lane any number of times, and the phone was always still there at the end of it. She fiddled with something that ensured the volume would be loud enough for him to hear, and began pushing the infinitesimal buttons.

"Harry, I hope I'm not interrupting anything. Do you have a minute?"

"For you, absolutely. Is anything the matter?"

"Rather... have you seen the *Daily Prophet* this morning?"

"No. I've never had an occasion to wrap fish while at work."

"Harry, this is serious. Could you dig up a copy and have a look at the third gossip item from the bottom, page five?"

There was a pause, and then some rustling.

"Got it yet?"

"Yes."

When he failed to elaborate, she pressed on. "Well? Is she right about there being an inquiry?"

"Let me be quite clear on this point. One: I refuse to admit knowing anything about last Thursday. Two: I would prefer to deny any and all knowledge of all Thursdays for the foreseeable future. Finally, assuming last Thursday ever happened, I would be watching all incoming messages from law enforcement agencies in Amsterdam, Barcelona, and all points in between to make certain I personally filed all such messages in the appropriate location. I would do so for at least a month, just to be on the safe side."

"Then I'm safe in assuming no Aurors are investigating any of this?"

"Very, very safe."

"Thanks, Harry."

They said their goodbyes and she ended the call. Her expression as she turned to Snape was the facial equivalent of 'I told you so' in three-foot-high neon letters. He thinned his lips to near-invisibility and warned her, "Don't say it."

Hermione affected a blankly innocent expression. "I didn't realize I was speaking."

Snape wished, very briefly, for his good old days of teaching. At least his scowls had accomplished something back then, besides exacerbating his wrinkles. "Before you decided to become needlessly alarmed, we had assumed that the 'inquiry' reference was sheer invention."

"This from the man who went into a needless swearing fit from some sort of...of Harry-paranoia."

He really wanted to respond to that in kind. But Reggie was bouncing up and down on the kitchen table in apparent agitation, making faces at him around Hermione's shoulder. Unless he was very much mistaken, the gist of her non-verbal tirade was, 'You'd bloody well better diffuse this before you have the row to end all rows, and can't exchange wedding vows because you aren't speaking to each other!'

Well, that interpretation probably left out several 'fucks,' 'craps,' and the odd 'hell and damn.' But he had gotten the beast's point.

"No," he contradicted Hermione, coming near enough to slide his long fingers along her jaw line, past her ears, and into her hair, "this from the man who is insanely, impossibly in love with you, and doesn't care to spend what should be our wedding day answering inane questions under Veritaserum, or something equally disagreeable."

A distinctly Jarvey-sized thud, reverberating with relief, was just audible from somewhere behind Hermione as she responded. "Exactly why I was alarmed," she said against his lips. Nothing else was said for quite some time.

They took a slight breathing break. "Then it certainly wasn't needless alarm. I can't imagine a more distressing prospect than not being able to marry you." The slight creak and thump of the kitchen door opening and shutting implied they were now alone. Not one to waste the moment, Severus lifted Hermione on to the kitchen table.

"I thought you wanted breakfast, love."

'Randy Severus' was doing an internal happy dance. Hermione would only say that in such a sultry tone of voice if she fully intended to give him the perfect opening for naughty innuendo...and the opportunity to make good on it.

"I have every intention of eating on this table right now, my dear Hermione."

Evidently the first course would be tongue, because Hermione had taken quite forceful possession of his mouth again, with no apparent intention of relinquishing it any time soon. When she finally did, it was to lay claim to his ear. "I wonder why she put in that bit about an inquiry by the Ministry. Just to get up Harry's nose, I expect."

He growled at her slightly and attacked her neck in retribution. "I thought we had an agreement on a list of things...and people...we're not supposed to mention at times like this?"

"Sorry, love. I'm just so relieved it wasn't anything that might be trouble for you. For us."

Few things made Severus feel more magnanimous than Hermione's riotous curls caressing his face while her very deliberate, delicate fingers did likewise to the rest of him. He was even moved to make an oblique sort of apology. "It was silly of me to think so. After all, any investigation into an incident concerning leprechauns and a werewolf would be handled by that new department that monitors dangerous magical beings."

In later years, Severus would be tempted to use this incident as evidence that they would be better off if he never apologized for anything, however indirectly. He wisely refrained from doing so, instead opting to wish he had been wise enough to remain silent on that occasion. Of course, the most shocking thing about the incident was how he had forgotten the cardinal rule of his days as a spy reporting to Voldemort: never say more than is absolutely necessary.

Hermione popped up from the table, leaving Severus to flop rather forlornly on one elbow, contemplating the loss of her warm snuggly-ness.

"Why didn't I think of that before? She probably brought her nasty insinuations to Department for International Monitoring of Potentially Dangerous Magical Beings. That means *Percy* would be involved, and of all the self-righteous, career-obsessed, bull-headed, rabid bureaucrats that might get his hands on this information/*he* might stoop so low as to persecute poor Remus for publicity!"

It was both disheartening and a little insulting that she seemed so able to go from 'let's have each other for breakfast' to 'poor Remus' in absolutely nothing flat.

"You're interrupting what promised to be profoundly torrid sex to whinge about the bloody werewolf and his happiness?" Snape was not whining. Malfoys whined. Snapes, conversely, expressed the profound injustice of their current situation in the most evocative tone possible.

"What sort of nasty, petty, crude, childish thing to say is THAT?"

"Offhand, I'd say it's the entirely justified complaint of a very hungry man whose breakfast is currently pacing around the room, fretting about another man's ability to get married."

"Your breakfast, indeed! If you keep up these insensitive remarks, you may very well need to start fretting about *your* chances of getting married!"

Skittering sounds and wet slapping sounds heralded the arrival of the Fairy God-Creatures. The much-abused kitchen door smacked the adjoining wall as silver Jarvey and greenish Kappa entered, wreathed in a decidedly bluish cloud.

"Chingado-fucked-a-shit-arsed-puta-stupidities, I fucking bleeding KNEW I shouldn't-a-hell-a-sonofa-damned-fucked-bitch have left you two wanking-addled-arses alone!"

Reggie was normally intelligible, even when swearing up a storm. She had apparently reached the stage of agitation at which coherency was impossible.

"The hell you shouldn't have! I'm not about to have it off in front of a talking dust rag and her accompanying sodden rag mop."

"The likelihood of that just dropped to..."

"Parrense! Can you two hear each other? 'Cause it's fucksure that everyone within five miles who has one working eardrum can! You're getting married in FIVE DAYS. Remember how hard you worked to get to this point? Remember how hard I worked to get you to this point?" The Jarvey didn't pause long enough to draw breath, much less prompt a reply. "Listen to your godmum, kiddies. The sooner you two kiss and make up (and whatever else you do towards that end, keep it bloody well to yourselves), the better! Let Moto and me take care of this Skeeter bitch and this Percy bastard, whoever they are. That way, you two don't have to worry about a goddamn thing."

"What do you mean, 'take care of'?" Severus couldn't fathom why Hermione sounded apprehensive. Hadn't she contemplated homicide...or at least, insecticide...just a few minutes earlier?

Either Reggie didn't hear her goddaughter or she elected to ignore her. "Moto! Get your tutu, we're on the clock!"

"Hai! Immediately, Reggie-san!"

The familiar pink tulle appeared...in Motoyoshi's case, hanging limp and translucent over his little loincloth, accessorized with copious amounts of fetid water.

"Chinga, Mijo, you need to learn to call your tutu without dragging it through a chuffing swamp first."

"Apologies, Reggie-san!"

"Moto and I aren't going to rest until we sort anyone who might stand in the way of your wedding!" Addressing the Kappa, she asked, "Ready to go invisible, kid?"

"Invisible now, Reggie-san! Where are we going?"

"Ministry of Magic. Always square your shite with the law first. Take it from someone who knows."

As the unlikely duo vanished, Snape contemplated the cruel sense of humor pervading the universe. How else to explain how his fate always seemed to hinge on the will of beings like barmy old men with candy fetishes, bespectacled brats with perpetually bad hair, and foul-mouthed Fairy God-Jarveys whose smelly little apprentices dripped swamp water all over his kitchen floor?

Reggie knew that she had a serious problem on her paws the instant she entered the appropriate office. There were wizards and witches snoring gently at desks so neat they would meet Pip's approval, and angry voices were issuing from behind the dividing wall. Apparently the staff's mid-morning siesta was involuntary, and the person or persons responsible were getting an earful about it.

Motoyoshi looked towards the source of the sound. "Reggie-san, I am willing to bet a month's supply of matcha that the one called Percy is there."

"You're learning, Moto. The way our luck runs, that's exactly where he'll be." Still invisible, they slipped around the partially open door.

"I assume this isn't a social visit, since you saw fit to assault my staff." This came from the tall redhead standing behind the desk, his wand subtly at the ready and his posture tense. According to the nameplate on the desk, this was the wizard they were looking for. Oh, goody.

"Well spotted, Lord Muck," said one of the identical redheads on the other side of the desk. The pair began to drift apart from each other, leaving their opponent with no clear target and forcing his attention to jump between them as they bounced remarks back and forth like ping-pong balls. Reggie twigged that these blokes were probably the infamous Weasley twins, whose exploits had a way of getting into break room conversations even at the headquarters of the International Fellowship of Fairy Godmothers and Related Do-Gooding Beings. For some reason, it tended to happen when Reggie was having a quiet week in terms of assignments. Funny, that.

"This is strictly business. We have an appointment to kick ten bells out of you for collaborating with the enemy," the other added, tossing down the offending issue of the *Daily Prophet*.

Percy made a dismissive gesture towards the paper. "I've seen that utter rubbish, and I'd like to strangle the woman!"

"Likely story, from the man who's been grasping at every shred of attention he could manage since school." Reggie studied the speaker, wondering which twin was which. They should really come with labels, or something.

"Considering your lack of subtlety, brothers, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that the fact that she did not name me, or my department, escaped your notice. A fact for which I am grateful, since she came in here with a story suited to 'The Quibbler.' It wasn't the sort of attention my department needed."

"So, she was here." Hmm. That one had a slightly different quality to his voice than the other, at least to a Jarvey's sensitive ears. If she knew their names, she might be able to tell them apart without sniffing them. For reasons beyond her understanding, humans usually found that objectionable.

"Yes, annoying my staff and wasting my time." Percy's expression added, 'Rather like you two,' to that statement. "In order to get rid of her as quickly as possible, I said I would make a few private inquiries IF I had the time. I certainly never agreed to contribute to one of her tawdry little stories. As far as I can tell, there IS no story!"

"Then what do you call this?"

"Sheer invention on her part."

Tension was building, and it was obvious that one of the three palmed wands would be put into action at any moment.

"Reggie, do something," Moto whispered.

"Why? Maybe the two stubby prats will sort the prat with glasses and get some useful information out of him. Save us some trouble," Reggie whispered back.

"But that would be unethical! Now that we are involved, it is our responsibility to see that no harm comes to anyone here!"

Eventually, Reggie admitted that she probably could have responded to the situation better. However, Moto was right, and one of the twins twitched just then, and it all came out for the best, in the end. At least, as she successfully argued in her eventual report, the whole series of events had given Moto a hell of a lot of practical experience. "Fuck it! Go ahead, stop 'em."

Moto jabbed his hishaku urgently into the air, performing the first spell he could think of.

Reggie surveyed the results with a sigh. All three human occupants of the room were now stuck to the walls like butterflies pinned to a board, angrily accusing each other of casting the spell that left them so.

"Apologies, Reggie-san," Moto said miserably. He bowed more deeply than usual, resulting in the total loss of the water from the top of his head...a distraction and drain on his powers so profound that he became visible.

The sight of a gasping Kappa in a dripping pink tutu writhing on the office rug effectively put a stop to the yelling match between the humans. By the time Reggie had helped Moto sit up and replenish the water in his head, all eyes were on the pair.

"Well, kid... you definitely kept them from a serious arse-kicking. I have no idea in hell who's going to save us from the same, once Mab gets wind of this. But if we get the Order of the Boot for this mission, at least it'll be for acting on principle."

Raising her voice, she addressed their audience. "Sorry for the inconvenience, wankers...but there's no way around it. Be back in a bit to help you down." She shut their mouths for good measure before hustling Moto out of the room for a quick conference. No use having their yelling wake the rest of the office.

"Apologies..."

"For fuck's sake, Moto, don't bow again! Let me think." She began pacing in a rapid circuit in front of her miserable Apprentice. "Bloody, fucking hell... Wiping their memories, temporary restraint... They're not very good solutions, and we need permission to do either of those, anyway. *Fuck!*"

Motoyoshi sniffed.

Reggie circled, nibbled thoughtfully at her own tail, and circled again. "Nothing for it, mijo. I'm going to have to report to the Unusual Situations Office."

"I am sorry, O-Reggie-san. I will take full responsibility for this disaster and turn in my tutu."

She shook her head at her Apprentice, expression hardening as her eyes glinted dangerously with some coalescing idea. "Like hell you will. This isn't a disaster, not by half. I'm going all the way to the top and summoning that stuffy bastard Pip. Just let me do the talking, okay? I think I've got a plan."

When Reggie returned with Pip, he didn't look as if he were impressed. He didn't sound as if he were impressed, either, resuming their conversation where it had apparently left off when she retrieved him from the office.

"Puck's Truss! You want to combine your crackpot Apprentice, the Weasley twins, and you? Are you planning a wedding or orchestrating Armageddon?" Pip asked, completely aghast. "Could there possibly be a more dangerous, needlessly complicated way to aid your godchild?"

"Look, it's just for few days. They'll be able to activate and dispel a glamour I set up for them, and use a couple of other piddling spells. In an emergency, I might give them the ability to 'poof' for convenience's sake. It's not like I'm granting them access to major Transfigurations or Good Will Punch."

Pip remained nonplussed. "I have one word for you, Fletcher: jobsworth."

"It's either that or major memory modification and a good week's worth of physical restraint... 'cause sure as shite they're going to go after their brother again once they run across that copy of the *Daily Prophet* or talk to anyone who's read it. How the hell do you think we got into this mess? Motoyoshi saw a real danger of serious physical harm and intervened as best he could! The rest was an unavoidable accident."

Not for the first time, Reggie wished everyone in the world saw things as clearly and sensibly as she did. After all, how the fuck do you make an omelet without breaking a few eggs? Or get your godchild their heart's desire without damaging a little plumbing? Or something of that nature. It was messy, that was all she knew.

"Assuming I do agree with this idea...an awfully big assumption...what are you going to do about the other witness? And you still haven't adequately explained why you need these wizards to deal with Rita Skeeter. I admit, from what you told me at the office, she sounds reprehensible and ought to be taught a lesson. But I have serious reservations as to your teaching methods."

"I figured you could get through to Percy, or as a last resort, sort him with a minor memory wipe," Fletcher said.

"How generous of you."

The Jarvey answered with a pained expression. "We're not going to injure anybody. I'm invoking the 'restraint to prevent harm' clause on the Skeeter puta. Restraint only...nothing violent. With humans involved, we won't need to use so much heavy magical shite. We're actually less likely to be discovered. So, what do you say?"

"I'd say 'counterintuitive' doesn't begin to describe your idea of subtlety." Pip sighed. "All right, Fletcher. You can have your deputies. But there will be conditions."

"It figures." Reggie bit off the rest of her comments and shuffled her paws. She was feeling the strain, not just from the stressful situation, but from being forced to cut down on her customary profanity levels in front of a supervisor.

"First, the wizards are under your jurisdiction at all times. You will be responsible for rationing out exactly as much of our magic as is needed for their tasks, for as long as it takes to accomplish those tasks, and no more. You will also be responsible for preventing them from misusing that power, without doing them any harm.

"Second, you are not permitted to damage the witch Skeeter. You may restrain her only as long as is necessary to prevent harm to your charges.

"Finally... Motoyoshi, clean that disgrace of a tutu. I know starch is probably too much to expect, but there is no way you are making Journeyman wearing a garment that smells like Kelpie piss."

"Hai, O-Pip-san." Moto managed to bow without spilling a suicidal amount of water from his head this time.

Pip would never admit it aloud, but Fletcher had definitely gotten one thing right: rendering Percy and the twins speechless. Explaining the situation to them was greatly facilitated by the fact that none of them could interrupt, argue, or express disbelief. He did the talking; it would not reflect well on the service to have Fletcher swear her way through the recitation of the wizards' limited options.

"I will now return your powers of speech, gentlemen. I suggest you use them wisely. Although we cannot, as sworn members of the Fellowship, ever do harm to another living being, we are under no obligation to stand by while you harm others. Neither are we constrained to stand idly by while you endanger the confidentiality of our organization. Our countermeasures with regards to such issues are nonviolent...but very thorough."

Percy was first to comment. "This sounds remarkably like something my department should be looking into. I daresay we should have a discussion. How an apparent pixie, Kappa, and Jarvey...of all creatures...have powers like yours is a matter of concern."

"Our powers are a matter of caring for others, to the point where it manifests as strong magic. I am willing to explain this to you in greater depth, but I first need your assurance that you will not attempt violence on anyone in this room, nor interfere with this Fairy God-Jarvey and her Apprentice...or any of our Fellowship...as they attempt to perform their sworn duty to do good and protect their godchildren."

With an irritated sigh, Percy acquiesced. "Oh, very well, if it gets me off this bloody wall."

One of the twins voiced an entirely different concern. "You still haven't proved Percy clear of this."

Pip meant to reply, but Fletcher interrupted. "What do you want, a fucking jury trial? I'd say the chances are pretty good that little shit stirrer Skeeter was able to come up with what she printed without once resorting to actual information." Somewhat tangentially, she asked, "Which one are you, anyway?"

"Fred, if that makes any difference."

The Jarvey kept talking. "Let me put it this way, Federico: until you can promise that you aren't going to go apeshit on your hermano, you're staying glued to that wall. Or somewhere else you can't damage anybody. Make that promise, and you get free. And if you still want to get Skeeter out of the way, and help Hermione, I might just have a proposal that would interest you. Got it?"

The other twin sighed. "That doesn't leave us with much of a choice, does it?"

"Glad you see it my way, Jorge. You don't mind if I call you Jorge, do you? I feel more comfortable doing names in Español when I'm working with someone."

George attempted to shrug. "Fine by me. Can I get off the wall now?"

"What about you, Rico?"

"You can call me anything but late to dinner, if you'll get me down from here."

"I have a bad feeling about this," Pip and Percy both muttered.

Reggie glared slightly at Pip. "Look, you speak bureaucrat; I'm fluent in mayhem. Let's say you take care of your end, and I'll take care of mine, and it'll all come out in the wash." Fletcher twitched her whiskers at Pip in a significant way. He got the message: all three brothers were telling the truth. Sometimes, he envied Fletcher and her ilk. Fairy Godmothers and Godfathers who did casework were so adept at reading people that 'lie' and 'truth' might as well be written on their faces. Pip arched a tiny, angular eyebrow fractionally in reply, and released Percy.

"Jorge, Rico, come with me." Magic prickled as Fletcher spoke their new nicknames, and they were detached from the wall. Pip would have argued, except that it was the Weasley twins they were dealing with, and somehow, they just seemed more Regina Fletcher's department than his.

With matching rude gestures in Percy's direction, the twins followed Reggie and Moto from the office.

"Why is it that I can't get the idea of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse out of my head?" Percy said, his tone conveying deep misgivings.

Pip found himself thinking much the same thing. "You know, I think we might just be able to come to an understanding. Shall I awaken your staff, so no further productivity is lost this morning? I need supervise things back at my office, but I can meet you at noon for lunch," Pip offered quite generously, considering the easiest thing to do would have been to exercise his option to administer a minor memory adjustment.

"That would be much appreciated," Percy admitted. He actually sounded as if he were looking forward to his conversation with the pixie. Pip thought he had an inkling of why. After all, it wasn't every day he met someone who had the right idea about productivity.

"Okay, Frick and Frack, here's the lowdown," Reggie addressed the twins with the air of a general issuing marching orders. "It's my job to see that one Hermione Granger is a happy witch. For reasons way beyond the cognitive capacity of my wee bonce, she seems to find that happiness with one Severus Snape, sarcastic bastard extraordinaire. Skeeter the bug-bitch is stirring up trouble for him and for her friend Lupin.

"At this point, anything that upsets Hermione upsets her impending wedding, and needs to be nipped in the bud...or in this case, the bug...sooner rather than later. My Apprentice Motoyoshi and I could use some discreet assistance in pulling off a modest hoax. We can give you temporary and EXTREMELY limited access to some very unusual magic in exchange for a piece of the action and you keeping your gobs shut about all of this. Not that anyone would believe you, mind; it's the principle of the thing. Otherwise, it's wiping your memories and keeping you under wraps until you forget about trying to kick seven shades of shit out of your hermano."

"A 'modest' hoax?" Fred asked, sounding rather patronizing. "I'm afraid it goes against our grain to be involved with a hoax that could be construed as 'modest.'"

"I have to agree, brother dear," George said, shaking his head. "We do have a professional reputation to maintain, after all."

"Well, I suppose I must acquaint you identical arsewipes with my definition of modest. The explosion of the gent's lav at the Midsummer's Eve Ball year before last was an example of one of my 'little' diversions," Reggie said.

"Aha, so that was you. Nice work," George said, nodding. "What do you say, Fred old boy? Do you think the Jarvey's performance is up to our standards?"

"Oh, certainly," Fred agreed. "It took Magical Maintenance a week to get the flow of water under control, and another week to repair everything."

"Only two weeks? Shite, I really fell down on the job there," she said, shaking her head.

"Ah, well. Better luck next time," George consoled her.

"Reggie-san, may I ask, what is the plan?" Motoyoshi twiddled his hishaku anxiously.

Reggie was careful not to let it show that she had almost forgotten that they were supposed to be planning. The prospect of reliving past adventures with a pair of like-minded avatars of chaos was quite distracting. "The way I see it, our goal is straightforward: get Skeeter to turn into a bug, and get her into a jar. We could just follow her and wait for her to spy on someone, but that leaves too much to chance. She might decide to write more shite in the meanwhile and cause more grief.

"I figure the best thing to do is to give her a situation where she can't resist changing form. We control the situation...we control any and all avenues of escape. Offhand, I can't think of a better way to do it than this."

She outlined her plan. By the end of it, Fred and George were both smirking dangerously, and Moto was nodding, a tight little approving quiver of his globular head that set the water in the top of his skull rippling and his reedy green hair swaying. "Keep in mind, any magic I loan you comes with fail-safes. You really don't want to find out what the consequences are if you fuck up and hurt somebody. Set the trap...wait till she goes buggy...then scoop her up. Then, we'll deal with her just desserts," Reggie finished. "Are you agreed, wankers?"

"I'm in, to the end. What about you, George? Or, should I say, Jorge?"

"Agreed, Rico. What do we do first?"

"Rico, you're with Moto. I need you to gather tactical information." She gave them their instructions, and Moto 'poofed' them away.

"Jorge, you're with me. Time to introduce you to the wonderful world of fairy glamours, 'cause tomorrow, you've got to see a reporter about some bullshit."

Rita Skeeter found Monday to be something of a disappointment. The office had been quiet; she'd invented something for Tuesday's column, then rushed back to her flat in hopes of momentous news. But there were no urgent Floo-calls, no anonymous owls with further developments on her story. By Tuesday, she was resigned to taking her

bug form and slipping out to seek the usual dinnertime gossip for her next column.

Her plans were interrupted by the slight whoosh of the Floo being activated. "Miss Skeeter? I need a word with you. I'm coming through." With no further preamble, the man did just that. He rolled across the hearth, stood up with a sort of brusque aplomb, and briskly shook bits of ash from his robes.

"Mr. Weasley, isn't it? I was rather hoping to hear from you." Her faux-friendly interviewer's smile and bright tone of voice immediately slid into place, like a firefighter jumping straight from bed into protective trousers and boots to answer an alarm.

He polished his glasses and cleared his throat, looking somehow pleased to be recognized. "Yes. Well. As you may recall, I mentioned the possibility of an inquiry when we spoke on Friday. Since then, certain details have come to light." He looked around as if fearing he might be overheard. "Certain sensitive details."

Rita tried not to drool as she Summoned her quill. He intercepted it. "No, Miss Skeeter...please, hear me out. I must ask you a tremendous favor. Due to the gravity of this situation, you must hold off on printing any further information you may encounter. Sometime Wednesday afternoon, I will be sending a special messenger to the authorities in Amsterdam to retrieve additional evidence. I wish it could be done tonight, but unfortunately, my liaison in the police station is off until Wednesday morning.

"I cannot stress how sensitive this information is. It is imperative that you stay well away from Amsterdam or any other locale involved in this inquiry. I will, of course, make every effort to see that you are contacted first upon the outcome of the investigation."

"Mr. Weasley, if this is as sensitive...even dangerous...as you say, the public has a right to know the story."

"Interesting choice of words, Miss Skeeter."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I was referring to 'dangerous,' if you must know. Should this information get out too soon, there may, indeed, be danger...and there may be no story. Take my word for it, and stay well clear of the Dangerous Beasts desk at the central police station. Otherwise, you may find yourself faced with some rather disagreeable legal repercussions." With that quelling remark, he took his leave of her.

Rita waited exactly thirty seconds before heading to her room to gather a few necessary items. Then, she set about looking up the hour of the earliest Portkey to Amsterdam. It should be in plenty of time to get to the police before the Ministry's messenger did.

"Good going, Jorge. She really took the bait, didn't she?"

"Like a Puffskein takes bogies. Nice trick that...you actually Apparating us back into her flat instead of leaving by the Floo."

"It's called 'poofing' babe, and there's no other way to travel."

George cancelled the glamour as Reggie had instructed him and pocketed the glasses she'd provided, in case they were needed later. "You know, I'm sort of surprised she didn't leave tonight."

Reggie scowled at the thought of Rita Skeeter. "Fucking harpy probably couldn't get the paper to foot the bill for a hotel room...otherwise I bet she would have. The bitch just couldn't wait to get her claws into something she could turn into a smear job. She was practically drooling at the idea of wrecking two weddings and bollixing up all sorts of people's lives just to get one headline."

"Too true. But we'll sort her, Reg."

"Damn straight we will. Your Percy impersonation was brill, by the way."

"That glamour of yours was incredible. I almost felt tall and uptight."

With a 'poof' of greenish smoke, Fred and Motoyoshi appeared.

"We've GOT to get them to teach us how they do this," Fred muttered to George. "It's like Apparating, only completely silent, no nausea, and totally unaffected by distance. I can't begin to say enough about how they become invisible. It's got Disillusionment beat by miles."

"Mission accomplished, Reggie-san!" Moto announced proudly.

"Yeah...Percy's alibi is airtight, and the scheduling information we sussed out yesterday at the police precinct in Amsterdam should work out for us tomorrow," Fred clarified.

"Good. Then there's no reason I can't be at the rehearsal tonight, to give Hermione moral support." A toothy little grin lit Reggie's face with ferocious glee. "So it begins."

Reggie's Spanish vocabulary:

Chingado: fucked

Putas: whore

Parrense: Stop it (both of you)!

Chinga: Fuck

Mijo: My son

Hermano: brother

If you're wondering if there is a reason why Reggie refers to Fred and George by the Spanish versions of their names...Federico (which she shortens to Rico) and Jorge...keep wondering. The answer isn't going to show up until later.

Author's Notes:

The latest nugget of pure gold in my treasure trove of British slang? The phrase, 'getting the Order of the Boot' as a way of saying your employment has been terminated.

And if George's Puffskein comment didn't make sense, why, you need to catch up on your reading. It's all right there in 'Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them.'

I went utterly and completely comma-happy on this chapter. Thanks to Tempest of Dreams for pruning the excess!

7: Hey Mister--Wanna buy a Wedding?

Chapter 8 of 12

Hermione does what she probably should have done all along, thus ushering in the 'wedding of the century.' The question is, will it be legal? And will even Reggie find this debacle worth preserving?

Disclaimer: Now, if I were J.K. Rowling, I might very well write fanfiction under an assumed name, just to let off steam. Alas, one look at my bank balance is sufficient to prove that I am not she. Reviews are my sole recompense, and I intend no disrespect in borrowing her characters. Except maybe to Rita Skeeter.

Chapter 7: Hey Mister...Wanna buy a Wedding?

Hermione was panicked. It didn't really show on the surface, but deep down, she was one piece of discouraging information away from vomiting. Reggie's reappearance on Monday night was not reassuring, especially since she asked more questions than she answered.

"So what happened after we left?" Reggie asked, whiskers twitching with energy.

"We had breakfast," Hermione answered primly.

Reggie snorted. "Cute euphemism."

"No, really...we had breakfast. The mood was shot to hell at that point," Hermione clarified, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Well, you'll have plenty of time to recapture it by Saturday. Don't worry about a thing...there's no investigation happening at the long-arsed-named department for monitoring magical beings. And I've got some reinforcements to help sort the Skeeter bitch for you. You've got the square root of sod-all to worry about." Reggie declined to elaborate further.

No additional information was forthcoming on Tuesday either, with both Fairy God-Jarvey and Apprentice absent well before Hermione awakened. This meant every quiet moment at work that day found Hermione's brilliant, frizz-topped mind absurdly full of images of broad-shouldered goblins or thuggish kelpies in turtlenecks, frog-marching one troublesome reporter to an unknown doom under Reggie's approving eye. Actually, it was easier for her to envision Severus supervising such a scene, but either way, she was in a state of hopeless distraction throughout her morning shift. Reggie returned that evening just in time to accompany them to the rehearsal...and gave no more detailed a report than a wicked, pointy smirk that did nothing to alleviate Hermione's anxiety.

The rehearsal itself was strained, organized insanity. Hermione felt distinctly dazed as her mother herded people around the room, telling everyone where to go, sit, stand, and so on in her brightest voice...the one that set Hermione's teeth on edge.

The world had become oddly fractured, or maybe it was just her perception of it. It was difficult to take anything in properly. What with trying to follow Mum's directions without actually listening to the annoyingly chirpy tone she was affecting, the oddest things were popping into Hermione's awareness: Dad and Severus dealing each other eerily identical glares across the length of the room, Harry talking to Luna in a worried voice, and Draco following Ginny around the room, apparently in the process of pestering the life out of her...which Ginny seemed to find unaccountably amusing rather than irritating.

Most confusing of all was the presence of people at the rehearsal who weren't actually in the wedding party. Remus had popped in with the excuse that he and Tonks were going out to dinner and the cinema with Harry and Luna afterwards, though Tonks was delayed at work for now. Harry's presence made a bit more sense; when he wasn't at work, it was practically impossible to detach him from Luna, and she was a bridesmaid. The fact that Ron had appeared out of nowhere was a little harder to figure out. He normally gave Harry and Luna plenty of space when they were in clingy-ooey-goey-in-love mode.

Now that Hermione was paying attention, it was obvious he was giving them ample space. It was Flora that he was crowding.

"No, I didn't see your match last Saturday...I had to work. But I caught some of it on the Wizarding Wireless," Flora said to him, her sweet, patient voice impinging on the edges of Hermione's awareness, under rather than over the general din.

Oh, Ron... please, PLEASE don't tell me you're here to chat up my dearest friend and chief bridesmaid. Couldn't you at least wait until the reception?

"Did you hear the bit where..."

Before she could make up her mind to march over to them and intervene, an even more bizarre snippet of conversation met her ears.

"But am I really your *type*...precious?"

Hermione may have been out of it, but it still struck her as peculiar that Ginny should be calling Malfoy 'precious'...even in a slightly mocking tone of voice.

"I don't suppose you'd actually care to tell me how I could prove to you that I'm not gay," Malfoy said, his voice thick with exasperation.

Somehow, linking 'gay' and 'Draco Malfoy' did not seem the least bit peculiar. It was, however, suggestive of things she preferred not to contemplate, especially in light of her weekend conversation with Ginny. At that precise moment, Hermione discovered that becoming a Healer did not 'Evanesco' all traces of squeamishness from one's psyche.

Luna came over, radiating serenity, and struck up a distractingly off-kilter conversation. It was either Luna just being Luna, or a very canny attempt to calm Hermione down. No one could ever really tell, not even Harry. Either way, Hermione appreciated it. At this point, anything was better than listening to her mother's Lady Bossyboots impression, another blow-by-blow Quidditch match description, or anything whatsoever pertaining to the earth-vexing ferret, whom she would quite probably slap again for no better reason than the fact that mention of his anatomy had disturbed her domestic tranquility. Alas, even that outlet was denied her. If only the insufferable prat hadn't been responsible for her getting reacquainted with Severus in the first place, and if only Severus hadn't unaccountably chosen Malfoy to stand up with him during the ceremony...

It was almost enough to distract her from the knowledge that there was an invisible Jarvey in the room, hovering like some sort of foul-mouthed guardian angel. Though nothing could quite efface the knowledge that everywhere that Reggie went, mayhem was sure to follow.

It was quite unprofessional to bait one's business partner, Ginny admonished herself. Still, they were as off the clock as co-owners of a company could be. One could argue that a little ribbing was actually in order, especially when one's business partner seemed intent upon quite unnecessarily proving his sexual orientation to her. With physical evidence, if necessary, which would actually be rather tempting if not for the whole professionalism thing.

She wondered whether he would tire of chasing her around offering proof of straightness before she tired of him doing so and simply conceded his point. It was, after all, slightly jarring to be pounced on immediately upon leaving the lav.

"You've kissed your share of men before...surely you could tell if a chap were just feigning interest in the proceedings," Draco said, an apparent non sequitur to anyone unfamiliar with the situation. His fixation was rather hilarious, especially considering how deadly serious he was.

Ginny snorted. "Assuming that I thought it would be good for our business relationship, I don't kiss just any bloke. I have standards that need to be met."

"For instance?"

"Well, he has to be clever enough to keep up with me."

"I've managed so far."

Ginny allowed that was more or less true. Draco may have been a bit late to rise and crap with numbers, but he wasn't exactly dim.

"I suppose you're hardly going to stand in the way of my career," she said with a laugh.

He smiled a bit ruefully. "Not if I want to keep making a profit."

Okay, this was back on friendly ground. "Bad breath is a deal breaker, of course."

"I'm quite as attentive to my teeth as I am to the rest of my personal hygiene and appearance, thanks very much."

"Well, no problems there, then. But really...can you kiss?"

"Try me."

Ginny blamed her inner Gryffindor for piping up in a brash voice just then with a pert, 'Oh, why the hell not?' She really had no one to blame but herself, though, for shrugging slightly and grabbing Draco's face in both hands to pull him in for a kiss.

For a brief moment, while their lips were still closed, Draco reflected that he had excellent taste in business partners. Then their lips opened, and the thought quickly evolved into, 'I have an excellent-tasting business partner,' and then to, 'Oh, yeah...'

Ginny was in charge of the kiss, and he wasn't inclined to object. After all, she pretty much ran everything they were mutually involved in, anyway. He provided the classy finishing touches that made it all work...in this case, his adept contribution to their tongue wrestling match, and his hands on her slender, flatteringly nipped-in waist, pulling her close enough that they could enjoy the warmth of each other's bodies. After an agreeable passage of time, the kiss came to a natural conclusion, and they separated slightly, looking at each other.

He really blamed Ginny's eyes for what happened next. They were as languid and warm as cinnamon...perfect bedroom eyes. Naturally, this evoked thoughts of his bed, and how exceptionally elegant she would look with her red hair cascading over his set of green silk sheets, which led to the memory of the one time she had been in his room. In all truth (a truth Draco was not yet prepared to acknowledge) his mouth held some of the blame for what followed. He really should have discouraged it from voicing the conclusion resulting from his train of thought. "So, you *have* been looking at my arse."

And even he had to admit the smug tone probably didn't help.

The next thing Draco knew, he was looking up. There appeared to be stars on the ceiling. And far from looking at his arse, his lovely and very strong-armed partner had just knocked him flat onto it.

"What the fuck was that for?" Draco shouted at Ginny's rapidly retreating back as he struggled to his feet.

"The kiss or the punch?" Severus asked.

Draco whirled around, threw up his hands, and yelled, "Both! Either! How the hell should I know? Wait, you saw all of that?"

"For the most part. If you want privacy, you should really find a better place to snog than right in front of the door to the public lav."

"Sod privacy! Why did she need to hit me?"

"I find your amazement puzzling. After all, you rather seem to have that effect on witches...Gryffindor witches, in particular." With that, Severus pushed past Draco to access the previously mentioned door.

"Well, if you're the expert on Gryffindor witches...what am I doing wrong?"

Severus sighed impatiently. "You might want to start by connecting your brain to your mouth the next time you address her, which means no talking immediately after a snog. The last time I tried to address Hermione with so little oxygen and blood flow to my brain..." He shook his head and let the door shut unhelpfully on whatever that unfinished thought might have been. A final remark filtered through the door. "Being smug probably didn't help."

Yeah. Worked that one out on my own, thanks.

They made it through a single run-through, with Dad looking daggers at Severus, Ginny directing a similar glance at Draco (who was nursing both a wounded expression and a wounded jaw by the look of him), and Harry practically twitching with the urge to ask Luna, "What's wrong?" for the millionth time. Hermione thought the last was rather justified, considering how pale Luna looked. Flora was an island of calm amid the lapping waves of discontent and anxiety, and it was all Hermione could do not to cling to her friend for dear life.

Tonks showed up, smelling faintly but unpleasantly of cabbage and sporting hair that was an angry, eye-searing shade of red. Tonks' face was only a few shades lighter than her hair, and she was uncharacteristically muttering angry epithets, which Remus' arm around her shoulders did nothing to slow down. At first Hermione chalked it up to whatever had kept her out late on assignment, until she caught something about 'effing reporters' and 'why don't newspapers have to tell the truth' and 'who in the nine hells is safe if they won't leave a pair of war heroes alone?'

Flora tried talking over Tonks, possibly to distract Hermione from thinking about the article, which was, of course, what they were all talking about when they thought Hermione wasn't listening. "The wedding is going to be so beautiful, Hermione. So nicely arranged. Of course, I wouldn't have expected anything less from you...you've always been so very good at everything." Hermione didn't have the heart to admit that remarkably little about the wedding had anything to do with her abilities. She wondered how many generations of Randolphs had been Hufflepuffs. Flora's sweet sincerity would have made Helga look like an unfeeling cow.

"I know if Harry and I ever get married, we're not going to have anything half as nice. We'll probably end up in a courthouse in some remote country, in disguise. Otherwise the reporters will outnumber the guests," Luna said, contributing her own two Knuts.

Great. I really needed the guilt from receiving an undeserved compliment and from having something a good friend of mine would appreciate much more, to add to

everything else on my plate at the moment.

"Okay, everyone, that was very nice, but I think we should go through it just once more," Jane said brightly.

"Why?" Hermione asked. Actually, to anyone within the sound of her voice, she whined. This caused all eyes to turn to her, and all expressions within her immediate vicinity to shift to some permutation of, 'Who are you, and what have you done with Hermione?'

Jane's smile went slightly brittle. "Because, my dear, it could go a little more smoothly. So, let's all take our starting places again, and have another run through."

"No."

Now, even to her own ears, Hermione sounded petulant. The assembled wedding party and onlookers began looking at each other instead of at her, and it was the sort of look people got just before suggesting a quick walk over to the spell damage ward.

"Hermione, dear, are you feeling well? Would it help to take a little rest?" Her mother was using that voice reserved for toddlers up past their nap time. It was the final straw. There was no other way to describe what happened next except to say that Hermione snapped.

"NO, I am NOT feeling well. No, it would NOT help to take a little rest. I have not been feeling well since my simple little wedding was kidnapped and brainwashed into becoming something that needed to be run by an all-powerful triumvirate, aligned with the moon, stars, growing seasons for exotic flowers, and I-have-no-clue-what-else, because for the past month I've been on autopilot, just waiting for it to be over! And I'm sick of it!" At this point, she turned from her mother and towards Severus, because she didn't really want to watch Mum's eyes pop out of her head and need to be retrieved from the floor, which seemed to be a very real possibility at the moment.

"I never wanted it to be a big production. I never wanted to be the center of so much attention! But I also don't want it to be a carbon copy of Mum and Dad's wedding, either. I don't want the Registrar's Office any more than I want a hotel ballroom. I want this to be *ours*, and instead it has everyone else's mark on it, and you won't give me any input, anywhere!"

Snape *sagged*. It was as if he was made of wax and the room had abruptly grown too warm for him to remain entirely upright. "And you complain that I never tell **you** what I'm thinking."

"Well, I'm telling you now! So, what are you going to do about it?"

Severus just stared at her, his eyes boring into hers, and for the life of her she couldn't read him at all. Which made it all the more surprising when he practically engulfed her in his embrace right in front of everybody. "I'm going to tell you to do what ever it is that you want to do with this ridiculous wedding, because all I want is you in your ring and that gorgeous gown you were wearing the first night we were together. And the damned gown is optional," he muttered against her ear, deliberately loud enough that he could be overheard.

"I didn't need to know that." Draco addressed his pained remark to the ceiling.

Ginny looked between Hermione and Draco with a slightly incredulous expression. "You know, the irony might just kill me," she said, to no one in particular.

"But whatever it is you want to tell these gape-mouthed dunderheads, make it quick...because this is the first time I've really seen **my** Hermione in months, and you have a maximum of fifteen minutes before I Apparate home with you, directly to our bedroom," Severus finished, fixing her with a *very* readable gaze.

Hermione almost jumped when she felt something fuzzy brush against her ankles. Reggie kept her voice low enough that that only Severus and Hermione could hear her say, "Mija, do what you have to do. I can fix the food and invites for your amigos if they want to invite more guests. I promise, you'll have a wedding on Saturday, it'll be a blast, and it won't be anything like your parents'. Trust me."

"I hate to be the one to interrupt this beautiful moment of clarity, but what about all these very elaborate wedding preparations? Preparations, I might add, which cannot be canceled so soon before the ceremony without significant financial repercussions." Ginny sounded just a bit whiny.

"Sensible girl," Alexander said, quite loudly and pointedly.

Hermione glanced meaningfully at Luna. "I can think of at least one person here who would like a wedding exactly like this one."

That was as close as she would ever get to admitting that there had come a point when she had simply let Luna plan the entire event, just to avoid having to think about it any more and to give the poor thing a chance to have a vicarious wedding experience.

Luna gazed wistfully at the blue roses in the practice bouquet that went so perfectly with her golden hair and silvery eyes, then turned to Harry.

Harry looked longing, but hesitant.

Severus grimaced as if looking at both of them was giving him a serious pain, and broke the pregnant silence. "Oh, just propose to her already, you twit."

"I'm going along with Snape on this one, saving the 'twit' part," Ron added.

Harry glanced around. Draco and Ginny threw up their hands in remarkably similar gestures obviously meaning, 'Don't ask me,' and Hermione and Flora smiled encouragingly at him. That encompassed everyone within line of sight over Luna's shoulder (except Snape, whom he never looked at if he could help it), and it probably would have looked like stalling had he stopped to scan the rest of the spectators for reactions. He turned all his attention back to Luna.

"Luna... Forgive me for not saying this, years ago. Forgive me for having the silly superstition that if you took my name, you'd fall prey to some sort of horrible fate. Forgive me for dragging you into the godforsaken spotlight that seems to follow me everywhere. And if you can forgive me all that... will you agree to marry me?"

"Someone check and see if that's really Potter," Draco muttered to Ginny. "That was... almost smooth."

"Maybe you could ask him for lessons," she whispered back sarcastically. Unsurprisingly, he responded with crossed arms and a massive sulk.

"Oh, of course I will," Luna said, her voice pleasant and faraway, as usual. Her eyes, however, were more than usually luminous. "It's a good thing you finally got around to asking, dear. Otherwise there might have been some awkward questions when the baby came."

In the stunned silence that followed, it was quite easy to discern the sounds of several people swallowing heavily. Harry, in particular, did so several times.

"Baby?" he finally asked in a low, frail, quavering voice.

"Yes, dear. I took the test twice yesterday; there's no doubt about it. And if you will all please excuse me, I have to go vomit now," Luna said agreeably. She turned and rushed off to the loo.

"Um... Congratulations?" Ron said, his smile more sympathetic than laudatory.

Were it not for Remus' quick thinking, Harry might have been injured upon fainting dead away. Fortunately, Remus had quite a lot of practice casting cushioning charms in a hurry, what with Tonks being Tonks.

A 'Rennervate,' an obliging run by Flora to check on Luna, and a whole lot of awkward glances later, Jane was still stubbornly trying to retract Hermione's gift. "They can't actually get married. It will be a nice party, but nothing legally binding. After all, the paperwork is in Severus and Hermione's names. Harry and Luna can't get a license on such short notice."

"Mum, I love you with all my heart. Now, please, if you love me, deal with it," Hermione said, with infinite patience and affection.

Alexander cleared his throat. "It's going to be a very nice party, indeed, if the bills are anything to judge by."

Hermione sighed. "Dad, I'm sure that..."

Harry interrupted her. "Tell me how much, and I'll pick it up from Gringotts first thing tomorrow."

For the first time in about six months, Alexander Granger smiled broadly. It lasted about one minute. "Why couldn't you have married someone of *substance*, like Harry?" he asked Hermione, with no attempt at discretion whatsoever.

Jane buried her face in her hands. "Oh, for God's sake, Alex."

"Do you get the feeling we're looking at a preview of Severus and Hermione about the time they have a child who's old enough to get married?" Remus whispered to Tonks, who snorted and toned down her hair color a couple of shades in agreement.

Luna, somewhat recovered from her nausea, was perched on Harry's lap. He looked quite as if he had no intention of putting her down any time within the next nine months, despite Flora's assurance that there was nothing abnormal about 'morning sickness' occurring at any time of the day at all. "We were so close," Luna sighed. "If only we had another week."

"Actually, what you need is a well-placed Ministry official with an authorized Time-Turner," a vaguely familiar voice interrupted from the back of the hall. "Which is a description that happens to fit me." It only took a moment to realize who the witch speaking must be, considering her companion's identity was unmistakable.

"Penelope? Percy?"

Severus rolled his eyes. "Why didn't we hold this rehearsal somewhere with less traffic...perhaps the platform at Hogsmeade station, end of term?"

"What are you doing here?" Ron asked, not bothering to hide his hostility.

"As it happens, Penny and I were thinking of having a ceremony to renew our wedding vows, and the manager of the hall said tonight would be a good time to see what the place looked like all fixed up for such an occasion," Percy said. He even had the grace to say it a little awkwardly, seeing as he and Penelope hadn't invited any of his family to the original ceremony.

Harry finally seemed to have recovered. Despite roughly a half-decade of stalling on the matter of making an official proposal of marriage, the prospect of an immediate wedding and rapidly looming fatherhood actually agreed quite thoroughly with him. "In that case... how about we make it a double? Remus, Tonks...do you feel up to having a little larger ceremony than you'd planned?" he asked brightly. He still wasn't letting go of Luna, though.

Tonks' hair turned a fairylike pearlescent pink as Remus' arms tightened around her. "Can that be managed? The restrictions..."

Penelope gave Percy a subtle yet significant glance. He looked cornered, then thoughtful and a little worried. He also glanced very briefly into an out-of-the-way corner of the room, though that didn't necessarily mean anything. "Well... fortunately, you also have an in with the head of the Department for Monitoring Potentially Dangerous Magical Beings."

Ignoring for a moment his mate's odd happy dance, Remus walked over to Percy and held out his hand. For the third time that night, Percy shocked the hell out of everyone and actually took it.

"We'll take that to mean, 'Yes, we will take this unwieldy wedding off your hands,'" Hermione said, her voice crisp and business-like for the first time in a long time, and quite loud enough to cut through the sound of Tonks' squealing. Severus never bothered to check if fifteen minutes had passed. He grabbed her and Apparated them both home to their bedroom, as promised. His lips were on hers so fast, it was almost as if the kiss started while they were in transit.

"You seem remarkably calm, considering we'll be sharing our wedding date not only with Remus and Tonks but with Harry and Luna. Not to mention there's going to be yet another Potter in the world in short order," Hermione said once they came up for air.

"Of course I'm calm. We now have a perfectly valid excuse for never attending their anniversary celebrations. And as for whatever your annoying friend has spawned, I will never have to teach it." And that was his last coherent utterance for the night.

Reggie remained after everyone else cleared out in the wake of Severus and Hermione's departure. She figured Jane would get over it, Alex didn't want to get over it, and Luna, Tonks, and company were over the moon, so there was no need for her to intervene there. She trotted over to the corner of the room. Observant creature that she was, Reggie had picked up on Percy's occasional glances in that direction. It didn't hurt that she could actually see who he had been looking at.

"I see you got through to the wanker," she said to Pip. "But how? And how did you get the missus on board without breaking secrecy?"

"You do realize that every administrator actually has to become a field-proven Master first," he answered cryptically.

"Ever think of going back to field work, Pip?"

"I speak bureaucrat; you speak mayhem. Let's stick to what we're good at," Pip said. "And until this mess is resolved favorably, I'm going to reserve judgment on how effective the mayhem approach is. Thanks for keeping those two clear of Percy, by the way."

"No problemo, jefe."

Reggie decided that someday, when all pertinent parties were living happily ever after and she was no longer on Pip's shit list, she would have to convince him to tell her how he'd done it.

Meanwhile, Rita Skeeter was in ecstasy. It didn't really show on the surface, but deep down, she was one particle of tawdry information away from peeing her pants in sheer joy. All it had taken was a single minor gossip item from her mighty quill to set the Ministry of Magic shaking in its boots. Once she intercepted this important, top-secret evidence, she'd be unstoppable.

Those weren't quite the words she used when she convinced her editor that she needed to spend part of the day in Amsterdam tracking down information for a really promising story, but the point was made. The secretary in charge of the foreign news bureau had given her a bored, slightly dubious look and an international press pass and sent her on her way. The boss' good will did not extend to paying for the Portkey journey, but that was a negligible expense. Her pass would get her in the front door, and it was always easier to convince people you had business in an official building once you were well within it.

Of course, it was easier to convince people of anything if you actually spoke the same language. Rita cursed inwardly as she went through another round of trying to convince the sober, portly officer at the counter that she was a messenger from Britain's Ministry of Magic and that there was an important parcel she needed to retrieve.

The only thing that seemed to penetrate was 'parcel,' and he kept trying to give her directions to the post office in a combination of slow, loud Dutch and stilted, pidgin English that was strictly for the birds.

That young bloke who left just before I walked up looked as if he spoke English, she thought irritably. *Damned inconvenient of him to take a tea break just now.*

In reality, it only took about twenty minutes to secure her prize. Subjectively, it felt like half a lifetime. Rita was so pleased to make her escape that she never noticed the old man dart away from the desk and into the loo with remarkably youthful speed. She certainly didn't remain to mark that no elderly officer ever re-emerged.

Back home, Rita was now shaking with anticipation. She'd spent the last hour in a moderately successful attempt to use translation spells on the report accompanying the parcel. The spells hadn't worked perfectly, but she had managed to read enough to know that there were two Thestrals missing from a herd in Austria, and the evidence related to their possible presence last Thursday night in Amsterdam. The label on the evidence package had proved disappointing...it was just a reference code linking it to the case file. So she resigned herself to spending the next hour carefully dismantling the magical seals in such a way that she could put it all back together again with no one the wiser.

She looked into the package and saw, for all her exhausting efforts... nothing.

Rita could have almost screamed in frustration. She was about to throw the apparently empty parcel across the room when she realized two things: one, it felt too heavy to be empty; and two, her various tests had revealed there was a stasis charm on it. Not the sort of thing one puts on an empty container. Perhaps there was an incorporated Invisibility Charm of some sort for added security?

With trembling fingers, she raised her wand, cancelled the spell, and reached into the package.

She felt something... warm. Squishy. And, with the stasis charm cancelled, it smelled really, really...

She actually did scream, this time. Though it was from abject disgust rather than frustration.

It was a struggle...but Reggie, Fred, and George managed to 'poof' out of Rita's flat before dissolving in hysterics.

George wiped his eyes, gasping for breath. "You know, Reggie, being able to watch the result makes it a thousand times more worthwhile." He turned to Fred. "But next time, brother, let me play the obtuse clerk. You would have blown the whole thing if Skeeter had known any Dutch."

Fred ignored the last comment except to punch his twin in the arm, opting instead to address Reggie. "Yeah... we could have actually seen Percy's face when he opened the dragon dung we sent him, if you'd been around back then," Fred added, coughing a little as he choked on his own laughter.

Reggie finally got her squeaking under control and gave them one of her famous grins. "Well, thanks, lads. Damned if I don't want a hat right now, so I could take it off to you two. If I ever settle down, it'll be with the sort of bloke who can get his mitts on a steaming-hot, fresh Thestral turd at a moment's notice."

After intense hand washing, many, many 'Scourgify's, and a blisteringly hot shower, Rita Skeeter was obliged to spend the rest of her morning carefully reconstructing the various seals on the evidence package. She made another dizzying Portkey journey, dropped it casually at one end of the desk from which she had taken it, and hoped quite fervently one Mr. Percy Weasley would be in charge of opening that particular parcel. She wouldn't want to deny him the pleasure.

Thursday was absolute crap. Her editor was fast losing patience with her stopgap items and refused to reimburse any travel or lodging expenses until she had an actual story in hand. There was no help for it; she would have to scrounge some gossip, eke it out into a Thursday and Friday columns, then travel on her own time and Sickles. Her efforts yielded less than sizzling information without the aid of her Animagus form; for some reason, all attempts to turn into a beetle resulted in an uncontrollable urge to take a shower. It was Friday before she could act on the information in the report.

It really wasn't much. Two Thestrals had apparently been stolen from a licensed breeder in Austria. Evidently he stabled his beasts in part of the old salt mines of Hallstatt and was almost as elusive as the creatures he raised; the best chance of catching him for a comment was to find one of the neglected mine shafts that intersected with his stables and sneak in through the back door. Rita set about looking up Portkey times again, and groaned at what she found. Hallstatt was too small a town to have direct Portkey service. She would have to make a transfer in Salzburg.

There was nothing for it. Back to the salt mines.

Everywhere that Rita went, the Kappa was sure to follow.

Motoyoshi had a talent for following people. This came as a relief to him. If he ever managed to make it past third-class Journeyman, he might have a future in the Office for Identification of Worthy Projects. Observing while unseen went smoothly; it was only when he tried to intervene that things became awkward. Even so, he deemed it prudent to intervene once in the course of his wanderings with Rita, when he discreetly banished the package she took so much care to deposit in the police station. After all, it wasn't quite fair for some innocent officer to be surprised by its contents.

Moto reflected that it did not take the cunning of a Kitsune to divine that the world was not safe for anyone so long as the Weasley Twins, Reggie-san, and invisible excrement all coexisted in it.

He was disappointed that the Skeeter woman failed to transform into a bug at any point on Thursday. They had given her several opportunities to do so, but she had failed to take advantage of any of them, electing instead to go about her business in a depressingly legitimate manner. The thought of what the twins might do to speed things along as the wedding date loomed worried him. He'd had enough trouble keeping them from having a reaction reminiscent of the effects of Erumpent horn fluid upon discovering that Skeeter actually used their extendable ears in lieu of her Animagus form.

Still... they had to do something. It was imperative that they keep Skeeter under wraps, lest she discover who was actually getting married on Saturday and turn it into a circus. Reggie-san was depending on him, since she was far too busy making alternate arrangements for Severus and Hermione's ceremony.

That was how he found himself actually considering the proposal with which the twins were presenting him.

"Don't worry, Moto. The cave-in will be completely fake. We'll be using your illusions, remember?"

"Yeah, we don't have time for anything clever at this point. We just need to force her to make the change."

Moto hedged a little. "Jorge-san, are you certain that she will attempt to free herself by transforming rather than by using any other form of magic?"

"There are anti-Apparition wards throughout the mines because the sound of Apparition risks the stability of the mine shafts. All the information on the mines warns visitors to leave attempts to escape or to move fallen materials to the experts, so that they don't risk a worse cave-in. And we made sure she has plenty of time to read the booklet while she's waiting for her connecting Portkey."

"Very well, Rico-san. I will consent to your plan."

It was thus that three invisible beings came to be trailing after one visible yet unobtrusive (for her, anyway) Rita Skeeter.

The humans were beginning to zone out during the safety speech, delivered in charmingly accented though slightly monotone English by their guide, when the word

'Animagus' penetrated the consciousness of one visible and two invisible tourists.

"It is not in the guide because there are not so many Animagi. But we must warn any Animagi who may take this tour not to assume their animal forms in the event of a cave-in. It is very possible for small creatures to be lost in the rubble, especially as our efficient rescue persons rapidly make their way to you. We want you to enjoy your visit to our humble mines and not share the fate of the field mouse a few years ago, who was eventually revealed to be an Italian alchemist on holiday. Please, do as your guidebook says and call upon the nearest ghost for aid. Our deceased miners are very conscientious about summoning rescue personnel immediately. Thank you very much. Please enjoy your tour."

Once inside the mine, Reggie, Fred, and George hung back from the group for a whispered conference. "This may be a problem, Jorge-san," Motoyoshi said, rather unnecessarily. He, of course, had diligently listened to the entire presentation.

"No shite."

"Quoting Reggie-san won't help."

"Okay, wait, George...all we need to do is make her so desperate to get out, she'll change anyway," Fred said, pacing and thinking aloud. "We know she doesn't have much patience for talking to people she can't understand."

"Like old Austrian ghosts?" Motoyoshi asked.

"Perhaps very old... even Visigothic ghosts..." George said speculatively.

Moto could almost hear the twins grinning. He sighed.

"Hai...two ghost glamours, coming right up."

Rita hung back behind the group, scanning the tangy, harshly salty-smelling walls for promising side passages. Some were too huge and well-traveled to look like a plausible back corridor to a hidden Thestral stable. Others were too tiny and obscure. Finally, she ran across one that looked just about right...mainly because it was half-obscured by a clumsy disillusionment spell.

She pulled her wand and checked carefully to make sure she could find her way back to the entrance using a direction-finding spell if necessary. Satisfied it would work, she entered the passage.

"Lumos," she said, lighting the crystalline walls with an eerily white glow. She began to walk.

And walk... and walk... and walk. Pretty soon, Rita was convinced the next bend in the tunnel would reveal an exit into China. She sat down on a convenient boulder (they seemed to pop up obligingly every so often) and attempted a direction finding spell to get her bearings. This didn't seem to be the right tunnel, and she wanted to get back to the main shaft and resume her search before any more time was wasted.

She didn't think she had spoken the spell too loudly. Obviously, the tunnel thought otherwise.

"*Merlin!*" she shrieked, instinctively ducking to the ground and covering her head. Her wand fell from her hand and rolled away, temporarily lost in the noise and dust.

After several moments of cowering, Rita noticed the tunnel was quiet. She also noticed that there was a faint light at ground level. She followed it gratefully to her dropped wand, which she picked up to assess the situation. It proved to be straightforward enough: wall of rubble in front; wall of rubble a few steps around the corner. With one Rita Skeeter stuck like a rat in a trap between them...and yelling definitely not an option. Rita sat down and whispered some very, very nasty words.

"Problem, Fraulein?"

Rita jumped. A short, stocky, palely-glowing young man in ragged coveralls, with a decidedly flattened helmet, was addressing her politely. *YES!* she thought in relief. *The tour guide wasn't kidding about those helpful miners' ghosts.*

"Oh, yes...please, could you get help for me, right away? My name is Rita Skeeter, and I'm a reporter on a VERY important assignment right now, so I MUST..."

"You are reporter, fraulein? For a newspaper?" he interrupted, his polite tone now slightly interested.

"Yes, that's usually where reporters work," she retorted in a sarcastic whisper.

"Jah, very good. I get Otto for you." He drifted through the wall of rock, leaving Rita to sincerely hope he hurried with the rescue party. He was back even more quickly that she might have hoped, with a very unusual ghost in tow. The haunt was built like an oversized Pogrebin: hairy of body, bald of head, and she was willing to bet his muscular body would measure exactly the same on four sides if his head were left out of the equation.

"This is Otto. At least, that is what we call him. He was miner here many centuries ago, in the Roman times. He tries to tell the workers and guides he was murdered rather than dying in an accident, but no one listens to poor Otto. Not even other ghosts. But you, fraulein reporter, will tell Otto's story! He speaks Visigoth, so I will translate for him. Then we get rescue party for you."

"Wh-wh-what?" Rita was aghast. Paying no mind to her stammering, the loincloth-clad ghost sat on the dusty floor and began to drone on in a harsh, angry language. His polite companion began to translate.

"Otto grew up in the village below here when it was only huts made of mud. The wife of the sheepherder was making eyes at him. Otto says how can he help it if he is like catnip for a sheepherder's lonely wife? Did it mean the skinny little man had to..."

The young ghost's provincial accent quickly became grating rather than endearing, and 'Otto'... Merlin's arse, Otto made the average half giant come across as the epitome of sophisticated charm. It was enough to make one wonder if that Umbridge cow who used to work for the Ministry was a descendant of his, considering certain eerie similarities in their looks. Speaking of looks, the expression on the older ghost's face suggested that Rita strongly reminded him of a sheepherder's lonely wife.

She couldn't bear it any longer. She had to get out of there *now*. It only took a moment's concentration, and she was skittering across the floor to the little gap in the stone from which a current of cool air issued.

In another moment, everything went black.

Motoyoshi ended the cave-in illusion and 'poofed' them all back to the twins' flat, the place of their strategizing sessions. The co-conspirators contemplated the jar of unconscious insect with a great sense of accomplishment.

"That was brilliant, Moto! I still wish I could figure out how you made her circle the same huge crystal formation for twenty solid minutes."

"Thank you, Rico-san. But misdirection and illusion are the commonest of fairy powers. I merely apply them with a certain creativity. Believe me when I say Reggie-san's abilities to confuse are far more impressive than mine."

George twiddled the jar thoughtfully. "Hmm. We could just turn her in as an unregistered Animagus."

"That we could George... that we could. And yet..."

"There is a 'yet,' isn't there, dear brother?"

"It's rather a bland option, isn't it?"

"Less than vanilla, I'd say."

"It goes without saying that she needs a punishment of some sort."

Motoyoshi found this conversation worrisome. "I have a very useful Karaoke Curse you could try," he offered helpfully.

"We could turn her loose in the Bowtruckle sanctuary..."

"Nah, they'd never mistake her for a woodlouse. But there's always the Fwooper room in the Magical Creatures House at the Royal Zoo."

"Please permit me to remind you that the consequences of harming another living being while deputized are quite grave, indeed," Moto said, wondering if he needed to attach them to a wall again.

"Believe it, wankers," Reggie said, appearing out of nowhere. Moto heaved a sigh of relief. "Besides... I have a better idea."

"You didn't even hear our ideas so far."

"The hell I didn't. I've been spying on you, amigos, just to make sure all went as planned. Those ideas are pants, the lot of 'em. No physical harm, no endangering of life or limb...not even of one limb out of six...on the insect bitch here. What she needs," Reggie pulled herself up to her full height (sixteen inches, if she strained on tiptoe), "is a bit of carefully applied psychology."

Hermione was practically giddy. It was all she could do to refrain from engaging in a silly little happy dance in reality, as she was doing internally at the moment. Helping Luna with the last-minute changes was a delight, since there was no more pressure. It wasn't her problem anymore.

Reggie had quickly picked her brains of all the features she had wanted to keep from the original wedding and 'poofed' off to accomplish what needed to be done. The Jarvey said 'trust me,' and, Severus' misgivings aside, Hermione did. Besides, it was easy enough to distract him now that she was properly relaxed. Reduced stress facilitated getting in the mood.

By Saturday afternoon they were assembled in the hired hall which Hermione had never liked, awaiting passage to the promised substitute wedding. Reggie sauntered in, sans tutu, carrying a sack in her teeth. She spit it out at Hermione's feet. "Okay, mija, here are Portkeys for everyone, and all the arrangements are squared away. You just gather up your wedding party, and we're set."

"Where's Motoyoshi?"

"He's handling a couple of last minute details for me. Don't worry, he'll join us later," Reggie said. "Oh, and since you can't talk about my line of work, if anyone asks, I'm Sev's familiar."

Snape was having none of that. "The hell you are. Who in their right mind would believe I would keep company with such a rude little rodent as yourself?"

"I love you too Prince Snarking. All right, you can say you met me through Fred and George, and I'm here for good luck at the wedding. Better?"

"With the exception of the bit about luck, that is a frighteningly plausible story," he answered.

Reggie drew a few curious glances as the Portkeys were distributed, but everyone was too absorbed in contemplating the mystery of their destination to ask about her.

It suddenly occurred to Hermione to ask, "Wait... how do you know about Fred and George?" But the Portkey activated before she could get an answer.

The whirling darkness was replaced by glaring sunlight at a low, early-morning angle, intense heat that was shocking for such an early hour, and a view of a bizarre assortment of soaring buildings. The wedding party and guests shielded their eyes with their hands, looking around in confusion.

Severus squinted at Reggie suspiciously. "Do I dare ask where the hell we are?"

Reggie turned to Snape with a toothy smile. She'd conjured and donned a wee pair of sunglasses against the hazy brightness. "Vegas, baby."

Author's Notes:

This was a difficult chapter to write. Not because of plotting intricacies, stopping to research various locales in Austria, or even good old-fashioned writer's block (all of which made appearances). This chapter proved exceedingly difficult to finish because it is impossible to type when, every fifteen minutes or so, one can't help but throw one's arms in the air and do a happy dance at the thought of Rita Skeeter unknowingly plunging her hand into a heap of Thestral manure. (Invisible horses... invisible poop. Logical, isn't it?)

Thank you, my darling husband, for the idea that Rita Skeeter might encounter the ghost of a garrulous miner by way of additional annoyance. (And, while I'm at it, thank you for tolerating my constant hogging of the computer!)

For the record: I looked up UK marriage license regulations, which vary by region. I decided to go with the idea that, even in the Ministry of Magic's jurisdiction, there is a waiting period. Call me a sap, but I had to give Percy a shot at redeeming himself. For you more vindictive types, I solemnly swear I will not extend the same courtesy to Rita Skeeter.

It's getting fun now, isn't it, Tempest? Thanks for holding on to this rollercoaster ride, even when it made a detour through the manure pile!

8: Three Weddings, No Funerals

Chapter 9 of 12

This is the chapter you've all been waiting for! Viva Hermione and Severus! Maybe you ain't nothin' but a Jarvey, Reggie, but you're still my hero. Oh, and if you are ever offered a fairy blessing, my advice is to take that very moment to stop and think of what you want, then respectfully convey your wish then and there. Fairy thingies get a little... unpredictable... when you keep them waiting.

Disclaimer: I only own the plot, the Jarvey, and the oh-so-bizarrely cute Kappa. Plus a few other original characters. But the world and the major players all belong to persons and entities far more powerful and better-funded than my humble self.

Chapter 8: Three Weddings, No Funerals

"You can't be serious!"

It was a good thing Reggie factored a 'temper tantrum allowance' into the time necessary for them to get to Vegas, get a marriage license, and actually have the ceremony. Even so, she was running out of patience with Snape's reaction.

"Look, would it kill you to act a little happy *justonce* when I save your arse, Prince Snarking?"

Snape assumed a grim parody of a cheerful expression. "Oh, I'm thrilled to death! Ecstatic! Just what I wanted...to start my life with my lovely bride in *Squibtown!*"

Reg's expressive little body conveyed her utter exasperation by judiciously slouching at various points. "Every time I look at you, I can't help thinking it's an absolute sodding misfortune that smiling sarcastically isn't a more widespread talent."

"Perhaps your new goal could be to go out and teach it to the world. There's no time like the present. I hear they have a certain appreciation for the freakish here in Squibtown," Snape said with an eloquent gesture at the skyline.

As usual, Reggie ignored this unobvious hint to leave. "I wouldn't call this place the 'S-word' if I was you. As the nickname implies, it's mostly Squibs that run this town, and they sometimes get a little... touchy."

With Hermione not-so-subtly squeezing his elbow, Severus toned down his ire. Slightly. "Surely there must be somewhere else in the world where one can get married on short notice."

"Maybe...but here, I've got connections." She addressed Hermione specifically, deciding that Sir Snark-a-lot was pretty much a lost cause. "One of my godchildren runs this wedding chapel. It's a nice new place, but with lots of traditional features and shite. You know, for folks like you who want to get married in Vegas but don't want a 'Vegas Wedding.'"

"I don't *want* to get married in Vegas." Snape was still grumbling.

Hermione had a different concern. "Reggie... aren't we sort of exposed, appearing right in the middle of the car park?"

"Nah, there are privacy shields all around here...we can see out, but no one can see in. I squared it all with Mack and Nadine. Besides, secrecy laws are a little... easier in the States. Look, why don't you escort the guests in, then we can get your license? I've got the paperwork all filled out, we just need to present your ID and sign a couple of things to make it legal. There's a twenty-four-hour ghost-staffed window at the Marriage Bureau that can handle it in half an hour, tops." She hoped that the guests would manage to refrain from killing each other during the time it took to secure the license...and, for that matter, during the ceremony. She didn't think she was up to keeping them all distracted and organizing things at the same time.

A tall, thin, pleasantly mousy woman stepped out of the little church-like building and favored them with a welcoming, slightly lopsided smile. "You're the Granger-Snape wedding party, right? Welcome to The Little Rose Covered Chapel. Come on in, make yourselves comfortable."

Reggie sidled up to the woman and whispered, "Hiya Nadine. We've got a live bunch here."

She glanced down at Reggie and winked. "Gotcha, Reg." Reggie grinned back. Nadine would prevent bloodshed while she was out.

Jane sounded cautiously optimistic. "It's lovely...it actually looks like a proper church."

"If only Hermione had picked out a man who actually looked like a proper husband," Alex said.

Reggie prudently 'poofed' Severus and Hermione over to the Marriage Bureau before either of them could respond to that.

Hermione wasn't going to let anything bother her today. The wedding chapel was adorable, despite Severus' stated misgivings, and she was perfectly happy to be marrying him, despite her father's stated misgivings. She wouldn't even let the ghost staffing the twenty-four-hour window at the Marriage Bureau dampen her spirits. After all, he probably said 'Good Luck' to every applicant in the same slightly dry, dubious tone of voice.

Nor would she, upon returning to the chapel, be disturbed by Minerva holding hands with the little Frenchman from the strip club. She would not worry as to whether Harry would let go of Luna in time for her to take her place in the procession. She would pretend she had no clue why that more than half the males present avoided looking at Neville, who was doing a decent job of pretending he didn't notice by focusing on Lola and little Alicia. Most of all, she would not find it unduly jarring to watch Professor Flitwick conversing with Narcissa Malfoy in a manner that suspiciously resembled a chatting-up, because it wasn't really. No, Filius was just being his usual gallant self. And Flora and Ginny would convince Draco of that... any minute now.

She wouldn't even worry when she heard Reggie shriek, "What the hell do you mean, the minister can't be here?" Hermione was not going to worry. Reggie had promised her a wedding, and Reggie had always delivered on her promises to date. What she couldn't deliver, she never promised. Though Hermione agreed with Severus' assertion that they should follow the sound of Jarvey screams and find out what, precisely, was amiss.

"I could answer you better if you'd explain what part of that statement you don't understand, first," said a portly wizard with a square face reminiscent of a good-natured bulldog's.

"Don't fuck with me, Mack! You promised me a wedding!" Reggie was growling now.

Oh, that was nice to know. The short-ish man was Mack. He made an interesting contrast with tall and thin Nadine. Still not worrying.

"Reg, it's not up to us. She got sick at the last minute. She's in the emergency room as we speak," Nadine said. Nadine was a very soothing person. Hermione would have to thank her later for slipping Mum that Calming Draught.

"Well, if there isn't a wedding here in about ten minutes, there's going to be another bloody damned emergency." Reggie paced frantically.

Stay calm, Hermione.

"Keep your fur on. I'll make some calls. If I have to, I'll call in a favor with Ed, all right?"

See. Everything was going to be okay. No worries.

Reggie stopped her pacing. "Sorry, Mack. Look, don't go to Ed... I'm supposed to take care of you guys, not the other way around."

"Don't worry about it, Reg. People get on edge about weddings, no reason Fairy God-Jarveys should be immune." Mack's face lit up. "Say, I bet I could get Sully! Sully always jumps at the chance to do a celebrity wedding, and this sorta qualifies. He usually doesn't let anyone book him for this early in the morning. Let me call him."

Reggie got a funny look on her face. "Um, Mack? Has Sully got the right vibe for carrying this off?"

Hermione became just a tiny bit worried.

"Sure, Sully's a class act. I'll ask him to wear the robes variation on his outfit. It'll be really spiffy, trust me."

Little silver paws shuffled back and forth on the carpet. "Uh, well, um..."

Mack seemed oblivious to Reggie's hesitation. "Don't worry, I'll call him. He should have his cell on. This'll be great!"

Hermione leaned down towards Reggie, whispering with a decided edge of worry in her voice, "Who's Sully?"

"Michael O'Sullivan, also known as 'Sully the Squib.' He's certified as a minister, been doing weddings in this town for years, and he's very much in demand. Great guy."

Hermione had the strangest feeling that there was something Reggie wasn't telling her.

"All settled! Sully was so hot to do it, he's gonna take a Portkey over here."

Nadine whistled. "Wow. That's a real honor. Sully won't use magical stuff for just anyone. What'd you do, call in a favor?"

"Nah, just let slip a few names on the guest list and told him Reggie'll be here."

A booming voice suddenly rumbled through the room.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THE KING IS IN THE BUILDING!"

All heads whipped around to the doorway. "SULLY! How the hell are you?" Mack yelled happily.

"Fine, Mack." The man who was apparently Sully smiled at Hermione. "Now, let me guess...this is the lovely bride. No mistaking that glow of happiness," he said, bowing dashingly over her hand. "Not to worry, pretty lady, I'll conduct the ceremony with due reverence. Anyone can see this is a classy operation. I just had to get my signature greeting out of the way."

Hermione couldn't take her eyes off him. From his high, patent leather boots... to his high, patent leather-like pompadour... and all the flaring, shining black robes in between... Sully the Squib was, unquestionably, the single living human being who looked most like Elvis Presley. She was still staring when the man turned to Reggie.

"Hey, lil' Reggie. Wanna hit Margaritaville when this shindig is over?"

"I got to get the kids back home to the reception after this. Is tomorrow good for you? And maybe we could check out that new jazz club...Margaritaville's a little tame."

"Any time's a good time to party with you, Reg. But I got a hankerin' for Floribbean."

"Fair enough."

Severus leaned down to whisper, "Hermione... we are surrounded by people who use 'party' as a verb. This does not strike me as a good omen."

Perhaps it was a delayed stress reaction, or watching Reggie talking to 'Elvis,' or the fact that Severus' words had hit her funny bone exactly right, but Hermione began giggling. She held her husband-to-be, trying to stifle her laughter in the front of his robes. "Please, love...we're here, everything's in place, and there isn't a reporter in sight. And I'd rather fillet flobberworms than go back to the way things were going to be."

"Well, the stupid stoat got one thing right...this is not your parents' wedding." Hermione didn't need to look up. By his resigned tone, she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Severus was rolling his eyes.

"Reggie was right about something else as well: it's going to be completely unforgettable," she gasped out between giggles.

Severus muttered under his breath, "Yes, no matter how hard we might try."

"Thanks for showing up, Sully. It's fucking early in the morning for normal people, much less for you," Reggie said. She felt a little bad for doubting Sully earlier.

"Mama's in town, so I turned in early last night. It wasn't that big a deal." Sully peered out at the assembled guests from the partially open office door. "Which one's Harry Potter?"

"Guy with the messy hair who won't let go of the little blonde bridesmaid. They're getting married right after this, back in Britain," Reggie whispered.

"Not a minute too soon, either," Sully said.

"What? What do you know about..." Reggie trailed off, at a loss as to how Sully had figured things out.

"Gimme a break, Reg. I do weddings. In Vegas. After a while, you know."

"Right," Reggie said with a sigh. "Keep it quiet though, would you?"

"No problemo. What happens in Vegas..." he trailed off with a shrug.

"Thanks, Sully."

"Y'know, Reggie, lil' buddy... normally, I make a joke to start off the ceremony on a lighter note."

"You mean, the one where you say, 'Glad y'all could make it here today... The enemies of the bride on this side, enemies of the groom on that side?'" Reggie asked.

Sully nodded. "That's the one. It wouldn't be a joke here, would it?"

"Nope."

"Think I'll skip it, then."

"Good move," Reggie said approvingly. She turned herself invisible and scampered out just in time to discreetly trail after Hermione as Alexander walked her down the aisle. She couldn't use Fairy Good Will Punch to prevent a battle of the sarcastic bastards, but she could at least temporarily silence the old man so that the ceremony could continue. Snarkypants had to be able to talk, but Fairy God-Jarveys can't have everything, either.

"Dearly beloved, Severus and Hermione thank you very much for gathering here today to celebrate the beginning of their life together."

Reggie had to admit, Sully was toning it down. If Hermione was still fighting attacks of the giggles, it must be nerves. Mack was right; Sully really was a classy guy. At least, he had a definite sense of style and all the right motives.

"Love is a little like rhythm. Rhythm is something you either have or don't have, but when you have it you have it all over. It's the same with love...if a couple is in love, you can see it all over them, just like with these two," Sully said. Reggie deferred the urge to tell him how brilliant that was until after the ceremony.

Hmm... speaking of the ceremony... she'd better check to make sure blondie had the rings. She scampered silently around Sully over to where Severus and Draco were standing and started twitching her whiskers in search of the aura of wedding bands. It was hard to focus on the rings, though... the pointy little prat was generating pheromones like mad, and it was messing with her senses. Damn, he actually smelled pretty good, sort of clean and...ferrety? Reggie shook her head to clear it. This wasn't answering the question, though judging by the whiff of scent she'd caught from the little Weasley brujita, she could guess who his pheromones were for. Someone with more time on their paws than Reggie needed to get those two together so that they could mate already and quit stinking up the joint.

Fucking hell! Sully was almost to the vows by the sound of things, and Reggie hadn't smelled any wedding rings. She 'poofed' back to the office and sniffed around desperately. No rings there, either. Summoning all her energy, she 'poofed' all the way back to Severus' house and tore around, sniffing wildly. No rings there, either, and the relatively later hour back in England as compared to Nevada set her mouth spouting profanity and her fur standing on end with alarmed urgency.

She 'poofed' to the original wedding site, where Motoyoshi was quietly babysitting Rita-in-a-jar. "Moto, babe, we've got a serious shite-tastrophe on our hands! Ferret-boy doesn't have the wedding rings, and it's almost time for that part of the ceremony!"

"Of course he doesn't have them. I have them, Reggie-san. You told me to keep them safe..."

"Why the fuck didn't you say so? C'mon!" She grabbed him by the edge of his turtle-like shell and 'poofed' them to Vegas, bug in a jar and all. She realized the instant they arrived that Moto was still visible, and quickly rectified that. The only minor disruption to the ceremony ended up being Draco's slight squawk of surprise when he felt something being shoved into his pocket.

Almost everyone's eyes were on Severus, Hermione, and the difficult-to-look-away-from spectacle of Sully the Squib. Only one pair of bright little eyes caught an anomaly appear and disappear almost instantly off to one side.

"Papa," little Alicia whispered, "I taw a Kappa."

Lola shushed her, admonishing her for letting her imagination run away.

Neville pulled his daughter close. "It's okay, mija. I think I saw one, too." He didn't bother to say that he hadn't seen one just now. Besides... considering Neville's experience of the prior week, it wouldn't surprise him in the least to see a Kappa show up in the most unexpected of places.

All things considered, Reggie thought it came off brilliantly. Even if at least one wedding photo ended up showing Draco glancing around in a comical degree of alarm, Snape glaring at him, Hermione giggling, Flora winking at someone in the pews, Ginny giving Luna what she thought was a surreptitious shake to bring her back to the here-and-now, and Sully, caught with eyes closed and mouth open, looking as if he were about to start belting out 'It's Now or Never' at any second.

She scurried out of the chapel behind Hermione and an uncharacteristically smiling (not sarcastically, for a change) Severus. There wouldn't be much rice-throwing or standing around taking photographs...as soon as Draco and Ginny signed off as witnesses, they all had to Portkey back to Britain and do this all over again with Harry and Luna and Remus and Tonks. Moto had already 'poofed' back to settle Rita. "Psst...hey, mijos...what do you want for your blessing?"

"Blessing?" Severus asked, trying not to look down.

"Yeah. As your Fairy God-Jarvey, I give you a blessing as you start out on your married life. So, what's it gonna be?"

Hermione sounded distracted, to say the least. "This sounds important... can we discuss this and get back to you during the reception?"

"Well, at the ceremony is more traditional, but sure. Why the hell not," Reggie said, giving a little shrug.

She wasn't sure if Hermione had heard her, though, as a booming voice roared through the chapel doors, drowning out all other conversation and even the early morning traffic sounds.

"MR. AND MRS. SNAPE HAVE LEFT THE BUILDING!"

Rita Skeeter awoke in a cold, bright place. Oh, no... glass jar again. This couldn't mean anything good.

"I am very sad to learn of your transgressions, Miss Skeeter. You could have been using your bug nature for good, not evil. Now you will have to suffer the consequences."

That voice! I've heard that voice before!

"It truly pains me to do this, but you must be punished."

No! Have mercy!

"Have you found a place for her?"

A different voice now. "Oh, we have a perfect vantage point for her. Nothing to do there except stay out of everyone's way and watch."

I'm sorry for everything! Please, don't I get a second chance or something?

"All right. I will leave her in your hands for the appropriate punishment." The Voice loomed closer, but remained a voice without a discernable body. "You will be kept in this place of confinement until you are no longer a threat to these good people. It's really for everyone's good."

The world was bouncing now; strange lights and patterns of shadow were everywhere. The Voice was gone, but a cacophony of other voices surged around her until she felt a jostling, upward motion and heat.

"Think that's too close to the lamp?"

"Nah. The Stasis Charm should keep conditions inside the jar from changing too much, as well as keeping her alive for the month or so necessary. Then, you may free her as instructed."

Only a month? At least this wasn't eternal torment.

Rita comforted herself with that thought until she heard music swell and saw a distorted image of people moving into the hall. Eventually, the music took on the character of a processional and two figures separated out from the crowd. It was... a wedding. And the bride and groom were...

At that moment, Rita Skeeter knew for certain that she was, in fact, in Hell.

Severus was content to slide into a seat at the back of the hall, appreciating the fact that Hermione indulged him in that regard though he'd been less than gracious about indulging her desire to attend the reception. He wouldn't have agreed to it if being married hadn't given him a sort of pleasant, light feeling, almost like the symptoms of that substance with which the Kappa had spiked his drink. He hoped it wasn't permanent. The feeling, that is...he was fairly sanguine about the marriage, even if it meant attending a reception replete with his wife's annoying friends.

Which reminded him, he still had Draco's flask, which contained a sample of the Kappa's stuff. He'd have to analyze it one of these days.

A sniffing sound from beside him snapped his attention back to the present. Severus turned, and felt a twist of anxiety at the sight of the tears in Hermione's eyes.

"You aren't regretting any of this...giving up the wedding?" he asked. It wasn't the first time he'd smoothed over his own trepidation with the silkiness of his voice.

"Not for a moment. It's just that Luna is so beautiful. It's all so beautiful." She leaned against him and whispered into the lapels of his robe, "I love you."

"I love you, too." He watched as the two at the altar exchanged rings. "It is beautiful, after a fashion," he admitted. "But it never was ours." He leaned in close to murmur softly against her hair, "And no one has a more beautiful bride than I do."

Reggie decided that her duty to keep the guests off each other's throats officially ended when the ink dried on Severus' and Hermione's marriage certificate. Still, it wouldn't hurt to monitor potentially volatile situations. In the worst case scenario, she could 'poof' her charges away from the party to their hotel room to start the honeymoon a little early.

But when she saw Percy and Penelope approach Arthur and Molly, she crossed her paws. She hoped that things wouldn't blow up so badly that she would need to exercise that option before Severus and Hermione had a chance to enjoy the shared reception.

"I know I wasn't invited, and I'm not going to keep you from the start of the reception. There had to be a representative from my department here, and I thought it would be best if it were someone whose discretion was ensured," Percy began, striking the wrong (slightly officious) note. But really, he probably couldn't help it.

Arthur leveled a stiff-lipped glare at Percy, while Molly sniffed and looked caught between miserable and angry.

"Ah... right. What I meant to say is, I'm really, truly sorry. I know I can't apologize enough, and that none of the things I did near the end..." he trailed off with a vague gesture encompassing the entire recent war, "could make up for the prat I was at the beginning. But, well, Penny and I wanted to renew our wedding vows on our anniversary next month... and if you could forgive me, we'd really love to have the ceremony at the Burrow."

A moment of silence fell between them, unnoticed by the crowd around the three pairs of newlyweds. Penny pulled Percy's arm more firmly around her waist, clasping it meaningfully to her stomach. Percy cleared his throat. "You see, I really want to make things right...because we want our children to grow up knowing their grandparents." He crossed his other hand over what was now obviously a slight swelling under Penelope's midnight blue robes.

Molly was on them both in a flash, crying and kissing them and carrying on and generally being very much herself. Father and son looked at each other over her head.

"I'm sorry it took me so long, Dad. I finally get it now," Percy said, looking at Penelope with an expression of hope and trepidation with which Arthur was familiar half a dozen times over.

"Better late than never, son," he replied, and joined the crush. "Come with us to the reception. As Tonks keeps saying...at the top of her lungs...the more the merrier."

Penelope giggled. "I think she was saying 'marry-er,' but then, I think she's a bit... excited right now."

There were two watchers in the shadows who were not terribly impressed with Percy's apology.

"The nerve of him, to think he can just stroll right back into our lives with a 'sorry' like that," Fred said with a scowl.

"Absolutely. Let's see if we have any of that Fairy magic left. He needs to pay a rather higher price before he gets back into everyone's good graces."

Suddenly, the twins found themselves bound tightly back to back and hanging most awkwardly from the ceiling.

"Oh... did I forget to mention... you gave me complete control over you when you allowed me to change your names for the duration of this mission?" Reggie grinned at the twins, rows of pearly little spikes glittering in her pointy little face. "So, lads, until you promise to behave yourselves, it's batsville for you."

"Damn it, Reggie, you don't know how much Mum cried over him and what he did!"

"Hmph. Was it anything like how much she cried over you two quitting school?" she asked knowingly. "Uh-uh. Forgive and forget, that's how things work in Fairy God-Jarvey land. Besides, you'll have a new niece or nephew soon. You wouldn't want to get thrown out of the little bugger's life before you had the chance to teach the kid what's what."

George was going to protest when Reggie's meaning suddenly hit him. "Hmm... there is that. Fred, I'm thinking that the unfortunate offspring of our brother is going to need the right sort of influence in order to grow up to be anything other than a right git."

As usual, where one twin's thinking led, the other's was sure to follow. "I hate to admit it, but she seems to have a point. Shall we go welcome our pillock of a brother back into the family?"

"Absolutely. And keep a parchment and quill handy. We need to make notes as soon as we have inspirations for suitable future birthday presents."

Reggie let them down. To her credit, she did so slowly...for the most part. "That's the spirit. And feel free to let loose at the party, wankers...so long as no one gets hurt."

Fred gave her a hurt look. "As if we'd do anything less."

"You know, I think everything besides the actual wedding is rather wasted on them," Remus joked, gesturing at Harry and Luna. They appeared to have been locked together at the lips since the end of the ceremony, with little indication that they intended to take in what was going on at the party (or even come up for air).

"Good grief. Someone check those two for a kissing jinx, or something," Draco remarked, looking completely nonplussed.

"Maybe the champagne was spiked with Gillyweed," Ginny giggled.

Severus very pointedly addressed them in full 'dryly snarky professor' voice. "When the officiant said, 'You may kiss the bride,' he didn't mean for it to continue through to the honeymoon."

Obviously, Luna, at least, was listening. Without missing a beat of the kiss, she disengaged one hand from the back of Harry's head and made an uncharacteristically rude hand gesture in the general direction of Snape's voice. Colin, ever the alert chronicler of the events of 'The Life of Harry,' captured the moment for posterity from a most encompassing angle. The resulting photo became a perennial favorite in the Potter wedding album.

Severus noticed Narcissa talking to Molly Weasley and edged closer to the pair, wondering if he should get his wand out, just in case. Short of tossing his Hermione into the ring, Severus couldn't think of a more potentially volatile combination of witches. Any second now, something about Draco and Ginny's business relationship, to say nothing of the assault at the rehearsal, might come up.

"So... why has your Fred shown up without his lady?" Narcissa asked.

"Why, I don't believe Fred is seeing anyone right now."

"Of course he is. This is the part of the evening when all the unattached males in the room are sufficiently well fueled with liquid courage that they begin showing off for the females. Fred has been conspicuous in his total absence of all such displays. So, I am left to wonder... where is his lady this evening?"

Molly's jaw worked open and closed a few times as she processed this. Then, without so much as a 'good evening' to Narcissa, she stormed off towards the twin in question. "FRED! Fred Weasley, why haven't you brought your girlfriend over for dinner? It's Angelina, isn't it? Fred? Stop avoiding me!"

As Molly headed off on the warpath, Severus glided up with a replacement for Narcissa's empty glass. "Cissy, are you ever going to stop manipulating people for your own amusement?" Severus phrased it as a question, but his tone indicated it was by and large rhetorical.

Narcissa accepted the fresh drink he offered and sipped delicately. "I only told her the truth. But I admit, the fact that the results are amusing is an added benefit."

Snape was about to respond to that when an annoyingly familiar whisper crept up from somewhere around his ankles.

"Oi... Sev! You and your lady figured out what you want for your blessing yet?"

Snape grimaced. "This is not a good time," he muttered stiffly, subtly nudging Narcissa away from Reggie.

Reggie pulled a face at him, and he could have sworn he heard something about 'all he needs is the fucking ventriloquist's dummy' as he walked away.

"Hermione...Hermione! Hang on, Mija! Where the hell's the fire?"

Hermione never slowed down. "Just a minute, Reggie. It looks like Ron is tormenting poor Flora again, and I have to rescue her."

Reggie kept up, though it was an effort to scamper and talk at the same time. Maybe she shouldn't have had that extra helping of cake. "What the fuck? Who died and left you in charge of him? Besides, she doesn't look upset."

Hermione slowed down enough to explain. "You don't know Flora. She's one of my best friends...a very shy, sweet, quiet person who would never hurt anyone's feelings. She'd probably rather work triple shifts in the spell damage ward than hear one more Quidditch story. Ron is a nice guy, but he's younger than she is and terribly immature by comparison. To make matters worse, he's had his share from the bar by now, and even Trelawney could predict he's about to say something stupid. I'd hate to have them feeling awkward around each other for the foreseeable future." Then, she picked the pace right back up and barreled into the middle of Ron and Flora's conversation.

"Ron, could you run along and give us a minute?" Hermione asked. Her voice had a bit of an edge to it.

Ron, not looking nearly as drunk as Hermione had supposed, blinked at her in surprise. "All right." He looked at Flora as if for approval and asked, "So, meet me on the dance floor when you're done?"

"I'd love to." Flora's face lit up with one of her best smiles, which was saying quite a lot. Flora was rather ordinary-pretty, but it was quite possible to fall in love at first sight with one of her smiles.

"Right then. Congratulations, Hermione...whatever makes you happy, and all." Ron softened his doubting shrug with a grin and headed off to give them the requested space.

"Hermione..." Flora trailed off, looking quizzical and a little worried.

"I'm really sorry, Flora. I mean, it's not as if I'm responsible for Ron, but..."

"Hermione!" Now she no longer looked worried. If anything, she seemed a bit annoyed...unusual for Flora.

"I wish he wouldn't just march up to people and start *abus*ing them with blow-by-blow descriptions of the latest from the Cannons." Hermione continued her apology, rolling her eyes in exasperation.

"HERMIONE!" Flora finally yelled, completely out of character for her, and yanked up the skirt of her formal robe...to reveal a bright orange garter charmed to blink, "I've got Ronald Weasley...find your own Keeper."

In response to Hermione's shocked expression, Flora shook her head and explained, in her gentlest voice reserved for injured children and spell damage patients, "Hermione, it's time you knew. I love Quidditch. I love the Cannons. And most of all, I love Ron. So... if you don't mind?"

Flora dropped the skirt and gave Hermione a quick hug before hurrying off to where Ron (whom she evidently actually preferred as some sort of lanky knight in orange Quidditch robes than in his current presentable state) was waiting to take her on another awkward yet enthusiastic 'flight' around the dance floor.

Reggie all but pulled on the skirt of Hermione's robes in an attempt to get her attention. "Mija, have you and that hombron of yours given any more thought to what you want for your blessing?"

Hermione tried to snap herself out of her daze. "Hmm... yeah... we need to discuss that." She wandered off to look for Severus, still apparently rather out of it.

Reggie shook her head. "This is getting ridiculous."

"Minerva, who is that?" Severus asked, looking between Minerva and the little man at the bar with an expression bordering on utter bewilderment.

"His name is Etienne, and he's my escort for the evening," Minerva replied.

"Escort?"

"My date, if you prefer, lad. Gentleman friend, lo..."

"Yes, I think I have the picture now," Severus interrupted hastily, trying to block the mental images. Internally, he berated himself for allowing the clichéd thought that Minerva was sporting a 'cat who got the cream' expression to cross his mind. "When... how?"

"You could try asking your wife. She was at the club when we met." Minerva did not elaborate, as her pint-sized 'gentleman friend' took possession of her arm with a jealous expression and steered her well clear of Severus.

Snape had a feeling he really had to ask Hermione about the Thursday before last.

"This is my cousin Stella and her daughters Thuban and Sheliak," Luna said, introducing... her mirror images... in brunette, and in three different sizes. He assumed Thuban, the taller of the two children, was older. The small one, Sheliak, seemed to be of an age where the random emission of bodily fluids was still a possibility, so he eyed her with extreme wariness.

"You know, you're really tall," Thuban said to Severus by way of greeting.

"Hmm," was all Sheliak said. Then she sat down on his feet.

"Oh, good, she likes you. Thuban, stay to translate while I get you and Sheliak some punch," Stella said. Snape was pretty sure that she intended for Luna to stay as well, but Luna wandered off shortly thereafter, leaving him at a distinct loss. Hadn't his karma involving looking after other people's children run its course for his lifetime? He didn't think kicking one of the bride's small cousins across the room was exactly good etiquette, but he couldn't let the little monster just sit there on his shoe. He gave his foot a shake to dislodge her.

"Not a good idea," Thuban warned...too late.

Sheliak evidently thought this was a game. "Whee!" she exclaimed as she tipped over. To Snape's horror, she got back up, laughing, and resumed her seat...this time wrapping her arms around his leg tightly, just below his knee.

"Move." He used his most intimidating low voice, trying not to call attention to the fact that there was a giggling toddler clinging to his leg. The glare he directed at her was somewhat of a failure, though, as he kept glancing around to see if anyone had noticed the situation.

Sheliak smiled benevolently at him. She gave a little bounce as if to encourage him to move his foot again.

Snape tried ratcheting up the ferocity of his scowl. Sheliak decided this was a weird face contest and scrunched up her own little face. Thuban looked on with great interest. "I mean it. Children find me frightening."

"Really?" Thuban asked. She studied him critically, as if trying to determine how so. He recalled that Miss Lovegood had never seemed intimidated by him, either, and concluded that mad people were very annoying that way.

"Buttons!" Sheliak exclaimed, beaming happily as she pointed.

Reggie sauntered along just then. "Hey, hombron...enjoying the ankle biters? Cute little buggers, ain't they?"

Offhand, Snape couldn't recall the Jarvey ever having said anything quite as inane as that, which was saying something. "I don't suppose it would be acceptable to employ a little 'Evanesco'?" he asked, not at all ironically.

"Funny."

"Kitty!" Sheliak screeched happily, waving at Reggie.

"I think that's a Jarvey," Thuban corrected her sister.

"Kitty," Sheliak said stubbornly.

"Oi, you're a smart one, mija...how do we detach your sister from tall, dark, and grumpy?" Reggie asked. Snape was pleasantly surprised, though rather annoyed ~~thabe~~ hadn't thought to ask the other half of the set.

"Usually, she'll drop off when she gets tired," Thuban said. With great interest, she asked Reggie, "Do you know any rude words?"

"Does a Centaur sh..."

"Reggie!" Severus interrupted, scandalized. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Answering the little blighter's question. Don't know what's got up your nose...you wanted to make 'em disappear!"

Snape contemplated sending his Patronus to fetch Hermione, since he had serious doubts that the Jarvey would consent to being so useful. Fortunately, he caught sight of his bride just then, and she was within speaking rather than unseemly yelling distance.

"Hermione...we have something to discuss."

"What is it, love...oh, hello. What's your name?" she asked, looking back and forth between Thuban and Sheliak in amusement.

"I'm Thuban. That's my sister Sheliak. Are you two married?"

"Yes, just today."

"Isn't he a little old for you?" Thuban asked innocently.

While Severus fumed silently and Hermione gaped, Reggie tried to get their attention. "Listen, you two, the reception's almost over and I haven't given you your blessing yet. Any preferences?"

"As soon as I find out what Severus wanted," Hermione said, putting it off again.

"I should think it was obvious," he said, giving his foot a shake and causing Sheliak to squeal happily again.

"Listen, kids, if you don't pick soon, I'm going to choose something at random, from the next words you say," Reggie declared, her tone carrying a clear warning.

Paying Reggie no mind in her enjoyment of Severus' predicament, Hermione smiled. "Really, love? Perhaps I'm a little fuzzy after a drink or three. You'll have to enlighten me."

"First word: Three. Speak now, or get whatever comes out of Snarky's gob," Reggie said. Moto wandered by, looking quizzically between the five of them.

Severus, his limited patience at its end, was unamused. "Shall I spell it out? Remove these children from my presence!"

"Children! Okay, great...three happy, healthy little brainiacs. Moto, let's do it!"

"Hai, Reggie-san!"

Moto raised his scaly hands, and Reggie raised her paws. Severus shivered at the curious feeling that overcame him, something not quite like magic. By the look of her, Hermione had felt the same sensation...and if she was anything to go by, they both had acquired a faint, silvery glow.

Sheliak yelped in alarm at her horse suddenly changing color and scrambled to the safety of her big sister. Stella wandered back, thanked the happy couple (in blissful ignorance of the little drama that had ensued in her absence), and wandered off to be introduced to someone else. Or, just as plausibly with that family, to search for Nargles.

"Finally." Severus sighed with relief. He noticed Reggie and Moto. "Well, at least you two did something useful for a change. Now that the urchin is off me, what is it that you wanted to ask? Something about a blessing?"

"That ship has sailed, amigo. And, for future reference... you might want to pay attention when you're offered a Fairy Blessing, and ask for something you've considered carefully," Reggie said, sounding a bit miffed. She and Moto wandered off, leaving Severus and Hermione to wonder exactly how they'd just been blessed.

"If Luna follows the pattern in her family, she'll be a perfect mother. Stella really gives the children her all, even when she seems a bit distracted."

Hermione noticed with some amusement that Harry had temporarily relinquished his hold on Luna. In her absence, he had to settle for talking about her, with Ron and Flora as his captive audience. They were making the best of it, nursing their drinks and waiting for the chance to escape.

"Harry, aren't you worried about the, um, rushed circumstances getting out?" Ron asked hesitantly.

"I couldn't care less. I'm going to have it, Ron...I'm finally going to have a family. All my own." With happiness beaming from his face, he looked like a little kid who had just learned he's getting a puppy for Christmas.

"Oh, by all that's good and holy, we're saved. Now he can finally quit mothering us," Ginny said in ill-disguised relief as she snuck past the little tableau.

"This is Harry we're talking about, Ginny...don't bet on it," Hermione warned her.

"You're right. After all, you and Harry are like brother and sister. Once Harry decides you and Snape are for keeps, he'll probably adopt him, too. As if there were ever more unlikely brothers-in-law," Ginny said, entirely too seriously.

Hermione blanched. "For heaven's sake, don't say that where Severus can hear you!"

"Draco, my precious..."

Draco tried not to flinch and succeeded. Mostly. "Mother, I do wish you would stop calling me pet names in public."

"Well, dearest, it's my duty, really. At least until you find an appropriate young witch to take over that particular job," she said, favoring him with her most affectionate smile.

"I hope you're not trying to play matchmaker," he said. Without realizing it, his eyes flickered across the room to where Ginny was talking to Gra...oh, right, couldn't very well call her that anymore...Hermione. Life had just gotten that much stranger.

"Now, I don't believe I'm the one considering playing at the moment. You needn't feign on my account, dearest. I saw where you were looking, and that ~~is~~ your wand in your pocket."

"*Mother!*" Draco yelped, absolutely scandalized.

Narcissa shook her head, a practiced expression of long-suffering firmly in place. "I was talking about the Portkey, darling, which is yet further evidence that I am quite correct in assuming your intentions toward the young lady involve something other than business alone. Now, do show some common sense and run along. I know the possibility seems remote at the moment, given that most of the unattached young male wizards in the room are related to her, but a prize like her is going to be claimed sooner rather than later. I should so hate for you to miss your chance."

Draco knew he was gaping at his mother like a fish out of water, but couldn't quite help himself. Finally, he said, "Right, Mother," and set about implementing his plan. He only hoped that knowing that his mother knew about it wouldn't make things impossibly awkward.

"Severus! Don't eat that!"

Snape stopped, glancing warily between his wife and the pastry in his hand. "Don't tell me. I feel certain I can guess." He closed his eyes and made a fluttery hand gesture that was actually quite an amusing parody of Trelawney's mannerisms. "Yes, I see it now... the Weasley twins spiked...everything."

"Not quite everything, but a significant random sampling. Sorry, love."

He sighed, contemplating the delectable looking Napoleon. He really liked them, and seldom had the pleasure of eating one drizzled with truly dark chocolate. Stupid twins. "Dare I ask with what?" If it wasn't too heinous, perhaps he'd save it for later...when he could experience the effects without public embarrassment.

"Ohhhhh, my love,

My darling,

I've hungered for your touch..."

Snape cringed at the off-key warble. Hermione gestured helplessly at Remus, who was serenading Tonks in the middle of the room, much to the extreme social and aural discomfort of anyone within hearing distance.

"Karaoke Kreme. They've managed to slip it into numerous sweets in the room, and even mixed some into the punch, though that doesn't seem to have taken," Hermione said, her grimace more than adequately expressing her opinion on the twins' latest masterpiece. As they edged towards the exit, she asked, "Did you hear where Harry and Luna are going on their honeymoon?"

"I'm guessing it would have to be on the moon, if they're to have any hope of privacy."

"Actually, Motoyoshi fixed them up in a traditional wizarding inn at some Japanese hot spring. It has a thousand-year record of utter and complete discretion; it's secret-kept, and you can't even find out about it unless a relative of the founding family refers you."

"Well, it should be relaxing, if a bit dull. Lupin was going on and on about somewhere in the Caribbean. It sounds tacky, touristy, and utterly...them."

Hermione winced as Remus hit...or rather, tried to hit...a high note. "Speaking of honeymoons, I think it's high time we headed out on ours, don't you think?"

"It pleases me to no end that we're on the same page in this regard," Severus said gratefully, taking her arm with as much alacrity as he had on their first date and hurrying out the door... narrowly escaping Remus' attempt at the big finish of 'Unchained Melody' and before Molly could convince Arthur to be the next to try one of the pastries of doom.

"Ginny, hold on."

Ginny was interrupted in mid-exit. Considering who had interrupted her, and the fact that she was fleeing from her parents (who were embarking upon a very embarrassing musical number courtesy of Fred and George's awful sweets), she felt perfectly justified in turning her coldest, most businesslike tone of voice on him.

"You needed something, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco huffed at her in frustration. "Isn't it enough that you tried to break my jaw? Are you going to try to freeze me to death as well?"

Ginny returned his frustration wholeheartedly. "Look, if there's anything we need to discuss, can we take it out of the room? I don't need to hear any more of that," she said, gesturing at her parents.

"No arguments," Draco said with a shudder, and they hurried out into the corridor where the stage for their latest round of tension had been set.

"So, have we any business to discuss, Mr. Malfoy?"

"You know, I think I liked it better when you were calling me 'ferret-boy.' At least you said it with affection," he said tiredly. "You've been Malfoy-ing me to death at the office, and now you're doing it here as well. We've had our tongues in each other's mouths. I think it would be all right for you to call me Draco."

"Bloody hell. I knew this would happen, that the least bit of physicality between us would be a complete and utter disaster for our business relationship!"

"Look, I'm...I'm actually sorry about that. Not about the kiss... that was brilliant. I'm sorry about saying something so stupid afterwards. I wasn't thinking." His apologetic overtones changed to something resembling the charm he normally reserved for business contacts. "I have to say, you rather destroyed my reasoning abilities for that moment."

"Say that in a *real* way...not the way you talk when you're trying to sell something...and I might be tempted to believe you."

Draco had the faintest trace of a desperate look in his eye, yet his voice was remarkably calm and polished. It reminded her forcefully of the night they decided to go into business together. "I may not have been thinking then, but I certainly have been since. You might have noticed I was a little late returning from Squibtown."

Ginny had noticed, but had no idea what it could have meant. She elected to simply nod and wait for his explanation, to see if he would dig his way out or simply bury himself deeper.

"I asked the proprietors of the chapel what they considered the most romantic hotel around there... the place they would take someone they wanted to impress." He fixed her with a stare that wasn't open to interpretation. As he had at least twice before, he laid all his cards on the table...this time, in the form of two objects. One was apparently a Portkey; the other was a key for a hotel room, and the logo on it suggested a certain level of luxury. "I want to go back there. And I have no intention of going alone."

Ginny had to admit that there was something unbelievably appealing about Draco when he was being honest. Maybe it was the novelty of it. "Why, Mr. Malfoy, I do believe you are attempting to seduce me." Her fingers brushed his as she took the room key, electrifying him, challenging him. She studied it thoughtfully. "I wonder what makes you think it's that easy, knowing me as you do."

It would all come down to his next words, and Draco knew it. This was not a time for his brain to disconnect, even slightly. "There's nothing easy about it except the logic, Ms. Weasley. As you have so often reminded me, we are equal partners in our business," he said. You can do this, Draco. Malfoys are not only born with a silver spoon in their mouths, but a tongue to match. "And since you have already thoroughly seduced me, I must, of course, return the favor."

There was no doubt about it, now. Her brown eyes were sparking with desire. Her lips began to pull into a smile. "Is that all there is to it, Mr. Malfoy? A bit of quid pro quo? Because I must warn you, if we enter into this sort of agreement, I will not be content with an equal share. I must insist on having all of you."

"Miss Weasley, as long as you are prepared to offer the same in return, I would say that we have reached an accord," he said, stepping in closer. As they leaned towards one another in anticipation of a kiss, he whispered, "You drive a hard bargain, Ginevra."

"I'm hoping you do as well, Draco," she whispered sensuously in reply. They activated the Portkey at some point in mid-kiss, and came up for air in a little alcove of the hotel's impressive lobby, obviously a place meant to hide guests traveling by Portkey from Muggle clientele. They hurried to the lift and made a point of finding their room quickly.

Needless to say, negotiations concluded successfully. Both parties agreed that it constituted an accord in satisfaction.

Author's Notes:

Thanks to the 'About: Quotations' website for giving me an idea of how to flavor Sully's speech with Elvis-like turns of phrase.

Thanks a million to Broomclosetravenclaw, who reminded me that there is much potential for wordplay, given the alternate meanings of the term 'Keeper' in the Potterverse and in real life.

I do hope you will forgive the legalese banter between Draco and Ginny. Let's face it...some guys just bring out the business in women. And no, I don't expect you to forgive that particular joke. Even if I did steal it (in a somewhat altered form) from Groucho Marx.

If you know of anyone who uses legal terminology as a euphemism for sex (I knew I had to turn 'accord in satisfaction' into innuendo from the moment I first heard it) please get them professional help as soon as possible. Otherwise they could end up like me.

And thanks once more to Tempest of Dreams, who, unlike Rita Skeeter, actually seems to enjoy being kidnapped by a Jarvey, a Kappa, and a cast of what feels like thousands (in certain chapters). It probably helps that they (and I) actually like her and aren't keeping her in a jar.

Up next (and next to last...yup, it's almost over, amigos!): The honeymoon... and what happens to uninvited guests. Or would-be guests. And other people we don't really like.

9: Okay, Maybe ONE Funeral. Or At Least, Some Passing On

Chapter 10 of 12

What do two people who've been living together for over a year do to make the wedding night a little something special? I suggest you not ask Severus and Hermione for advice in that regard. Oh, and everyone acquainted with fairy tales knows that you're supposed to invite key fairies to weddings... or christenings... or something like that. But what's the etiquette regarding nosy reporters or people who were supposed to be dead?

Disclaimer: I am seriously running low on witticisms to plug into these things. You know darn well I don't own it (except for the Jarvey) and that I make no money from it. Please refrain from suing me.

Chapter 9: Okay, Maybe ONE Funeral. Or At Least, Some Passing On...

Severus finished washing up and brushing his teeth in high spirits. Hermione had told him to take all the time he needed, but to come to the bed fully dressed. Apparently she had something interesting in mind for their wedding night that involved undressing him, and he was quite eager to find out what it was. He exited the bathroom of their hotel suite and turned the corner to the bed area.

"Shite!" he exclaimed, turning several unflattering shades of pale.

Hermione was manacled and spread out on something that looked suspiciously like the potions bench he'd used for years at Hogwarts... wearing a much abbreviated student uniform... with no bra underneath her far, far too small blouse. Obviously.

"I'm ready for my detention, Professor Snape," she said demurely.

Snape's legs had no intention of holding him up, so he grasped at the doorframe, his jaw coming unhinged and his mind suggesting it was inclined to follow his jaw. "You have obviously taken leave of your senses. What do you mean by this...this *perversion*?"

"I've been very, very naughty, Professor," she said, affecting a contrite expression.

"Please, **please** tell me you never fantasized anything like this when you were in school." He looked downright grayish now.

Hermione temporarily gave up her student persona. "Of course not. Good Lord, Severus, you can be such a prude sometimes."

"Because I'm not a pedophile who fantasizes about my former students?"

"Oh, I promise, I'm of age, Professor," she said, forcing a giggle through her impatient expression. He didn't exactly blame her for her impatience, judging by how uncomfortable her position looked; he hoped the clinking manacles and the splintery wood of the 'potions bench' were illusionary instead of Transfigured. "Don't tell me I went to all this trouble just to get a visit from 'yes-those-buttons-are-as-Victorian-as-they-appear-Severus.' Play along, love. What would you have done if you'd found me like this, say, in some fictional seventh-year detention?"

"You mean, assuming I survived hitting the stone floor of the dungeon in a dead faint?" he asked, not at all sarcastically. "At minimum, the deduction of 100 house points and detention with Filch for the rest of your student career."

Hermione sighed and reached behind her head for her wand, confirming his guess that this was just a bed in disguise and that she was actually lying comfortably on the pillows. She canceled the various illusions, revealing the cuffs to be bits of elastic, easy for her to slide free of and sit up. "Hmph. Excuse me for trying to inject some excitement into our wedding night."

"It fascinates me to no end to discover that my wife's idea of an exciting wedding night is driving me to cardiac arrest. This is what I get for marrying a Healer," he said, still looking askance at her skimpy uniform.

"Well, at least I would have been able to revive you," she said, resisting the temptation to stick her tongue out at him.

He sat down beside her on the bed. Warily. "I can't believe you seriously thought this would put me in a suitable frame of mind for sex. I was never in any mood except 'irritable' as a teacher."

"You mean, you wouldn't have gotten off on me calling you 'sir'?" she asked, unable to resist a little smirk.

He snorted. "What was I supposed to do at the moment of climax, award you house points?"

She rolled her eyes and flung a pillow at him. "You are such an *arse* sometimes!"

This did not faze him in the least. Sulky Hermione threw insults. Angry Hermione threw blunt objects or punches. Homicidal PMS Hermione threw hexes and curses, occasionally without the aid of a wand. Pillow-throwing Hermione was synonymous with Frisky Hermione, who was hands down his very favorite version. Well, he was also quite fond of Brilliant, Intellectually-stimulating Hermione. But at the moment, Frisky suited his mood.

"I knew that's what this was about. All right, Miss Granger... One hundred points to Gryffindor...with the stipulation that this particular scenario *not* be repeated," he said, favoring her with what he knew was the sexiest smirk in his repertoire.

"Oh, get out of these already," she said, in proper bossy fashion as she attacked his buttons. She stopped when she encountered a slight bulge in his breast pocket. "What's this, love?"

Severus felt a bit embarrassed when he recalled what he'd put in that pocket. "It's that bloody Napoleon. I'm quite partial to them, but I wasn't about to risk eating it at the party, in case it turned out to be one of the spiked ones."

"It does look good, doesn't it?" Hermione studied it with a speculative look on her face.

It occurred to Severus that, short of sneaking the thing into the shower with him and Silencing the door, he wasn't really going to get a better chance to eat it. "Well, those identical idiots haven't killed anyone with their inventions...yet," he said, taking a generous bite. Hermione surprised him by quickly claiming most of the rest of it, leaving

him with one last little bit to pop into his mouth.

He swallowed... waited... opened his mouth to make a smug comment about having dodged the jinx when...it happened.

Severus couldn't think of the title of what they were singing. It sounded vaguely familiar, though he was certain he never would have thought of it on his own, even as beautifully, almost embarrassingly, appropriate as it was. And perhaps he was caught up in the moment, or merely biased, but he thought their voices actually sounded rather good together.

"Is that how you feel?" he asked her when they finished the song.

"That's it, exactly," she answered, sliding her hands along the sides of his face, burying her fingers in his hair. She knew all his weaknesses, and he thought it was absolutely brilliant. If that wasn't love, what was?

"Then I think it's a very good thing we got married today... because that's precisely how I feel, as well."

At the rate they were going, the ensuing kiss would last the length of their honeymoon. After a moment of contemplating their state of shared chocolate, cream, and buttery-pastry perfection, Severus deemed this perfectly acceptable.

Eventually, Hermione popped up for air. "I think we may have to thank Fred and George for that pastry."

"I'll thank you not to mention those two when we're doing this sort of thing," he growled, and pinned her to the bed for another leisurely kiss.

He came up for air first this time, gasping when she managed to sneak a hand between his various layers of clothing and caress skin. He looked her over hungrily, but his expression abruptly creased into annoyance.

"What's wrong, love?" she asked, twining the fingers of her other hand into his hair. All right, perhaps it was slightly annoying that Hermione knew so well how to soothe him. A man likes to hang onto his righteous indignation once in a while, after all.

"It's that bloody uniform and the mention of the bloody damned twins. I want to know why in the Nine Hells they couldn't have applied themselves like that in my classroom," he said, sitting up and huffing with exasperation.

It didn't really help when she burst out laughing. "I love you when you're irritable."

"That strikes me as being absolutely barmy, but considering how often I'm irritable, I certainly feel assured of your constant affection."

"So long as I remain barmy," she said, hints of laughter still lacing her voice as she moved behind him. "I take it you like me that way?"

"Since it's the only reason I can conceive of for you staying with someone like me, I'd say I quite love you that way," he said, softening the rather sarcastic words with a silky, teasing tone of voice.

"That's funny. I could have sworn there were other reasons. Would you care to refresh my memory, love?" Severus decided it was time to see what, exactly, she had been doing behind his back. He turned to find Hermione lounging on the pillows, all her curves gloriously unadorned. Her pose recalled their first night together, when his first thought upon seeing her was how favorably she compared with Manet's 'Olympia.' This time, it wasn't her superior shape that he noticed, but the fiery invitation in her eyes that made Olympia's cool insolence look insipid.

There was really only one appropriate response to that. He drew his wand, spelled off his clothes, and pounced.

The reception was winding down, with one of the three newlywed couples having made their escape and the other two seeming inclined to follow their example. Technically, Reggie had no further reason to remain. In practice, the only way to get her to leave a party was to remove her by force, threaten legal action or similar dire consequences, or end the party.

The remarkable thing was that Pip was still there. Pip at ease at a party would probably have made Reggie's personal 'list of things I have a hell of a time picturing' had she ever considered the possibility. Having an amiable chat with Pip at a party was just plain surreal.

"I don't always approve of your methods, Fletcher, but I appreciate your dedication," he said.

In his own officious way, it was a compliment, and Reggie accepted it as such. "Gracias, Jefe. Speaking of methods... care to enlighten me as to how you got Percy sorted?"

"You know very well that a lot of our most successful cases depend on timing. He's got a child coming... people tend to rethink their lives when that sort of thing is upon them." Pip shrugged modestly.

"Okay, timing's a big part of it...but you've got to know how to work the situation, too." She glanced at her Apprentice, diligently observing at her side, as always. "C'mon, at least tell me for the kid's sake. He could use the benefit of your experience."

"He's supposed to be benefiting from your experience," Pip said dryly. "Let me put it to you this way, Fletcher...if you wanted to use someone as an object lesson in what sort of administrator NOT to become, who would you choose?"

Reggie had to think about that for approximately five seconds. "You took him *toher*?"

Moto looked confused for a moment, then his bulbous, glowing eyes bulged even wider with understanding. Pip nodded. Reggie whistled. "Damn, you play hardball, Pip. Remind me to stay on your good side...as much as someone like me can, anyway."

"Just try not to incur any casualties, Fletcher. That's all I ask," Pip said with a sigh.

"Por supuesto, jefe...it's all about happily-ever-after, right?" With a grin and a salute (a polite one, for a change) she was heading back to the bar, Motoyoshi in tow. "Hurry, Moto, I think it's last call!"

The largish pixie shook his head at Fletcher's retreating tail and Motoyoshi's dutifully following shell. Of all the creatures to ever tap into the Magik of Faerie, these two were the most unlikely, oddly matched, and... inexplicably effective.

His musings were interrupted when the only other person in the room who was able to see him approached. "Penny and I are leaving, Pip. I just wanted to thank you for the object lesson. The thought of ending up like Mab..." Percy shuddered.

"Don't mention it...especially since you were good enough to suggest a useful course of action for my situation," Pip said.

"My pleasure. You will tell me how that works out, won't you?"

"Of course."

Ginny relaxed into the perfectly soft bed, reluctantly deciding that they would have to leave the room sooner rather than later. There were only so many sexual positions she could run through before breakfast, even considering that she hadn't had a boyfriend in longer than she cared to contemplate.

Speaking of positions... as much as she appreciated the view (as well as Draco's skill with his tongue, which, she was pleased to discover, was in no way limited to verbal persuasion), it was high time to move. Her breasts were sticky, Draco weighed a good bit more than he appeared to, and having him panting against her thigh just felt odd. She gave his backside a good nudge. "Very nice, love. Why don't we get up now?"

"Hmm... give me a few minutes, you insatiable vixen."

She rolled her eyes. Nice to be reminded of how Draco could always be trusted to misinterpret any statement in his own favor. "Move, you slug. I want to get out of bed and get dressed. I'm hungry."

"You just ate. It's not my fault you didn't swallow. OW!"

Upon reflection, Ginny decided she would have smacked his arse just as hard if he hadn't accompanied that particular crude remark with a smirk against her thigh. He was going to have to learn to lose the smugness around her. At least while they were in bed.

"Serves you right for... wait a minute. You... you LIKED that." In the position they were still in, it was impossible not to notice.

Draco tried to glare over his shoulder at her. "You smacked me!"

"Yes, and you enjoyed it. Try denying it."

He didn't bother, instead rolling onto his back and assuming a contrite expression with alluringly downcast eyes.

Ginny felt a stirring in her belly that had nothing to do with desiring food. "Tell me, Draco... were those leather trousers part of a Dominant's ensemble... or a Submissive's?"

"How would you like me to answer that, Mistress?"

She grabbed her wand, spelled his wrists together with a temporary Sticking Charm, and straddled his waist. "I think you just did."

Draco squirmed, though he didn't look as if he objected in the least. "I thought you said you were hungry."

"Did I give you permission to speak?" Ginny asked, tilting his chin up with the hilt of her wand. He shaped his face into a sexily apologetic pout.

"That's better," she said, leaning over his face until they could feel each other's breath on their lips. "Now, what do you have to say?"

"I think I'm in love with you."

By the time they finally left the room, they had two urgent errands: finding breakfast and shopping for an engagement ring.

"Hey, Reggie. Hey, Moto."

"Greetings, Rico-san."

"Hey yourself, Rico. I'm here to pick up my package."

"I reckoned as much, seeing as all the happy couples are back from their honeymoons and the news of the 'Wedding of the Century' finally trickled out." Fred yelled in the general direction of the stock room. "George! We've got an order for insect-under-glass."

"One bottled reporter coming right up." George turned the jar over to Motoyoshi, who held it up for Reggie's inspection.

She nodded in approval. "Good job, amigos. Not an antenna out of place. Well, I guess you can have your names back now...Fred, George. Damn, feels weird, calling you that."

"Feel free to call us the others, as long as it doesn't involve indentured servitude again," George said dryly.

"Yeah, and as long as it doesn't involve giving our baby sister away to the Ferret," Fred said, scowling.

"Don't look at me, babe. They worked that out on their own," Reggie said. To mention that Ginny and Draco went into business in the first place as a result of one of Reggie's earlier operations would have been extraneous information, so she opted to omit it. "And that name thing was just an insurance policy...a damned smart one to take out, under the circumstances."

Fred shrugged. "I guess Ginny can hold her own. I just hope some of the prototypes she borrowed last week were for use on him instead of her."

"Which prototypes?" George asked, looking askance at his brother.

"You really don't want to know."

Reggie deemed this an apt moment to interrupt, then get the hell out of there. She twitched her whiskers at them and grinned. "Well, it was nice working with you lads. Try to keep any charges from sticking, will you?"

George snickered. "We've managed so far."

The tell-tale whoosh came while Flora was setting the table, dinner for two ready to go. She knew who had just come through the Floo without looking. The Cannons had a home game this weekend, after all. She also knew it would only be a matter of moments before...

"Guess who."

She smiled, nudging her nose against the big, slightly rough hands covering her eyes. "Mmm, must be a really good Quidditch player, judging by the broom calluses."

"Well, a really happy one, at least." Ron chuckled and spun her around into a kiss. Flora wondered if she should put a warming charm on dinner. Her knight in orange Quidditch robes was apparently frisky tonight, the one circumstance for which he would actually delay eating. He managed to restrain himself for the moment, however, instead taking up his wand to finish laying out a place setting next to hers. That was fine with Flora as well. It quite pleased her to satisfy every one of her wizard's substantial appetites.

"So... is it the game on Sunday that has you in such a fine mood?"

"A bit. Have you seen the 'Daily Prophet' today?" he asked, Summoning the paper.

Flora grinned. "Oh, have I ever! In fact, I was there when they brought the Skeeter woman in. It was a sight...she was raving something about being a 'fly on the wall' and

needing to get to her editor with something about 'the wedding of the century.' They put her right in the Thickey Ward. Last I heard, Healer Stroud said that Lockhart was trying to convince her to write his memoirs...once he remembers anything."

Ron looked surprised. "Really? I hadn't noticed that story." He found the article and read it, beginning to snicker halfway through. "This is brilliant...we'll have to frame it for Harry and Luna."

"If that wasn't what caught your eye, what was?" Flora asked as she employed the proper charms to neatly snip the article from its page and set it aside for preservation.

"Here...on the Wedding Announcements page."

Flora read the indicated passage, feeling slightly puzzled. "Well, we've known that was coming ever since they came back from Las Vegas. I'm so glad for your sister, Ron. She and Draco seem... well-suited."

Ron grimaced. "Well, if by that you mean they both occasionally have very nasty mouths and both chase Galleons like a Seeker chases a Snitch, you've got something there. But I wasn't necessarily thinking this is news. More like... it reminded me of something."

"Of what, love?"

"Of the fact that I've found someone who particularly suits me." Ron grinned at her from beneath his fringe and fished a little box out of his pocket. "I know it's a little sudden, Flora... but want to get married?"

Flora pounced on the ring like a Kneazle on a Gnome, practically chipping her nail in her haste to slide the pretty circle of white and yellow gold and amber into place. "All you had to do was ask."

Dinner ended up being reheated.

Hermione contemplated the bookshelves looming over the staircase, searching for gaps into which she might insert their latest acquisitions. It wasn't the easiest task, considering that the already narrow treads had lost a third of their width to the library.

"Remind me again why we spent our honeymoon visiting the five largest bookstores in the wizarding world?"

Severus' ironic tones drifted up the stairs. "Because it was the only activity for which we could agree to leave the hotel room?"

"Hmm, that must be it. We need a bigger house, then."

"Sorry, can't afford one. We spent all our money on books."

"Oh, well," she said, "at least we agree on our priorities...to the point of putting away books before doing the laundry from our trip."

"Well, we won't have to go about bare or dingy. Draco and Ginny sent us a package from Las Vegas, and it feels like clothing."

"Really?" Hermione shoved one last volume into place and trotted downstairs to see what Severus was pulling from the parcel.

"T-shirts? The sun must have gotten to them. I wouldn't be caught dead in such a sorry excuse for a garment," Severus said, looking decidedly askance at the contents of the parcel.

"Now, now, love. They obviously put a lot of thought into this, considering this one is so appropriate for you." She snickered, pointing to the artistic scrawl on the shirt's chest that read, 'I'll try being nicer if you'll try being smarter.'

Snape picked it up to toss aside, his lips twisting with intent to make a snide remark when the sight of the garment beneath that one stopped him. He broke into an evil smirk. "No, I think that one must be yours... since they also sent this one." He held up a black shirt emblazoned with bold white print: 'I don't need an encyclopedia, my wife knows it all.'

"Very funny. Hand it over."

"Oh, no. I'm wearing it in the lab."

She made several grabs for the shirt, all of which he successfully evaded. "You prat. If you ever wear it outside our house, you're sleeping on the couch for a month," she said, hands on her hips. "And I'm hexing Draco the next time we see him."

"Do you honestly think these were the idea of a wizard who still looks for someone to duck behind whenever you appear to be reaching for your wand?"

"You're right. I'm hexing Ginny."

"Forget about hexing anyone, and let's get the laundry done. I think we should start with your violet blouse."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "That's the one I'm wearing."

"Precisely," he said, giving her a very different sort of smirk.

"We're not going to get anything done if you're going to change the subject. Wash first, get dirty after," she said, shaking her finger at him playfully.

Severus snorted at her, but picked up their suitcases. "Bossy witch. That had better be a promise."

She smiled and Summoned a basket for the dirty clothes. "It is."

Eventually, Hermione had to leave for the evening shift at St. Mungo's. Snape was glad, though he wouldn't have minded another hour of post-laundry diversion. He'd been sweating it out a bit, having spotted another package amongst their deliveries that he absolutely had to deal with before she noticed.

He decided to simply come through the Floo rather than calling or sending an owl. He hated waiting on the hearth on hands and knees while that dunderheaded house-elf looked for someone to answer the call. Narcissa would most likely still be alone in the Manor at this hour; Ginny had an uncanny knack for keeping Draco's nose to the grindstone at the office. Severus preferred not to contemplate what threats or inducements she used to do so.

He had scarcely finished dusting himself off when he heard a sleepy voice. "Master is home! How nice. Let Sniffy..."

The elf's words were cut off abruptly, and Snape instantly became alert. In his experience, nothing shut Sniffy up. Not even Silencing Charms. He palmed his wand and cautiously eased open the door to the corridor.

"Why, Severus... fancy meeting you here. I truly must have been away too long, if Narcissa is looking to you for company."

Snape showed no outward surprise at hearing that voice, but cursed silently for choosing to look the wrong direction upon peering out the door. "This may seem a silly time to remind you, but you're supposed to be dead," he said, raising an eyebrow ironically at the very distressing alive (and disquietingly tanned) Lucius.

"Yes, that was really rather clever of me, wasn't it? If I'd simply escaped, I would be looked for. So obliging of Rabastan to be the first to die in the riot. He was close enough to my height and build that I didn't have to do much transfiguring to make him fit the coffin, so to speak."

It had been far too long since Severus had dueled, and his brain was working frantically behind his impassive expression. It seemed a bad idea indeed to allow Lucius to roam the house. Lulling him into a false sense of security might be useful. "Do you mind me asking, why return now?"

Lucius smiled, his teeth looking eerily white against his uncharacteristically dark skin. He'd cut and darkened his hair as well. Only his unmistakable arrogance was easily recognizable. "This is no place to catch up on so much lost time. The parlor, if you please?" He gestured casually with his wand. Their mutual calmness was belied by the fact that neither took his eyes off the other for a moment, even if that meant backing towards the room in question at times.

"I would invite you to sit down, but it's no more my home than it is yours," Snape said. He moved subtly to a position facing the partially open door, hoping that if Lucius felt the escape route was covered, he would succumb to overconfidence.

Lucius' gray eyes flashed. "I suppose it technically reverted to Narcissa at my untimely demise, didn't it?"

"Naturally. So, are you going to mention where you've been, and why you aren't there now?"

"I've come to stop my son from marrying that sneaky little Weasley slag, of course. I admit, it's a bit of a risk coming back into the country, but I imagine I wouldn't be readily recognized even without glamours." He stopped to run an appreciative hand through his own hair. "The tan is natural, though... courtesy of the lovely nation of Argentina."

"Well, I suppose that answers my questions. How have you been living there? Camping under a palm tree?"

"How droll, Severus. My accountant was good enough to liberate sufficient Galleons for me to set myself up quite comfortably with a nice villa and an obliging little companion... Maria, or is it Magdalena? Hmm." He pretended to think a moment, then shrugged. "At any rate, to hide my timely withdrawal of funds, he was willing to disappear with a share and make it look like embezzlement."

"That was a generous share...considering that when he disappeared, nearly your entire fortune went with him. I suppose it never occurred to you to make certain he left anything for your wife and son."

Red fury glowed through the tan on Lucius' cheeks. "Greedy, opportunistic little bastard! I shall have to track him down... when I'm done here."

Suddenly, more than Lucius' cheeks were glowing red. He slumped to the floor, leaving Severus staring into an entirely different set of icy eyes. Rather watery icy eyes, though their owner's level, raised wand arm never wavered.

"That was one hell of a 'Stupefy,' Cissy."

"That was one hell of a lot of gall on his part, showing up after five years and expecting to run our lives." Narcissa lowered her wand, and the action seemed to drop the floodgates on her glacial blue orbs. Her voice trembled as she murmured, "Even with that outlandish tan and absurd glamour on his hair, I recognized him coming up the walk. I'd know that...strut...anywhere."

"Well, at least I know where things stand with you. Is there any reason we should tell Draco about this before we send ~~him~~ this back to Azkaban?" Severus gestured at Lucius' prone form.

Narcissa knelt by her erstwhile husband, shaking her head as she studied the short, dark hair. "He's not going to Azkaban. We stopped needing him some time ago, and I won't have Lucius' disapproval casting a shadow on Draco's relationship with Ginevra." Her voice hardened. "My dragon can handle things on his own now...and what he can't do on his own, he and Ginevra can manage together. She's good for him. No one is going to take that away from him. Not to mention I want grandchildren while I still look too young for it."

Severus idly wondered if Narcissa knew that Ginny had just about knocked Draco's lights out when the two were still in the 'courtship' phase. At the moment, he had the sneaking suspicion that it would contribute to her positive evaluation of the Weasley girl, rather than otherwise.

She raised her shockingly bright eyes again. "I used to dream Lucius was still alive, that he'd come home again. And now that he's here... having heard what he means to do, all I want to do is tell him to go sod himself."

"As much as I never imagined that particular expression leaving your mouth, it's rather a relief to see that you've finally joined the club." Snape winced at himself, but really, he could almost go without breathing longer than he could go without sarcasm.

Rather uncharacteristically, Narcissa snorted. "Just because I never said it before..." She couldn't help choking on the laugh, ending it in a little sob.

Severus knelt beside her and offered a comforting arm. Cissy must be falling apart, if she actually used profanity. She leaned into his embrace. "I've always wondered why you treat your mind like an iceberg...I don't think you routinely allow more than a tenth of it to show above the surface."

"You have your defenses...I have mine. Incidentally, thank you, dear, for showing up so opportunely. Did you have some errand, or was it good fortune?"

"Actually, I came about this." He held up the package.

"Ah, yes, your wedding gift. I didn't wish to present it at the party; it's so gauche to let money change hands in public." Her eyes were shrewd over her smile. "I hope you came to say thank you, however unnecessary that might be."

"Cissy, we really can't impose."

"Good. Therefore, you will finally quit wrapping yourself in absurdly foolish pride and accept it, because your lack of graciousness is a tiresome imposition."

Snape cleared his throat awkwardly. "Not to put too fine a point on it, but I had the impression from Draco that your finances are not all they could be."

"Yes, my poor darling comes to an inordinate amount of grief when dealing with money. Yet another reason dear Ginevra will be good for him. Think, Severus. Did you really believe I would spend money we didn't have? Or, if I did... that I would fail to keep the receipts?"

Apparently, Severus' incredulous stare was not the response she was hoping for. She sighed at him and Summoned a small, neat ledger from her writing desk. "See for yourself, though I do think it terribly crass to have to resort to showing you my records to convince you that I can afford to make this gift."

He stared at the entries, gradually recognizing a pattern. "How long have you been at this? I mean, making shopping trips, then returning everything and saving the cash?"

"Since Lucius and I were married. Silly man. He was perfectly willing that I should spend ludicrous amounts of money on constant wardrobe renewal, but utterly unwilling to allow me access to any sort of cash to invest. Fashion is such a waste of money; when one possesses true style, all one really needs is a core of classic pieces to which key accessories may be added. But I don't suppose I should have expected any more of him. After all, I never could get him to give up that tacky cane." She rolled her eyes. "Though, I must admit, it's rather fun to periodically try on all the latest outfits, if only to confirm how utterly devoid of real class they actually are."

"I suppose it didn't hurt that seeing the account balances dwindle away spurred Draco to actually take some sort of action."

Narcissa smiled guilelessly, which Severus found rather scary. "Did it? What a fortuitous bonus."

Severus couldn't help but shake his head at her in admiration. "Cissy, I always knew you were the most dangerous of the Black sisters. I just never realized how, and by what margin."

"Why thank you, dearest. I can always count on you not to underestimate me... too severely." He let her pull him in for a kiss on the cheek.

"Let me tidy up your parlor for you, all right?" Severus nudged Lucius with the toe of his boot.

"Only if you'll take the gift."

He knew it was no use arguing any further. Cissy's mind was made up. "Fine. I'll consider it a waste removal fee."

"Whatever it takes." Her face twisted with sadness for a moment as Severus 'Mobilicorpus'-ed her erstwhile husband's unconscious form. "Dear Lucius," she whispered sadly. "If only you could have learned to be flexible... like a proper snake." She leaned over his face, just ghosting her lips past his hairline. Her eyes began to fill again, but she was startled out of a sob by a squeaky voice.

"Hey, Oh Duke of Discouragement...need a paw with that?"

A sigh seemed in order just then, and Snape didn't hold back. "I should be surprised, but I'm not."

Reggie nodded in Narcissa's direction. "You know, the lady and I have something in common besides looking good in silver...we're both a little tired of your crankiness with people who are just trying to help you."

"Fine. I'll take all the help I can get at this point," Snape said, throwing up his hands in surrender.

"That's the spirit," Narcissa said approvingly, apparently not the least bit startled by the sudden appearance of a tutu-wearing Jarvey and similarly attired Kappa in her parlor.

"I know this is probably a stupid question, considering the number of people present who really have no business in this room...but what brings you here?"

"Oh, Moto and I wanted to ask how you and Hermione enjoyed the honeymoon, and showed up just in time to catch you trying to sneak back the wedding gift like the overly proud pain-in-the-arse that you are. So we tagged along to make sure you didn't succeed. If you'd ever been in any real danger from the perma-tanned wanker, we'd have sorted him for you."

"Speaking of which... how, exactly, do you intend to lend a 'paw?'"

"Moto's done this sort of thing before. That's how he got recruited...spontaneously 'poofing' the family of his former Master to safety before the crazy bastard could abuse them again."

Moto twiddled his hishaku nervously. "Reggie-san, I did that spontaneously. I don't know if I can 'poof' these two to Argentina all on my own."

"Sure you can, mijo. You have the ability. Don't let fucking Mab and her 'you ain't shite if you ain't a fairy' attitude affect your performance."

"No pressure," Moto said faintly.

Reggie butted her head reassuringly against his scaly knee. "Look, kid, you care about everyone living happily ever after...right?"

"Of course, Reggie-san!" he exclaimed, nodding vehemently.

"Happily ever after is what we do best! Who got the five stooges out of Amsterdam without them getting their heads bashed in?"

"I-I did, Reggie-san," Moto said hesitantly.

"Who made sure none of them ended up splattered all over the Continental countryside on their wild ride?"

"I did, Reggie-san," Moto said, more firmly this time.

"Who got everyone out of jail, with minimal if well-deserved embarrassment, and without blowing your cover?"

"I did, Reggie-san!" he exclaimed happily.

"And who helped pull off Operation Wedding Switch, which, in one fell swoop, set no fewer than four couples and one family on the road to Happily Ever After, ignoring for a moment the fights and the laundry? And which, incidentally, prevented the insectoid-bitch from ever fucking up anyone else's happiness again?"

"Me! Oh, I did, Reggie-san!" He marched over to Snape, solemnly taking the hem of his coat, Hishaku at the ready.

"Do be careful, dear," Narcissa said, addressing Severus and Motoyoshi equally. Motoyoshi bowed, taking great care not to spill anything on the antique rug, and obligingly 'poofed' them away.

Reggie sighed. "Good luck, kid. You'll need it."

Snape, Motoyoshi, and the unconscious Lucius 'poofed' into existence in broad daylight in the middle of a field. Snape drew his wand to Disillusion them, but was stopped by the Kappa. There was something profoundly wrong with a creature who could even grab one's arm politely.

"Rest assured, Snape-san, we are only visible to each other. I do apologize...we are in Argentina, but we are nowhere near the residence of Malfoy-san. I shall rectify that."

"No need, Moto. Let him find his own way back." Snape should have realized they were invisible; the surrounding cows seemed utterly unperturbed by their sudden appearance.

"As you wish."

"I suppose I'd best wake him up, if we're to convince him he's to remain here permanently." Snape frowned and drew his wand. "I'm not keen on using Cruciatius... but Lucius is remarkably resistant to more civilized forms of persuasion."

"Oh, no, Snape-san. I may not participate in anything that physically harms another."

"I'll tend to it, then."

If Snape had been wondering what it took to break Motoyoshi's façade of gentle courtesy, he'd found it. The Kappa was frowning now and actually looking rather Kappa-like and dangerous. "No, Snape-san. I cannot stand by while one causes another pain. That was why I helped you bring him here in the first place."

"Then I hope you have a better idea, because he won't remain unconscious forever."

Moto sighed. "If only I could administer Fairy Good Will Punch to this disagreeable individual. A constant supply would keep him distracted enough not to remove any sort of binding I could cast to keep him here. I used a similar tactic to prevent my former master from tracking down his wife and children after I removed them from his harmful presence. It is why my family no longer acknowledges me; they are still quite displeased that I did not conduct myself in true Samurai fashion, obeying our master though he was unprincipled."

"Well, why don't you dose him and get it over with?"

"The substance is considered mind-altering, and I did not realize how severely its distribution to humans is restricted. Had Reggie-san not carefully worded her report on my actions at the club in Amsterdam, I would most assuredly have been stripped of my tutu for providing you with access to it."

Referencing the club made Snape grit his teeth slightly, but just as quickly, it twigged something in his mind. "Did you perchance put any in Draco's flask?"

"Hai, Snape-san. I thought it best at the time."

Snape drew the flask from his pocket. "What if I were the one who administered it?" he asked. "I have no doubt that he has a new refilling flask in those robes somewhere. Spiking it would provide him a lifetime of distraction."

The Kappa's glowing eyes scrunched up slightly with happiness. It almost improved his appearance. "As Reggie-san would say, that might very fucking well be a plan."

Lucius awoke to no small degree of confusion. Why was he napping in a pasture when the last he recalled, he had a mission: to stop his son from mixing with that Muggle-loving Weasley family? He picked up his wand and cast a cleansing spell. There was no way he was about to go to the Manor smelling of cattle.

Instead of a cleaning, he received a slight shock...literally. His body glowed briefly purple before the stinging subsided, and a piece of parchment appeared with a loud 'pop' before him. Warily, he picked it up and began to read.

'Dear Lucius,

I'd use a different salutation, but I would like to get home to my lovely young wife and can't be arsed to think of a truly eloquent insult. If I know you (and sadly, I do), you attempted to clean yourself before Apparating to your new home and setting about creating an illegal Portkey. You can save yourself a great deal of time by simply going home, because there is no possibility you will ever return to Britain again. In fact, the best of luck leaving Argentina.

You see, an associate of mine has some very interesting magical abilities... and he used them to bind your powers to this place. If you ever attempt to leave again, becoming a Squib will be the least of your problems.

Of course, it simply didn't seem quite fair for you to remain here, having an easy life and taking out your frustrations on innocent bystanders, so we worked out an additional safeguard. Any magic you may attempt will result in a shock similar to the one you just experienced. The stronger the spell, the worse the shock...so I suggest you only use magic for minor things. No more curses and hexes, you bastard. And you won't be interfering in the lives of your wife and son again, or in the lives of your grandchildren.

Incidentally, I haven't been shagging Narcissa, you absolute arse. First, I'm quite happily married...to Hermione Granger. I'm sure you remember her. I tried to convince my companion to curse you so that you would experience nasty consequences if you had disparaging thoughts about her, but sadly, he is far too restrained for that level of vindictiveness.

Second...and, more to the point...Narcissa is like a sister to me, which you would have known if you had ever bothered to really, truly get to know the remarkable witch you married. That surprises me not in the least, considering you never bothered to really get to know your son...who has become a much better man than you could ever hope to be, entirely without your help. Or, perhaps more accurately, without your hindrance.

Yours...not especially cordially,

Severus'

Lucius swore and weighed the potential pain of Apparating against the sheer agony of walking. Thinking was thirsty work, so he idly reached for the accustomed weight of his flask and took a sip.

Suddenly, the afternoon seemed remarkably pleasant. Warm sunlight, wide-open fields... the cows were annoying, but one couldn't have everything, after all. Perhaps he would work on a way around this supposed binding; perhaps it would be best to simply return to the comfort of his villa. Things were a little confusing right now. A walk and another small sip might clear things up...

"Okay, I don't give a damn if I'm breaking secrecy to do this...amiga, you are one hell of a natural psychologist," Reggie said, with great enthusiasm. It was plain this was a real lady, and it might be worth talking to her while waiting for Sev and Moto to sort the swaggering arsehole. A reduction of profanity was called for as a gesture of respect.

"Thank you. And you are...?"

"Regina P. Fletcher, Master Fairy God-Jarvey. Gotta give you props for getting your boy to realize the little Weasley brujita is his cuppa. That rivals my operation to put Sev and 'Mione together."

"Oh, you were responsible for that? I appreciate the assistance. Honestly, I put the life of my firstborn on the line to deliver Miss Granger right into dear Severus' lap, so to speak, and what does he do but talk her to death for a year?" Narcissa asked with genteel exasperation.

"Yeah, some guys need more of a fire lit under them than others before they get their heads out of their arses," Reggie said solemnly.

"And some, like my not-so-late husband, never do."

"If you don't mind me asking...you're a right classy bird... how did you end up marrying ol' Lucy there? Not to be too crude (and I hope you realize the effort involved in that for me), but all he seems to have going for him is arse and assets. Whereas you strike me as being the sort who appreciates a bloke who's got it going on between the ears."

"Well... he did have one more thing going for him when we met. He was very, very convincing." Narcissa sighed. "At the time, I was, perhaps, not as good a...what was the term you used? Psychologist?"

"I hope it wasn't too bad. The marriage, I mean."

"I have at least one very worthwhile thing from it." Narcissa smiled fondly at a framed photograph on a side table, one of many throughout the house showing her with Draco.

Duh, Reggie, she thought, feeling foolish. Considering there must be a mother-and-son portrait somewhere in the house for just about every month of Draco's life, it should have been an automatic conclusion. The one in this room looked to have been taken around month three or so.

"I gotta ask you not to tell anyone about me. We're not really supposed to reveal our true nature to any people besides our godchildren. Sev knows me, but that's not a problem, since I think he'd rather wank off a skrewt than admit I exist."

"I assure you, I can be the very soul of discretion. So... are you going to tell me how you, to put it delicately, convinced Severus to stop sitting on his common sense with regards to Miss Granger?"

"If you've got the time, sure. It's one hell of a story, amiga."

"I would be pleased to hear it."

"Uncensored?"

"Certainly. It couldn't be any worse than what Lucius said when he caught Draco using house-elves as dress-up dolls. We lost three that day."

"*That* sounds like a story. Wouldn't mind hearing a little more detail on your matchmaking operation, either."

"From what you mentioned, it seems I owe at least part of my success to your efforts. After all, Draco and Ginny met over Severus and Hermione's troubles."

"Good point. I'll go first."

"We should make ourselves comfortable. Tea, Miss Fletcher?"

"Thanks! Call me Reggie. Here, let me help you with those biscuits."

"Thank you, dear. Do please call me Cissy."

Author's Note:

Reggie's Spanish Vocabulary:

Gracias: thank you

Jefe: boss

Por supuesto: of course

Amiga: friend (female)

When hubby and I were in Vegas researching this story, we were much amused by the wares of the t-shirt vendors on the strip. At least, I was, until he said that he needed the shirt with the 'encyclopedia' crack on it. I said he either needed his head examined or a nice couch to sleep on if he intended to wear that in public. He wisely elected instead to purchase the 'I'll try being nicer' shirt for him and one that read 'Sarcasm is one of the services I offer' for me. We also renewed our wedding vows, though regrettably, not in front of Elvis.

Marriage...it's all about compromise.

All I can say about Lucius' fate and the scene with Narcissa and Reggie is, if you saw that coming, you've probably been hanging around me too long.

Are you wondering what song came of the Karaoke Kreme? You'll have to stay in suspense...but just until the Epilogue, which is coming right up! (Erm, right after one more chapter, that is... it sort of grew... (Damn plot bunnies. Sigh.) Thank you, Tempest, for beta-reading under pressure!)

10: Moving On

Chapter 11 of 12

Severus and Hermione make some major moves, Draco and Ginny spin the wheel of karma without ever knowing it, Pip puts his plan into action, and a character from 'The Ring On Her Finger' shows up. You aren't going to get the bit about Luna and the Pygmy Puffs at all unless you remember 'Return of the Fairy God-Jarvey' in a fairly high degree of detail.

Yes, this has all the narrative coherency of a tossed salad. Don't blame me, blame the plot bunny.

Disclaimer: This world isn't mine. I just put my own spin on it.

WARNING: There is a reference to a certain document at the end of this chapter, which will not make a single particle of sense unless you have read 'The Ring On Her Finger' (the story which introduces the character of Rose Mraz.) While it is not essential to have read any of the Fairy God-Jarvey stories to appreciate 'The Ring on Her Finger,' it IS quite necessary to read 'The Ring On Her Finger' to appreciate the Fairy God-Jarvey stories. So, if you haven't already, go and read. Reggie and company promise not to move the plot along without you.

Chapter 10: Moving On

"Severus?"

Snape tensed. The last time Hermione had called to him in that tone of voice, there had been a Kappa in their bathtub. He rushed to the kitchen, wand in hand.

Fortunately, all that met his eyes was his wide-eyed wife contemplating a letter. "Love... Have you ever heard of an old neighborhood being bought up by speculators, who update and resell everything?" she asked, the odd quaver still in her voice.

"The neighborhood is GENTRIFYING?" He couldn't keep the incredulity from his voice. "Someone actually wants to buy this...and I use the term very loosely...house?"

"Along with all the others on that street."

"How much are they offering?"

"I haven't read that far yet." She scanned further down the page. Her jaw dropped. She couldn't bring herself to name the figure aloud; simply passed him the letter to read for himself.

Soon gravity also defeated Severus' hold on his own jaw. "You've got to be kidding," he finally gasped. "How quickly can we sell?"

Hermione looked at him as if he'd suggested she become an exotic dancer. "Sell? After all the work we've put into renovating it?"

"Absolutely. You won't have to commute every day, I won't have to hide from a lot of annoying Muggle neighbors all day, and we can tell the termites to unclench and let the wood chips fall where they may."

She took a deep breath. "All right... I suppose a visit to an estate agent is in order, then?"

Dealing with estate agents was bringing Severus and Hermione to the end of their rope. At this rate, it would only be a matter of time before Severus cheerfully handed the next one from it. Diagon Alley was outrageously expensive when it came to residential space, and a magical house hidden in any Muggle part of London wasn't any more affordable.

As for decent Muggle neighborhoods... it was apparent that the ability to make something magically larger on the inside than it appeared on the outside would make a wizard in the housing business very wealthy, indeed, were it not a breach of secrecy.

They weren't about to move into the same sort of building they were intending to vacate, particularly if they only managed to get half again as close to the city as they had been. They both agreed that Knockturn Alley was not an option, and one agent's consistent efforts to steer them in that direction ended in a severing of the relationship with some unkind words and one very creative jinx.

"Well... I suppose it's time to try another agent," Hermione said with a sigh.

"After that jinx, I doubt we'll find any who are willing to deal with either of us. By the way, that was very original," Severus said, watching in appreciation as talking cotton swabs chased the retreating wizard, shrilly demanding that he clean out his ears. "Did you put a time limit on it?"

She shrugged. "If he doesn't get someone to put a 'Finite Incantatem' to it, they should give up in a day or so."

"Whereas we're giving up today, it would seem," he said, deeply disgruntled.

"Should we perhaps try... Tangent Alley?" Hermione asked hesitantly.

Severus was not impressed with the idea. In his day, Tangent Alley hadn't been much of an improvement on Knockturn Alley...it was just occupied by people convinced that they were artists instead of vagrants with paint.

"When was the last time you were there?" she persisted in asking. Admittedly, it wasn't the sort of place Hermione was inclined to visit, at least not based on the reputation. But if Severus was taking this long to answer, he certainly hadn't visited lately. "I thought so. Mightn't it have changed for the better? Why don't we take a look?"

It was shabby, but not 'Knockturn Alley shabby.' More like one part gone to seed, two parts 'lazy/artistic/bohemian/can't be bothered with tidying up.' Wizards and witches in an eclectic mixture of traditional and Muggle clothing sauntered along a narrow cobblestone street that lazed crookedly up the side of a slight incline. No one seemed to be in much of a hurry, unlike the bustling, business-like throngs in Diagon Alley. Nor did anyone seem to have any nefarious intentions, as the skulkers and loungers in Knockturn Alley. Buildings rambled skyward at an uneven variety of heights, occasionally almost or actually meeting over the narrow lane. Others tipped away from each other to admit enough sunlight so as to permit eccentricities like a small tree or flower bed growing through a gap in the cobbles.

"It's rather cute and friendly, actually," Hermione said, cautiously impressed. Intriguing strains of jazz music and the sound of someone evidently taking sitar lessons tickled her ears agreeably.

"It's a neighborhood, not a kitten," Severus scoffed. However, he found himself salivating at the exceedingly tempting smells wafting from a little bakery with pretenses of being French. The coffee house didn't smell too poorly, either.

"Ooooh," they sighed in unison as they rounded a corner. Occupying an entire four-story building was...

"Arbor Librae," Severus breathed the name on the sign reverently.

"An entire building full of used books," Hermione whispered, and their hands tightened together convulsively. "Let's go, luv," she said, drifting towards the front door as if mesmerized.

"Are you daft, woman? We need to find a place to live as close to this wonder as is humanly possible!"

Hermione shook herself free of the spell of bound printed matter. "Of course, darling, what was I thinking? Somewhere in this paradise of fresh coffee and old book aroma, there must be a place for us!"

An hour later, Severus and Hermione were on the verge of a not insignificant row. It had devolved to the point where he was muttering about her 'Gryffindor optimism'...always a sign his less than mature side was making a surly appearance...and she was reminding him tartly that *he* had been the one to insist they needed to find a place to live on the street, immediately if not sooner. His annoying inner pedant was a breath away from saying something as disastrous as 'I told you so.' The sad fact was that most buildings were either entirely devoted to commercial endeavors or were subdivided into an infinity of little flats to accommodate artists (who, if not starving, were at least eating very economically).

"This is useless. Let's go home and try to come up with an *actuaplan*," Severus said, devoting substantial effort to deferring a fit of spectacularly bad humor.

Hermione had her stubborn face on. "We're almost to the end of the street. Planning hasn't availed us much in our life together so far, so humor me. Let's push our luck once more, okay?"

Severus made a gesture of surrender and followed. He was so focused on his internal grumbling that he very nearly stumbled over Hermione when she stopped short, just the other side of a bend in the street. He caught at her and she clutched his arm in turn, and they found themselves wrapped around each other in front of a very vacant building.

It was similar to most others on the street...three decidedly rambling stories, an octagonal window promising some sort of attic and windows at ground level hinting at a musty cellar, with a storefront occupying most of the ground floor. It was located on a slope, forcing the building next to it to lean slightly away, leaving a walking space

between the two. They followed their curiosity to find a small backyard on two levels...one accessed by a door opening into the rooms behind the shop, the other reached by a sort of step-down from a porch/balcony hybrid. A squatty oak and a rowan hedge separated the two yards, both of which ran down to the little willow-lined trickle of water that was the open drainage ditch dividing them from Muggle London.

"Come to enjoy the view of Clearwater Stream?" They looked up to find the owner of the voice to be as elderly as he sounded.

"That's an overly optimistic designation if I ever heard one," Severus said. Hermione elbowed him slightly...byplay which did not escape the old wizard's notice.

"How long have you been married?" he asked, knowing amusement lacing his voice.

Much to her surprise, Hermione blushed slightly. "Almost a month," she said, feeling proud and uncharacteristically shy. Severus tightened his arm around her, without thinking about it.

This drew a full, slightly wistful smile from their interrogator. "I expect you have a place to live, then."

"Actually, our current living arrangements leave much to be desired. We were hoping to find something around here."

"Ah, but it's all flats not big enough to swing a Kneazle in, hereabouts. Not really fit places to raise a family." He knocked imaginary ashes from the bowl of his pipe, but refrained from lighting it, much to both Severus and Hermione's relief.

"No, not really," Hermione said.

The man turned the pipe over in his hands. "Except for this building, of course."

"Sorry?"

Hermione knew she was blinking stupidly, and his tone of voice told her Severus was as well.

"I'm not sure how to make it clearer. This building is available...but only for a family, though a business would be welcome on the ground floor. It was in my family for ages, and I'll see it subdivided over my dead body. I won't move in with my granddaughter and great-grandchildren until I'm sure this place will be taken care of. Sad to say, they aren't the least bit interested in it...at least, not on my terms."

Severus was wary, as usual. "And what would your terms be?"

"I think that's something best discussed over tea. Please, come in."

As they ascended the rickety back steps, Severus whispered to Hermione, "Incredible good fortune, and not a pink tutu in sight."

Hermione kept quiet. If Severus hadn't noticed the damp little footprints trailing after them, she wasn't going to point them out.

Severus tried to ignore the knots in his stomach as he and Hermione looked over their financial records, trying to see if they could actually meet Mr. Russell's terms. He had planned on abstaining from optimism, but this was looking incredibly promising. "I can see one problem: what are we going to do about the shop on the ground floor? Even with the insane amount of money they're offering for our fleatrap, we can't afford to buy the building outright. It would be nice to have the rent to help with the monthly payments." He would rather not mention or use Narcissa's gift yet, if he could help it... but it was comforting to have it, just in case.

Hermione fiddled with her quill. "I was thinking you could have your own apothecary shop."

"Hermione, love...think about that for a moment. Please, by all means, strain your impressive brain and try to picture me as a shopkeeper."

"Well, we could hire someone to run it."

"And thus consume what meager profits we may or may not make. We've been through this. My image isn't that rehabilitated. It likely never will be. The Galleons would come in much more certainly each month if we were to rent it to a successful endeavor."

"I suppose we could advertise in the Daily Prophet for something quiet to move in down there."

Snape was on the verge of agreeing with her when another thought occurred to him. "Actually, I can think of a business that might possibly wish to relocate."

Rose Mraz checked the wards on the front of the store one more time before retreating to the back room to feed Duke. With Granddad finally resting in peace and Mum gone off to marry that silver-tongued Welsh jeweler, the old Oriental Bay-Owl was the only other living thing in the shop. Rose had taken to discussing her day with the creature. She wished she'd thought to ask Granddad why he'd chosen such an exotic species of owl for his familiar. She loved the soft, musical whistling it made in response to her words. It made their conversations seem less one-sided.

"Dobru noc, Dukchek. Not much point in keeping the shop open any longer today."

She could have added that there wasn't much point in keeping the shop open any longer, period. Without Granddad, Mum hadn't been able to stand Knockturn Alley. Without Mum, Rose wasn't sure she could mind the store and create new inventory as well. Mum and her new man were sure she couldn't, which was why they had invited her to come to his shop in Wales. She'd sooner have accepted an invitation to guard Azkaban. Moore and Mraz was Granddad and Otecko's legacy. She wouldn't abandon it that easily.

"You're lucky, Dukcheck. If people look at your face and mistake you for a barn owl, there's no harm done," she said bitterly.

Duke whistled mournfully, as if he understood her reference to Otecko's death. Those were dark days, when Aurors were hexing first and asking questions later...especially when it came to anyone with a Slavic accent.

She considered advertising for an apprentice, but she had to weigh the costs against the potential for results. There just weren't a lot of good apprentice candidates these days, what with custom metal charming and transfiguration replacing the age-old art of coaxing the natural magic of stones and metals to yield to the artisan's will. Any potential apprentice would likely be put off by the address of their shop, assuming that there were any really decent wizards who wanted to be artisans these days instead of getting a fancy education at some Wizarding school.

Wizarding schools. Durmstrang. That was the only thing Otecko and Granddad had ever fought over, to her knowledge. Otecko wanted her to have a 'classical' education to back up her practical training. Granddad had thrown six kinds of fit over a perfectly good artisan wasting her valuable time learning 'fancy magic.' By the time she had returned home at the end of her fifth year, she knew she wouldn't be going back. She'd come to her own conclusions about formal education, deciding that dueling was about all the 'classical' magic she could stand, though she'd acquitted herself honorably in all her classes. Otecko would have objected, except that she also had the excellent argument that she wasn't keen to continue at a school where the Headmaster was on the run from You-Know-Who.

Duke seemed uninterested in owl treats. Just as well... they hadn't may left, and she was loathe to leave the store unattended while she shopped, even warded as heavily as she knew how to ward it. "Do you want to hunt tonight, Dukchek? I worry about you when you're out there, little friend." Duke gave a reassuring trill.

Rose sighed. If she was going to let him out the front door, it wouldn't do to look as defeated as she felt. Knockturn Alley was no place to appear weak. She rolled her

sleeves down and smoothed them, then glanced in the mirror Mum had always kept by the door from the workroom to the display area. The owl... the mirror, for last-minute primping... the meticulous files in the basement... little reminders of the family that would never grace the inside of this store again.

She raised a shaky hand to push her hair out of her eyes. "Bozemoj... gray hair. I thought I was too young for gray hair. Aren't I only thirty-one?" Duke climbed from his perch to her shoulder, preening the mousy hairs framing her face.

"Silly owl," she murmured affectionately. Duke gave a sharp squeak at the same moment that Rose noticed the dark shape outlined in front of the partially closed blinds. Even before the silhouette against the windows registered in her conscious mind, she'd shaken her wand from its dueling holster into her hand. Stepping behind the counter, she cancelled the wards on the door and hoped it was a legitimate customer.

The door opened, and she relaxed. He was a repeat customer, and not one of those cheating bastards shopping for toys for his mistress. "Good evening, Mr. Snape. Can I help you?"

"Possibly." He glanced around the shop. "Tell me, Miss Mraz...have you ever considered relocating?"

Arithmeus Tinker, alias Abner Trapp (former accountant for the formerly wealthiest family in the wizarding world), was indulging in his second favorite hobby...casino hopping. This did not preclude him from indulging in his favorite hobby, congratulating himself on having had the daring and skill to pull off one of the largest embezzlements in the wizarding world.

Had he any sense of restraint, he would have stopped there. But someone with the audacity to double-cross Lucius Malfoy wasn't about to shy away from parleying his increased socioeconomic status into a marriage with a wealthy heiress. Who cared that she was plain, and a Muggle? She was susceptible to his charms, easy to ignore, and gullible enough to believe that he was going on trips in the name of some invented charity when he was actually jaunting off to one of his favorite high-roller suites.

Of course, for all his gall, Trapp was occasionally a very nervous man. He'd covered his tracks brilliantly, it was true, but there was always the chance that... well, chance was a gambler's best friend and worst enemy, wasn't it? Speaking of which, gambling was thirsty work. The wares of the frozen Margarita vendors on the street were irresistible on a day like this. Just as he was sucking down an icy mouthful, he made the fatal mistake of looking across the street...right into a familiar pale face.

It had become something of a ritual for Draco and Ginny... popping back to Las Vegas, just for an evening, to stroll under the millions of light bulbs. They had a bit of curiosity to satisfy with regards to the place; after all, they couldn't have described much of Squibtown after their original visit other than the color of their bed sheets. Still, there were certain things that passed under their mutual radar... in particular, the faces of passers-by, even a face that should have been familiar to one of them. The ambulance fighting its way through traffic towards the area they had just passed might as well have been a part of the light show.

It was just as well. Karma prefers to work with a minimum of witnesses.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. Trapp," the officer said. "The autopsy determined that the aspirated ice was incidental. Mr. Trapp actually died of a heart attack, cause undetermined."

He was very kind about giving her information on claiming her husband's body and whatnot. Leocadia Slade Trapp thanked the nice young man, showed him out the door, and all the while revealed no trace of shock at discovering where her late husband had actually been and what he had been doing. Then, she strode purposefully over to the fireplace, lit a fire, and tossed in a handful of powder from a hidden drawer in the mantle.

"Dewey, Cheatham, and Howe, Solicitors," she announced clearly into the flames. She was quite proud of the steadiness of her voice.

"Mrs. Trapp! How may I help you?"

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Dewey, if he's available. Here."

"Certainly, ma'am."

A distinguished older gentleman passed through the flames. They exchanged pleasantries briefly before Leocadia cut to the chase. "Abner passed on yesterday. I know he didn't have a will, so I would like you to handle the legalities."

"So sorry to hear it, Mrs. Trapp." Dewey was the picture of lawyerly sympathy.

"Don't worry about me...you know very well I'll be quite comfortable. But see to it that every cent of his goes to this organization." She presented Mr. Dewey with a small booklet.

"Shoreline Home for Children with Special Needs?"

"It's an orphanage, Mr. Dewey...for Muggle-born wizards and witches abandoned by their families at an early age because of their oddities. And while you're at it, see if they have any hard-to-place children that need to be adopted. Abner was disinclined to be a parent, but I believe I have something to offer a child who is alone in our world. Even if I am but a Squib."

Madam Mab was feeling miserable. She had been running the day-to-day operations of the International Fellowship of Fairy Godmothers and Related Do-Gooning Beings for the past two centuries, essentially with absolute power over everything, and the strain was taking its toll. Only the Special Council of Three, who intervened when requested, and Oberon, who was so ancient he hadn't left Elysia to visit Headquarters in at least a century, were technically above her in the hierarchy. But for all intents and purposes, the buck stopped with Mab.

Recruitment was down (as usual), Gizzywiggle had lost another important file, and worst of all, the Fletcher beast (a disgrace to the tutu if there ever was one, in Mab's opinion) had gone on some sort of rogue mission that resulted in no less than four collateral instances of happily-ever-after. As if all that weren't bad enough, the outlandish swamp monster that was Fletcher's Apprentice had actually been provisionally promoted to Journeyman, Third Class, as a result of his role in the debacle. (Some utter rot about non-violently neutralizing a potentially lethal threat.)

*That **thing** is 'poofing' into people's homes and granting heart's desires at this very moment,* she thought, and that musing was enough to send Mab into Migraine Land.

She winced at the knock at the door. "This had better be important! And if you're Fletcher, get the hell away from that door before I make you into an ink blotter!"

"I assure you it is important, Madam Mab."

Good old Pip, Mab thought fondly. Files had never gone missing when he was her intern. "Come in, Pip, my boy. What's the news?"

"The Council of Three has a new decree for the Fellowship, and the Union approved it in an emergency meeting last night."

"Emergency meeting?"

"Yes, you were sent a memo. See, there it is." Pip fished a scrap of gold parchment out of the disaster area that was her desk.

Damn Gizzywiggle! "What decree is that?"

"The Updating Act."

"Updating? Pip, speak English."

"It's quite simple, Mab. Any Fairy God-Creature who has been out of the field for between fifty and one hundred years needs to take refresher courses to reacquaint themselves with the basic principles of fieldwork. Henceforth, they will have to take at least one field assignment per decade in order to remain active in the fellowship."

"ME? Take classes again? That's *outrageous!* I was one of the first members of the Fairy Godmother's Club! However reluctantly, I helped supervise the transition to the current fellowship! The idea of me sitting in a classroom again is laughable."

"Oh, you won't be taking classes, Mab. You fall under the second provision of the Act, whereby any Fairy God-Creature who hasn't taken a field assignment in over a century will be obliged to retire, so as to allow those more in tune with current affairs to run day-to-day operations. They will, of course, have special status as occasional advisors, in light of their long service and tremendous experience."

Mab's tiny jaw dropped, and her eyes bugged out behind her glasses. "You can't retire me!"

"How many centuries has it been since you've been in the field, Mab?" Pip asked gently.

Her gossamer wings shivered and drooped. "But... but... I was the one who got Shakespeare through his writer's block! I was the one..."

"Of course you were," Pip soothed her. "All the more reason for you to have a nice rest. There's a lovely little castle being built in the Elysian Glade as we speak, and provisions have been made for retirees to teach occasional classes of new recruits. You know... pass the old traditions on to the next generation and all."

At the mention of the Glade, Mab grew a little misty-eyed. "The Elysian Glade? I haven't been there in... in..."

"One hundred fifty years. It's in your personnel file." Pip indicated the pertinent passage helpfully.

"But who will be in charge? The Fellowship can't do without me!" she squeaked frantically.

"The Council has already appointed an interim Supervisor, who can be confirmed in as little as a month if all goes well." Pip gently took her by the elbow. "We're going now, take your wand. After all, they're going to need someone to help manage things at the new castle. Some of those retirees are as bad as Gizzywiggle."

Dazed, Mab allowed Pip to guide her from the office.

An hour later, Pip returned to find Motoyoshi industriously sorting memos from personnel files from case files, with Fletcher advising and frequently zapping coffee stains from the maltreated parchments with judicious flicks of her tail.

"Thank you, Master Fletcher, Journeyman Motoyoshi," he said formally. "You can fetch Gizzywiggle now. I think my first act as Interim Supervisor will be to give him an ultimatum: learn to file or go back to janitorial work."

"Hey, don't mention it, jefe. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours, verdad?"

Pip grimaced as Fletcher and her former Apprentice exited the office. *His* office. "That was a mental image I didn't need."

Hermione 'Reducio'd the final crate of books and stuffed it into her pocket. "We're going to like Tangent Alley." Her words had a distinct edge.

"You make that sound almost like a threat," Severus said, quirked an eyebrow at her in amusement.

"No, it's a promise. There is no way on earth I'm ever going to pack all these books again."

"What a pleasant surprise... once again, we're on the same page with regards to the situation."

"Yes, especially since we couldn't agree on having anyone actually help us move. I know, I know...we don't need to have the argument again," she said, forestalling his intended interjection with an exasperated glare.

"But they were such excellent arguments," he said, a teasing smirk in full evidence. There really was something amusing about the fact that neither of them could agree on who to ask for help moving...because neither of them was able to agree on a friend or friends who could be relied upon not to break anything or splinch in the process... and who was not terminally annoying to one of them.

Actually, Severus had grudgingly admitted that Ginny fit the bill. But since the only way to separate Draco from her these days was with a surprise blow from a Bludger, they'd opted to go it alone. Hermione still found Draco terminally annoying, and Severus had to admit that dealing with Hermione seemed to cause Draco to splinch more often than chance would account for.

"I'm not arguing with you just to have make-up sex," she scolded him. Then she grinned slightly. "You'll just have to follow me home and try to convince me to initiate one of the rooms of our new house." She checked her pockets for thoroughness' sake and Disapparated.

It seemed somehow hasty and disrespectful to simply vanish from within the house, leaving it empty inside all at once. Feeling it was a foolish, superstitious thing to do, yet unwilling to forgo the idea since there was no one present to witness it, Severus patted his own pockets and headed out the front door. He could just as well walk around and Disapparate from the shrubs at the end of the street.

He took one last look back into the dark entryway. His eyes caught a glimmer of light on a spider web, its occupant resting from its intricate labors as it awaited the arrival of an unwary insect. He remembered how, as a child, he'd thought spiders were the 'spinners' for which the dismal little street was named.

"Well, try to manage through the renovation process," he murmured. Saying farewell to an arachnid was even sillier than feeling consideration for the house, so he hastily made his way out and locked the door before he could do anything truly absurd and possibly maudlin. With a supreme effort, he refrained from warding the door out of reflex. Then he walked away without looking back.

In the garden of the house at Spinner's End, formerly residence of one Severus Snape and Hermione Granger-Snape, a meeting was being held.

The Pygmy Puff Lord surveyed his minions from a lofty dais consisting of the heel of a discarded boot. His human minions would pay for not informing him sooner of the acquisition of this last vital piece of land; he had long coveted this particular house at Spinner's End as the idea place to plot, plan, and hold rallies. It would only be a matter of time, now. He and his fuzzy children had escaped the identical idiots who had dared to try to harness his powers for their own inane purposes. Soon he would avenge himself upon them and all their kind.

"*What are we going to do tonight, My Lord?*" Pinky Puff asked reverently.

"What we do every night, my child. Prepare to take over the world."

The spider clan was deeply disgruntled. It had been quite some time since they'd seen the wizard they considered their master...the Protector of Hatchlings and Keeper of the Ley Line of the Web Spinners...for more generations of arachnids than they could count. Now, these ugly little puffs of fluff were massing under the bushes outside the Master's web, and the matriarch of the clan strongly suspected they had something to do with his disappearance.

"Give us the word, Mother, and it shall be done." Thousands of glittering eyes belonging to hundreds of eager spiders focused on their Matriarch, legs twitching and crossing, caressing the filaments of their webs in anticipation.

The Matriarch thought about it a moment, then flickered her eight glossy eyes approvingly. *"Go, then, my children. Take the largish one that sits upraised on the piece of man-chitin. Drain that one dry. I suspect the others will be helpless without it, and we will have avenged the Master."*

As silently as only spiders can, the throngs of her children descended their silken ropes and focused on making a meal of the largest fuzzy one.

For once, it was Harry who woke in the middle of the night to find the other side of the bed empty.

"Luna?" He squinted into the moonlit room, just able to make out her rounded form silhouetted against the window.

"Harry." Her voice had a smile in it.

"Is everything okay?" He found his glasses and studied her, to verify that she actually was smiling.

"Oh, more than okay. In fact, I think I wouldn't mind having one of those mobile phones you're always trying to get for me." She waddled back from the window, haloed in faint moonlight and pure serenity, and snuggled up beside him. He carefully arranged a pillow under the bulge of her tummy.

"I'm glad you've finally decided that it would be a good precaution," he said, unable to keep the relief from his voice. Hedwig had been good enough to indulge Harry by staying near Luna all day in case she went into labor early, but it was a strain on the aging owl. The mobile phone would be an easier...and faster...option for everyone.

"Oh, it's not that, dear. The Pygmy Puff Lord finally got sorted."

Harry sighed. He kissed Luna's lips. He kissed the swelling that marked the location of their unborn child. He reflected that he would never entirely understand what she was about. Then he fell asleep.

The shop in Knockturn Alley was nearly empty; tools had gone first, followed by inventory and shop furniture. Rose had moved as many of her personal items as would fit into the living space behind the new shop, and was now contemplating whether Otecko's ancient files had any place in Moore and Mraz's shiny new location.

She decided to move all of the files after all. A little judiciously applied 'Reducio' and they could fit handily under her bed. Before she did, however, she remembered a little mystery from those files... one her new landlord might just be able to solve. It was easy enough to locate the curious stub and set it aside for later.

'Later' ended up being several months into the future, after the shop was all in order and Rose's days had settled into a good working routine. She might never have remembered if the morning chill hadn't obliged her to don the coat she'd last worn during the move, on the exact morning her landlord arrived to collect the rent.

"This was in my files, Mr. Snape. It's the pawn record for the piece of jewelry from which the sapphire in your wife's ring was taken. I don't mean to pry, but is there any chance that it means anything to you?"

He took the stub and skimmed it quickly. His calm, slightly bored expression seemed to freeze, and she could have sworn he was holding his breath. His eyes finally began to move again, this time slowly, as if devouring each meager word on the slip of parchment, one letter at a time.

Without a word, he tucked the parchment into his pocket and pulled out a receipt book. Summoning a quill, he scratched something on it and tore the page out, thrusting it into her hands before he abruptly spun, his coat whirling behind him, and stalked out the front door. The bag of coins remained untouched on the counter.

Rose finally became aware that she was watching the closed door with her mouth hanging open. In utter amazement, she looked down at the parchment in her hands for answers.

In spiky, cramped, slightly shaky letters, he had written 'May rent...paid in full. Thank you. S. Snape.'

It was all the answer she would ever receive from her landlord about the initials 'E.P.S.' on the pawn ticket.

Author's Notes:

Rose's Slovak Vocabulary:

Dubro Noc: Good night

Dukchek: Little Duke

Otecko: Daddy

Bozemoj: My God

Reggie's Spanish Vocabulary:

Jefe: boss

Verdad: true (literal); used in the sense of, 'isn't that right?'

British Ground Floor=American First Floor

British First floor=American Second Floor

And so on...

The bit with Harry, Luna, and the evil Pygmy Puffs will not make the least bit of sense unless you've read, 'Return of the Fairy God-Jarvey.' It would help to have a passing familiarity with the cartoon 'Pinky and the Brain' as well.

Yes, I admit that the bit about the fate of the embezzled Malfoy money and the embezzler was utter fluffy (if slightly vindictive) sappiness. And I'm not about to apologize. Though I think it would be capital fun to track down Lucius in Argentina and tell him Muggle-born orphans are living off his money, and there's not a damned thing he can

do about it. And yes, I stole Messrs. Dewey, Cheatham, and Howe most boldly and shamelessly from the Three Stooges.

The epilogue is next...I promise, I'm not going to let this thing sit on a sunny windowsill and grow any more chapters, Tempest!

Epilogue: Bright Blessings

Chapter 12 of 12

By golly, I tried. But I couldn't help myself. Here, in all its lack of glory: The Epilogue.

Disclaimer: Reggie, Rose, and Moto are mine. The rest I nicked when JKR wasn't looking, and will have to return... eventually.

Epilogue: Bright Blessings

"I'm behaving myself," Hermione said smugly as they left the doorstep of the new house at Godric's Hollow.

"If you had been behaving yourself, you would have managed to avoid this invitation altogether. And rest assured, I will spend the rest of tonight working in my laboratory if you decide to be so absurd as to say, 'That wasn't so bad,'" Snape said. He didn't bother to disguise his sarcasm any more than she had her smugness.

"I think Aster actually liked you," she teased. "There must be something about you that appeals to young females in the Lovegood family."

Snape gave her a glare that could have curdled milk. "I thought I was the one who liked inciting arguments to solicit make-up sex. Believe me, I could have happily gone the rest of my life without acquainting myself with Potter's little foliage-themed brood; it's quite unnecessary for you to relive the introduction all the way home."

"All right, love." Hermione laughed. "But will you at least agree with me that naming identical twins Aster and Azalea is cute to the point of inducing nausea?"

Snape humphed, but it was an amused 'humph,' and he knew his wife would recognize it as such. He would really rather put all thought of the little Potter brats out of his mind, but he couldn't help thinking, *Hermione and I could do much better than that.*

Perhaps one day... if he could convince Hermione. Hadn't Albus' portrait all but said that they were destined to have a child anyway?

The thought crossed Hermione's mind that she really would like to have a child while she was still young and while Severus wasn't especially old by wizarding standards. Perhaps she could, sometime in the near future, talk him into just one.

When they reached the Apparation point, he pulled her close, looking deep into her eyes with a suggestive smile playing about his lips. Hermione clung to him tightly, answering desire sparkling in the chocolate depths of her eyes. Without a word exchanged, they Disapparated home—straight to the bedroom.

"Would you like to play our song?" she whispered. He flicked his wand at the phonograph, knowing that the recording was still there from the last time they played it. There was no need to discuss what they intended to do next.

Rose moved her workbench into the half of the garden accessible from her shop. The moon was full that night, and she didn't want to waste a single ray; conditions were ideal for making divination rings.

Bless the old man who sold this building, and Mr. and Mrs. Snape, and anyone who made it possible to move Moore and Mraz to Tangent Alley she thought. The garden alone was worth more than the old shop in its entirety. There was no substitute for moonlight unfiltered by glass windows.

She set out silver ingots, an array of moonstone cabochons, a handful of beryl orbs, and several onyx discs, to absorb the moonlight. Then, she removed the stones and metals charged on the last clear, moonlit night from their protective sacks and set to work.

Rose had only completed four rings (two with moonstones, one with a perfect crystal orb of clear beryl, and one with an oblong disc of onyx) when soft music began to drift from the upstairs windows. She listened for a moment, then smiled. Her landlord and landlady played that tune often enough that she'd picked up all the words. This was no song to make scrying rings by. She Summoned paper and parchment and began to design betrothal rings.

As the strains of the orchestra floated in the moonlight, she softly sang along...

'When I fall in love

It will be forever

Or I'll never fall in love.

In a restless world like this is

Love is ended before it's begun

And too many moonlight kisses

Seem to cool in the warmth of the sun

When I give my heart

It will be completely

Or I'll never give my heart

And the moment I can feel that

You feel that way, too

Is when I fall in love

With you.'

Sometime the next afternoon, Regina Fletcher sensed an appointment being written into her Fairy Date Book. She hastily flipped several pages into the future, then whooped ecstatically at the new entry writing itself in.

"Moto! Moto, are you around? Get your arse over here!"

Motoyoshi trotted over obediently. Even though the silver threads around the waistband of his tutu proclaimed that he was now a Journeyman and no longer answerable to Reggie, he still kept up with the cases they had handled together. "Do you have news of Hermione-san and the Snarky One?"

"Yup. Kid number one is on the way," Reggie said, happily pointing out the entry: 'Celebrate Birth of Eileen Snape: February 16, 2008.'

"Though I am pleased to be a Journeyman, it saddens me that I will have no reason to visit the child since I am no longer your apprentice," Moto said wistfully.

"You could always just show up with me and claim you 'poofed' the wrong way, like when we ended up in L.A.," Reggie said with a snort of laughter.

"Oh, I brought us to Los Angeles intentionally. I remembered that you said you were born there, and I thought you might like to see it again," Moto said.

Reggie stared at him, her little jaw dangling. Never mind that it had been so many years since she'd been there that she would have been hard-pressed to find her actual birthplace with locator spells... paws down, that was the most thoughtful thing anyone had ever done for her.

"Moto, I know for damned sure I never said this enough... but you were one hell of an Apprentice. No matter what they come up with next, it won't compare to you."

Moto bowed. He now managed to do so without spilling anything... most of the time. "Domo arigato, Reggie-san. And you were a most excellent Master."

Over the course of the coming months, Reggie watched the name in the FDB change to 'Athena Eileen Snape... Acantha Granger-Snape... Eileen Amanda Granger-Snape... Acantha Eileen Snape-Granger...' Motoyoshi ultimately gave up the vigil, asking Reggie to please inform him when a final decision was reached.

As she noted the almost daily name (and sometimes hourly) changes near the end of the nine months, Reggie said lazily, "You know what, hinnys? You'll bloody well have to work that part out for yourselves."

FIN

Author's Notes:

'When I Fall In Love' was written by Edward Heyman and Victor Young; if anyone other than Nat King Cole ever recorded it, I don't need to know about it.

I'd like to say thank you, Jim Henson, wherever (or, if you believe in reincarnation, whatever) you are. From the time I was three years old, your brilliant creations deeply ingrained in my psyche the idea that fuzzy critter + adult vocabulary = comedy with a heart.

Thanks, as always, to my Dad—who hadn't the faintest clue what constituted appropriate TV viewing or reading material for a young, impressionable child. I owe you half my DNA and most of my sense of humor, Dad. Though I picked up all the bad words on my own... and I think Mom might be to blame for some of the risqué elements of my humor.

And will everyone who reads this please join me in giving *Tempest of Dreams* a well-deserved round of applause?

We're taking a wee break from Reggie's case files on Severus and Hermione, but be on the lookout for 'The Origin of the Fairy God-Jarvey'—a trip back in time to discover the Jarvey behind the snark and the laughs. Warning: in the long literary tradition of stories involving animals, the humor will be, at best, bittersweet. But it's all about Reggie.