

The Devil is in the Details

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Hermione learns that the Ministry is serious about its fine print and Draco and Severus find themselves dueling for a prize neither wants. Marriage Law, sort of.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Hermione Granger did not consider herself a violent soul. She had supported equal rights for house-elves with peaceful expressions of poorly knitted caps and handmade buttons. She aided the meek when confronted by the most terrible of Potions professors and gave of her notes (albeit somewhat reluctantly and only when they weren't being total prats) to her friends. She only slapped people when they truly, truly deserved it. So, when she had visions of Dolores Umbridge molested by a werewolf, then tossed into a barrel of ornery Blast-ended Skrewts, and then roasted slowly over a bonfire on a spit turned by none other than Hermione, herself, she was a bit unnerved. Only a bit, though.

Screwing up her face to form the narrowest squint of her short years, Hermione peered at the Ministerial decree on her desk, her nose almost brushing the heavy parchment. She knew there had to be *something* in the document that referenced the reason why she was being forced to marry. She was still under twenty years old and she had accepted an invitation to study at university, both of which should have excluded her from this ridiculous Ministerial Decree. With a muttered curse and the sound of paunchy flesh sizzling in her imagination, she tilted her head, trying to intensify the squint without actually closing her eyes.

No, she still didn't see any fine print: just a heavy underline beneath the Conditions of Exception. The Ministry couldn't be serious, could they?

She relaxed her face and sat back, sighing loudly. "*Accio* magnifying glass," she spat, and then ducked as the heavy implement sailed toward her head. With a less than graceful snatch at the air, she caught it, to the death of one brittle fingernail yet another crime for which the horrible Umbridge woman was responsible. Next time, Hermione would make sure the Centaurs pulled her apart. And trampled her. Repeatedly.

Applying the thick lens of the magnifying glass to the parchment, Hermione glared at the bit of so-called text that had become her biggest enemy, aside from Chairwoman of the Committee for the Promotion of Wizarding Births Umbridge. At least, the Ministry *claimed* that it was text. It still looked like an underline to her...

"Conditions of Exception

Any witch who is less than twenty years of age or has been accepted at or is attending a school, university or apprenticeship program is hereby excused from the requirement to petition a wizard as groom and no wizard who is less than twenty years of age or has been accepted at or is attending a school, university or apprenticeship program will be included in the groom lottery until these conditions no longer apply to him/her."

... No, wait. There, the line broke... and there. With a sinking feeling in her gut, she tapped her wand on the edge of the lens and whispered a silent spell in her mind. Within the circle of metal, the line blurred, then expanded, finally forming squat letters that almost bled into one another:

"The above Conditions of Exception do not apply to any person or any person who associates with a witch (said association will be decided at the Ministry's discretion) who has knowingly and willfully assaulted a Ministry Official with any curse, jinx or poison, or who has knowingly and willfully led a Ministry Official to an ambush of Magical Creatures, whether they be half-breed or fully Creature, or who has knowingly and willfully..."

Yes, the Ministry was serious. Bloody hell.

Now what?

The answer to that question arrived with a pounding on her Head Girl's door.

"Granger! Granger, you twat, get that bushy head out here this instant!"

Draco Malfoy had been raised under a stalwart misconception that the law did not apply to him. As a youngster, he had kicked puppies, pulled cats' tails and stolen his peers' pocket money (Crabbe and Goyle faithfully immobilizing his victims) with righteous self-obligation. Of course, other parents complained but were thoroughly trounced by his father, and no one who valued their livelihood, reputation, and (as he learned much later) lives, messed with Lucius Malfoy. So, imagine his surprise when a rather embarrassing escapade of his father's had landed the patriarch smack-dab in Azkaban and his mother and himself deeply in the Dark Lord's displeasure.

After an unsuccessful attempt to fill his father's shoes (yes, he'd gotten the Death Eaters into Hogwarts, but kill an old man in cold blood? Not his cup of tea) he had found himself working shoulder to reluctant shoulder with his nemesis and pals on the side of the Light, all under the harsh eyes of his godfather and traitor, Severus Snape. So it was that Draco Malfoy, would-be Death Eater, helped the Boy Who Lived, aka The Chosen One, aka Potty-head defeat Lord Voldemort. He was now in possession of an Order of Merlin, Second Class, thank you very much.

When the Ministry, broken, disorganized, and missing many key members due to death or loyalty to Voldemort, issued its latest bizarre decree, he thanked the gods he'd never been born with a penis, rejected several petitions from women who now found themselves requiring a husband, and sat back to watch the wizarding world squirm. It had never occurred to him that he could be drawn in the groom lottery for witches who hadn't bothered to draft petitions.

This was obviously all Granger's fault.

"I mean it!" he shouted at the heavy wooden door and slammed it several times with his fist. "Open up, or I'll..."

The door swung open and he was suddenly confronted with a pair of furious brown eyes and the point of a wand. His cheek smarted with the ghost of a slap and he closed his mouth with a snap.

"Well? You were saying?" Hermione ground between clenched teeth, the tip of her wand still hovering between his eyes.

Wordlessly and without moving more muscles than strictly necessary, he raised the Notice of Selection as a shield. She sighed, sounding rather like a deflating air mattress, and he watched with relief as the wand dropped to her side.

"I know."

"But we're still in school! And we're nowhere near twenty years old! And I'm Draco Malfoy! Don't they know who they're dealing with?" he complained loudly as he tossed the Notice to the floor, not bothering to disguise the whine in his voice. As much as he loved to despise Hermione Granger, she could always be counted upon for a reasonable explanation, followed by a solution to one's problem. Or an admonishment to "go look it up," but he was hoping for the former.

"Yes, well..." she trailed off and ran a hand through tangled, curly brown hair. "... do you remember what happened to Umbridge in our fifth year?"

"I was a bit busy with family issues at the time," Draco answered snidely.

Hermione rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest, her wand disappearing in a sleeve, to Draco's unacknowledged relief. "Harry and I led her to a herd of Centaurs. It seems that *she* hasn't forgotten and is now taking her revenge."

"I didn't do anything to her!"

"You associate with me, which apparently is enough! Didn't you read the fine print on that decree?" She chose to ignore the fact she had only found it minutes ago, herself.

Draco sighed heavily, still not convinced that this was his problem, and rubbed the back of his neck. "So what are you going to do?"

"One hundred points from Gryffindor for being an incompetent, overconfident inconvenience to her professor!" a voice roared down the hall, followed closely by a beaky nose, startlingly black eyes and great, billowing robes. Both Draco and Hermione winced.

"Him, too?" Draco asked unnecessarily. Hermione nodded miserably.

"Haven't I taught you to *pay attention to details*? Did you not *read* the Ministerial Decree Ninety-Seven? Or did you simply *assume*," his voice lowered to a hiss as he loomed over the two quailing students, despite the small difference in height, "that it wouldn't apply to one of the members of the *untouchable* Golden Trio?"

'I have to learn how to do that,' Draco thought as he forced his shoulders to stop hiding under his ears. He was very, very glad that Professor Snape's ire was not focused upon him.

Hermione cleared her throat and fought against the fearful roiling in her stomach. Much more excitement this morning and it might rebel altogether. "Professor, I..."

"*Silence!*"

Life had not been kind to Severus Snape. From a gawky, ugly teenager with no social skills and a fascination for the Dark Arts, he'd grown into a miserable, ugly adult with a reputation for one of the foulest tempers to teach at Hogwarts this century. He could map the constellations on the scars that crisscrossed his body, though the one he most regretted, the Dark Mark, had vanished along with the last breath of its maker.

It wasn't that he preferred to be alone; if he had, then he would not have taken a teaching position at a boarding school, repentance for joining the Death Eaters or no. It was really a matter of other people not preferring to be alone with him. If anything, he was a creature of habit that was *used* to being alone and was not inclined to alter the status quo. His selection by lottery as one of eight bachelors to duel over the hand of Miss Granger was a ridiculous intrusion into his carefully groomed, wretched solitude.

After he had finally escaped the clutches of his two masters (though it was a shame he'd had to kill Dumbledore instead of Voldemort), and had been reinstated into the relatively cushy life of a tenured Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, he had little intention to invite a nagging harpy into his lair, no matter how frequent the sex might be. There wasn't even a guarantee that the sex would be frequent.

No matter how much the wizarding population had dwindled during the war, it did not need Severus Snape's help. Hadn't those idiots up at the Ministry heard of a naturally occurring post-war baby boom?

His dark eyes darted to Draco, blond and shining unabashedly in the mid-afternoon sunlight that streamed through a high window, then to the missive laying face up on the stone floor. "I see I'm not the only unfortunate to fall victim to your ineptitude."

'It's as if I planned all this just to make their lives difficult,' Hermione griped silently to herself. Like I'd *want* to marry *either* of them! She straightened her spine and met her Professor's, now suitor's, glower. "Then there is still hope for me yet!"

With a curt sniff, her chin jutting indignantly into the air, she spun quickly and flounced into her room, slamming the door behind her.

"Hey! Don't you shut your door on me!" Draco's incensed voice permeated the thick wooden door, followed by Snape's colorful cursing, and Hermione cast a quick silencing charm to block out the noise.

Professor Snape was correct, Hermione thought. He and Draco were only two of eight possible candidates. How much worse could the other six be?

Sensible girl that she was, she decided not to dwell on that question since it would be answered in the morning, anyway, and instead turned her attention to penning a letter to her parents. It looked like her mother would be getting the grandchildren she wanted sooner than expected.

"So, there's nothing," Ron cut himself off mid-sentence as his eight-month old infant puked down his back with a wet burp. Unfazed and with surprising dexterity, he twisted his free arm behind his back and staunched the thick drip with an already sticky burp cloth. "So, there's nothing you can do to get out of it?" he finished.

Hermione blinked and swiftly reorganized her thoughts. It never ceased to amaze her, though perhaps it shouldn't, how easily Ron had adjusted to the little "accident" he and Lavender had had in their sixth year.

"No, I've searched the entire Ministerial decree and the Conditions for Exclusion for a loophole, but Umbridge was thorough. She may as well have written, 'These conditions excuse all young women younger than twenty or still in school, *except for Hermione Granger*.'" She traced her name in the air with an imaginary quill, ending it in a grand flourish, much to the delight of little Violet.

A warm breeze kicked up, heavy with the scent of cut grass and weathered wood baking in the sun, ruffling the mass of brown hair that she'd neglected to tie up this morning. Harry, Ron and Lavender had joined her on the benches that had been set up on the edge of the Quidditch pitch for viewing of the first round of duels. Hermione had hoped that Ginny would join them but was unsurprised by her absence. Ever since Lavender had begun to show, she'd avoided wizards like they bore the plague, literally, as if pregnancy were an air-borne contagion.

"Ginny, you have to put some *effort* into getting pregnant," Hermione had lectured her one morning in the Great Hall after she'd wiped down the handle of a serving spoon that Harry had just touched.

"Right," she'd snapped back as she served herself a sticky, gray pile of oatmeal. "And the effort I'm putting into *not* getting pregnant will mean it's even less likely."

It wasn't that Hermione blamed the youngest Weasley; Ginny herself had been a surprise to her parents. However, she missed her friend and had grown somewhat tired of Harry's lovelorn sighs. And, she could use all the support she could get as she watched six complete strangers and two strange wizards duel for her hand in marriage. All in all, not quite the way she wanted to spend her last weekend before graduation. At least the NEWTS were over and done with; there would have been no way she could have studied with *this* hanging over her head.

"Marriage isn't that bad," Lavender interjected defensively, bolstered when Ron nodded his agreement.

Hermione looked between the two, mildly incredulous. She could count the number of times they had agreed on one hand since their wand-point wedding the previous summer, held right after Lavender had discovered her condition. Needless to say, their families had been incensed and harsh words had been spoken, but Ron and Lavender were giving it a go. In light of Ron's help in the defeat of Voldemort, Headmistress McGonagall had made an exception to Hogwarts' rule of expelling students who became parents and had allowed both teenagers to come back for their seventh year, baby and all.

"Who else is on your list?" Harry asked quickly before Hermione could point out the blatant marital issues between the couple and defray the momentary peace.

"Other than Professor Snape and Draco... Toliver Marigold, Erik von Puddington, Romulus Flint, Benny Tanaka, Jean-Claude de Montague and Pramod Dass," Hermione recited the names of her eight randomly selected suitors from memory.

Lavender tried to stifle an unladylike snort behind a hand clutching a baby bottle emblazoned with Harry's smirking likeness, lightning scar and all.

Transferring the baby to his other shoulder, Ron snapped, "It's not funny." And it wasn't, not to him. If he and Lavender had heard the age-old teenage joke, "What do you call a couple that uses the withdrawal method? Parents," just a few weeks earlier, then he would have convinced Hermione to petition *him*.

"It is, so," Lavender jabbed the air with the bottle's nipple. "Can you picture Snape... and Draco... *dueling... over Hermione?*" with each dramatic pause, Lavender's composure threatened to break, until the last word where she burst into a gleefully derisive cackle.

"I'm so pleased that our little predicament amuses you," a darkly sarcastic voice cut through Lavender's laughter. The young mother paused to glance behind her, noted the DADA professor and Malfoy heir dressed in formal dueling robes, and then again burst into raucous guffaws, much to everyone's chagrin.

"Come on, Lav, give it a rest," Ron complained as Violet squealed happily and waved her pudgy arms.

"That will do, young lady," Headmistress McGonagall sniffed as she strode toward them, four wizards trailing behind her. The first wizard was tall, lanky and sported a head so bald and shiny that the sunlight reflecting from his dark pate hurt her eyes. Dark chocolate eyes and straight, white teeth flashed her a smile from behind her Transfiguration Professor's summer cloak.

Wizard number two might have been a china doll had someone dressed him in a bonnet and pinafore. In fact, Hermione silently mused, with his honeyed ringlets, milky complexion and fine bone structure, he would have looked more appropriate in frills and lace than his eggplant robes. Hermione wondered if Umbridge had bothered to take into account sexual preference when putting together the sodding Marriage Law and groom lottery. At least the third wizard looked male, though the only description of him that came to her mind was brown. Brown hair, brown eyes, slightly tanned skin and brown robes created an ultimately forgettable package. An odd glint in his eyes told her that it was wholly intentional.

Standing out amongst the contestants was an Asian wizard of medium height and slender build with shockingly bright pink hair, spiked as if it had been blown away from his face by a strong wind. He had a pleasant, attractive face and an easy smile. Hermione liked him immediately. Almost hidden by his colleagues was a short, squat man with a thin, black mustache, immaculately groomed and almost long enough to touch the ground. A burgundy fez perched on his head, its gold tassel bouncing against hair as blue-black as a raven's wing.

Puffing along at the back was a wizard who could have easily passed as Neville's older brother. Round and soft, he had a kind face and smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose. He had missed a button on his dueling robes and they hung crooked on his husky frame.

Hermione was not much encouraged.

The hot summer sun beat down on Draco's deep green velvet dueling robes, reminding him why duels were usually fought inside or at night. Even the zephyr that strolled

lazily through his hair and up his full sleeves did little to dry the sweat that was now trickling down his body in sticky rivulets. More discomfiting than the heat was the squidgy feeling in his stomach inspired by his opponent squared off in front of him.

His father had always taught him to never hit girls. Death Eater his father may have been, he'd drilled that adage into his son's head for as long as he could remember and had followed it somewhat carefully himself. Even during raids and the war, his father hadn't raised a hand to a woman if he could conveniently avoid it. That's what minions were for. This bloke looked way too much like a girl for Draco's comfort. Just as well he didn't really want to win, anyway.

"Gentlemen," Draco sneered at McGonagall's opener, "you stand here today in accordance with Ministerial Decree Ninety-Seven with the purpose of dueling each other for the honor," she stressed the word and sent a quelling glance at Draco, "of Miss Hermione Jane Granger's hand in marriage. You are opening the first round, comprised of four duels, the winners of which will go on to fight each other and so on until a final winner has been proclaimed. That wizard will officially be named Miss Granger's bridegroom. Remember, gentlemen, these duels are not to the death and Unforgivables are not allowed. Moving outside of the dueling square will mean forfeiture of the match."

"Mr. Draco Malfoy, Mr. Jean-Claude de Montague, you may begin."

Noting the precise and easy movements of his opponent, Draco bowed and saluted Jean-Claude with his wand. No sooner than he'd taken the traditional dueling stance, he had to dance away from a jet of vicious red light; all thoughts of not winning replaced the war-honed instinct to stay alive. Another burst of yellow light lanced toward him and he threw up a hasty shield, shouting, "*Protego!*" and follow with a silently cast stunner.

Face impassive, his adversary blocked expertly, turning on the ball of his foot and then firing several streams of yellow light. Again, Draco dodged, but this time moved closer to the other wizard. Dropping into a crouch, he rolled away from yet another yellow spell but toward the wizard's feet, putting him at an advantage against a wizard who expected his opponent to be standing in dueling formation. Focusing his mind on a hissing serpent, he thought, "*Serpensortia!*" sending a furiously hissing snake into Jean-Claude's face.

Wide-eyed and shrieking, Jean-Claude clawed at the snake, then crumpled to the ground under Draco's final stunner.

Bustling forward, Madam Pomfrey performed a Mobilicorpus and moved Jean-Claude's inert form away from the chalked dueling square and onto a cot that had been prepared for just such an occasion.

"In the duel of Mr. Malfoy versus Mr. de Montague, the winner is Mr. Malfoy!" McGonagall announced to a small, cheering crowd. Draco wiped away the sweat that had collected on his brow, flashing the audience his most charming grin... until he caught sight of a stunned Hermione.

Bugger, he wasn't supposed to win. Well, he could always lose the next one.

Hermione closed her mouth with a snap, hardly registering the applause around her. Draco had *won*? She had fully expected him to take a fall. Feeling a bit dizzy, she absently watched the blond, who looked more than a little shocked himself, take a seat with the remaining contestants. He was scrutinizing his wand closely, as if it had acted on its own volition.

"I didn't expect him to put up a fight," Luna commented behind Hermione's left shoulder. By "him," Hermione assumed she meant Draco, and the resultant irritation snapped her out of her daze. It had also been her own thought, but she didn't appreciate the Ravenclaw's uncomfortable truth. To her surprise, several more people had drifted over to watch the show.

"Thank you, Luna," Hermione groused and focused on the next two duelers.

The bald Indian man and the brown man both stood and were introduced to the crowd as Pramod Dass and Romulus Flint, then faced each other. Both looked to be in their late twenties (though you could never tell with magical folk) and fairly seasoned fighters, Dass preferring flashy spells and Flint parrying with lesser-known hexes that left scorch marks on the pitch. They seemed evenly matched until Dass sent Hermione another dazzling smile and then was hit in the chest by a nasty cutting spell. Blood splattered across the wizard's yellow robes and McGonagall was quick to end the fight. Poor Pramod joined Jean-Claude in the makeshift infirmary.

Luna sighed wistfully. "I hope the wizards chosen in my lottery are as good looking."

"Good looking?" Hermione repeated, incredulous. "Wait, your lottery?"

Ignoring the second question, Luna answered dreamily, "Well, yes. Draco has always been handsome in a pale, pointy kind of way. And that Asian wizard is quite dashing, don't you think? Even Professor Snape has an air about him if you un-focus your eyes..." She tilted her head and her gaze became even more glassy than usual.

"You're a nutter," Lavender informed the Ravenclaw girl. "Hadn't you heard, Hermione? All the DA girls who've come of age have had to petition for a groom or are receiving their lottery letters."

Umbridge was snatched up by a rampaging Mongol horde and thrown onto a burning pile of Ministerial Decrees in the depths of Hermione's imagination. They were just about ready to pelt her writhing body with fistfuls of dragon dung when Lavender dug her elbow into Hermione's side as Snape and the boy who could be Neville's brother strode (or in the boy's case, bumbled) onto the dueling square.

Gathering his voluminous robes about himself, Severus rose to meet the folly that awaited him, chalked neatly on the Quidditch pitch. His opponent followed close behind, stumbling over the hem of his robes as he mopped at his brow with a worn, graying handkerchief.

"Professor Severus Snape, Mr. Erik von Puddington, you know the drill." McGonagall waved her hand in an impatient gesture. Her mouth was puckered and thin, as if she'd been sucking lemon wedges. It was clear that she didn't approve of one of the contestants and it wasn't difficult for Severus to guess who it was.

Severus bent neatly at the waist, suppressing a sigh when Erik sketched a clumsy bow that was not dueling standard. It galled him to think that he would have to lose to a wizard who looked like he could melt a cauldron with his hands tied behind his back. However, it was best just to bow out early and get this nonsense behind him.

"Raise your wand, boy!" Severus snapped when it was obvious that Erik had forgotten the next step in a duel. He startled, hoisting his wand into the air to aim shakily somewhere over Severus' left shoulder. He didn't need to be a master Legilimens to know that the boy was scared shitless.

Losing might be more difficult than I thought, Severus mused to himself as he closed his eyes in a silent bid for patience. It was the perfect opportunity for the boy to hex him, yet no spell came. Opening his eyes, Severus fixed him with a dark glower, resisting the temptation to throw a spell on principle alone. Fortunately, the force of his scowl seemed to goad Erik to action.

"*Conjunctivio!*" Swinging his wand in an exaggerated arc, he lunged forward... and caught the hem of his robe under his shoe, toppled sideways, and fell onto his own wand, just as it spurted forth the spell. Erik howled and clawed at his eyes, which had gummed shut. The duel was forgotten as the boy rolled about on his back, smudging the chalk lines and tossing up fine clouds of dust.

Madam Pomfrey rushed forward and fussed over him, casting the counter-jinx and helping him to his feet. Still partially blinded, Erik buried his face in her sympathetic shoulder and let her lead him to the cots, to the soundtrack of an uproariously laughing audience. Wand at his side, Severus stared at the spot where the boy had fallen and jinxed himself, then glanced up at the crowd. Hermione was trying not to grin and failing, her eyes glistening with poorly suppressed mirth. Their eyes met over the distance and she flushed, glancing away.

Interesting. He had made her blush.

Fiddling with the hem of her skirt, Hermione concentrated on looking anywhere but at Professor Snape. It had been quite clear that he'd meant to lose by the way he had just stood there with his eyes closed, waiting for Erik to make his move. It was somewhat insulting but certainly no shocker. No, the surprise had come when their gaze had met and the cold censure that normally radiated from those black eyes had softened. It had sent her heart racing and the blood rushing into her face, Luna's comment about him "having an air" echoing through her skull. She'd looked away before he could notice, but knowing him, he'd seen her cheeks color.

"He gave you a look," Luna commented mildly, and Hermione needed no clarification as to who "he" could be. "Maybe he is seeing you differently."

"Don't be ridiculous," Hermione sniped as she fought a losing battle with her flush.

"Hm. I have a pair of Aural Projection glasses that would help you discern what he's feeling about you by showing you the colors of his aura," she said, pulling from her pocket a pair of slightly crumpled spectacles that looked like they had been punched from a magazine.

"No, thank you," Hermione replied as politely as she could and turned from Luna to listen in on a conversation between Lavender, Parvati and a Hufflepuff girl Hermione didn't know regarding which wizards were still in the match.

"Wow, this is *so* romantic!" exclaimed the Hufflepuff, tucking her clasped hands beneath her chin. "Just like in 'Crossed Wands of Cairo,' where all the eligible princes fight to the death over the hand of the Egyptian princess."

Parvati snorted, "Except that most of those guys are not princes, Laura."

"Yeah, but to have them *duel* over you," she sighed, her eyes drifting longingly over Draco.

Annoyed, Hermione pointed out, "I have to *marry* one of them."

"I think it will be Mr. Flint. He's a distant cousin of Marcus', from an old family that has dabbled in the Dark Arts for as long as anyone can remember. Nothing illegal, of course," Parvati was quick to add at Hermione's disapproving glare.

"It certainly won't be Malfoy or Professor Snape," Lavender stated firmly.

"Better not be," Ron added darkly as he jiggled baby Violet on his knee.

From behind the group, Dean spoke up, gesturing to the next two contestants, "I'll put two galleons on Mr. Pink. The Japanese start wizarding school a couple of years before we do here in England."

"Two galleons on Mr. Flint," Seamus shook Dean's hand.

"Well, anyone for Malfoy?" Dean asked the crowd. Millicent Bulstrode waved a callused hand as other students queued up to join the pool. Bets were placed and hands were shook until all but one of the contestants had had money placed on him by at least one student.

"But I don't *want* to bet on Professor Snape!" Neville complained above the hubbub.

Seamus patted him amicably on the back, "He's the only one's that hasn't gotten bets. Don't worry, mate. We'll all throw in an extra galleon if Snape wins. Won't we?" He looked to the crowd for confirmation and everyone nodded. Neville sighed in resignation and shook Dean's hand.

Luna just smiled, toying with her signature radish earrings as the last two candidates of round one took the field.

"Oh, I think he likes you!" Laura exclaimed to Hermione as Benny Tanaka, the Asian with pink spiky hair, bowed in Hermione's direction before bowing to his opponent, the squat Mr. Toliver Marigold. "He looks kinda like Abarai Renji in 'Bleach'! Except he hasn't got any tattoos and he's got a wand instead of a sword..."

"Bleach?" Lavender and Parvati asked simultaneously. Hermione stayed silent; she wasn't about to admit to knowing the reference or watching Anime.

"I'd like to meet Benny; he's a kindred spirit," Luna stated airily as the first spells flew.

Laura cocked her head, her blonde bob brushing her shoulders. "How do you know that?"

Without taking her attention from the match, Luna handed the Aural Projection glasses to her. "I looked at him through these."

Hermione rolled her eyes and turned back to the fight. Benny seemed to be showing off, rapidly firing small spells that were keeping the rotund Toliver hopping about the dueling square like a toad on a hot stove. The crowd, now comprising of close to fifteen students of varying years and houses and two more teachers, hooted and hollered encouragingly. Benny seemed to eat it up, adding dance moves and casting creative spells that aimed to embarrass more than injure. After ten minutes, Toliver had only managed blocking spells and one stunner, had lost one side of his mustache and had sprouted a crown of daisies that had knocked off his fez.

With a grand pirouette, Benny sang, "*Furnunculus!*" and hit Toliver on the nose. The stout wizard screeched as he broke out in painful, oozing boils, failing to dodge the next *Furnunculus* that promptly hit the back of the hand that was holding his injured proboscis. The audience exploded with laughter and Hermione howled right along with them.

"Confound it all!" Toliver sputtered as he threw his wand to the ground. "I concede! No witch is worth this humiliation."

Benny raised both arms to the audience, gesturing for applause. The audience happily obliged him, stamping their feet, yelling and cheering his performance, except for Crabbe, who had put money on Toliver. With a flourish, he snapped his fingers and produced a rose the color of his bright pink hair, and then sashaying up to Hermione, bowed low at the waist and extended the flower. She took it with a wide grin and tucked it behind her ear.

Round one was complete and Hermione found that she was quite enjoying herself.

A two-hour break had been scheduled between the end of the first round and the beginning of the second, just enough time for Draco to work up a good sulk at the thought of being outdone. The obvious darling of this dueling championship was Benny, his opponent in round two. The pony git had style and charisma; he had to give him that. Not as much style as a Malfoy, of course, and not near as much class...

He spared a sullen glance for his godfather, who he had not expected to last to round two. The Dark Arts professor had further surprised him by a distinct lack of griping. For the better part of the two-hour break, he had been staring at his knees with a taciturn intensity that was, in Draco's opinion, wholly unwarranted. It unnerved him, though he couldn't say why.

Just before his second duel and the beginning of round two, Severus found himself trying to recall each and every instance he had made a woman blush, and ~~not~~ from anger, frustration or humiliation. The last time he could recall was eight years ago when he had taken it upon himself to prepare a hangover potion for Minerva after they had spent an evening polishing off a bottle of Firewhisky. She'd been pitifully thankful and he had blushed in return, unused to such effluent gratitude.

The Marauders had seen to it that he hadn't had a love life at Hogwarts. And because he'd never had a chance to snog in hidden alcoves or at the top of the astronomy tower, he made it his personal mission that no one else could enjoy it, either. He'd met women as a Death Eater, but none were the type to blush at his glance. These days, he lived life much like a monk; he just hadn't felt the inclination to search out company of the feminine persuasion. Unless he counted getting pissed with Minerva, which he did *not*.

Hermione's blush had had a profound, somewhat unwanted, effect on his person. An odd spark had lit in his chest, bits and pieces were stirring that had no business making themselves known, and the idea of entering, say, the Three Broomsticks with a woman half his age on his arm did not sound like such a horrible state of affairs. He was, for lack of a better word, feeling frisky. If he were the sort to lie to himself, he would blame it on indigestion from the kippers he had eaten for breakfast. He wasn't, however, and had to lay the guilt firmly on his oppressed libido.

Minerva would have his bollocks if she knew.

Without moving any more muscles than necessary, Severus snuck a peek at the creature that had put him in such an awkward state. She was sharing a bag of crisps with a group of girls, laughing and talking as if this were a picnic instead of an event that would have a significant impact on the rest of her life. In deference to the heat, she'd undone the top buttons of her peachy-colored blouse. Even so, it was sticking to her matured form, transparent in places where sweat had seeped through the fabric. Thank the gods she was wearing civvies.

"Godfather, you dirty old man," Draco admonished with a leer and jabbed him in the ribs with a sharp elbow.

Snapping his eyes away from his former student's breasts, he silently cursed the days in hiding when he and his godson had become so informal. He straightened his spine and fixed the boy with a baleful glare. "Mr. Malfoy," he enunciated the name with a precise, derisive drawl, "I would advise you to keep your misinformed opinions to yourself."

Unfortunately, Draco didn't seem intimidated. His leer grew into a grin as he said, "No need to get defensive. She has a cracking set of knockers for a Mudblood."

Nice breasts or not, Severus had no intention of marrying an unendurably irritating former student and was about to disabuse Draco of the notion that he'd noticed her breasts when the Headmistress entered the dueling square, clearing her throat to call the audience's attention. "This is the start of Round Two, where the final two contestants will be determined. Professor Snape, Mr. Flint, please take the field."

At first glance, Severus had disliked Romulus Flint. The Flint family name had come up at too many Death Eater gatherings for his comfort, and the wizard himself was a bit dodgy: it was in the shiftiness of his eyes, the slightly predatory twist of his mouth when he glanced Miss Granger's way. Severus could not, in good conscience, let such a man continue to the third and final round of dueling. Winning this match would be his final act of protection for this particular student.

His decision had nothing whatsoever to do with the lady in question's knockers... er, breasts.

As if she had heard his train of thought, Minerva shot him a glare that felt like ice water had been splashed over his groin. When their eyes met, she jiggled her wand, jerked her head toward Flint and winked, broadly.

Gryffindors and their subtlety, he thought sarcastically. She had better not have in mind what he thought she did. Of course, she wouldn't necessarily *know* that the Flint family was involved in Dark magic, and she would be inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt, even if she did...

Like the proper Dark Wizard he was, Flint had missed none of Minerva's pantomime and raised an amused eyebrow as he bowed and settled into a traditional dueling stance. Severus' bow was curter than propriety allowed, but he didn't give a damn.

Without wasting any time, Severus opened the duel with a nonverbal *Expelliarmus*, unsurprised when Flint blocked it tidily and sent it rebounding back at him, followed by a muddy blue jet of light that stank of gray magic. He blocked both spells easily, smirking slightly as they hurtled toward Flint more powerfully than when they had been cast. It was a little trick he'd worked on while awaiting trial and had wisely kept it a secret. His smirk fell, however, when he tried to adjust his stance and found that his feet were anchored to the ground. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Minerva's smug smile and slight nod. She thought she was doing him a favor.

After this duel was over, he would make sure that a double dose of the Weasley's U-No-Poo found its way into the Headmistress' nightcap.

Flint had noticed Severus' predicament as well, and was quick to take advantage of it. A jet of green light hit the turf at the professor's feet, missing the shield he had raised to block it. Immediately, the vines that had wrapped around his shoes to trap him sprang to life, thickening and strengthening as they wound around his body. Each movement caused the vines to tighten their grip, digging sharp thorns through his clothes and into his skin. He didn't doubt that they were tipped with poison. Ceasing all motion, he relaxed his muscles, trying to give the appearance of one defeated. It wasn't difficult, as the vines had encased his legs and torso and bound his arms to his sides.

Seemingly quite pleased with herself, Minerva rose from the bench and began to stride toward the dueling square. Just as Flint turned toward her, Severus snapped his wrist and cast a silent stunner. It hit Flint in the back of the head and he dropped like a rock. The vines went limp and collapsed to the ground just as Minerva gasped, staggering backwards in surprise. The crowd, which had remained mostly silent in tense concentration during much of the duel, exploded in applause. Hermione was blushing again, the red stain creeping down her face to her décolletage and fanning the flame behind his sternum. Severus couldn't help but bow smugly to the audience before returning to his seat.

Winning felt good.

Draco was now feeling gloomier than ever. The audience that had started as the core group of Hermione's friends was now comprised of an unruly crowd encompassed of a good quarter of the school, and they were eating this contest as if it were the richest of dark chocolate. The match was down to Severus and the winner of this duel. Forfeiture wasn't allowed. Winning wasn't much of an option, but losing to Benny would be a loss of face. What was he to do?

The crowd roared as they stepped into the dueling square, and his heart soared and wept in turns. He gave the crowd a jaunty salute, winking in Hermione's general direction. The bint raised an eyebrow and tossed her hair, sun-kissed curls tumbling over her shoulders, and then produced a frilly handkerchief from between the breasts he'd been admiring with his godfather. Standing regally, as if she were a queen holding court, she tossed the bit of fabric toward the pitch, letting a current of magic carry it fluttering along... and into Benny's outstretched hand. He held it to his nose with a look of bliss and then tied it to the base of his wand. The girls in the audience screamed and waved their hands; a fourth year from Hufflepuff clasped her hands over her heart and keeled over backwards in a mock faint.

That did it. Benny was going down.

With a new and burning purpose, Draco bowed to his opponent and assumed traditional dueling stance, his grey eyes hardening to steel, a plan of attack already forming in his mind. The bloke was quick but many of his movements were superfluous to the fight. Draco would move in hard and fast, bringing the Asian down before he could finish his first pirouette.

The moment Benny had extended his wand in his right hand, Draco lunged forward, casting a wicked *Stupify!* that shot out of his wand like a blazing bullet from a gun. Benny barely cast his shield in time, the stunner rebounding harmlessly to the side. Draco followed with several more stunners, pummeling his shield until it wavered and finally collapsed.

Flashy though he might have been, Benny was no amateur. Pulling a small, intricately cut piece of paper from his robes, he flung it into the air and cast a silent spell. For a brief moment, a large cloud of white smoke obscured his pink hair, and then two identical Bennys faced Draco, complete with wands and grimly determined expressions.

"Not so confidant now, eh, nancy boy?" the Bennys spoke in unison, slowly walking apart to flank the sides of the dueling square.

Draco sneered and flipped his long blond fringe out of his eyes. "Two incompetents do not make one decent wizard." The bastard was going to pay for trying to tough talk a Malfoy. Using a wide-range trick that he'd learned from the master of nasty spell creation, he focused on cutting his opponent as he thought the word "*Sectumsempra*," arching the slicing motion of his wand to cover the entirety of the square. It lessened the severity of the spell but included a larger target.

One of the Bennys exploded in a shower of confetti; the other shrieked and clutched at a bleeding gash in his right forearm. Draco followed with an "*Expelliarmus!*" and neatly caught his opponent's wand in his left hand. Without missing a beat, he tugged the handkerchief loose and tossed the wand away, holding aloft the scrap of lace to a hysterically cheering audience and Millicent, Padma and Blaise sharing congratulatory high-fives. To Hermione, he blew a kiss from over top of the handkerchief, and if possible, the crowd screamed louder. Grinning haughtily from ear to ear and with his head held high, he tucked it into the sleeve of his robe and headed back toward his seat.

Severus sat waiting for him with a smile of dark amusement, his fingers steepled under his chin. "Nicely done."

"Thank you. It was, wasn't it?" Draco preened under his godfather's rare compliment and the adulation of the crowd.

"To where shall I send the wedding gifts: Malfoy Mansion or the Summer Estate?"

Draco dropped his head into his hands and groaned.

"Erm, Hermione..." Harry started, unsure of how to proceed but sure that he should say something.

"Yes, Harry?" Her eyes hadn't left the empty dueling square.

She sounded much too calm and collected for a woman who had to marry one of the two people they'd spent six years hating and one year merely despising. Perhaps her overworked brain had fried and she'd finally gone 'round the bend.

"All right?" he asked, unable to think of anything better.

She turned her head and fixed him with eyes that were both coldly sane and seriously hacked off.

"How could you possibly ask such an idiotic question? How do you *think* I am? I will have to marry a ponce whose Animagus form is a ferret or my ex-Defense Against the Dark Arts professor! Oh, everything is just peachy! Right as rain! Fan-*fucking*-tastic!"

"He was just asking, Hermione. No need to get your knickers in a twist!" Ron cut into her tirade, only to have her round on him.

"Going to tell me how *swell* marriage is again, Ron?" she snapped, the baby clutched protectively to his chest the only thing stopping her from grabbing his shirtfront and shaking him.

"At least you know both of them; they aren't complete strangers," Luna entered the conversation with a serene smile. "Everything will work out for the best, you'll see. And if it doesn't, you could always take him on honeymoon to the Irish bogs and feed him to the Umgubular Slashkilters."

Harry blinked. "Why would anyone go on honeymoon to a bog?"

"Umbug-what?" Ron asked, his brow crinkling in confusion.

"Never mind," Lavender interjected impatiently. "The last round is about ready to start."

"Ooooh! I can't wait to see who will win!" Laura squealed from behind them, bouncing in her seat. "This is so thrilling!"

Thrilling it was, Hermione had to admit, though in a kind of gut-clenching way that made her want to have a wastepaper basket on hand. Why hadn't Malfoy just let Benny win? Luna patted her shoulder reassuringly, saying, "I'll go introduce myself to Benny..." and wandered off.

The crowd collectively held its breath as the two opponents faced off, wands pointing at each other's chests, left hands raised with fingers slightly curled. Draco blinked hard and sweat out of his eyes, shifting nervously as he waited for his godfather to do something. He seemed to be using the same strategy as he had with the von Puddington boy, to let Draco's first hex take him out, thus handing the match to Draco. He wasn't going to fall for that trick, but neither was he going to fall on his own wand and hex himself.

"Get on with it!" Severus finally snapped, scowling darkly.

"You get on with it!" Draco retorted, matching him glare for glare. "Or are you afraid to hex your own godson?" he sneered in the patented Malfoy drawl.

Severus' scowl darkened. "Hardly. I merely find it unsporting to attack one so much less proficient than myself at the art of dueling."

Snorting derisively, Draco shot back, "Less proficient? I'd say you were questioning your own proficiency at another sport." He leered at Hermione to make his point clear. From the audience, Harry let out a bark of laughter that was joined by all but the Slytherins, and it was as if Severus were seventeen all over again, being pantsed by a Potter to the amusement of his peers.

"*Levicorpus!*" he shouted in his head. Draco shrieked as he was lifted by his ankle and hoisted into the air. His robes fell over his head, revealing a pair of fashionably cut designer underwear in a green silk that matched his dueling costume. Wand still in hand and his wits about him (Draco had nothing about which to be embarrassed down there and a number the audience had already seen his underwear, anyway), he cast a bat-bogey hex at his godfather's face.

Severus released the spell to fend off the bats and retaliated with a jelly-legs jinx. Draco wobbled comically, pinwheeling his arms as he tried to keep his balance, and just managed to fire off a hair-thickening charm as Severus batted away the last bogey. The effect was immediate: his fine, greasy black hair became a lush, full mane that obscured his eyes until he flipped it over his shoulders.

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed. That "air" of which Luna had spoken was now quite blatant. Severus seemed to have caught her soft cry because he glanced over. Hermione blushed hard, forcing her eyes away. She really had to stop doing that. Behind her, Laura was keening and wringing her hands as she hopped out of her seat, only to collapse back into it a moment later.

"Good look for you, *Professor*," Draco mocked, irritated that his spell had backfired and earned his opponent admiring glances that should have been meant for him.

"Jealous?" Severus asked snidely, inordinately pleased by the appreciative looks he was receiving from a particular female in the audience. Now he was feeling seventeen, but in a way that made his trousers tight.

Draco made a rude gesture, "You wish." Intent on making up for improving the older man's appearance, Draco cast a nonverbal spell that would have caused Severus' face to break out in weeping boils had he not ducked and cast a silent spell of his own. Staggering, Draco looked down in alarm as his toenails burst from his boots and made an attempt to grow into thick, yellowed claws.

"Gah!" Draco tried to back away from his own horrific feet and found the action ultimately futile. His lengthened toenails dragged in the dirt and his ruined shoes flopped clumsily, and after a moment of ungainly wheeling about, Draco tripped and landed hard on his side.

The audience went silent except for an outraged gasp, compliments of the Headmistress, and the sound of Neville smacking his head on a bleacher as he fell in a dead faint.

Momentarily forgetting about his still growing toenails, Draco glanced down in confusion... and noted that he'd fallen out of the dueling square. His eyes raised to those of his godfather's, his mouth dropping open. Severus stared back, in as much shock as he was. Finally, Draco cleared his throat and allowed a slow grin to creep across his face.

"So, godfather, where shall I send the wedding gifts? Hogwarts or Spinner's End?"